Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies

Social Sciences in Asia

Edited by

Vineeta Sinha
Syed Farid Alatas
Chan Kwok-Bun

VOLUME 19

Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies

Edited by

David C.L. Lim

BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2008

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Overcoming passion for race in Malaysia cultural studies / edited by David C. L. Lim.
p. cm. -- (Social sciences in Asia v. 19)
Includes index.
ISBN 978-90-04-16815-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Race awareness--Malaysia.
2. Malaysia--Race relations. I. Lim, David C. L.

DS595.O94 2008
305.8009595--dc22

2008012862

ISSN: 1567-2794
ISBN: 978 90 04 16815 2

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore for hosting me as a Postdoctoral Fellow, and for its support in organising "Overcoming Passions", the conference held in October 2004, from which this book grew. Thanks also to Chee Heng Leng, Mika Toyota, Xiang Biao, Anthony Reid, Joel S. Kahn, Maila Stivens, Khoo Gaik Cheng, Eric Tagliacozzo, Chen Kuan-Hsing, Resil B. Mojares, Srinivas V. Singavarapu, Nir Avieli and Cherian George for their support and friendship.

ABOUT THE EDITOR AND THE CONTRIBUTORS

The editor

David C.L. Lim obtained his PhD from the Australian National University and was Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, where he worked on this book project. He is currently Senior Lecturer at Open University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. His interdisciplinary research and writing straddle social texts, critical theory, discourses of race, religion, and the ethics of freedom. His publications include *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi 2005) and essays in journals like *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Wasafiri*, and *SARE*.

The contributors

Mohan Ambikaipaker is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College, University of London, and doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin. He is co-author of the Runnymede Trust commissioned study, "What's new about new immigrants in twenty-first century Britain?" He is presently engaged in fieldwork research on Asian and Black antiracist social movements in London.

Daniel P.S. Goh is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. He obtained his doctoral degree from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He specializes in comparative-historical sociology and cultural studies and is currently working on his book, *Ethnographic Empire: Imperial Culture and Colonial State Formation in Malaya and the Philippines*. He has published on the sociology of religion, environmental politics, colonial ethnography and state formation, and the postcoloniality of politics in Singapore, and continues to conduct research in these areas. His other research interests include multiculturalism, civil society and postcolonial culture.

Susan Leong is a doctoral candidate in Media, Society and Culture at Curtin University of Technology. Her research interests include the broad socio-political implications of media and technologies for the lived experiences of time, space and the nation.

Suvendrini Kanagasabai Perera (Curtin University of Technology) completed her BA at the University of Sri Lanka and her PhD at Columbia University, New York. She has published widely on topics relating to race, ethnicity, multiculturalism and refugees and is currently working on a project on borders and junctions in the Asia-Pacific region. Her most recent book is the edited volume, *Our Patch: Enactments of Australian Sovereignty Post-2001* (API, 2006).

Tee Kim Tong was born in Malaysia. He obtained his PhD in Comparative Literature from National Taiwan University. An Associate Professor of English and American Literature at National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, he is currently visiting the University of Victoria, Canada. His publications include a book on *Mahua* literature entitled *Nanyang lunshu: Mahua wenxue yu wenxue shuxing* [Studying Southeast Asian Chinese: Chinese Malaysian literature and cultural identity] (2003) as well as edited and co-edited anthologies such as *The Renaissance Fantasy: Arts, Politics, and Travel* (2003), *Chongxie Mahua wenxueshi lunwenji* [Essays on rewriting *Mahua* literary history] (2004), and *Chongxie Taiwan wenxueshi lunwenji* [Essays on rewriting Taiwanese literary history] (2006). Presently he is working on two research projects: one on diaspora literature and the other on Asian literary Modernism.

Tamara S. Wagner obtained her PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2002 and is currently Assistant Professor of English Literature at the School of Humanities & Social Sciences at Nanyang University of Technology in Singapore. She is the author of *Longing: Narratives of Nostalgia in the British Novel, 1740–1890* (2004) and *Occidentalism in Novels of Malaysia and Singapore, 1819–2004: Colonial and Postcolonial "Financial Straits"* (2005). Her previous publications include articles on nostalgia, occidentalism, and the functions of commerce in fiction. Wagner's current project is a book-length study of financial speculation in Victorian literature. She is also editing a collection of essays on nineteenth-century consumer culture.

Gabriel Wu, born in Singapore in 1965, teaches modern Chinese literature in the Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics of City University of Hong Kong. He received his PhD degree from the University of Washington at Seattle, and served as assistant professor at the National University of Singapore. He is also a poet and fiction writer who has published four books, and winner of the 1998 Singapore Young Artist Award.

INTRODUCTION

David C.L. Lim

Race, as an object of socio-critical theorising, has long been debunked as a false index of natural sameness, an invention of European modernity to catalogue and hierarchize putative human differences. This would be a banal statement to make, were it not for the disturbing fact that little of this knowledge has seeped to the everyday level of lived experience. Across the world race persists in popular imagination as a biological fact, signifying discrete populations distinguished by identifiable phenotypical and cultural markers.

In Malaysia, from parliament to coffee-shops, race is hardly ever discussed and understood as a mode of identity and identification that holds together social subjects who would otherwise have little to do with each other. Race is grasped instead by the overwhelming majority as synonymous with ethnicity and culture; as a palpable, visible, heritable inevitability that overdetermines one's identity, loyalties, morality and religion. To be sure, race is not everything in Malaysia. It is not the totalising logic by which every social relation in the country is structured. Nor is its articulation ever entirely independent of gender, class, cultural, political, global and other inflections. Race may seem old and fatigued, having been subject to countless analyses. Yet, as much as there are those who would like to have it otherwise, its power is far from spent, manifesting as it increasingly does as religion, to divide and foment discord.[1]

The persistence of race extends beyond politics and popular imagination into the academe, where it flourishes across fields, not excluding biomedical research and genetic studies (see Azoulay, 2006; and Wald, 2006). In studies on culture and society in Malaysia, for instance, race is not always consistently treated as a discursive category. Even when

[1] Ethnicity and religion cut across the same body of population in Malaysia, albeit imperfectly. Practising or otherwise, all Malays in Malaysia are Muslims by the definition of the Federal Constitution; almost all Chinese identify as non-Muslims; a large majority of Indians are Hindus; while non-Malay indigenous peoples could be Christians, Muslims or adherents of traditional faiths.

they purport to speak from a multicultural, postcolonial or postmodern viewpoint, and even as they succeed in shedding light on certain social aspects of a given text, they often unintentionally end up reproducing the very essentialist belief about race that they seek to undercut. The problem persists unevenly in all major linguistic domains in which scholars of Malaysia Studies produce knowledge. To compound this, there are also, in language-streamed intellectual circles in Malaysia, studies which reject as 'heretical' the premiss that race is a social construction. In these circles, to take the position that race is anything less than natural inheritance is to belittle and betray one's own race.

Against the above horizon, *Overcoming Passion* presents eight new essays examining the durability of race in contemporary Malaysia. Broadly the essays look at the disjunction between the falsity of race as a scientific category and the entrenched belief that race determines one's rightful identity. They highlight what might otherwise be described as reality falling short of truth, a situation where individual minds and institutions of power fail or refuse to recognise and act in accordance with the knowledge that race exists only insofar as its existence is tautologically sustained by the believer's belief in it. In reading Malaysia, several essays take the anti-foundationalist approach to subvert race in its multiple incarnations, pushing its inexistence to the limits. Others perform the equally important task of renewing our understanding of the pathos of race, of its impact on lived experience, and of the formidability of thinking of identity—either one's own or others'—beyond race. The contributors probe these issues from multiple angles, drawing from a burgeoning but under-examined archive of Malaysia-related social texts, ranging from media and technological discourse, popular culture and literary production to historical writings, produced originally in English, Malay and Mandarin Chinese.

Directly or tangentially, the essays in this volume underline the often-overlooked fact that racial and racist thinking has an internal self-justifying logic which is steadfastly resistant to rational arguments pointing to its errors. This applies particularly in a climate where civil dialogues on 'sensitive' issues such as race and religion are severely curtailed or prohibited altogether. In such a situation, explanations on issues like the pseudo-scientism of race or the tautology of belief, no matter how theoretically sophisticated, are by themselves rarely sufficient to compel subjects to overcome racial and racist thinking. For what is at stake here, beyond facts, are subjective affects, the pleasures and pains derived by human subjects from incorporating particular

racial discourses into their self-conception. Despite its falsity, race is a highly charged object of identification that bears strongly upon the subject's attitudes, values, beliefs and actions. It is a passion, affective intensities which, subjectivised and experienced as "what is most individual about the individual", crystallise "the conflicts that people have with themselves, and therefore with others" (Meyer, 200:2).

Recognised in the history of thought as a sign of human difference and diversity, passion is as capable of becoming an obsession that absorbs or overcomes entirely to ultimately deprive the subject of control; as it is capable of bringing about reflection, responsibility and freedom. In this sense, passion is not simply the antithesis of reason, as conceived by classical liberal political theorists such as Locke, Mill, Smith and Madison. Nor does passion represent only the most extreme experiences of being, for it can be "consistent with the calmest reflection" and is able to "co-exist even with subtle reasoning" (Kant, 1974:133). Precisely because passion is "a form of sensitivity" (Meyer, 1974:4) preceding morality, that can be directed to folly or wisdom by the agency of will, the subject is never simply 'uncontrollably' subjected to its passion. This, despite the passivity of the language of passions which disavows agency ('overcome by passion'; 'swept by emotions'; 'flew into a rage', etc.).

The problem in Malaysia is that racial passion is often not only *not* recognised for what it is but is also framed as benign and upright by a significant moral majority who regard its articulation as proof of loyalty to their race. Throughout the country's history, leaders and aspiring leaders across all fields of power have been not always been shy to declare their 'deep feelings' for their race, and their commitment towards defending it, sometimes as if it were under siege. This process of giving vent to racial passion invariably leads to the demonisation of 'other' races and their subjection to a culture of intimidation and thuggery.[2] Articulations of racist passion are usually put down by the general

[2] To cite but a few examples: In 1986, Abdullah Ahmad, then a member of parliament from the dominant United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), reiterated that Malays have the birthright to be "politically dominant" (Ahmad, 1986:3) in Malaysia because the country belongs to them as "original" inhabitants of the land. That, he warned, is how things are and must continue to be because the Malays would rather share poverty with Indonesia (their co-religionists and ethnic cousins) than to see their dominance eroded by non-Malays (the Chinese in particular), implying that they would rather destroy the country first. In 2000, UMNO Youth members threatened to burn down the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, the building which houses *Suqiu* (literally "appeal"), the committee behind the Malaysian Chinese Organisations'

public as familiar rhetoric used for self-serving reasons. Although there is truth in this view, and while it is also true that many Malaysians have come to silently accept the rhetoric with weary impotence or cynical detachment, it would be dangerous to surmise that this were all it amounts to; or that, because threats against 'other' races are not always carried out to the full, they are ultimately harmless. Racist language, symbolism and imagery exert radiating effects on civil society. As they circulate and reproduce, they stir, rouse and embolden cross-sections of inclined Malaysians to legitimate racism and to perceive others with deepened prejudice. As this is iterated over time, a certain kind of everyday experience and thinking is unified and hegemonised, transformed from precedent to tradition.

The consequences are far-reaching, bearing in mind that the field in which power operates is not reducible to competing blocs vying for control of policy issues and the distribution of resources. Power penetrates and is dispersed and "remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture" (Butler, 2000:14). As narrow racial and religious thinking permeates society and delineates the limits of thought, certain ideas are rendered unthinkable, certain possibilities are foreclosed and certain divisive practices incited. Two immediate repercussions of this have been the contraction of the space for civic dialogue and the worrying rise in the number of reported cases

---

Elections Appeal. *Suqiu* was targeted for purportedly playing with *api perkauman* (racial fire) and threatening Malay sovereignty in coming up with a seventeen-point elections appeal. Among other things, the memorandum, which was accepted unconditionally by Barisan Nasional prior to the 1999 general elections, called for the abolition of racially-discriminatory national policies, the introduction of affirmative action based on the "the status of the weaker sectors and not on race, social background and religious belief," and the enactment of "a Race Relations Act to combat racism, racialism and racial discrimination" (Suqiu Committee 1999). In 2005, Hishamuddin Hussein (Chief of UMNO Youth) drew applause in a political summit when he brandished a *keris* (a weapon symbolising Malay power) in defence of Malay supremacy and as warning to non-Malays who would oppose the party's proposal to enhance Malay "special rights." And in 2006, a Chinese Malaysian Member of Parliament (Barisan Nasional), Loh Seng Kok received an unannounced "visit" and an ultimatum from a mob of fifty UMNO Youth members at his office. Both were prompted by Loh having allegedly "hurt the feelings of Malay Malaysians" when he raised "sensitive" issues in Parliament. Loh had earlier spoken up about the imbalanced history syllabus which ignores the substantial contributions of non-Malays to nation-building, the state-issued Muslim prayer recital guidelines for "everyone and every government and private agency" which was drafted without reference to or discussion with non-Islamic bodies, and the problems faced by non-Muslims in setting up places of worship (Beh 2006a; 2006b).

of intolerance and discrimination against racialised minorities. Regardless of whether particular racist articulations are strategic, heartfelt or simultaneously both, a certain episteme has come to be hegemonised in everyday Malaysia—one which rationalises the overriding prioritisation of one's race as requiring no apology and as 'the right thing' to do. In this episteme, being overcome by passion for one's race is not seen as a pathology requiring overcoming but a condition to be proud of. To disagree with this viewpoint is, from the side of the episteme, to be 'racist' and a 'threat' to the country's 'racial harmony'.

In view of this deadlock, what does one say, not to a stranger, but to a friend or a colleague who believes in her deepest convictions that to regard 'other' races as equal is to dilute the supremacy of one's own? What if she insists that she believes this *freely*—rationally and self-transparently, subjected to neither false ideology nor faulty knowledge? As a gesture towards dialogue, it is worth highlighting firstly that self-certainty is never a sufficient condition for the establishment of the autonomy of the will in any philosophy of freedom. Contrary to popular understanding, to take our passions—for instance, our belief in the specialness of our race—on their own cognisance and to act on them, on the strength of our emotions, as proof of their infallibility, is not to be free but to "prisoners of our immediate nature" (Žižek, 1993: 126). Regardless of whether we realise or admit it, we are always already determined, 'imprisoned' by a causal link that chains us to the external world. Nature, culture, upbringing, divinity, historical forces, unconscious psychological impulses and an array of other causes shape and determine our self-conception and beliefs in complex ways which we can never neatly untangle. However—and here is the crucial twist—although we are the effect of a host of causes which remain opaque to us, we are never simply passively acted upon. Our beliefs about our race, for instance, are never spontaneously ours, built into our identity without our intervention. They may have been influenced by family, peers, the media, the state and by many other factors. However, in order for a belief to become our belief, we have to make the precipitous personal gesture of identifying it from a multitude of beliefs and then incorporate it into our identity. What this means effectively is that the cause of which we are the effect is ultimately self-posited. We are the ones who freely posit our dependence on an external cause (belief) we insist is upright on account of our professing it.

The practical implication of the logic of freedom identified above becomes apparent when applied to Malaysia's attempts to come to terms

with its constitutive plurality. Being overcome by passion for one's race, by one's belief in the moral necessity of putting to work the ideology of racial specialness, is not to be free but to make the "free choice of unfreedom" (Zupančič, 2000:39). It is to independently choose to be dependent on a cause which one posits as absolute. The free decision to choose unfreedom (to say 'I can't help but to insist on the unshakeable moral uprightness of my belief in my race') is always a choice for which one is fully responsible. It is here then that the ethical core of freedom lies. The subject can choose freedom by seeing itself as its own creation—the one who has the power to transcend its racial notion of itself and transform the bundle of features that make up its identity. Granted, this choice of freedom is almost never a desirable alternative to unfreedom; for to attain freedom, the racial subject literally has to give up what is most precious to it: the emotionally-invested beliefs underpinning its racial self-identity.

Whether the free choice of freedom is made will have an overarching effect on future relations between the 'races' in Malaysia, the totality of which describes the country's 'coming community'. It will determine whether the future will be owned by collaborating multitudes organising themselves on the basis of "being-together" (Agamben, 1993: Section 11), indifferent to identities derived from traditional categories like race, religion and gender—or by peoples divided by their myths of the authentic, culturally-integrated, self-enclosed community.

From different angles, the essays in this volume interrogate the key issues sketched above, all underlining the urgency of rethinking the passion for race. Suvendrini K. Perera examines this in Chapter 1, where she demonstrates how popular culture continues to challenge and contest the racial logic by which Malaysia's "national story" is inscribed. Perera describes the "national story" as the post-1969, state-endorsed (his)story of Malaysia, a narrative about "who came when (or who was always here) and who fits where." The coherence of this story hinges on the near-biologistic essentialising of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and over sixty ethnic communities found in the country. It depends on their being reduced to frozen blocs, unchanging in essence, distinct from and entirely unrelated to each other. Perera's argument is that, although the "national story" is sustained through an array of state technologies, it has yet to completely erase the historical reality of what she terms "multiethnicity": "the irreducibly mixed and intertwined racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious histories" characteristic of Malaya/Malaysia and indeed the region, in particular, certain parts of South and Southeast

Asia. Perera unpacks this interconnectedness of the "races" through an allegorical reading of Chuah Guat Eng's, *Echoes of Silence, A Malaysian Novel*, a crime-thriller which rewrites Malaysia's "national story" through "the device of shared lineages, mixed inheritances and hidden histories of biological hybridity."

Chapters 2 and 3 pick up the thread by examining contesting imaginings of being and belonging from the perspectives of four contemporary Chinese Malaysian poets. Gabriel Wu (Chapter 2) and Tee Kim Tong (Chapter 3) provide rare insights into the worlds of Fang Ang, Fu Chengde, Chen Qianghua and Lin Xingqian. The four are key figures in *Mahua* literature (Chinese Malaysian literature in Mandarin), who remain relatively unknown and under-studied in the English-speaking world, as little of their work has been translated to date. Focusing on the first three poets, Wu illustrates how 'Chineseness' is experienced and negotiated by Chinese Malaysians sharing the poet's subjective positioning, emphasising that the burden of race carried by the community is far from theoretical. Wu makes a nuanced case in dispelling the persistent stereotype of Chinese Malaysians as irredeemably Sinocentric, a trope often cynically applied to those formally educated in the vernacular and immersed in the Chinese linguistic world. Insecurity about the future, in the face of perceived or real threats to their identity and dignity as ethnic Chinese, has driven many to identify even more passionately with Chineseness. However, as Wu argues in the context of Fang, Fu and Chen, identification with Chineseness, however passionate, is not an insurmountable mountain. For even as the poets celebrate it in various texts, they display awareness, however reluctantly shared, of identity being contingent upon the circumstances in which one is thrown. Treasured as they might be at a given time and space, the cultural underpinnings of identity cannot but be rethought and understood anew, as circumstances change and as one generation succeeds the next.

In contrast to home-based Fang, Fu and Chen, the fourth poet, Lin Xingqian, has been living in voluntary exile since 1983. As Tee Kim Tong highlights in Chapter 3, Lin left Malaysia for Taiwan, out of disillusionment with the country's racial politics, in what he then took nostalgically as "an act of cultural return … to the maternal body of mainstream Chinese culture". Over time it became evident to Lin that his cultural return had been an "impractical myth"—the self-reflexive pursuit of which, although it did not rid him of exilic consciousness, was nonetheless necessary for him to "get over" his passion for Chineseness.

Tee traces this journey towards the "post-identity" of self-supercession and freedom through Lin's major poems and essays. From these works, Tee delineates a "poetics of diaspora" which breaks significantly from mainstream conventions of Mahua writers residing in Malaysia.

In Chapter 4, I examine the role of the dominant Malay intelligentsia in imagining Malaysia, using as platform for discussion, two popular Malay teen novels by Gunawan Mahmood, a Malay/sian writer. A key claim in Gunawan's award-winning *This Land* (*Tanah Ini*) is that the alienation of ethnic and religious minorities in Malaysia has been falsely attributed to policies and attitudes which lean heavily towards Malay-Muslims. It contends that the root cause of their discontent lies rather within themselves, in their failure to recognise that they harbour a pre-existing baseless prejudice against the Malays and Muslims. The text illustrates this through Albert Sia, the main protagonist who, to a certain extent, reminds us of Lin and many others like him who have taken the impractical yet necessary journey of cultural return. Out of nostalgia for Chinese culture, Sia, in the novel, leaves Malaysia for China, his ancestral homeland, where he finds neither the plenitude of Chineseness nor the freedom of Lin's post-identity. Ironically enough, what Sia finds instead is Islam, the religion he associates with the Malays against whom he is prejudiced. Sia's discovery of Islam at the roots of his ancestral origins in turns washes away his racism towards the Malays and awakens him to the foolishness of having treasured the Chinese culture which "did not belong to this country." Chapter 4 demonstrates that this ideological line emerging from *This Land*, as from the second focal text, *Namaku Ayoko* (My Name is Ayoko), is not, as one might hope, a random anomaly. Rather it conforms to the wider neoconservative pattern in modern Malay literature and to the trend on the ground where more Malays appear to be folding back into themselves, away from the plurality surrounding them.

In Chapter 5, Susan Leong employs Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as a text through which she interrogates the relationship between nation and ethnicity. Leong delineates three notes of dissonance the MSC introduces to Malaysia, disrupting the dominant imagining of the nation as an ethnocracy. Against this, she links the discussion to transnationalism and belonging, highlighting how the MSC, in inflecting the nation in contradictory ways, also acts for some Chinese Malaysians as a passage out of decades of vulnerability to anti-Chinese policies and as passage towards the call of "Greater China", a

transnational space where capital and race interbraid and brothers lost in diaspora are brought together again, to paraphrase Aihwa Ong.

In Chapter 6, Daniel Goh in revisiting "Malay" and "Chinese" makes the point that the 'races' in Malaysia, although a legacy of the colonial yoke, are far from straightforward orientalist inventions. He asserts that their reification was thoroughly implicated in both colonial-era transnational economic processes, as well as the libidinal economies of the colonial officers themselves, many of whom were from the fringes of the middle class or from marginal nobility. Goh's intertextual reading of the quasi-historical, quasi-ethnographic and semi-autobiographical writings of Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford and Anthony Burgess reveals that "Malay" (essentialised as indolent but whose "heart" was nonetheless constructed as noble and courageous) was not a racial or ethnic category at the point of its incarnation. Rather it describes the "*ideal ego* of the late-Victorian Anglo-Saxon male", a narcissistic image in which the British appeared to themselves as likeable. In "Chinese", by contrast, the British saw a negation to their fantasy of bringing civilisation to Malaya, where "larger processes involving [pre-colonial] transnational capital and migration … were already shaping the materiality" of the land. "Chinese", in other words, was a racialised symptom of pre-existing transnational processes which the British stumbled upon in Malaya and sought to control and shape. Weaving his case through texts and contexts, Goh concludes with the argument that this fundamental fantasy of the 'races' not only remains intact in contemporary Malaysia but serves as the foundation of Bangsa Malaysia, an "imaginary bricolage" of "multiracial union" which occludes the construction of race and the violence of globalisation-related material development.

Bangsa Malaysia is explored further in Chapter 7, where Mohan Ambikaipaker considers the place of the "Indian" within the state's nation-building idiom. Ambikaipaker shares with Goh the premiss that, in order to fully appreciate the material force of race and to open up the space for intervention, the passion it conjures should be read, not as a primordial feature of society, but as an effect of the value-forming process inherent in globalised capital accumulation. To illustrate this, Ambikaipaker traces the historical disenfranchisement of "Indian" labour in Malaysia, its discursive evolution from an "industrious and compliant" plantation workforce to "indolent" low-wage workers displaced to urban fringes, whose value can only be used up but not enhanced. This, then, serves as background for Ambikaipaker's dis-

cussion of the Kampung Medan racial attacks in 2001, during which a "generalized interpellation as Malaysian-Indian, and secondarily as non-Muslim, was sufficient to licence brutal violence". The Kampung Medan violence, he notes, suggests a break with the "May 13 paradigm of comprehending racial conflict in Malaysia." Instead of bodies symbolically associated with economic privilege (e.g., "Chinese") being targeted, working-class Indian bodies living in squatter settlements were violently attacked, chased, beaten and slashed with *parangs*. Ambikaipaker draws from media reports and his personal exchanges with Indian residents of Kampung Medan. From these he delineates the shifts in which the attacks were coded and recoded in popular imagination: from denial of their racial character and denial of their linkage to the government's developmental policies, to the invocation of Bangsa Malaysia as "a way of quickly moving beyond the facts of racial violence."

From racial interpellation, the focus shifts to racial identification in Chapter 8. Here I employ the signifier "Hindu-Indian", taken to represent minoritised communities in Malaysia, to think through the politics and ethics of remembering "our" cultural roots. Towards this end, I thread the discussion through K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives*, a novel about the eviction of an aged Indian woman squatting on a plot of land and the state's use of psychological methods to loosen her grip on it so that "development" could be brought about. I read the text symbolically to explore a series of questions on identity and identification: "firstly, if the roots we remember as ours really do precede and determine us in ways beyond our control; second, if they are not in fact a euphemism for race; and third, if our roots/culture/race are not ultimately ours to remember only insofar as we volitionally posit them as ours in an act of decision for which we are always fully responsible."

In the final chapter, Tamara Wagner reassesses the problematics of representing sameness and otherness, both in Malaysia and in the context of the global alterity industry which turns on the marketing of othered cultures. Through a critical analysis of orientalism, occidentalism and neo-orientalism, Wagner highlights the impasses of sameness and otherness (us/them, East/West, local/foreign, etc.), illustrating how they all too often overlap and congeal from a bricolage of prejudices. There is lesson in this for Malaysia's imagination of community, Wagner explains, fleshing out her argument through two internationally-marketed pieces of fiction by Malaysian writer Ooi Yang-May. Belonging to the popular genre of legal thriller, *The Flame Tree*

and *Mindgame* employ themes of racial stereotyping, cross-cultural relationships, and the selling of sameness/otherness, capitalising on the very objects commodified by the alterity industry. However, as Wagner notes, the texts also go beyond that in their working through and against stereotypes in order to expose them as ironic fictions—not by simplistically standing them on their heads but self-reflexively, through twists, inversions and double inversions in the passion for 'other' lovers. Wagner reads in these texts a narrative irony that dismantles the imagination of a millennial community premised on exclusionary politics.

Collectively the essays in *Overcoming Passion* represent an effort to reinvigorate critical studies on race and to broaden the limits of possibility for thinking about what it means to live together in a world of irreducible plurality. The volume does not pretend to offer the last word on the subject. Nor does it claim to cover the full spectrum of social texts available for critique. What it does offer, however, is the reminder that just as racist exclusions occur at multiple sites of power, resistance to them should be deployed at as many fronts, including the field of cultural production. As well, the texts remind us that, although those instrumental in creating and expressing racisms are in the best position to end them by reigning in their passion, there are also other means of intervening to increase Malaysia's incorporative gains, of undermining through critique "the conceptual conditions and apparatus, the deep grammar," in terms of which racist discourse is expressed (Goldberg, 1993:225).

Works Cited

Ahmad, Abdullah (1987) "Speech delivered at the Institute of International Affairs, Singapore, 30 August 1986", in K. Das intro. & comp., *Malay Dominance? The Abdullah Rubric*. Kuala Lumpur: K. Das Ink.

Agamben, Giorgio (1993) *The Coming Community*. Michael Hardt tr. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Azouley, Katya Gibel (2006) "Reflections on Race and the Biologization of Difference". *Patterns of Prejudice* 40.4–5:353–379.

Beh, Lih Yi (2006a) "Religion and History: BN MP with All Guns Blazing". *malaysiakini.com*, 15 March. http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/48377 (accessed 25 March 2006).

———, (2006b) "BN MP Gets 'Ultimatum' from Umno Youth". *malaysiakini.com*, 28 March. http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/49009 (accessed 28 March 2006).

Butler, Judith (2000) "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism", in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. London; New York: Verso, pp. 11–45.

Goldberg, David Theo (1993) *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Oxford; Cambridge MA: Blackwell.

Kant, Immanuel (1974) *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Mary J. Gregor tr. The Hague: Nijhoff.

Meyer, Michel (2000) *Philosophy and the Passion: Towards a History of Human Nature*. Robert E. Barsky tr. University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Suqiu Committee (1999) "The Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals", *freeanwar.net*, 16 August. http://www.freeanwar.net/news/suqiu_demands.html (accessed 2 November 2006).

Wald, Priscilla (2006) "Blood and Stories: How Genomics is Rewriting Race, Medicine and Human History". *Patterns of Prejudice* 40.4–5:303–333.

Žižek, Slavoj (1993) *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Zupančič, Alenka (2000) *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*. London; New York: Verso.

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITIES? RETELLING MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL STORY[1]

Suvendrini Kanagasabai Perera

In 1998 I was teaching a short course on settler literatures at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia). On my first day, preparing to catch a taxi out to the university at Bangi, about 20 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, I was surprised to be cautioned that some taxi drivers might be reluctant to take me there because "they remember May 13." Some of the other Malaysians to whom I later mentioned this story have dismissed it as unrepresentative and overly negative. Yet my first day's experience was but one among many others to indicate that running parallel to the comfortable interactions of everyday life in a multicultural society was something else: a social landscape marked by fears, traumas and resentments, as well as by tacit agreement on racial, religious and ethnic no-go zones, both topographic and metaphoric.

Submerged but unmistakable hints and warnings from Malaysians of all ethnicities suggested that the violence of May 13, 1969 had not been buried under the affluent shopping malls and giant office towers of the new Malaysia. And it didn't take much to for me to decode this and other encrypted reminders. I had heard similar ones all my life. Long before the conflagrations of July 1983 that drove most of my extended family out of Sri Lanka, I had become accustomed to oblique reminders of "1958", "1976" and a litany of other anti-Tamil pogroms invoked only in cryptic references to dates and place names.

The warning on that first day in KL was unexpected but somehow not a complete surprise: in Malaysia, as just another South Asian-looking body on the street, I am a more naturalised presence than I will ever be after almost two decades in Australia. Misrecognition as "local" draws me into a subterranean drama of ethnicity with its silent dynamics of acknowledgment and complicity, (mis)takes me for

[1] I am grateful to J.V. D'Cruz, Alberto Gomes, David Lim, Prem Kumar Rajaram, Sumit Mandal and Ismail Talib for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

being at home while telling me all the while that I am not at home. Interpellated by Malaysian narratives of 1969 and after, I feel I am hearing stories that I know well in parts, though not at all in others, stories whose twists and turns, and above all whose endings, remain unknown to me. What follows, then, brings other contexts and conflicts to bear on what are often thought of as discrete national histories. Prompted by Chuah Guat Eng's award-winning *Echoes of Silence, A Malaysian Novel*, a serendipitous find in a bookshop in Bangsar, I read Malaysia through Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka through Malaysia, a project that provokes surprising resistances on both sides. Yet, each of these multiethnic postcolonies shadows the other as an unspoken presence, and intimates the limits and possibilities of any coming community.

Crime Story as National History

At the centre of Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence, A Malaysian Novel*, is a mystery, the mystery of national identity. Unravelling its detective plot—the murders, some fifty years apart, of two white women, both fiancées of an English rubber plantation owner—reveals a scandal; a tangled web of racial, ethnic, familial and sexual histories that thoroughly implicates the multiethnic characters of the text in each others' pasts and futures. The national claim staked out by the subtitle, *A Malaysian Novel*, prompts a reading of the text as allegory, but is this national history posing as crime fiction or the unfolding of a crime as an untold national story? Even as it uncovers a history of murder, racial and ethnic passing, sexual and family violence and lies, however, the text simultaneously collaborates in covering it up again. Detective and accomplice, *Echoes of Silence*, suggests the pitfalls and possibilities of trying to tell other national stories.

This essay uses *Echoes of Silence* as a springboard for a series of questions about the vocabularies, forms and modalities through which what I call 'multiethnicity' can be represented. I use the term 'multiethnicity' to signify the irreducibly mixed and intertwined racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious histories that characterise, in particular, certain parts of South and Southeast Asia (Pfaff-Czarnecka et al, 1999). Multiethnicity as I am invoking it is not to be confused with the policies of multiculturalism espoused as state projects in many of these countries; neither is it, as I discuss later, a variant of the proliferating theorisations of hybridity-as-all-purpose-panacea in postcolonial studies.

State multiculturalisms function to assign discrete roles in the national story to selected groups: not everyone is granted visibility in the national story, as witnessed by the obscuring of Orang Asli and other Aboriginal groups in Malaysian nationalist discourse (Nah, 2003). The multicultural story—there is usually only one—is, rather, about situating selected groups within the state in time and place as it incorporates them into the narrative of the nation. This is a linear and hierarchical narrative that establishes the nation's spatiotemporal parameters. It tells who came when (or who was always here) and who fits where (Perera, 2000; 1999). The multicultural national story secures priority in time and centrality in place for its dominant group, assigning later and smaller places for the other groups it chooses to make visible. Authorising narratives of the state, its domestic and foreign policies, its endorsed histories and official memories, work to produce, reinforce and consolidate selected ethnic, racial and religious collectivities as they manage them through an array of state technologies—from tourism to the census and school curricula.

Processes of multiethnicity are distinct from state multiculturalisms' scripting of national time and space. If multiculturalism can be visualised as a graph or grid that orders and ranks selected groups in time and space, multiethnicity is more nebulous and difficult to plot. It is a space of leaks, perforations and overlaps, produced by a heterogeneity of practices, of common linguistic, religious and regional affiliations and daily interactions in shared places. Multiethnicity is located in what I call junction zones, drawing on memories of my childhood and adolescence in Sri Lanka. These junction zones are places where ethnic, racial and religious differences are both delineated and undone; spaces of conflict and collaboration, engagement and exchange, demarcation and destabilisation, desire and denial. In junction zones, the presence of a plurality of languages, religions and ethnicities calls into question the notion of a singular national story. Their coexistence is not always peaceful, but suggests possibilities for negotiating and transacting with differences, understood as partial and contingent rather than exclusionary, absolute and primordial (Perera, 2000; 1999).

A number of theorists writing from different positions have discussed specifically Asian histories of multiethnicity, cosmopolitanism and coexistence. Ashis Nandy cites the existence of "plural identities", for example, selves experienced as simultaneously Muslim and Hindu, and identifies "alternative traditions of cosmopolitanism" in India. According to Nandy, while these forms of cosmopolitanism "did not conform to

the Enlightenment view of humankind … [or] to the needs of a contemporary concept of global political economy as we understand these needs today, [they] did cater to inter-community, inter-cultural and inter-continental exchanges of a wide variety" (1999:160–161). Writing in the same volume, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake also point to "South and Southeast Asia's hidden history of inclusive cosmopolitanism" (1999:38) in Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and Malaysia, arguing that "post/colonial state building has created the very ethnic identities, conditions and violence that states proclaim as ancient and then purport to control" (11).

Contemporary ethnic and racial identities in these places are not static and timeless, but the complex product of colonialism, modernity and Western notions of nationhood working in combination with the policy decisions of post-independence states (Krishna, 2000). Specific technologies and practices past and present underwrite current understandings of South and Southeast Asian states as made up of ancient, distinct and self-contained ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic groupings locked in competition for national space. In his essay, "Number in the Colonial Imagination", Arjun Appadurai discusses the emergence of the census in India as one of the main technologies for consolidating distinct ethnicities. As implemented in British colonies from India to what is now Malaysia, the census conjoins "the utilitarian needs of fiscal militarism in the world system, the classificatory logics of orientalist ethnography, the shadow presence of western democratic ideas of numerical representation, and the general shift from a classificatory to a numerical bio-politics" (1993:333). This configuration of factors produced "self consciously enumerated communities" who became "embedded in … wider official discourses of space, time, resources, and relations" generating a "specifically colonial political arithmetic, in which essentialising and enumerating human communities became not only concurrent activities but unimaginable without one another" (333).

Enumeration and essentialisation as twinned processes are crucial to the development of ethnonationalisms in postcolonies. The different understandings of Asia as the home of distinct ethnic and religious ("communal") entities marked by ancient, intractable hatreds conceal a much more prosaic history involving a range of practices, knowledges and ideologies from anthropology and linguistics to parliamentary representation, by which, in David Goldberg's words, these states were "endowed and endow[ed] themselves with races" picked from "various sources, scientific and social, legal and cultural" (2002:130–131). To

cite just two examples, separate legal systems were codified for groups identified (essentialised) as distinct by orientalist scholarship, while separate parliamentary seats for selected ethnic/religious communities were enshrined in successive pre-independence constitutions.

In turn, measures such as these determined, in large part, both the *cast* of nationalist arguments in the period leading up to self-rule, and the *modalities* in which postcolonies came to imagine themselves. Enumeration and numerical representation, inevitably linked to essentialised ideas of separate "communal groups", were key technologies by which post-colonial states sought to redress colonial injustices and (re)fashion the new nation. Equally inevitably, essentialised ethnic and religious identities provided the cast for oppositional movements in these states, to a great extent drowning out the address of counternarratives of internationalism, anticommunalism and coexistence. Although alternative histories of cosmopolitanism and multiethnicity could not be completely overwritten, ethnic arithmetic not only came to pervade the language of politics but also provided the grammar and vocabulary through which ethnic and religious identities were—and are—conceptualised, interpreted and experienced (Perera, 2006).

Enumeration, Essentialisation and the Arithmetic of Ethnic Violence

The starting point of *Echoes of Silence* looks back to 1969 from the mid-1990s. In a cinematic opening that telescopes time and space, the narrator is on a plane back to Kuala Lumpur from Zurich and London where she has lived since 1970. Chapter One of the novel begins with a stark explanation of her diasporic location:

> In March 1970 as a direct result of the May 1969 racial riots I left Malaysia. I had only one objective: to find a safe, orderly, predictable place to live in … where I could sink into obscurity and, as a tiny minority of one or at most two, never present a threat to anyone. (5)

After 1969, Ai Lian, a Chinese Malaysian student "face to face with the misfortune of being Chinese without feeling particularly Chinese" (25), seeks to reconstitute herself elsewhere as part of an unthreatening minority, made up *of one or at most two*, in a country where she can live as "part of it and yet not part of it, like a reader in a book" (5, my emphasis). The desire to disaggregate herself from a threatened and threatening Chinese Malaysian minority explains Ai Lian's future actions and

serves as the motor of the novel's detective plot. In the characteristic logic of self consciously enumerated communities, ethnic arithmetic, working hand in hand with essentialism, computes any larger minority as threat—indeed, *re*computes it as majority in relation to some imagined whole elsewhere. In this essentialist calculus, *minority* and *majority* are protean, malleable terms. As ethnicities are essentialised back to some point of pure origin, "minorities" can be re-imagined as "majorities" (for example, counted in with the number of Chinese in China or Tamils in India) while majorities conversely minoritise themselves: "Sinhala people are a minority in Sri Lanka if you compare them to all the Tamils in India"; "Tamils can always go back to India, or Chinese to China, but Malay and Sinhala people have nowhere else to go". Through these means, majorities cultivate "minority complexes", as Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rajasingham-Senanayake put it (1999:13), while minoritised subjects might unite themselves with some larger phantasmic elsewhere, or harden and consolidate discrete identities through counter-nationalism or separatism.

The paradox of enumeration and essentialisation is that these strategies characterise both the success stories and the failures of multiethnic postcolonies. Nowhere is this paradox more marked than in comparing Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The trajectories of Sri Lanka and Malaysia since independence could not be more opposite. The success story of Malaysia post-1969 is in painful contrast to the slow unravelling of Sri Lanka since the pogroms of 1958 and especially 1983. If for Sri Lankans the success story of Malaysia constitutes a reproachful vision of the might-have-been, for Malaysians, Sri Lanka could serve as a frightening object lesson of what might happen if ethnic passions are not carefully controlled and managed. Yet, ethnic arithmetic and essentialism, technologies that mark critical stages in Sri Lanka's long descent into civil war (Bose, 1994; Krishna, 2000; Thambiah, 1986), are also represented as the central planks of the Malaysian state's success in containing ethnic violence post-1969 through its program of redistributing national resources under the NEP and refashioning notions of nationality, entitlement, inheritance and belonging (Lee, 1999; Gomez, 1999; Nah, 2003).

In an essay comparing the differing trajectories of Sri Lanka and Malaysia Chandra Muzaffar has argued that the very different outcomes of policies for redistributing national resources through ethnic arithmetic can be explained primarily by the agreement among minority groups of the primacy of Malay rights. Unlike in Sri Lanka

where Sinhala dominance is not uncontested, Muzaffar contends, the Malaysian body politic is premised on a consensus of 'Malay preeminence' and the presupposition that the Malay presence is at the core of national politics based on Malays' indigenous status (2000:17–18). This consensus on Malay preeminence, Muzaffar suggests, in turn underwrites the successful implementation of the NEP.

I read *Echoes of Silence* as representative in many ways of indirect or camouflaged responses to the notion of consensus around the core of Malay preeminence and the role played by the NEP's technologies of enumeration and essentialisation. Popular culture in its various forms, including anecdote, urban myth and folklore of the everyday, emerges as the site for the expression of doubts and discontents that are interdicted at more serious levels where a "national consensus" must prevail. Perhaps the tale of the Chinese taxi driver with which I began carries more emotional than literal truth: as such it represents the forms in which unauthorised fears, memories and suspicions circulate as the underside of national consensus.

Ostensibly a detective story, *Echoes of Silence* similarly can be located at the level of popular culture, absolved of the responsibilities of "serious" social analysis. Its murder plot operates as a cover story for exploring the central paradox of the NEP: that while the paired technologies of enumeration and essentialisation are understood as the means of averting (further) ethnic violence and divisiveness, they themselves are experienced as enacting division and violence in the daily lives of Malaysian subjects of all ethnicities. Yet by a grudging agreement, reinforced at every level by the state, this violence remains for the large part unnamed, for fear of unleashing a worse violence. A further paradox is that enumeration and essentialisation, understood as necessary means for the redress of colonial injustices, also reinscribe, redeploy and reenact the very system of colonial divides, distinctions and typologies that they seek to reject and undo, thus perpetrating their own forms of psychic violence.

Alice Nah argues in a recent essay that in Malaysia the mechanisms and technologies of the colonial state came to be adopted wholesale by its post-independence successor, creating ethnic Malay identity as the "new Self" to be defined in relation to "new Others"—Aboriginal and "immigrant" Malaysians who are seen to have less legitimate claim on the national inheritance. Yet, even as the post-independence successor may assume the technologies, powers and self-presence of the colonial ruler, colonial categories are not completely cast off. Rather,

they silently underpin and structure the nation-building imperatives of the new state, while colonial classifications and typologies of ethnic/racial referencing refract and reemerge in the interactions of the postcolony's selves and others. These combinations and configurations are at the same time both new and not-new. In a similar vein, Yao Souchou points to the continuing role of what Nah calls "old selves" in his discussion of the "Faustian cost" that "positive-discriminatory pro-Malay policies" exact, "creat[ing] a cul de sac in the Malay subject whose socio-economic arrival is finally measured by the achievement of the Other" (2003:201).

In *Echoes of Silence* the contradictions of enumeration and essentialisation in the new Malaysia are canvassed through the relationship between Ai Lian, the successful transnational businesswoman, and Hafiz, a prosperous Malay lawyer and entrepreneur. Ai Lian sees herself and Hafiz as "rivals" by "accident of birth" (31) and cites two interconnected reasons to hold back in her business dealings with him:

> One is the fact that I am a woman and he is a man; I do not want to seem bossy and interfering. The other is that I am Chinese and he Malay; I do not want him to think that I feel I have a god-given monopoly of business acumen. (291).

Hafiz, for his part, is suspicious of Ai Lian because of her reluctance to put down "roots [in] Malaysian soil" or to invest in property rather than money, accusing her of "an opportunistic … totally uncommitted" approach (293). The divide between Hafiz and Ai Lian, expressed in gendered and ethnicised terms, is reinforced and heightened rather than superseded by the post-1969 regime's ethnicising of economic behaviour and institutionalising of ethnic stereotypes. The implicit equation between the two sets (woman/man, Chinese/Malay) suggest a divide that is biologised (an "accident of birth") as natural, immutable and given.

Understood in such terms, this divide can be bridged only when the "accident of birth" that divides the characters is undone: the secret of the plot discloses that Hafiz's mother, Puteh, seemingly the quintessential Malay matron, is in fact Ai Lian's aunt and a woman of Chinese and Eurasian ancestry. Puteh, the enigmatic centre of the text, is revealed to have lived three different ethnic identities in the course of her life. Beginning life as Charbo, a generalised Hokkien term for 'girl' her name is changed to Mary when she runs away from her abusive family, is adopted by nuns and goes to work in the household of a

British rubber planter, later becoming his mistress. Finally she becomes Puteh when, for protection from the invading Japanese during the war, she is married off to the Malay driver on the plantation, later rising to the status of a respected member of post-independence Malaysia and achieving the title Datin.[2]

Charbo/Mary/Puteh gives birth to two sons. The elder is Michael Templeton, son of the English rubber plantation owner and raised as the heir to the latter's estate. Her second child, Hafiz, is the son of her humble Malay husband. Puteh's survival depends on her gendered manoeuvring and mobility in the context of shifting power relations between Chinese, British/Eurasian and Malay groupings in the transitional years between World War II and independence. Her story indicates the submerged links between these three apparently self-contained groups, destabilising the notion that each is characterised by fixed and distinct attributes and identities.

By seeming to destabilise the ethnicity of Puteh, the Malay mother, a pillar of society and figure of the new nation, *Echoes of Silence* on one level attempts to undo ethnic and gendered essentialisms, suggesting instead that the three dominant groups in Malaysian history share irretrievably entwined lineages. Significantly, Indian-Malaysians are explicitly excluded from this triangulated Malay-Chinese-European family. In a telling scene, the old English planter entrusted with the care of the young, beautiful and apparently Eurasian Mary as the Japanese forces advance, finds himself unable to imagine her in the arms of any of the Indian workers on the Templeton estate. Instead, he hands her over to his handsome Malay driver, signalling the eventual transfer of the estate and the nation into ethnic Malay custodianship.

In resolving the tensions of ethnicity through the device of shared ancestry and genetic indeterminacy the text can be understood on one level as refusing the logic of the enumerated community and challenging the essentialist inscriptions of difference that underwrote social policy in post-1969 Malaysia. In a review in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*,

---

[2] In a personal communication Alberto Gomes points out that the names Charbo, Mary and Puteh all suggest ethnic types—*Charbo* is the Hokkien word for girl, while "*Mary* reminds many Malaysians of the Anglican church, St Mary's, in Kuala Lumpur." *Puteh* is the Malay word for white and "it is no surprise that Puteh should marry the Malay driver. Another stereotype! Malays, in the minds or imaginaries of upper or middle class non-Malays of the 1960s and 1970s, are usually drivers!" Gomes concludes: "the author in adopting these names is clearly imbued with the kind of ethnic conventions that she seems to want to challenge with her case for hybridity."

reprinted on the back of the 1994 edition of *Echoes of Silence*, June Mo describes the text as a new development in Malaysian fiction—new not only in literary terms, but for its "solution" to Malaysia's particular "cultural conundrum", the "cultural orphanhood" experienced by its minoritised subjects after 1969. Mo further suggests that the text's "solving" of that conundrum of "cultural orphanhood" is its real detective task, lifting it outside the thriller genre and positioning it as no less than "the most accomplished Malaysian novel to date." As serious rather than popular literature, Mo sees *Echoes of Silence* as entering, albeit indirectly, the public debate on national identity—a claim underlined, as already noted, by the subtitle *A Malaysian Novel*.

Naming itself *A Malaysian Novel, Echoes of Silence* poses a series of questions about the valences of the term *Malaysian*. Is it a Malaysian novel because it deals with *the* national question, the question of who counts as a Malaysian? Is it a Malaysian novel because its characters are Malaysian, regardless of their ethnicity and their diasporic location? Or, again, is the story Malaysian because no other term more accurately describes the ethnic identity of its central characters?

If in Mo's description, the conundrum (re)solved by *Echoes of Silence* is that of "cultural orphanhood," the minoritised subject's sense of exclusion and dispossession from the birthright of national belonging, the text's resolution to this problem is to (re)insert Chinese- and British-Malaysians into a rediscovered national family. In the climactic scene, Ai Lian hands Hafiz a diamond necklace stolen by Puteh from the Englishwoman she murdered some twenty years before to protect the inheritance of her eldest son, Michael:

> "In that case," I say, taking Hafiz' hand and placing the necklace in it, "consider it part of the Templeton endowment for the Al-'Alim College of Science."
>
> "I'll think about it," he says. But he takes the necklace from me.
>
> Then I hug him. My cousin. A family connection, at last. (338)

As Hafiz and Ai Lian are established as family, the rift between them turns out to be a simple case of mistaken identities. Ai Lian signals her return to the national fold by donating the necklace, together with the last remaining piece of land on the Templeton plantation, to a private Malay science college that Hafiz plans to establish on the site. The college, an appropriate project for a nation consolidating the gains of the immediate post-independence period, combines the elements of scientific modernity, Malay advancement and private enterprise leavened

by just the right touch of philanthropy. Ai Lian's incorporation into this nation-building project signifies her willingness to finally acquire "a stake in the country" (293), leaving behind the rootless diasporic subject who put her faith in portable property. Reconnected to Malaysian society by her link to Hafiz, Ai-Lian exchanges "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1997) for the promise of home and belonging.

As questions of ethnicity are revealed to be no more than a case of mistaken identities, the matter of guilt and innocence in the two ancient murders becomes equally irrelevant. Ai Lian recognises in Charbo/Mary/Puteh, not only a long-lost aunt but also a teacher and fellow survivor of multiple violences:

> But how do we begin to segregate and classify ourselves? Was there ever a murderer or thief who was not also a victim? … The victim is the murderer. The murderer is the victim. (342)

Classification, ethnic or ethical, becomes increasingly difficult in a state where technologies of enumeration and essentialisation have been rendered obsolete. This ending rewrites the various characters of the text as one big family, content, if not happy, and linked by their retrospective complicity in the crimes committed in the cause of safeguarding the family inheritance—an inheritance now retrieved from British ownership and recast as a genuinely national possession. Puteh, victim of the Chinese patriarchy and of British colonial racism and sexism, is revealed as the murderer of the two white women, British and American, who, by marrying her former lover, may have produced new heirs to the national estate. By eliminating these potential rivals, Puteh ensures that her two sons, Hafiz and Michael, can safely inherit the plantation, although the part-English Michael's early death fittingly leaves Hafiz (child of Malay and Chinese-Eurasian parents) as sole owner. At the conclusion of the story, the Al ʿAlim Private Science College built on the grounds of the Templeton rubber estate, coupled with the great transnational wealth accumulated by Ai Lian, forms the basis for a second phase of state-building in which ethnic referencing and differentiation are no longer sustainable or necessary.

In this new—"post-ethnic"—Malaysia, ethnic identities are not subsumed so much as reworked into new combinations and more usable resources for a globalised economy. In this environment a composite Asian ethos—part Sanskritised, part neo-Confucian recalling the epigraphs of *Echoes of Silence*—is invoked in campaigns ranging from the valorisation of state-endorsed "Asian Values" to the "Malaysia—

Truly Asia" tourist promotion. Both are built on continuing erasures—the absence of Aboriginal Malaysians—but are seen as inclusive in new ways in the space that they allow for acknowledging the contribution of selected ("Asian") minorities.

Post-Ethnicity, Hybridity and Mistaken Identities

In the concluding section of this chapter I want to explore the limits and possibilities of the text's writing of multiethnic histories through the device of shared lineages, mixed inheritances and hidden histories of biological hybridity. While the revelation of hybridised pasts undoes the NEP schema of ethnic differentiation and enumeration and suggests the shifting sands on which the postcolony's nation-building project was founded, its reliance on the "mixed" family as the basis for configuring a new post-ethnic or amalgamated national identity poses its own set of dilemmas. Hybridity, as Goldberg warns, is a double-edged concept in which the "resistive" and the "conservationist" inhere almost equally (2002:31). If "hybridity is conceivable only against the background assumption of racial terms, biologically or culturally comprehended" (Goldberg 2002:31), the text risks building on the very categorisations it attempts to undo in its construction of a new hybrid or amalgamated national family (see also Gomes's remarks cited above). In rejecting the myth of a pure Malay genealogy for its son of the soil, Hafiz, for example, the text falls into the trap of reinscribing ethnic types in its accounting for Hafiz's financial success through Puteh/Mary/Charbo's sound business advice.

The uncritical embrace of hybridity as the answer to ethnic conflict also depoliticises practices of ongoing injustice and inequality within the state, deflecting questions of incommensurability (for example, the status of indigenous groups) and deteriorating into a new universalism that can "banalize difference into synthesis" (Krishna, 2000:246). The conceptualisation of biological or cultural hybridity as the main challenge to systems of racial/ethnic categorisation and enumeration also leaves little space to acknowledge the part played by resistive practices of internationalism, cosmopolitanism and multiethnicity, or by what Trinidadian theorist Rhoda Reddock calls "interconnectedness". In the period immediately before and following independence, for example, possibilities for a multiethnic future were often affirmed and enacted through the adoption of Marxian ideologies. These now discredited his-

tories of internationalism and interethnic solidarity can offer a powerful counterforce to contemporary ethnonationalisms. A. Sivanandan's acclaimed novel *When Memory Dies* is an instance of an attempt to reclaim in careful detail the history of anti-imperialist struggle that stands as an alternative tradition to the emergence of communalism in Sri Lanka. In *Echoes of Silence* this memory of internationalism and anti-communalist solidarity is recalled at the edges of the plot through reference to the years Jonathan Templeton and his friend Yew Chuan spend in the jungle with the Communist rebels. These allusions to an almost mythical period of politicised interethnic solidarity, however, signify as no more than a trace—an irrelevant, even slightly shame-faced, memory of a hope that has lost both national and global currency.

Bracketing for now the ongoing symbolic appeal of such unrealised histories, I will end with a move sideways in space rather than backwards in time by briefly elaborating on Reddock's notion of interconnectedness. I do so partly to introduce other theoretical and geographical dimensions into this discussion, and also by way of decentering theories of hybridity developed primarily in metropolitan postcolonial literary studies. I want to mark, as well, a query about the adequacy of hybridity, as a concept primarily focused on thinking relations between coloniser and colonised, for understanding contemporary relations between differentially positioned, *co-colonised* groups, such as Chinese and Malay in Malaysia, Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, or Indian and African in Trinidad. Reddock's discussion of a way forward for Afro- and Indo- Caribbean feminist scholars in Trinidad suggests that another set of questions and theorisations is called for in attempting to understand forms of connectivity between differentially colonised groups in postcolonies, groups who bear distinct relationships to the coloniser *as well as* to one another. Reddock writes:

> In conceptualizing a theory of difference for the Caribbean … it is not enough simply to celebrate diversity. We need to isolate the ways in which the constructed differences have contributed to how we have conceptualized ourselves. Difference in the Caribbean therefore can be a mechanism for showing interconnectedness. (1998:10–11)

For Reddock, an Afro-Caribbean, her identity has been constituted not only in relation to the coloniser but also in a complex exchange with and against her co-colonised counterparts:

> It is for this reason … that in my own historical research begun some years ago, my efforts at understanding the experiences of Indian women were as important to me as was my understanding of African women.

> Not simply because it was politically correct for me to do so but because our differences had in some way contributed to what we had now been constructed to be. In other words, it was impossible for me to know myself if I did not know my other/s. (1998:10)

Reddock's notion of thinking about "difference [as] a mechanism for showing interconnectedness" suggests new modalities for understanding the processes by which states "are endowed or endow themselves with 'races'; and adjust and adopt races to governmental purposes" (Goldberg, 2002: 131). Exploring practices of interconnectivity and the co-constitution of ethnicities and races in multiethnic postcolonies will not overwrite the processes of enumeration and essentialisation by which their subjects have been marked and scored, but it does open up other theoretical possibilities for understanding the mechanisms by which differences are produced, maintained and resisted—and perhaps even for thinking the contours of a future where differences can be more imaginatively mobilized.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun (1993) "Number in the Colonial Imagination", in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 314–339.

Bose, Sumantara (1994) *States, Nations, Sovereignty Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Elam Movement*. New Delhi: Sage.

Chua, Beng-Huat (1998) "Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore", in Kuan-Hsing Chen ed., *Trajectories Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 186–205.

Chuah, Guat Eng (1994) *Echoes of Silence: A Malaysian Novel*. Kuala Lumpur: Holograms.

Goldberg, David Theo (2002) *The Racial State*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

Gomez, Terence (1999) "Tracing the Ethnic Divide: Race, Rights and Redistribution in Malaysia", in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka et al, *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia*. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 167–191.

Krishna, Shankaran (2000) *Postcolonial Insecurities*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Lee, Yumi (1995) "Cultivating Authentic Sons of the Soil: Development Discourse and the Management of Indigeniety in Malaysia", in Suvendrini Perera ed., *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities/Ethnicities/Nationalities*. Melbourne: Meridian, pp. 161–177.

Mo, June (1995) "Review of Echoes of Silence". *Far Eastern Economic Review* 9.

Muzaffar, Chandra (2000) "Comparing Notes on Sri Lanka and Malaysia: A Quest for Inter-ethnic Harmony", in A.J. Canagaratne ed., *Ethnicity,*

Pluralism and Human Rights Neelan Thiruchelvam Commemoration Conference Papers. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, pp. 17–26.

Nah, Alice M. (2003) "Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia: Beyond Being 'Not quite/Not Malay'". *Social Identities* 9.4:511–534.

Nandy, Ashis (1999) "Coping with the Politics of Faiths and Cultures: Between Secular State and Ecumenical Traditions in India", in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. eds., *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia*. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 135–166.

Nandy, Ashis (2002) *Time Warps Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*. London: Hurst & Company.

Ong. Aihwa, and Donald M. Nonini eds. (1997) *Ungrounded Empires The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*. New York: Routledge.

Perera, Suvendrini (2006) "Race Terror, Sydney 2005". *Borderlands* 5.1. http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol5no1_2006/perera_race-terror.htm.

———, (2000) "Futures Imperfect" in Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas eds., *Alter/Asians*. Sydney: Pluto Press, pp. 3–24.

———, (1999) "Unmaking the Present, Remaking Memory: Sri Lankan Stories and a Politics of Coexistence". *Race & Class*, 41.1–2:189–196.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, Joanna and Darini Rajasingham-Senanyake. "Introduction", in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanyake, Ashis Nandy and Terence Gomez eds., *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia* New Delhi: Sage, pp. 9–40.

Reddock, Rhoda (1998) "Contestations over Culture, Class, Gender and Identity in Trinidad and Tobago: 'The Little Tradition'", in Christine Barrow ed., *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, pp. 62–80.

Sivanandan, A (1997) *When Memory Dies*. London: Arcadia Books.

Talib, Ismail (2002) "Malaysia, Singapore and Migration", in Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks eds., *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Petaling Jaya: Pearson Education, pp. 136–143.

Thambiah, S.J (1986) *Sri Lanka Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yao, Souchou (2003) "After The Malay Dilemma: the Modern Malay Subject and Cultural Logics of "National Cosmopolitanism" in Malaysia." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18.2:201–230.

THE REJECTED IMAGINATION IN THE POETRY OF FANG ANG, FU CHENGDE AND CHEN QIANGHUA

Gabriel Wu

In his classic discussion on the origin and spread of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) identifies four waves that swept across the world over the past few hundred years.[1] The first began with the independence of Creole states in the Americas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, followed by European nationalism and its reactionary official nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century and, lastly, colonial nationalism in Asia and Africa after World War II. Malaysia, together with most of its Southeast Asian neighbours, rode on Anderson's last tide of nationalism to become a sovereign nation.[2] For almost half a century since attaining independence from British colonial power in 1957, the state has implemented national policies to forge a national identity that will unite its plural society. However, partly because colonial baggage and the state's continuing commitment to racial policies favouring the 'Malay', the nation continues to be divided structurally and affectively between 'Malay' (also Muslim by constitutional definition) and 'non-Malay/Muslim', of which the Chinese constitute the majority.

This essay examines the responses of three major ethnic Chinese Malaysian poets to the ideology of Malay hegemony as birthright and the marginalisation of the Chinese (and non-Malay minorities) in Malaysia. The three poets are Fang Ang (1952–), Fu Chengde (1959–) and Chen Qianghua (1960–). As we shall see, the poets' selected works from the 1980s and 1990s, all written originally in Mandarin, reveal a strong emotional connection to Malaysia as home—a connection which is nonetheless impinged upon by an identity crisis resulting from

[1] The term "nationalism" has different definitions and categorisations. For instance, Anthony D. Smith (2000) has come up with another set of nationalisms, i.e., the primordial, the perennialist, the modernist and the ethno-symbolist.

[2] Malaysia was known as the Federation of Malaya until 1963 when it was renamed Malaysia, with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore as part of the federation. Singapore exited Malaysia in 1965.

the imagination of Malaysia as rightfully belonging only to the Malays. There is also an unmistakable sense of 'Chineseness', a through-line which is bound to tempt some critics to construct as evidence of inherent Sinocentricity, or to dismiss as a cliché which adds nothing new to our understanding of 'race relations' in Malaysia. Indeed, to write emotively about being Chinese in Malaysia today, to demonstrate attachment to Chinese culture and language, to express disillusionment with the marginalisation of the Chinese in Malaysia, and to furthermore do all this in the Chinese vernacular—is to face the risk of being typecast as possessing the insular mainland Chinese mentality of yesteryear, as unable to move on with the times, as harping on tired issues that add little to national integration, or even as 'anti-Malay'.

The concerns raised by poets like Fang, Fu and Chen do not always garner uniform sympathy or identification, including from segments of the hardly-homogenous 'Chinese' in Malaysia, not all of whom are literate in Mandarin Chinese or appreciate Chinese imagery. Still, I think it would be doing a great disservice to our understanding of ethnic relations in Malaysia if the concerns raised were ignored, for what is important is not whether what the poets raise is novel, fashionable or neither, but rather the fact that these issues continue to be raised today, and that they remain unresolved, fifty years after Malaysia's independence. Not all non-Mandarin-literate readers are aware that the concerns transcend the poets, forming a larger circulating discourse in the Chinese vernacular in Malaysia, a discourse which—as will be explained through selected poems of Fang, Fu and Chen—relate to Chineseness as a melancholic object of comfort and pain, of constant negotiation and potential loss. As the following analysis of selected poems will show, this relation is genuinely heartfelt, arising not from any inherent need to be 'Chinese' or to play a cruel zero-sum game with other 'races' in the country but out of material suffering in living with what I call 'zero identity'.

Living With 'Zero Identity'

To Anderson the nation is imagined as an inherently limited and sovereign political community, an invented deep, horizontal comradeship. It suggests a strong affinity and inspires profoundly self-sacrificing love among its members, and such love is clearly pronounced in their cultural products like poetry, prose fiction, music and plastic arts

(Anderson, 1991:6–7, 141). As the predominant element in literary expressions of national feelings, love for the nation is not uncommon in Chinese-Malaysian poetry. Tian Si (real name: Chen Litong, 1948–), for instance, pledges in his poem "Women bushi houniao" (We are not Migratory Birds) that "we shall never leave / This land which we love to the utmost. / For the sake of Her future happiness / We pledge / To contribute our youth and vigour." Tian Si also sings with hope in "Ningju" (Cohesion) that

> We keep suspicion, jealousy and hatred out of the gate.
> We are here
> To put together our lofty intents of contributing to nation building.
> We are here
> To put together our ideals of great harmony for the nation.
> We are here
> To lay out a beautiful blueprint of the next century.[3]
>
> (Tian, 2002: 151; 121)

Often, however, love for the nation as articulated in Chinese-Malaysian poetry is at least minimally tinged with sorrow. Time and again we hear from the poetic circle deep regrets and laments about the nation's obsessive maintenance and perpetuation of racial identities. Exemplifying this is Fang Ang's 1984 poem "Tian biaoge" (Filling Up Forms):

> I have no idea when
> I would be allowed to fill up forms designed by Malaysians,
> In which I need not indicate whether I am Malay, *Shina jin* [Chinese] or Indian;
> But state properly—
> I am Malaysian!
>
> (Fang, 1990:41–42)

The form is one of the most common and effective means of personal identification in modern society, containing the most up-to-date data that define its user. In "Tian biaoge", Fang speaks in the voice of a form user who is dissatisfied with the need to declare his race. By asking in return when he will be allowed to state only his national identity ("But state properly—I am Malaysian!"), the form user leads us to contemplate if it is not the designer of the form who determines what data is required and what identity he wants the user to assume. Notice how the same word "Malaysian" appears twice in the above stanza but carries different meanings. The form designer, representing state author-

[3] The translation of poems quoted in this discussion are all mine.

ity, has designed the form to differentiate the users according to their race, the assumption being that all Malaysians must be categorised that way. Compare this with the form user who shows the opposite mindset. The form user sees Malaysians as one community and he desires to state this identity which is shared by all in the country. But his hope is thwarted by the authority's demand for specification and differentiation. In another poem, "Gei HCK zhi er" (To HCK Part II), composed in 1986, Fang goes as far as to reject the notion of "Malaysian":

> Call us natives of China, but indeed we are not.
> Call us *Shina jin*, but we are unwilling to accept it.
> Call us Malaysians, but who says we are?
> Call us Chinese, but of what country are these citizens?
> We have a past that underwent the most changes,
> A future that is most desolate. (Fang, 1990:56)

Here the Chinese in Malaysia are portrayed as belonging to what I shall call a 'community of zero identity' because they are denied validation. They are Chinese but their homeland is clearly not China. They are Chinese Malaysians, citizens no less; yet they are constantly reminded of their lesser status as non-*bumiputras*, framed by discriminatory policies and attitudes as *shina jin*, a derogatory term first used by the pre-war Japanese to refer to the Chinese as a humiliated people of the defeated and declining China of the early twentieth century. In making the highly emotional statement—"Who says we are Malaysians?"—and painting a bleak future for the zero-identity community, Fang rejects the concept of "Malaysia" as imagined by exclusivists who, silently or otherwise, believe in the rightness of maintaining a double-tiered citizenship.

As we shall see, it was during the 1980s and 1990s that the key poets discussed in this essay were keen on articulating their anxiety of identity. The eldest among the three poets is Fang Ang (real name: Fang Chongqiao), born in 1952. Fang graduated with an honours degree in mathematics from the University of Malaya and is currently a lecturer in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (Sultan Idris University of Education) in Perak. The son of pioneer Chinese Malaysian writer Fang Beifang (1918–), Fang Ang demonstrates a deep concern for the underrepresented Chinese in his poems, most of which appear in *Niao quan* (Bird's Rights; 1990), one of five books of poetry he has published thus far.[4] As for Fu Chende and Chen Qianghua, they were born in 1959

[4] Fang's collections are *Yeying* (Nightingale; 1984), *Niao quan* (Bird's Rights; 1990),

and 1960 respectively. The two junior poets share several key similarities. Both studied in Taiwanese universities and, upon graduation in the mid-1980s, returned to Malaysia to become teachers in Chinese secondary schools. Both poets have published at least one volume of poetry, respectively *Gan zai fengyu zhiqian* (Ahead of Wind and Rain; 1988) and *Nanian wo hui dao Malaixiya* (The Year I Returned to Malaysia; 1990).[5] Most significant of all, Fu and Chen, like Fang, share the same concern with and sadness about racial realities in Malaysia.

Unlike Fang who lets his works speak for themselves, Fu and Chen make additional efforts in the preface and colophon of their books to explain their motives for writing; although, of the two, Chen is less direct in his explanations. In an understated way, he writes merely about his disappointment with the hustle and bustle of everyday Malaysia to which he had returned from Taiwan, so much so that he immediately planned another distant trip out of Malaysia. Chen also reveals that it was poetry that helped him to face the realities at home, be they suppressive, unworthy or anomalous (Chen, 1998:129). By contrast, Fu is more forthright, calling his collection, *Ahead of Wind and Rain* as "lyrical poetry on politics." He considers it a heartfelt poetic response to the fate of the Chinese community in Malaysia, particularly during the tense political standoff between Chinese- and Malay-based parties in late 1987. The events which led to the confrontation began as a protest by Chinese educationists against the state's placement of non-Mandarin-speaking senior administrators and principals in Chinese vernacular schools. When politicians from Chinese component parties of the government joined Chinese opposition leaders in protesting against the move, Malay groups responded with an intimidating threat of an even bigger show of Malay solidarity against the Chinese. Before the rally could be held, the state ordered the largest crackdown on opposition leaders and social activists since the race riots of May 1969. These were the circumstances to which Fu responds

---

Bainiao (White Bird; 1992), *Yandi* (Eavesdrops; 1993) and *Na rutou shang de mao* (Hairs on the Nipples; 2001). *Bird's Rights* contains poems written between 1980 and 1989. "To HCK" is one of them.

[5] Aside from *Ahead of Wind and Rain*, Fu has also published *Kucheng chuanqi* (The Legend of a Weeping City; 1984) and *You meng ru dao* (My Dream is Like a Knife; 1995); whereas Chen has produced *Yan yu yue* (Mist, Rain and Moon; 1979), *Huazhuang wuhui* (A Masquerade Ball; 1984) and *Xingfu dixiadao* (The Underpass of Felicity; 1999) on top of *Nanian wo hui dao Malaixiya* (The Year I Returned to Malaysia).

in *Ahead of Wind and Rain*, in which he expresses his intense feelings—doubt, anger, disappointment and worry—for the traumatic situation facing the country (Fu, 1988: Preface).

Remembrance of Bygone Harmony

In varying intensities, Fang, Fu and Chen probe into the daily life of Malaysians in order to question and contest the way in which 'Malaysia' is imagined through narrow racial terms. Deeply troubled by deteriorating relations between the Chinese and Malays in the 1980s, the poets turn to the past for relief. They recall and invoke a plural yet harmonious society which characterised pre-independent Malaysia. This strong nostalgic feeling is articulated in Fang's "Filling up Forms", the poem cited earlier:

> At that time the British flag soundly slapped our cerulean sky,
> Neither the Malays, nor the Chinese, nor the Indians had become
> Malaysians.
> Malaysia was still a foetus,
> Malaysia was a name to be whispered only.
> The Malays were governed by the sultans,
> The Chinese arrived from the Tang mountains,
> And the Indians intended to return to their sub-continent eventually.
> Effortlessly the British ruled for eighty-two years.
>
> Now that our national flag is erected on this land,
> Our constitution says we are all Malaysians,
> Our leaders say we are, regardless of race and colour.
> In *kampungs*, cities and rubber plantations,
> In places where we are not given reminders,
> Many have almost forgotten whether they are
> Malay, Chinese or Indian. (Fang, 1990:41–42)

While there were more complicated reasons for better ties during the colonial era, Fang Ang merely wants to highlight the sharp contrast between pre- and post-independent Malaysia so as to critique the latter. In Fang's reconstruction of the past, the different communities of pre-independent Malaysia were aware of their origins but they were not compelled to assume a national identity. They coexisted in relative peace, a result of which was that colonial Britain was able to rule the peninsula with ease for almost a century. By contrast, in post-independent Malaysia, people are constantly reminded of racial differ-

ences and the threat multicultural diversity poses to the Malay-Muslim-centric national identity. By invoking a peaceful, bygone age, Fang suggests that the elevation of one community above the rest and the purposeful suppression of the country's diversity could not possibly contribute to national integration.

While Fang Ang contemplates the question of identity to himself, Chen Qianghua invites as interlocutor the Chinese historical figure Qu Yuan (343 B.C. – 277 B.C.; noble title: Lingjun—literally 'Divine Balance') to bear witness to what he sees (Hawkes, 1985: 68). Chen shares with this banished poet and counsellor of the ancient Chu kingdom his critical view on the disequilibrium facing the changing Malaysian society.[6] Chen's 1987 poem "Malaixiya 'Li Sao'" (The Malaysian 'Encountering Sorrows') reads:

> Oh come, Lingjun!
> Come and cast a glance at our land,
> Where all those in chaos are our fellowmen.
> Please come with burning passion,
> And witness how we love this land with worry and anxiety.
>
> Back and forth, twisting and turning. Oh! Lingjun,
> When you pass through China Town and the *kampungs*,
> Behold! The ethnic communities that had once united,
> Are now separated by fences,
> Their yelling go high and low, they calculate their own interest.
>
> (Chen, 1998:103)

What Chen presents here is a state of ethnic separation or antagonistic estrangement. The various communities have isolated themselves and excluded each other with "fences". In pursuing their group interests they have also created situations which can exacerbate already tense relations. For this reason, the poet finds himself having to love the country with worry and anxiety, for he sees a portentous future waiting.

The Wasted Hearts for Malaysia

In their quest for identity, the three poets venture beyond the unproblematic belief that citizens should offer unconditional love to their country, so they could question the worth of expressing such love when

[6] On the history, geography, culture and society of the ancient Chu Kingdom of China, see Cook & Major (1999).

unrequited. To question thus for the poets is to indirectly reject the hierarchical definition of what it means to be "Malaysian", as we shall see. In a poem written in 1982, "Yinwei, wo bu shuyu zhepian tudi?" (Because I Don't Belong to This Piece of Land?), Fang Ang illustrates this sentiment by depicting how despondent a Chinese man of meagre income feels when his application for a public residential flat is repeatedly rejected. The poor man has waited seven years since his first application but he has yet to be allocated a unit, even after his fourth child was born. The reason given by state officials for their rejection is that land is scarce in Malaysia while applications for flats are plentiful. However, Fang, who speaks in the sad voice of the persona, could not help but wonder:

> Is it because I don't even own a single piece of roof tile?
> I am a man of no shelter?
> Alas! We don't belong to this piece of land? (Fang, 1990:19)

The poor man's questions imply that, while destitute Malays have been prioritised for assistance by the state, similarly disadvantaged Chinese have had to fend for themselves, even as the state expects selfless contribution from them. To Fang, and many of his fellow writers, this treatment of the Chinese is wounding at best. By comparison to Fang Ang, Fu Chengde is more direct in capturing the dejection of the Chinese community. Many of his poems in *Ahead of Wind and Rain* reflect on the question of whether the Chinese should continue to have faith in Malaysia, given the circumstances. Consider, for example, Fu's early 1988 poem "Yinwei women shi ruci shen'ai!" (Because We Love Her Deeply!), in which he bemoans:

> Yueru, this is our land!
> The place where we laugh with joy, where we depend upon,
> Where we were born and live.
> Yet certain emotions have been toyed with,
> A certain thinking has been polluted,
> A certain goodness has been destroyed,
> A certain quietude has been shaken.
>
> […]
>
> Yueru, this is our land!
> The land that we care and feel sorry for
> Because we love it so deeply!
> Yet certain feelings have begun to subside,
> A certain loyalty has begun to change,

Certain ideals have begun to vanish,
Certain passions have begun to turn cold … (Fu, 1988:45–46)

In a dialogue with his lover Yueru, an imagined Malaysia-born Chinese lady (Zhang, 2001:104), Fu conveys, in the above poem, the Chinese Malaysian's attachment to Malaysia, their disappointment at the under-appreciation and under-recognition of their commitment, contributions and sacrifices, and the resultant disillusionment and the ebbing away of their faith in the nation. In "Women ai bu ai nin, Malaixiya?" (Do We Love You, Malaysia?), written seven months later, Fu Chengde delves deeper into the collective wasted hearts for Malaysia:

We put our children to sleep in *sarung*,
We praise the king of fruits, the durian, with our native accent,
We pick up Malay scenery and delights with chopsticks,
Yet someone asks repeatedly:
"Do you people love Malaysia?"

Do we love Malaysia?
When all that is remembered in nurturing and upbringing is skin colour,
When all that is remembered in praises is language,
When all that is remembered at meal time is cutlery,
Do we love you, Malaysia? (Fu, 1995: 29)

In the poem, Fu recounts the ways in which the Chinese in Malaysia have adapted to the land and grown roots in it—none of which, however, seems to amount to much, to those who, perhaps with conscious cynicism, persist in questioning the community's love and loyalty to the nation. In the eyes of the latter, embracing all that is local like using the *sarung* or imbibing Malay delicacies does not make a Chinese Malaysian an equal citizen, for the Chinese are after all Chinese, an entirely different people from the Malay. In this sense, then, the poem "Do We Love You, Malaysia!" reads as a strong protest and rejection of the narrow way in which 'Malaysia' is imagined.

The Burden of Race

In the process of nation building, differences between Malays and non-Malays have over time become essentialised and naturalised to the point where they seem necessary and politically correct to maintain and defend. For the three poets whose works are examined in this essay, this over-emphasis on difference is precisely that which breeds mutual

suspicions, hinders national cohesion and estranges the non-Malays. Fang Ang, in particular, finds himself conscious of his difference not because he wills it but because he is constantly reminded of it. We see this exemplified in Fang's 1984 poem, "Wuti zhi yi" (Without Title No. 1), where the persona, a Chinese Malaysian, recounts the establishment of a lavishly-built new bank downtown. Although impressed with the bank, the persona could not but feel alienated, for he knows he does not qualify for the credit benefits offered only to *bumiputras*, even if he were destitute:

> Every time I pass by downtown, this new bank
> Reminds me with its gigantic-size name—
> You are not *bumiputra*! (Fang, 1990:43–45)

The name of the newly-established bank is not revealed in the poem. The bank could be a fictional entity or perhaps an allusion to Bank Bumiputra Malaysia,[7] originally set up to finance Malay businesses and to expand the Malay entrepreneur class. It is also possible that the poet is indirectly calling attention to the proliferation of schemes and organisations in the country which cater only to Malay advancement. Such assistance (if not prevented from reaching the poor by systemic corruption), while necessary to uplift the Malay poor, could not but remind the persona of his otherness and exclusion. The underlying message here seems to be that a nation that prioritises race over class or merit is one which invariably estranges, a sentiment Fang also expresses in "Pifu" (Skin), a poem he composed in early 1989:

> Worry is my skin,
> And my skin is yellow colour.
> If worry is the skin and can be removed,
> What's left is badly mutilated flesh. (Fang, 1990:94)

In "Pifu", Fang draws a connection between "worry" (insecurity in being a minority), "skin colour" (physical attributes) and "flesh" (the culture that defines the community). By bringing these three elements together, Fang is attempting to highlight a painful double-bind facing a Chinese Malaysian like him. Worry covers him like the skin covering his body, remaining with him and bringing him more worries over time. The tragic irony here is that even if he were able to shed his

[7] The bank was rebranded as Bumiputera-Commerce Bank in 1999. It recently reconsolidated into CIMB Bank.

skin (in the sense of rejecting its "yellowness"), he would still not be in a better position, for a skinned corporeal (a person who disavows the culture underpinning his identity) can only exist in a "mutilated" state. The skin metaphor is extended in another poem Fang penned in mid-1989 called "Jixu zao'ai" (Continue Making Love). This time it is provocatively cast in terms of sexual intercourse:

> Only when making love one need not worry about differentiating the left or right lapel,
> Need not choose between lounge suit, Chinese costume and *sarung*,
> When skin breathes, and body exposes,
> We believe this is the most selfless moment.
>
> […]
>
> Yes, pertaining to the question of equality—
> The brown skin goes atop, and yellow skin beneath,
> So who is suppressing whom? (Fang, 1990: 101)

With a hint of sarcasm, the poem suggests that sexual intercourse is the only activity where differences are levelled; for it is then that race vanishes and naked bodies lying together become equal as what Giorgio Agamben terms "bare life" (1998). Even so, there is a possibility that one body would attempt to dominate the other during intercourse, thus undoing equality, an act made more pernicious by the dominator's disavowal of his action. Put in the Malaysian context, "Pifu" suggests that Chinese Malaysians are not only marginalised on account of their race, there is also denial of their being marginalised. This is implied by the line "So who is suppressing whom?", a question which can also be read as an indirect response to the old belief that Chinese minorities would undermine or take advantage of the dominant Malays if they had the opportunity and if they were not pre-emptively suppressed.

Pronouncing Chineseness

Fang, Fu and Chen have been fairly articulate in voicing their worry and sadness over the dilemma of 'zero identity' facing the Chinese community in Malaysia. To resolve it, however tentatively, they have attempted to re-imagine the Chineseness underpinning their everyday life and communal integration. Along the lines of Huang Jinshu (1967–), a Taiwan-based Malaysian scholar and writer, they view Chi-

neseness as contingent upon how a person defines himself as 'Chinese' while residing in Malaysia. In the broadest sense, 'Chinese' implies one who is born with yellow skin and adopts Chinese customs; in its narrowest, one who uses the Chinese language and learns about Chinese culture and China, the nation of his ethnic origin (Huang, 1998:112). Unlike the majority of their forebears who migrated from mainland China and planned to settle temporarily in Malaysia, Chinese Malaysians after the second generation are not only local born but also emotionally rooted to the land that is Malaysia. They need no reminder and are fully cognisant of their commitment to Malaysia, not the remote land of their forefathers. As such, the Chineseness expressed in Malaysian Chinese poetry has been mainly a representation of the tradition and cultural values of the ancient China, not of the contemporary socialist polity. In short, the China of their identification is an imagined, codified one, which Huang Jinshu calls *neizai Zhongguo* (internal China) (Huang, 1998:222).

The notion of "internal China" finds its most prominent representation during the Cold War period when prolific writers like Wen Renping (1944–; real name: Wen Ruiting) and his younger brother Wen Rui'an (1951–) composed poems and organised activities around the *Tianlangxing shishe* (Sirius Poetical Society, 1973–1989) and *Shenzhou shishe* (Poetic Society of the Divine Land, 1976–1980), which they established in Malaysia and Taiwan respectively. While Wen Renping felt marginalised as a non-*bumiputra* in Malaysia, the latter felt doubly so because he faced rejection in both Malaysia and Taiwan, where he was seen as outsider. In response to their experience, the Wen brothers harked to the culture of internal China, which they sought to defend against the heavy influence of Western modernity. They treated Chinese traditional symbols and images with fondness and repeatedly referred to specific geographical names, historical figures and classics of ancient China in their poems. The younger Wen even portrayed himself as a white-robed stalwart swaying his bloodied sword and singing of unfulfilled dreams when drunk.[8]

Fang, Fu and Chen follow in the footsteps of their predecessors in highlighting their Chineseness without associating with the mainland China socialist polity. When Fu Chengde "raises his pen" in his

[8] Ample examples can be located in Wen's poetic collection *Jiangjun ling* (The General's Order). See Wen (1975).

poem "Buxiu" (Immortality), for example, he imagines himself "raising Mount Tai / to block the eastward rushing currents of Yangzi River and Yellow River", a common simile for stopping the passage of time in Chinese classical poetry. He also speaks of listening to a Chinese flute that "sounds forth mournfully / in choking tunes, / and weeps like the wind that howls and wails between the rocky nooks and cracks", while he sips hot tea and studies history books in "a cold and concealed small room" in "Xiao ming" (The Sound of Flute). With the exception of Chen (the youngest and least traditional of the three poets), Fu and Fang are, like the Wen brothers, partial to portraying in their poetry Chinese heroes whose grand wills are thwarted, for they see similarities between them and Chinese Malaysians. In "Mingzi" (Name), for instance, Fu assumes the persona of Xiang Yu (232 B.C. – 202 B.C.) and sings praise of this tragic pre-Han Dynasty mighty hero, who had won a great many battles but chose to take his own life rather than surrender when he was eventually besieged by the army of his arch contender Liu Bang (posthumously Emperor Gaozu of the Han Dynasty, reigning from 202 B.C. – 195 B.C.) near the River Wu (Fu Chende 1988: 88–89; 80–81; 128–129). Fu admires Xiang for his courage and for the heroic act which won him everlasting fame in Chinese history. Another hero is Confucius (551 B.C. – 479 B.C.), who appears in Fu's "Ye meng Fuzi" (I Dreamed about You at Night, Confucius):

> I dreamed about you at night, Confucius—
> In the fourteenth year of Duke Ai of Lu
> Travelled the startling bad news that a unicorn was captured during the western hunt.
> A group of country hunters
> Had no knowledge of how precious this auspicious entity was.
> Their long spears and short arrows penetrated the last hope
> In your fearful heart.
> Yet this time, you grieved no more,
> Your dry throat was already hoarse,
> Only wounds on the body of the precious beast
> Would flow the rhythm, the song of extinction they sang for you.
> Your silvery white hair
> Danced like a myriad hands. (Fu, 1988:134)

Early sources indicate that Confucius stopped compiling *Chunqiu* (Annals)—the history of the State of Lu from 722 to 481 B.C.—after he learnt about the capture of a unicorn. Confucius, an admirer of the Zhou dynasty tradition, wept for the demise of the creature of benevolence and lamented that it made its appearance at the wrong time

where there was no sage king.[9] Confucius is invoked in Fu's "Ye meng Fuzi" but the latter does not focus on the absence of a benevolent ruler. Instead Fu contemplates the wounding of the Chinese culture in Malaysia, one resembling the hunters' ignorant spearing of the unicorn. To express his great disappointment at the decline of the culture, Fu makes his cultural hero Confucius voiceless to signify the hopeless protectors of Chinese culture who, in failing to seek redress from the state, allow the unicorn to sing of its doom as it bleeds.

Fang Ang, too, celebrates historical Chinese heroes such as Qu Yuan, whom we encountered in our earlier discussion on Fang's poem, "Malaixiya 'Li Sao'" (The Malaysian 'Encountering Sorrows'). In "Zongzi" (Rice Dumpling), written in 1987, Fang invokes Qu Yuan again, this time in order to chide the younger generation for not cherishing their Chinese heritage, in particular the traditional customs associated with the hero:

> Is this rice dumpling?
> My younger brother, who has just returned home from his Chinese tuition class,
> Gobbles a mouthful of dumpling.
> "It neither tastes like *laksa* nor like *satay*,
> How can one eat such a thing?"
>
> Eating rice dumpling again?
> Holding a bottle of Coca-Cola in her left hand,
> and a hamburger in her right,
> And rushing for three consecutive shows of Jacky Cheung,
> My younger sister yells in disgust—
> "Damn Dragon Boat Festival! Damn rice dumplings!"
>
> By chance, one of the dumplings made by Mum
> Ends up spreading its leaf and flesh on a plate;
> While another lies askew on the table.
> This fragrance of five thousand years lingers sporadically in the air.
> Casting their menacing eyes, the flies circle atop and dash down—
>
> (Fang, 1992:103)

According to legend, the people of the Chu kingdom threw rice dumplings into the Miluo River (Modern Hunan Province, China) to keep

[9] See *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* (Gongyang Commentary of *Chunqiu*), "Kongzi shijia" (The Hereditary House of Confucius) and *Kongzi jiayu* (School Sayings of Confucius), in *Shisan jing zhu shu* (Annotation and Explanation of the Thirteen Classics), 2:2353; 2:2172, *Shi ji* (The Records of the Grand Historian) 6.47:1942; *Sibu beiyao* (The Four Category Collectanea), 4.8a.

the fish from feeding on the body of Qu Yuan, who, in grief, drowned himself there as he foresaw the downfall of the kingdom. Since then it has become customary for the Chinese to eat rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves on the anniversary of Qu Yuan's death (on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar). The festival commemorating the patriotic cultural hero is always marked by dragon boat racing. The tradition is alive today but, as Fang observes, younger Chinese Malaysians no longer celebrate it like their antecedents. They either prefer the local (like the persona's younger brother in the poem), or cultural imports from the West (like the little sister who uses abusive language to curse the Chinese tradition). In the end, all the persona could do is to witness the wasting of the rice dumplings under the attack by flies—a poignant metaphor of Chineseness lost.

Living elsewhere: a future diasporic community

In the face of the constant reminders of their otherness, Chinese Malaysians like Fang, Fu and Chen have striven to retain what they regard as their tradition and identity, the Chineseness that coalesces the Chinese Malaysian into a community. But even as they call for more care and respect for the centuries-old Chinese heritage, they are melancholically aware of the uncertainty the future holds for the continuity of Chineseness as they understand it. Pessimistically they foresee that the burden of race they carry in their lifetime will also be the future generations' to carry. In "Xie gei jianglai de erzi" (To My Future Son), Fu Chengde contemplates the fate of the coming community in which his future offspring will live. In a deep conversation with his fictional wife, Yueru, about the name they should give their yet-born son, Fu says

> Most important, Yueru,
> *Tu* is our roots
> Whereas *dan* refers to the rising sun from the level ground;
> Together they mean friendly and warm, energetic and vigorous,
> Down to earth yet full of hope,
> And broad-minded.
> Hence, we shall teach him to cherish the soil,
> Be simple but enthusiastic and take initiative.
> This is more meaningful than anything at this time, in this space.
>
> After a long silence you nod
> And say, "We shall call him Fu Tan,

And instruct him to bear in mind
The colours, worries and joys of this soil
Are indeed the colours, worries and joys of his entire life."
(Fu, 1988:41–42)

The Chinese word *tan*, meaning "level" and "smooth", is made up of the radical *tu* (literally "soil") and the character *dan* ("morning sun"). By naming his future son Tan, Fu hopes that he will have a smoother and brighter future in comparison to his own. By breaking up the compound word, he hopes that Tan will remember the "soil" of his motherland and at the same time rise from the east like the "morning sun," both references to cultural China as his origin and identity. The name is auspicious but Yueru recognises, as she remarks in the last two lines of the above extract, that their son is unlikely to escape being discriminated against by his skin colour, even as he derives a sense of grounding and worth from it. For being Chinese, Fu Tan, like his parents, will face this future, so long as race is used as an overriding index of discrimination.

A truly inclusive and cohesive Malaysia—a Malaysia that sees positive good in its cultural diversity—is still in the far horizon. For the poets, the future is uncertain, bleak even. This was particularly so in the late 1980s when ethnic tensions were mounting between Malay and Chinese parties. In moments of dejection, they even give up hope, preferring to see future generations of Chinese Malaysians leave their homeland to live and succeed in places where merit is recognised and equal opportunity upheld. Thus, in his 1986 poem "Xie gei jianglai de erzi" (To My Future Son), Chen Qianghua puts hope in the future diaspora:

Eventually we will give birth to you,
Our only son.
Chen Jia, indeed, Chen Jia
Jia means good,
And that is your name.

In the years to come we will turn senile,
Either hide and protest among the crowd, or be silent.
Hence we keep on saving money,
And work diligently
For just one reason:
In future you will be able to study abroad
Or migrate.
And, yes, surely you must read education. (Chen, 1998:91)

Chen's poem extracted above recalls Fu's "Xie gei jianglai de erzi" (To My Future Son) we examined earlier; the key difference is that Chen does not, like Fu, relate the name given to his future son to deep Chinese symbols. "Jia" simply means "good" in Mandarin; a name uncircumscribed by particularities. Behind the name is the father's prayer that his future son will not have to live with discrimination in his own country, and that he will strive to develop his potential and build a better life for himself in a more equitable society elsewhere. Migration, the poem suggests, may well be the only alternative to the marginalisation faced by non-Malays in Malaysia. The idea is echoed in another poem, "Yejian buding de xiangxiang" (The Flickering Imagination at Night), this time Chen involves both parents and future son:

> Bear me a son!
> If the environment deteriorates,
> And unjust treatments are as frequent as before,
> Because of our skin colour, language and sentiments,
> We are well prepared,
> Even to pay the high cost of migration. (Chen, 1998:116)

Again, in "1990 nianchu ji gei Blue" (To Blue, In Early 1990), Chen reiterates the idea of having the entire family lead a diasporic life overseas in the future:

> Dear Blue, I shall
> Have my future child here.
> My wife says, "Then let him enrol in an English school!
> And we should start saving money
> So that in future he can also study abroad
> Like you, study education."
> We shall plan for migration when we have saved enough money.
> (Chen, 1998:27)

Through the persona's wife, Chen emphasises the importance of his future son being properly equipped with English so that he may succeed in the Western world. His hope is that the son will also specialise in the field of education but at a university in the West, instead of in Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan, like Chen. Ironically, Chineseness is no longer stressed by Chen once it is resolved that migration is the only dignified response to their unrequited love for Malaysia. To succeed on equal ground or to live a better life, Chen believes that he and family will have to do the opposite of his ancestors. Whereas their forebears left their mainland China to settle in pre-independent Malaysia, the coming community of Chinese Malaysians may have to uproot and seek a new identity elsewhere.

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson's theory serves well in explaining the origin and content of modern nationalism but it makes no provision for marginalised minorities in nations that define their identity in exclusivist terms. It is this grey area that Fang Ang, Fu Chengde and Chen Qianghua address in their key poems produced in the 1980s and 1990s. The poets are acutely aware of their alterity as Chinese in Malaysia, alienated and compelled to identify even more with their Chineseness by policies and attitudes which detract from national unity, value creation and meritocracy. They may be accused of being Sinocentric but their writings remain testament to the Chinese community's protracted search for subjectivity.

Worked Cited

Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Daniel Heller-Roazen, tr. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Y. Andaya (2001) *A History of Malaysia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Chen, Qianghua (1979) *Yan yu yue* (Mist, Rain and Moon). Meinung: Palm Tree Publisher.

———, (1984) *Huazhuang wuhui* (A Masquerade Ball). Taipei: Malaysia News and Magazines Center.

———, (1998) *Na nian wo hui dao Malaixiya* (The Year I Returned to Malaysia). Johor Bahru: Penerbitan Pelangi.

———, (1999) *Xingfu dixiadao* (The Underpass of Felicity). Kuala Lumpur: The Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia & Selangor Hokkien Association.

Cook, Constance A., and John S. Major, eds (1999) *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Fang, Ang (1984) *Yeying* (Nightingale). Penang: Northern Bookshop.

———, (1990) *Naio quan* (Bird's Rights). Kuala Lumpur, Times Creative.

———, (1992) *Bai niao* (White Bird). Kuala Lumpur, Times Creative.

———, (1993) *Yandi* (Eavesdrops). Kuala Lumpur: The Writers' Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia.

———, (2001) *Na rutou shang de mao* (Hairs on the Nipples). Kuala Lumpur: Mentor Publishing.

Fu, Chengde (1984) *Kucheng chuanqi* (The Legend of a Weeping City). Kuala Lumpur: Ziteng.

———, (1988) *Gan zai fengyu zhiqian* (Ahead of the Rain and Wind). Kuala Lumpur: Omnipresence Publisher.
———, (1995) *You meng ru dao* (My Dream is Like a Knife). Kuala Lumpur: Times Creative.
Goldberg, David, ed. (1990) *Anatomy of Racism*. Minneapolis; Oxford: University of Minnesota Press.
Hawkes, David, tr. (1985) *The Songs of the South*. London; New York: Penguin.
Huang, Jinshu (1998) *Mahua wenxue yu Zhongguo xing* (Malaysia Chinese Literature and Chineseness). Taipei: Yuanzun wenhua.
Leifer, Michael ed. (2000). *Asian Nationalism*. London: Routledge.
Ng, Boey Kui (1998) "The New Economic Policy and Chinese in Malaysia: Impact and Responses". *Journal of Malaysian Chinese Studies* 2 (Dec): 99–123.
Rao, Chandriah Appa (1977) *Issues in Contemporary Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books.
Smith, Anthony D. (2000) "Theories of Nationalism: Alternative Models of Nation Formation", in Michael Leifer, ed., *Asian Nationalism*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–20.
Tian, Si (2002) *Tian Si shige zixuan ji* (Self-selected Poems of Tian Si). Kuala Lumpur: Mentor Publishing.
Wen, Rui'an (1975) *Jiangjun ling* (The General's Order). Bidor, Perak: The Sirius Publisher.
Xu, Wenrong (2004) *Nanfang xuanhua: Mahua wenxue de zhengzhi dikang shixue* (The Study of Political Resistance Poetics of Malaysian Literature in Chinese). Singapore: Global Publishing & Southern College.
Ye, Lin-Sheng (2003). *The Chinese Dilemma*. Kingsford: East West Publishing.
Zhang, Guangda (2001) *Fengyu zhong de yizhi bi* (A Pen Amidst Wind and Rain). Kuala Lumpur: Mentor Publishing.

FROM FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES TO POST-IDENTITY: LIN XINGQIAN'S POETICS OF DIASPORA

Tee Kim Tong

> At dusk I pass through the mean alleys in Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, Hong Kong. Gradually I perceive the expressions behind the panes and understand how the city lost its language.[1]
>
> ("Shiyu de hangdao" [Passage to losing language]; Lin, 2001:226)

In 1989, Lin Xingqian [Lim Chin Chown, 1963–], a budding writer from the diasporic Chinese Malaysian community, left Malaysia for Taiwan. In Taipei he resided until 1993, when he moved to Hong Kong for further study. He has been resident there since earning his doctoral degree in Chinese literature. Aside from academic writings, Lin has published two books of poetry, namely *Shiti de yishi* (The Ritual of Poetic Form; 1999) and *Yuanshi* (Originating Poetry; 2001). He also has a collection of lyrical essays entitled *Kuanghuan yu posui: bianchui rensheng yu dianfu shuxie* (Revels and Shatters: Marginal Life and Subversive Writing; 1995). As a diasporic writer, Lin has moved physically from one place to another, crossing borders, experiencing displacement in different places and maintaining an exilic consciousness. Unsurprising, then, one of the most frequently used words by the author is "piaobo", meaning "drifting", "wandering" or simply "exile", suggesting a sense of estrangement from home, homeland, and perhaps even from the current country of residence. In the act and (hi)story of changing places and cultures, identity for a diasporan like Lin is in a state of unfixity, caught in a continuous process of reconfiguration. This identity is in a paradoxical sense a non-identity, a state of being neither/nor or "neither here/nor there", as Azade Seyhan (2001) puts it. Lin's case is discussed in this essay to illustrate the diasporic phenomenon of *Mahua*

[1] English translations of Lin's poems in this essay are my renditions.

writers (Chinese Malaysian writers writing in Mandarin Chinese)[2] leaving their homeland, writing from outside the nation and arriving at what I call a "post-identity": an identity which, although remaining exilic, comes after the overcoming of the nostalgia for Chineseness.

Like many migrants and their post-colonial descendants in other nations, most if not all ethnic Chinese (and non-Malay/Muslim communities) in Malaysia experience their identities as double or divided identities, where ethnicity and nationality are concerned.[3] The dividedness of their identities precipitates primarily from the ideology of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) which promotes an exclusively three-in-one (race-culture-language) unity of *bumiputra*—or more accurately *Malay*—identity.[4] In promoting the Malay agenda on all levels of Malaysian society and in constructing Malay culture as Malaysian culture, the state effectively sidelines the non-Malays, alienating them into their private sphere. For Lin and other Chinese Malaysians, there seems no conjuncture where Chinese cultural identity can meet up with Malaysian identity defined in terms of Malay supremacy. "Being Chinese" and "being Malaysian" become incommensurable when they are ideologically cast as "other" in the biologistic discourse of race.

A consequence of the adoption of this autochthonal, monocultural, racial ideology has been the voluntary exile of many non-Malay intellectuals, who emigrated to Commonwealth countries, the United States, other Asian territories, and so on. The majority who chose to leave and not to return not because their lives were threatened but out of disillusionment or fear of increasing discrimination in their own country. By contrast to those who migrated, *Mahua* writers who stayed back and continued to write were caught in a difficult situation in the post-1969 era. Producing literature of direct political engagement had become almost impossible with the state's prohibition of public dis-

[2] The term *Mahua*, referring to the Chinese Malaysian writers who compose in Chinese, is a coinage from *Ma*lai(xi)ya *hua*wen, which means 'Malay(si)an Chinese-language'. Hence Chinese Malaysian writings in Chinese language are termed *Mahua wenxue*, meaning Malaysian Chinese-language literature. Literary works by Malaysian writers of ethnic Chinese background, irrespective of the language used, are preferably called *Huama wenxue* in Mandarin Chinese, which is a shorter form for *Huayi Malaixiya wenxue* (Malaysian literature of the Chinese descendants).

[3] The idea of divided identities here is borrowed from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her reading of Salman Rushdie's fiction. See Spivak, 1989.

[4] The term 'bumiputra', meaning 'sons of the soil', refers to Malays and the indigenous ethnic groups of the peninsula and East Malaysia. More often than not, the term is implicitly used to refer to the Malays only.

course on sensitive issues involving race, religion and education. As a result, many writers of the *Mahua* literary system turned to their inner world, appropriating (European) modernist techniques to explore the fragmented self—fragmented because of the discrepancy between their national, ethnic, and cultural identities. As for followers of the (Chinese) school of Social(ist) Realism, they could not textualise historically concrete representations of reality for fear of being associated with communism. In short, as the literature of resistance could not find an outlet, many *Mahua* writers of both camps in this period produced either modernist works indulging in the authors' personal emotions or social realist texts which were only skin-deep in representing society.

For Lin Xingqian, who left his homeland while others stayed on, the word "piaobo" (exile) is not a neutral one, for it signifies being forced out of a place called home, mostly for political reasons. "Piaobo" is thus a kind of punishment or banishment for being a non-conformist. Lin also uses the word interchangeably with "ziwo fangzhu", self-exile or a voluntary act of self-displacement to escape from the reality, memories or ideology at home, and, at the same time, to enjoy the freedom (of speech, of using the mother tongue or a marginalized language, for instance) restricted in the homeland. Self-exile, hence, suggests simultaneous enjoyment on the one hand and suffering and sadness on the other. It is a fulfilment of necessity rather than mourning for a lack or loss; it is political and yet non-political. Such kind of ambiguous self-exile is closer to the experience of expatriates, who, as defined by Edward W. Said, "voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons", than to refugees; though, like all displaced persons, voluntary exiles also suffer from "the solitude and estrangement of exile" (Said, 1990:362). Here then lies the predicament of the self-exile: being an exile in a foreign country, like all émigrés, means that he or she is able to enjoy the benefits of a new kind of freedom, but without being able to free him or herself from estrangement. In his "Reflections on Exile", Said underlines the misery of the exile's "hopeless attempts to make satisfying contact with new surroundings" by citing Joseph Conrad's description of the death of Yanko Goorall, the central character of his short story entitled "Amy Foster". Yanko's miserable death, "which like the deaths of several Conradian heroes is depicted as the result of a combination of crushing isolation and the world's indifference." Despite the freedom he enjoys in exile, the expatriate (Yanko, for example) exists in "the supreme disaster" of loneliness, despair, and estrangement (Said, 1990:361–362).

Lin's case is similar to Yanko Goorall's but more complicated in a way. Although a Malaysia-born Chinese, Lin self-consciously regards himself as "haiwai [Zhongguo] ren", an overseas Chinese. The self-image here is not a simplistic assertion of racial/ethnic identity and abjuration of national identity. For Lin, "haiwai ren" describes the post-identity of the diasporic Chinese whose passionate attempts to recuperate their "lost" Chineseness are precisely that which will ultimately lead them to realise the impossibility of the endeavour. As will be made clear, this post-identity is arrived at in a protracted process of self-discovery, a journey of multiple crossings and exposure to different cultures as an "exile", with the attendant loneliness of being one.

In his essay "Zhushen de huanghun: yizhong haiwai ren de ziwo lunshu" (Gods at twilight: a self-discourse of overseas Chinese), Lin begins his elaboration of "haiwai ren" in poetic terms as encompassing "All Chinese who left Mainland China, and they are like gods in exile, searching generation after generation for an earthly paradise in the world outside the matrix" (1995:278). Lin is aware, though, that in reality those who seek often "fall into the abyss of cultural identity and political myth" and become "marginalised self-exiles" (1995:277–278). In a poem entitled "Haiwai ren", Lin writes of the fate of the overseas Chinese:

> The year the ritual began
> their desire was already marginalized.
> Darkness under the feet stayed in the heart.
> Dreams fragile.
> A dreaming race,
> is another name for a flower.[5]
> Replacement of the thousand-year giant snake
> becomes water-people of the
> sea, becomes people of the overseas. (Lin, 1999:162–165)

Even before "the ritual began"; that is, even before the birth of the modern nation-state in the region, diasporic Chinese in some South-east Asian countries were already marginalized. They are "a dreaming race" whose dreams are fragile, for they can only dream of and, only in their dreams, desire for a country where they can develop a localized national identity and maintain their Chinese cultural identity. For Lin, such a project is ultimately in vain, as witnessed by those diasporic Chi-

[5] In Mandarin Chinese or *Putonghua*, 'hua' (flower) and 'Hua' (Chinese) are homophonous words in different characters.

nese who became "water-people of the sea", alluding to the haunted fate of the "boat people" who were driven by the Vietnamese government to face the terrors of the South China Sea in the 1970's (Amer, 1991). For Lin, diasporic or overseas Chinese are also boat people in a metaphoric sense, dispersed across the world yet linked by the "snake" invoked in the poem, a traditional totem for the Chinese, symbolising Chinese ancestry.[6] In different parts of the world, often as a minority, overseas Chinese are aware that their roots have been cut off and that they have a history buried. Employing the same sea metaphor, Lin writes:

> My motherland was buried in the seawater of homeland.
> My shattered buried longing
> has become overseas China.
> In previous lives they departed,
> in this—life their roots
> are lost in the boundless sea. (Lin 1999:162–165)

For many first or second generation diasporic Chinese Malay(si)ans, their ancestral homeland or ethnic origin has become an imaginary or cultural space, a location of the spectre ("buried homeland" of the previous lives) which is not real. But their diasporic "this-life" is equally unreal, since they fail to find a place to truly call home. They are, as Lin depicts in his poetry, "stray birds", a key metaphor borrowed from Rabindranath Tagore. In "Piaoniaomen" (Those stray birds), the poet writes:

> Names cannot be given to
> those stray birds that have lost their woods.
> …
> Making up the languages of islands and continents
> in strange dialects,
> conversing with the tribes from tropical rainforests,
> living alone, hunting,
> doing business in the exilic south. (Lin, 1999:157–158)

"Haiwai ren" without roots, like stray birds without woods, have little choice but to make adjustments and learn new languages to fit in and make a living (including "doing business" in the country of residence), although often at a heavy price. In some Southeast Asian countries,

[6] In Chinese legends "N[u] Gua and Fu Xi were snake-bodied progenitor gods" (Tresidder, 1998:186).

naturalised diasporic Chinese have been discouraged, if not curbed, from using their mother tongue, educated instead in ex-colonialist or local languages. As described by the poet:

> Outside the homeland, farewell they bade.
> They adopt the culture of other ethnics
> to describe their ancestors' homeland, evading their own selves.
> (Lin, 1999:163–164)

In another poem entitled "Shiyu" (Losing language), Lin expresses a similar sense of loss. The last stanza reads:

> After leaving the Mainland,
> the peninsula did not speak the ancestral tongue of migrants.
> Life depends on living space
> now that the beautiful rhetoric describing our body has lost.
> (Lin, 2001:229)

Losing a language involves not just the loss of language but also the loss of self. Beyond its utilitarian function, language is intimately bound to identity, individual or collective; as the Malay adage goes, *bahasa jiwa bangsa* (language is the soul of the race). Malaysia's national identity is in fact partially underpinned by the Malay language, formulated by the state as the language of nation-building. For Chinese Malaysians like Lin, however, the (Malay) language that defines Malaysia's national identity is not so much a language that unites as it is a reminder of their marginality. Why then do *Mahua* writers like Lin insist on writing literature in their marginalised mother tongue?[7] For them, literature serves not only as a means to express their ideas and feelings but also to define their ethnic consciousness and cultural identity. The Chinese-language, then, is not merely a language but a symbol of resistance to the marginalization or suppression of education in the mother tongue. It is symbolic also of their cultural homeland, without which "means merely the death of a partial world for some but for others it implies the withering of the whole mind" (Lin, 1995:51). Lastly, the use of Chinese as a medium of literary expression symbolizes the internal exile of

[7] The term 'mother tongue' is loosely used here to refer to Mandarin Chinese or *Huawen/Huayu*, which is, in fact, not the mother tongue of most Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese. The mother tongues of the majority of the local Chinese community are the Chinese dialects of *Guangtong hua* (Cantonese), *Fujian hua* (Hokkien), *Chaozhou hua* (Teochew), *Kejia hua* (Hakka) and *Hainan hua* (Hailam). For a short discussion on the mother tongue issue, see Talib (1998: 207–208).

Mahua writers: they *choose* to write in their mother tongue instead of the national language because it is the language with which they feel most at home.[8]

Diasporic Chinese Malaysian writers have of course expressed their literary talent in Malay and English, aside from Chinese. Indeed, the three literary traditions have long co-existed in the Chinese Malaysian literary polysystem. In the nineteenth century, Baba or Peranakan Chinese writers used English or Baba Malay to compose creative works and translate or rewrite classical Chinese stories.[9] In as early as the 1890's, immigrant Chinese writers in the Straits Settlements and Malaya wrote literary texts in classical Chinese. The trend was supplanted around 1920 when vernacular Chinese was used by immigrant Chinese literati as the linguistic medium to compose "xin wenxue" (new literature) in the literary supplements of local Chinese language newspapers, echoing the 1919 New Literary Movement in China.[10] When Malaya gained her independence from the British in 1957, most immigrant Chinese writers became citizens and continued to write in Chinese. For native born Chinese-Malaysians who were then educated in Chinese (up to secondary level), the language they used to express their literary feelings and cultural identity was Chinese, though they also used Malay and English in other occasions. For the Peranakan Chinese or their descendants and other English-educated Chinese Malay(si)an writers, on the other hand, English was their literary medium. When the post-War local English writing tradition emerged within and without the University of Malaya, which was then located at Singapore, writers such as Ooi Cheng Teik, Beda Lim, Wang Gungwu, Ee Tiang Hong, and Wong Phui Nam from this community played a significant

[8] Tan Swie Hian, the Indonesian-born Chinese Singaporean writer and artist, once revealed that although his professional languages are English and French, Chinese is the only language for his creative writing. Tan explains, "The reason for such a choice is that Chinese is my mother tongue. In no other languages can I express my thoughts and feelings more fluently and precisely than my mother tongue." (Tan, 1994:8–9).

[9] For a discussion on the Baba literary traditions, see, for example, Teo Lay Teen, *A Study of the Malay Translation of Chinese Fiction by the Baba Chinese: with Special Reference to Khian Leong Koon Yew Kang Lam*, M.A. thesis, University of Malaya, 1981; and Huang Huimin, *Xinma Baba wenxue de yanjiu* (A study of Baba literature in Singapore and Malay(si)a), M.A thesis, National Cheng Chih University, 2004.

[10] For an account of the development of *Mahua* literature, see Wong Seng-Tong, *The Impact of China's Literary Movements on Malaya's Vernacular Chinese Literature from 1919 to 1941*, Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1978; and Tee Kim Tong, *Literary Interference and the Emergence of a Literary Polysystem*, Ph.D. diss., National Taiwan University, 1997.

role.[11] Some of them, Wang and Ee, for example, even endeavoured to use localized English as the literary language, especially in their poetry, to express a national identity with the colonial language. The introduction of *Engmalchin* suggests that this group of post-War English speaking Chinese Malay(si)an writers were well aware of the necessity to nationalize and indigenize English, although according to Ismail S. Talib, "what may seem to be the incorporation of Engmalchin … does appear to be more a case … of *code mixing*, and … of *code switching*" (Talib, 1998:211; author's emphasis).[12]

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, discussing the relationship between language and identity in a similar vein, admits that in "the quarrel between national identity, as defined by a monocultural and monolingual ideology, and the English language, I recognize that … English is too much a part of my identity, confused as it already is ethnically, racially and culturally, that I cannot abandon it for any overriding purpose" (Lim, 1994:169). Shirley Lim's statement refers to the position of English-language writers in Malaysia but the same applies also to Chinese-language writers like Lin Xingqian who use their mother tongue to express their literary talent and to make a future in Malaysia.

While Shirley Lim left Malaysia in 1969 after the May 13th Kuala Lumpur racial riots, Lin Xingqian left in 1989, twenty years after the riots and two years after *Operasi Lalang* (Operation *Lalang*) in 1987.[13] Unlike other exiles who left so as not to be discriminated, Lin left Malaysia not because of the fear of being marginalized in his own country, for by writing in Chinese he has already chosen to be marginalized from the national or mainstream public sphere. In Malaysia since *Mahua* texts is not recognised as *Sastera Negara* (National Literature) because they are not written in the national language, the public sphere of *Mahua* writers is limited to the Mandarin Chinese newspapers, which

[11] For a view on the emergence of Singapore and Malaysian literature in English, see Lim (1989).

[12] Just like the idea of a hybridized local music 'Machinta' (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil), 'Engmachin', a coinage from English, Malay, and Chinese, refers to the idea of a blending local language.

[13] 'Lalang' is *imperata cylindrical*, a kind of long-bladed grass. In October 1987 the Barisan Nasional government under Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad launched the operation which saw the arrest of more than a hundred non-political dissidents and opposition party leaders. Mahathir rationalized the act as a necessary means to avoid the repetition of May 13 riots.

serve as a popular cultural institution for these communal writers to win recognition and maintain their literary identity.

Obsessed with an imaginary homeland or imagined cultural community, Lin, a third generation diasporic Chinese Malaysian, crossed the boundaries of exile in order to escape marginalization in a country where 'Malay' takes precedence. Lin's leaving for Taiwan is an act of cultural return of the diasporic or overseas Chinese to the maternal body of mainstream Chinese culture.[14] The roots are cut but he found a way out by using his tongue to "lament and record" his revels and shatters (Lim, 1994:169). When he arrived at Taipei in 1989, he might have thought of his act as an "exile's return," a return to the cultural homeland in the dreams of some overseas Chinese. But the late 1980's witnessed the transitional years of Taiwan moving from a traditional Chinese society to one that embraces a pro-native ideology. Moreover, Lim also sensed an unexpected change in the island's hospitable climate towards overseas Chinese (and the Chinese Mainlanders on the island). His disappointment is reflected in a short poem entitled "Likai Minguo" (Leaving the Republic), written in the winter of 1993, the year he left for Hong Kong:

> Leaving an isolated island,
> a foreign country that was my fake homeland.
> Leaving far behind me,
> gorgeous history subverted.
> The disappearance of the other
> is also a sense of nostalgia,
> a fake return. (Lin, 1999:36)

Twice Lin uses the word "fake" in the short poem to emphasise his disillusionment with Taiwan's socio-political reality. Taiwan is now but "a foreign country", not the roots of his cultural identity. In another poem entitled "Posui de xiangchou" (Shattered nostalgia) he writes:

---

[14] *Mahua* writers' cultural return to Taiwan was already an issue in the early 1970s. See, for example, Lai Swee Fo, "Wenhua huigui yu ziwo fangzhu" (Cultural return and self-exile), *Mahua wenxue* (Chinese Malaysian literature), ed. Wen Renping (Hong Kong: Culture Book House, 1974), pp. 153–156. A famous example of the exile's return from Malaysia is the case of Wen Ruian, who left for Taiwan in mid-1970s but was deported by the KMT (nationalist) government in 1981 and has since then become a forced exile in Hong Kong. See also my Chinese paper "Wenhua huigui, lisan Taiwan yu luxing kuaguoxing: 'ZaiTai Mahua wenxue' de anli" (Cultural return, diaspora in Taiwan, and traveling transnationalism: locating *Mahua* literature in Taiwan), *Zhongwai wenxue* (Chung Wai Literary Monthly) 33.7 (2004): 153–166.

> In autumn alone I left the peninsula
> to decode the encrypted nostalgia.
> But I found the awkward
> shatters of my dreams. (Lin, 1999:160)

The speaker left his homeland to explore the significance of his own cultural nostalgia and to reclaim his cultural citizenship. But instead he found broken dreams and disillusionment. This is echoed in what Lin writes in the final part of the earlier essay "Zhushen de huanghun" (Gods at twilight):

> In front of me lies the lesson of fragmented history: Overseas Chinese of the new generation and the Chinese Mainlanders on the island have always cherished the memory of a paradise lost, but only in dreams do they return to their homeland …. Rains. Year after year rains fall on Taiwan. I am scheduling the itinerary of my departure without showing any sense of reluctance. I am scheduling, and will leave the city of sadness when the day finally comes. (Lin, 1995:281–282)

Though Lin failed to carry out his project of constructing the real, leaving the republic symbolizes leaving his broken dreams behind and returning to reality. What Lin has learnt from the disillusionment of his cultural return is the importance of going beyond, be it Malay, Chinese, and so on. Towards the end of the essay "Piaobo de zhushen: bei Taiwan de bianyuan suiyue" (Gods in exile: my marginalized years in northern Taiwan), he writes about the impact of the disillusionment upon his mode of thought: "In their exilic situation overseas Chinese lost their identity and are thus longing for a return to the mainstream", but "in the years living in Taiwan one learns that return is but an impractical myth" (Lin, 1995:34). And hence his realization: "I am glad that the three years I spent in Taipei helped release me from nationalism, and I am able to adopt a mode of thought that regards man as subject and history-society and ethnicity-culture as objects" (1995:37). Elsewhere Lin also mentions that leaving for Taiwan provided him with an opportunity to reflect on and demystify nostalgia. He writes: "Accidentally while indulging in cultural nostalgia I manage to deconstruct the myth of exile and return, and see through the emptiness and hypocrisy of nationalism" (Lin, 1995:91). Lin's awareness or awakening intervenes and helps "overcome passions" and eventually reconfigure his post-identity. In other words, his ethnic and national identities are now supplanted by a transnational identity. Writing, for Lin, now an exilic, transnational poet and expatriate academic living in Hong Kong and travelling from time to time to Taiwan and Malaysia,

is still an act of remembrance and mourning. In "Fushi chezhan" (Mundane station) the speaker's memory of tropical rainforest is evoked as he walks toward the subway station in late spring Hong Kong, but the passing crowd of people he sees reminds him of the mass in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of his home country, suggesting the lasting memory of geographical homeland in the self-exile:

> Malay Peninsula is the capital of my initial orientation in life.
> People pour into people.
> I now realize the nature of rupture.
> Exile is a rose leaving its stem
> to search for survival principles out of evolution theory.
>
> (Lin, 2001:222–223)

What is significant to note is the effect of this rupture suggested in the poem. Rupture implies discontinuity, whereas the memory of homeland articulates a link between past and present. This paradox between continuity and discontinuity can also be found in Lin's concept of "haiwai ren". It is in the seemingly anachronistic self-identity of the diasporic "haiwai ren", a term Lin frequently used in the 1990's, that his transnational or marginalized post-identity is manifested.

In his essay entitled "Chidao xianshang" (On the equatorial line), Lin recollects the memory of his last visit to the library of the University of Malaya in 1988. In that evening at the East Asia collections section he flipped through a memoir by the historian Wang Xiunan and was much impressed by what Wang said about the fate of overseas Chinese: "Longing disappointedly for the motherland, overseas Chinese are indeed overseas orphans, despite the fact that they are known as 'the mother of revolution'" (qtd. in Lin, 1995:96). The difference, as Lin records in his poem "Haiwai ren", is that the "haiwan ren" of the new generation are determined to "take their own paces" and embrace the culture of difference at the expense of their own selves (Lin, 1999: 164).

Living and writing outside the nation as a Chinese Malaysian transnational writer,[15] Lin remains a "flexible" citizen of Malaysia[16] who

[15] While James Clifford emphasizes the "transnational connections" of the traveling trajectories of a certain type of diaspora, Shirley Lim terms the concept of voluntary displacement of particularly Asians from Hong Kong "traveling transnationalism". See Clifford's concept in "Diasporas" (1997). For Lim's discussion of the new type of diaspora, see Lim (2002).

[16] The term "flexible citizenship" refers to Ong Aihwa's idea. See Ong's "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *Positions* 1.3 (1993):745–780.

identifies himself as a "haiwai ren". He chooses not to stay home but to travel between home and his colonial (and later post-colonial) homeland. As a travelling transnational migrant living in the metropolitan or global space, Lin constructs a poetics of diaspora, or in Lin's own term, "Bianchui de shuxie" (Writing periphery/writing on the periphery) to express his evolving, mobile and marginal post-identity. He chooses to move away from the two centres (Malaysia and Taiwan) of nativist discourse because he sees no future for multiculturalism and political pluralism in both places. Unlike some Chinese Malaysian intellectuals in the 1990s who chose to intervene or oppose, after demystifying nationalism and cultural nostalgia, Lin self-consciously resituates himself as a "haiwai ren" who lives and writes outside the nation. Indeed he is a "haiwai ren", an appropriate term referring to diasporic Chinese; he is also a Malaysian living in "haiwai", meaning beyond the sea or ocean. We can interpret his choice as an act of loosening the Chineseness he identifies as his, echoing the rupture mentioned in the poem "Fushi chezhan" (2001) discussed earlier. I would add that Lin's rupture is a double rupture—on the one hand, being a diasporic Chinese ("orphan of China", as he puts it in "Haiwai ren"), he has lost the inheritance of Chinese culture. Being a Chinese Malaysian poet writing outside the country, he has likewise discontinued his link with the *Mahua* literary homeland by articulating a diasporic "haiwai ren" identity. Most of Lin's poems and essays express such a diasporic theme ("piaobo"), with such recurrent topics as "departure", "border", "stranger" and "passenger", which are not the primary concerns of those *Mahua* writers residing in Malaysia.

The *neither-nor*ness of Lin's post-identity corresponds to the notion of "non-national literature" conceived by Ng Kim Chew, another *Mahua* scholar-writer writing outside the nation. According to Ng, the cultural return of Li Yongping, the *Mahua* novelist, to Taiwan exemplifies "nothing but an act of exile—a misplaced return" (Ng, 2004:159). In Ng's essay, *Mahua* writers residing in Taiwan are compared to the image of tenants: "They silently observe the ethic of tenants, as they are aware that the place they live in is a borrowed place; even their time is time borrowed—indeed they are in the middle passage of mobilization" (Ng, 2004:161). Since such "misplaced" writers are virtually writers without homelands, Ng argues, their works therefore belong to the literature of "non-nation". From this aspect we can say that Lin Xingqian's reassertion of his "haiwai ren" post-identity (in Hong Kong) echoes Ng's notion of "non-national literature".

Works Cited

Amer, Ramses (1991) *The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and Sino-Vietnamese Relations*. Kuala Lumpur: Forum.

Clifford, James (1997). "Diasporas", in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 244–277.

Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin (1989) "The English-Language Writers in Singapore", in Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley, eds., *The Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 523–551.

———, (1994) "Tongue and Root: Language in Exile," in *Monsoon History: Selected Poems*. London: Skoobs Books, pp. 167–173.

———, (2002) "'Traveling Transnationalism': Locating Hong Kong Literature in English". *Sun Yat-Sen Journal of Humanities* 14:53–66.

Lin, Xingqian (1995) *Kuanghuan yu posui: bianchui rensheng yu dianfu shuxie* (Revels and Shatters: Marginal Life and Subversive Writing). Taipei: Sanmin shuju.

———, (1999) *Shiti de yishi* (The Ritual of Poetic Form). Taipei: Jiuge chubanshe.

———, (2001) *Yuanshi* (Originating Poetry). Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu gongsi.

Ng, Kim Chew [Huang Jinshu] (2004) "Meiyou jiayuan" (Without homeland). *Yinke wenxue shenghuozhi* (Ink Literary Monthly) 12:158–162.

Said, Edward (1990) "Reflections on Exile", in Russell Ferguson et. al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 357–366.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1989) "Reading *The Satanic Verses*". *Public Culture* 2.1:79–99.

Seyhan, Azade (2001) *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Singh, Kirpal (1987) "The Only Way Out: Sense of Exile in the Poetry of Ee Tiang Hong", in Bruce Bennett, ed., *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*. Nedlands: Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia, pp. 33–42.

Talib, Ismail S. (1998) "Responses to the Language of Singaporean Literature in English", in S. Gopinathan et al., eds., *Language, Society and Education in Singapore: Issues and Trends*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, pp. 203–218.

Tan, Swie Hian (1994) "Cong xiaodao dao dazhoulu: *Xuanji* chuban ganyan" (From island to continent: reflections on the publication of my *Selected Works*). *Chao Foon Bimonthly* 459 (March/April): 8–9.

Tresidder, Jack (1998) *Dictionary of Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Images, Icons, and Emblems*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

"WHY AREN'T YOU A MUSLIM?" PRIDE AND PREJUDICE THROUGH GUNAWAN MAHMOOD'S TEEN FICTION

David C.L. Lim

This essay examines the role of the dominant Malay intelligentsia in imagining Malaysia, using as platform for discussion two contemporary teen novels by Gunawan Mahmood: *This Land* (originally published in Malay as *Tanah Ini* in 1996; out in English translation in 2002) and *Namaku Ayoko* (My Name is Ayoko; 1994). The chosen author and texts are little known outside of the Malay literary world, which alters not the fact that Gunawan is a multiple award-winning, state-affiliated writer who, like many of his Malay-Muslim contemporaries and predecessors, believes that "those with knowledge ought to write" and "literature should educate, awaken and inspire society" (in Mahmood, 1993:x). Gunawan is an 'intellectual' insofar as he participates in the production and distribution of knowledge, as someone who professes a vocation for the art of "representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public" (Said, 1996:11).

Against what one might expect of the genre, neither *This Land* (*TL*) nor *Namaku Ayoko* (*NA*) features adolescent characters or deals with the usual growing pains arising from the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Instead the novels bring to life characters who have grown into themselves as young adults, all engaging with issues of identity through the lenses of race and religion. In *Namaku Ayoko*, for instance, Zahin, the protagonist, is portrayed as a model Malay-Muslim who thinks constantly about his warrior race and the eugenist glory it might reap from infusion with samurai blood through procreation with Ayoko. Ayoko is Zahin's Japanese fiancée and the novel's namesake who has to discard her family and Japanese heritage and become a Muslim before he would wed her (*NA* 55). In the same tone, *This Land* takes on the thorny subject of 'race' relations in Malaysia, attempting to lay bare the reasons behind the protracted alienation of non-Malay-Muslim minorities in the country—reasons beyond what the novel disputes are laws, policies, and attitudes which discriminate against minority

communities. For the effort, the original Malay-language edition of *This Land* was awarded Best Adolescent Novel in the 1996/97 *Hadiah Sastera Perdana Malaysia* (Malaysia Prime Literary Award). Picked out of forty Malay publications in that category, *This Land* was praised by the judges as a mature work of substance and as positive inspiration and Islamic guidance to its readership ("Laporan Panel", 1998).

This Land and *Namaku Ayoko* are earnest attempts to present in an intellectual way the realities of race and religion to their implied core readership of young Malay-Muslims (aged thirteen to eighteen years, by the prize's definition). Riding on the wave of the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, they speak in a guiding voice of reason, demonstrating upright ways of thinking, feeling, acting and being Malay/Muslim. The question is: What ideas, beliefs, values, assumptions, and attitudes do *This Land* and *Namaku Ayoko* textualise, effectively and beyond the citations of awards? Do they imagine Malaysia as constitutive of empathetic coequals, or as peoples marked and stratified by race and religion? Concomitantly, how would *This Land* and *Namaku Ayoko* measure if we read the ideals they espouse against the standards of the intellectual, as conceived by a long line of major thinkers, including Karl Mannheim, Edward Said and Mohammed Arkoun?

By Mannheim's definition, intellectuals are socially free-floating, insofar as they do not unquestioningly defend or valorise their roots but are prepared to scrutinise and critique them. Similarly, for Said, the intellectual's role is to confront orthodoxy and dogma, not to reproduce them out of primeval loyalties. Said qualifies that this is not "always a matter of being a critic of government policy, but rather of thinking of the intellectual vocation as maintaining a sense of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along" (Said, 1996:23).

Along the same trajectory, Arkoun takes it as the intellectual's responsibility to resist modes of thinking that prohibit free initiatives, open debates and voluntary interpretations, especially where religion is concerned. Arkoun is concerned with the need to protect the space for intercreativity, including in Muslim societies around the world, where 'Islam', fragmented as it is, is as rampantly instrumentalised by non-Muslims, as by Muslims, to silence critical discourse, repress thought and legitimate claims to power. The simple but all-too-often overlooked fact is that "We live with wrong knowledge and wrong knowledge can be institutionalised which means perpetuated and taught" (Arkoun, 1999), even by intellectuals and the *ulamā* who are supposed to "con-

tinue, defend, protect, expand and renew the critical function and creative reflection" (Arkoun, 1998; see also 2003b).

Without apologies or condescension and without absolving the West for the hostile image it has created of Islamic cultures, Arkoun argues that Muslim communities are in crisis today in the sense that their understanding and practice of 'Islam' have been shorn of the faith's most progressive element: the cognitive power which classical Islam recovered from the ancient Greeks, developed, and transmitted to the Europeans, who in turn used this to produce the abundant fruits of modernity. In his analysis of Islamic reason, Arkoun dates the decline of Islam's theological-philosophical dynamism to the thirteenth century, following the death of Ibn Rushd in 1198 and the banning of the intellectual Muʿtazilī school by the Caliph al-Qādir (Arkoun, 2003a:13).[1] The result has been the rise to hegemony of a foundationalist tradition of thought in Islam, one which largely closes itself off from the rich theoretical debates generated in classical Islamic theology, as much as from the challenges of intellectual modernity. In attempting to reactivate Islam's lost (self-) critical reason, Arkoun aims to make thinkable again the many accumulated issues about human coexistence which need to be discussed in good faith, issues which have been rendered unthinkable, taboo or sacrilegious to discuss.

Arkoun's emphasis on substance over form, and thought over taboo, is not irrelevant to Malaysia, where two decades of Islamic resurgence, the spread of Wahhabi thought, and state-induced Islamisation have transformed the Malays/Muslims in different ways, affecting microshifts in their self-perception as Malays/Muslims and their perception of the racial and religious other. These changes have also brought about an increasing number of reported cases of Malay/Muslim assertions of religiosity and exclusivity towards those who are not one of them. Without detracting from the strides Malaysians have made in forging transethnic solidarities (see Mandal, 2004), mounting evidence suggests that a narrow brand of 'Islam' is on the rise in Malaysia, creating intolerance, fomenting ignorance and encouraging division. Non-Malay/Muslim communities have for the most part remained anxiously silent, if not cowed by "right-wing Malay-Muslim groups, parties and organisations" who insist that non-Malay/Muslims have "no right to comment on matters Islamic" or to protest against "the increas-

[1] The Muʿtazilī school applied logic and rationalism to Islamic doctrines, proving that there was no inherent incompatibility between the two.

ingly repressive laws and regulations that have been passed in the name of Islam" (Noor, 2005).

What is significant to note about these perceptual and relational shifts in Malaysia is that they are not evenly recognised by all as worrying or requiring remedy, even though many concerned Malaysians across ethnic divides have warned that intolerance is on the rise and Malaysians have to be brave to confront it instead of being silenced by fear of being branded 'anti-Malay' or 'anti-Islam'. To explore these issues further, I want to now bring in Gunawan Mahmood's *This Land*, and to inspect its ideas on religion and race against the above horizon.

Non/Malay/Muslim

This Land is essentially a didactic tale which reverses the arrow of prejudice in the direction of the non-Malay/Muslim. At the centre of the story is Albert Sia Hiang Tiong, the male anti-protagonist in his early twenties, who is ethnic Chinese and Christian. From the outset, Sia is marked off from the 'good' Chinese represented by the like of his late migrant father who, without irony, wanted Sia "to be a government servant because in that way they could repay their gratitude to the country [Malaysia]" (*TL* 74). Another 'good' Chinese in the novel is Sia's sixty-year-old mother who, although previously a migrant from Kunming (Yunnan, China), is not only "proud to be able to live in Malaysia" as a citizen (73) but is also convinced that "The government is good" (61). As it turns out, Sia neither fulfils his parents' wishes nor lives up to the supposed reputation of the Chinese as "a fantastic and very capable people" who can "sense business [opportunities] before others even thought about them" (31). Instead Sia is more interested in "trivial issues such as culture" (56) and in fighting for the right of minorities to practise their culture and religion without discrimination. As a reporter in a small press and in his activism, Sia wants to delve into the hearts of the people and voice their concerns. He once protested against the demolition of a shrine to give way to a housing estate, "although he himself was a Christian" (28). He has also spoken out against the subjection of the minorities by the country's policies and attitudes. Primarily, Sia is portrayed as "a defender of Chinese culture" (6) who passionately believes "the younger generation should be exposed to the language and the origins of their ancestors" (8).

Sia says that he seeks justice in speaking out against injustice but those closest to him tell him otherwise; that he is, unbeknownst to himself, "emotional and full of prejudice" (*TL* 8) against the Malays and Islam, that he is too proud of the Chinese culture which "did not belong to the country" (10), and that he is wasting his time and playing with danger by "fighting for something that would only destroy his own [Chinese] people [in Malaysia]" (11). Sia's pursuit of justice is seen by his friends and family as misguided and foolish because, as far as his mother is concerned, justice has been served:

> Your late father and I worked very hard here [Malaya, to which we fled from Mainland China, where there was nothing but suffering]. We started from scratch. We had nothing. But now we own a piece of land, a house and a car. We could afford to educate you. Is this not justice? What else do we want? (*TL* 73)

From the moral viewpoint of the novel, Sia represents the 'ungrateful' Chinese who, given the proverbial inch, wants a foot. The novel emphasises that Sia, although probably well-intentioned in his quest for justice, fails to see that his prejudice against Islam, and the Malay-dominated government is ultimately unjust and that it springs, without his consciously realising it, from his pre-existing baseless prejudice against the Malays. Sia is scripted in *This Land* as having acquired this self-engendered prejudice while reading for his undergraduate degree at the University of Malaya. Formerly free from racial consciousness, he became dissatisfied with the Malays after listening to the many opinions and ideas exchanged during discussions held by the clubs he joined at the university. The sociopolitical issues discussed in the meetings include the institutionalization of Malay birthright supremacy and the under-recognition of non-Malay contribution to nation-building Malaysia. As a result of Sia's exposure to these ideas, he became "angry with whatever his Malay neighbours did" (*TL* 28). This eventually spreads to his perception of Islam, which he looks upon as "a religion belonging to the Malays" (79). Sia, as described in the novel, can be "quite prejudiced against the Muslims" (80). He finds Christianity "more tolerant" (80) and not restrictive and prohibitive as Islam, and feels that there are "too many mosques in Malaysia" (70). "Even the sound of the *azan* [the call to prayer] from the mosque made him angry and irritable" (80).[2]

[2] The problem of the *azan* being "too loud, too grating, lacking in beauty or uniform timing" exists in many parts of the Islamic world, including Cairo (see "Call for

For his social activism, Sia is sought by the police and forced to go into hiding before deciding to retreat, interestingly enough, to Mainland China, where he has never been but believes he would find space to give full expression to the Chinese culture of which he is so proud. Sia plans to go directly to Kunming, Yunnan, to trace his ancestral roots and bring "the great Chinese tradition" back to Malaysia (*TL* 43). He faces strong resistance from friends and family, whose advice he ignores. Sia's mother, for instance, tells him roundly that "you will not find what you are looking for in Yunnan" and that "You are not a Chinese from China; you are a Malaysian Chinese" (43). A friend, Maria Chua Ah Heng, who works as "an officer in charge of culture in a government department" (9), is more caustic when she finds out about the plan. Mocking Sia, she says, "Wow, you seem to love the Mainland much more than this country although you were born here and your parents made a living here" (26).

In Kunming, Sia quickly learns that things are not as idyllically or grandly Chinese as he thought they would be. He observes with a tinge of regret that there is "a strong influence of the western world" on Kunming, where youngsters wear the latest western fashion and dye their hair (*TL* 41). Sia could see the town fast developing, creating jobs and opportunities for countless Chinese youths. But he also sees that life in China is harsh, compared to Malaysia. Sia sees this etched on the "weather-beaten" faces of the thousands of Chinese cyclists on the road, faces showing "the hardships of life that they [have] to go through" (40). Despite the initial disillusionment, Sia perseveres in his quest for his Chinese roots and living relatives. He searches here and there for them but what he finds in the end is not the expected plenitude of Chineseness he had earlier sought. Instead, in a way he could never have imagined, he finds, ironically enough, Islam, the religion he had hitherto been prejudiced against. Sia's discovery of Islam in China in turn washes away his prejudice towards Islam and the Malays, awakening him to the contended reality that "What he had been fighting for [in his writing and activism had only] encouraged a

---

Centralised Prayer", 2004), and to a lesser extent, Malaysia. Recently, a reader (whose letter appeared in the Malaysian Bar Council Bulletin) had a police report lodged against him. The complainant, an Umno member, alleged that the writer had insulted Islam by describing the *azan* as "noise pollution and an annoyance to neighbours" (see "Bar Council Article", 2004).

hatred for other races. It was a foolish effort, one that would lead to disintegration, clashes and suffering" (123).

Unravelling This Land

This Land is not entirely without progressive moments. On principle it rejects racism, rightly pointing out that, in Islam, "man was created of different ethnic groups so that we could get to know one another" (*TL* 47). Its recycling of old Chinese stereotypes is admittedly neither charitable nor rooted in contemporary reality. Few, if any, would disagree that one would have to try very hard to find any Malaysian of Sia's generation and background who would today "love the Mainland much more than this country" (26). All the same, Sia's representation is not entirely unbelievable, insofar as his feelings are not his alone but are shared across cultures. Evidence of this is found everywhere, including web-forums, where inflammatory views on other races and religions proliferate.

This Land only starts to properly unravel when we probe its twofold postulate: first, that instead of being proud of their cultures which "did not belong to the country" (*TL* 10) and instead of being resentful and making an issue of their "second class status" (11), non-Malay-Muslim minorities of migrant origins like Sia should learn to be more patient and tolerant of the will of the dominant Malay-Muslim majority; and, second, that the way to achieve the first aim is for the like of Sia to convert to Islam. We saw the first exemplified through Sia's parents who try in vain to get Sia to show his love for the country by being thankful for their comforts in Malaysia, and to remember that they would all be suffering in China, as their ancestors had done, if not for Malay beneficence. The second is illustrated by Sia, who is portrayed as finally awakened by Islam to how unjustly misguided and unpatriotic he had been when he challenged Malay supremacy as a principle of natural necessity.

It has become less acceptable today to openly declare that the Malays are the 'master race' and that 'other races' (Malaysia-born non-Malay-Muslims like the Chinese, Indians and indigenous groups) are immigrants, immigrant progenies, or minorities of non-primary consideration. The change is encouraging but it should not be taken to suggest that the belief has died out or that it is, whenever invoked, always fully recognised by all parties as narrow, insensitive, chauvinis-

tic, or contradictory to the spirit of egalitarian being-together. To an influential cross-section of the dominant Malay intelligentsia across all fields of knowledge, the belief is genuinely seen as historically, legally and morally correct. These intellectuals might not necessarily be willing or proud to publicly spell out their belief or its basis, lest they be judged prejudicial, chauvinist or racist. But they can be articulate and forthright about it, given the right platform.[3] Only recently a professor from University of Malaya's Islamic Studies Academy made clear in a media interview that non-Malay-Muslims should be more patient and tolerant of the will of the majority (Malay-Muslims), considering that "this is the land of the Malays to begin with" (Theophilus, 2004a). "The Malays were here first. The others came later […] Why is it that the non-Malay races fail to comprehend" this? Similar to the advice Sia receives from his parents, the professor stated that non-Malay-Muslim citizens of migrant stock should by right be grateful for the opportunities afforded to them by the Malays for a good life in Malaysia, instead of being resentful towards the Malays and Islam for the priority they receive. This much is owed to the Malays, the professor argued, especially when "the Malays have compromised on many things over time," from tolerating the migration of outsiders like the Chinese and Indians to the then Malaya, to their gradual usurpation into economic and political activities. Implicit in the establishment of this claim is the veiled threat that "History [the 1969 racial riots] will repeat itself" (*TL* 6) if non-Malay-Muslims push too hard for equality.

The belief held by the likes of the professor and echoed in *This Land* has generated long and acrimonious debates which have been well-covered elsewhere. Instead of repeating them here, I want to consider, beyond the rightness or wrongness of the belief, the concrete implications of insisting upon the specialness and prioritisation of one race and religion in a world of irreducible plurality. With good intentions, no doubt, *This Land* sets out to guide and educate its intended readership on how to orientate themselves as upright, young, modern Malay-Muslims. However, because of its essentialist emphasis on the radical difference between the Malay/Muslim and the non-Malay/Muslim Other, it does not see that it promotes, by that very act, divisive race

[3] Malay racial passions usually peak around Umno annual summit. In 2005, Hishamuddin Hussein (Umno Youth Chief) created controversy when he waved a *keris* while delivering his opening speech during the wing's general assembly. On Malay racial-centricity, see, for e.g., Beh (2003); and Aznam (2005).

consciousness. That is what *This Land* achieves, instead of unveiling race as a pseudo-scientific construct to be dismantled. In the same self-undermining way, the novel employs intellectual reasoning to alert its readership to the realities of race and religion in and beyond Malaysia. It sets out boldly to explain to its intended readership why non-Muslim, non-Malay minorities are alienated by the doctrine of Malay birthright supremacy. However, instead of entering into the 'other' perspective in good faith, it frames the minorities as those who are always and already less than coequals.

In its effort to articulate truth, *This Land* also neglects to take into account the contribution of its intervention into the problem it sets out to explain. In the depths of its conviction, it does not recognise that what fuels the racial and religious prejudice it complains about and invests in the non-Malay/Muslim is precisely the passionate self-conceitedness of its own effort. First it paints Malays and Muslims as unrealistically blameless and impervious to prejudice by virtue of Islam being doctrinally blind on matters of colour and creed (*TL* 47, 106–107, 121). Through Islam, blame of prejudice is projected onto the non-Malay/Muslim, who is, on top of that, prescribed Islam as the solution to the prejudices they are made to bear. By thus disavowing culpability, *This Land* effectively dispenses with the need for self-critique, to question if the Malay/Muslim subject on whose behalf it purports to speak might not be as infallible as the religion it describes as perfect. As well as this, the novel forecloses the possibility that there might actually be legitimate reasons for non-Malays, non-Muslims like Sia to be alienated by the ideological insistence that "this is the land of the Malays to begin with […] The Malays were here first. The others came later" (Theophilus, 2004a). Lastly, although *This Land* aims to inspire the reader with the beauty and justness of Islam, it succeeds instead in displaying what Hegel terms "Law of the Heart," that is, the self-conceited attitude which seeks its pleasure in displaying the excellence of its own nature (Hegel, 1977:221; see also Lim, 2005).

To unpack all this, we would need to return to Kunming, China, in order to retrace and examine Sia's cleansing by Islam.

"Why aren't you a Muslim?"

Sia's rapid transformation from anti-Islam (because anti-Malay) to devout Muslim (hence brethren to the Malays) stems from his chance

encounter in Kunming with Na Li Fang, a female young-adult who is a local Chinese-Muslim from the Hui clan. Like "a magnet with an invisible force" (*TL* 83) and with her pretty round eyes, Li Fang captivates Sia from the first time they meet, even though she wears the *tudung* (veil), "which he had once despised" (81). Li Fang is pretty and chaste, not to mention respectful of tradition and her elders, a bright student of Islamic Studies, the daughter of an *ahum* (*imam*; religious leader), and a teacher of the Quran to children. Li Fang is flawless in many ways but her flawlessness is ultimately undermined by the way in which she (and her community) relates to Sia (as Other) on matters of faith, as the following scenes illustrate. The first time Li Fang meets Sia, she asks unprovoked if he is a Muslim; when Sia replies that he is a Christian, she lets slip, "I pray that Allah will open up your heart" (77). Before Sia is due to arrive at Li Fang's village for his first visit, Li Fang informs her father that Sia is a Christian and that they should "pray to Allah that he will take a keen interest in Islam." The father's reply is "Let's hope so" (95). When Sia finally meets Li Fang's father, Na Mo Sa, the latter tells him matter-of-factly in the course of their conversation that "I pray that one day you will decide to embrace Islam" (101). In addition, Sia is interrogated no less than three times on why he is not a Muslim. "Sia could not believe his ears. No one had ever asked him that question. In Malaysia, the question would have been considered a very sensitive one. No one would dare ask such a question" (103). The question, Sia recalls later, had been asked of him in the past. He remembers how, during his childhood, a neighbour's son said to him, "Sia, why don't you become a Muslim?" (108). Young Sia's reply then was that, even though he feared turning into firewood in the next life if he did not convert to Islam before this life expires, he could not be a Muslim because "I must obey my parents" (108). When young Sia recounted the episode to his mother, she merely smiled and shrugged it off.

"Why aren't you a Muslim since Malaysia is an Islamic country?" (*TL* 103),[4] pursues Mo Yin, a local Chinese-Muslim businessman in

[4] Based on the framework of the Federal Constitution, Malaysia is a secular state with Islam as its official religion, not an Islamic state, as declared by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Although Mahathir said he did not intend to amend the Constitution to make it reflect his declaration, "an overzealous lot were already making full use of the declaration as a green light to speed up the process of turning Malaysia into an Islamic state, by introducing more and more Islamic laws, institutions and regulations" (Liu, 2002). See also Teh (2001); Lim (2002); and Fernando (2006).

Yunnan. With hesitation, Sia replies that "Maybe it's because the followers of Islam in Malaysia are mostly the Malays" (103). This prompts Mo Yin to challenge Sia: "If there were many Chinese Muslims, would you embrace Islam?" (103). Before Sia could answer, Li Fang's father intervenes and brings the subject to a close, having already sensed "a change in the future" (104). As presaged, that same night Sia's heart opens up to Islam. As a result, for the first time, he is "touched by the sound of the *azan*" (104), instead of irritated by it. Thereafter, in the span of sixteen pages, Sia's interest in Islam increases exponentially, climaxing with the declaration of his intention to convert, to the jubilation of the Muslim-Chinese host community. At his conversion ceremony, Sia, "his eyes […] wet with tears" of joy (122), repeats the *dua kalimah syahadat* (testimony of faith) and is declared a Muslim.

Days later, as the wound of his circumcision starts to heal, Sia—now renamed Muhammad Sia—is engaged to be married to Li Fang. The marriage is to take place after Sia returns from Malaysia, where he wants to face up to his past and "ask his mother to embrace Islam" so that they could "perform their duty to God together" (*TL* 124). Upon his return to Malaysia, Sia is detained by the police for two years under the country's infamous Internal Security Act. News of this never travels to Sia's fiancée in Kunming, who defends his non-return as "the will of Allah" (140). Sia accepts his incarceration because he believes he should pay for his past misdeeds. Besides, he says, "The people needed to live in a society without racism, prejudice or enmity" (137). During his two years in prison, Sia takes full opportunity to learn more about Islam and how to be a pious Muslim. After his release, Sia travels to Mecca for *umrah* (pilgrimage). There he crosses paths with Na Li Fang, his (former) fiancée who is coincidentally studying *Usuluddin* in Saudi Arabia. The novel concludes with Sia and Li Fang reconciled, praying together in front of the Kaabah, the holiest place of worship in Islamic belief.

"Become like me"

This Land was cited by the judges who awarded it Best Adolescent Novel for 1996/97 as attesting to the "holiness of Islam" which is "capable of curing prejudice, bias, and the soul's restlessness" ("Laporan Panel", 1998). From the citation, it seems clear enough that the judges have no issue with the novel's treatment of the non-Malay/Muslim

other—for instance, the way in which Li Fang and her community relate to Sia from the position of the religiously superior. Evidently the judges do not find it disturbing, patronising or self-absorbed that Li Fang and others should so eagerly desire Sia to become like them by embracing their religion. Nor do the judges seem to find it a matter of concern that Li Fang and her community, pious as they are, are unable to relate to or respect those of other faiths without needing to convert them. In short, they entirely overlook how Allah, "Most High, is too All-embracing and Great to be confined within one creed rather than another, for He has said [in the Quran], *Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God*" (al-'Arabī, 1980:137).

Belief in Islam as ready-made solution to everything, including issues arising from Malaysia's plurality, is not confined only to *This Land* and the judges but circulates in the wider Malay intellectual and popular discourse. In varying degrees of subtlety, the belief is reproduced regularly in varying intensities in the Malay logosphere across mediums: newspapers, periodicals, state and political documents, the internet, quasi-scholarly works, and so forth. As Asrul Zamani (2002) states in his book, *The Malay Ideals*, "Only if the country could achieve Chinese and Indian Islamisation in a sizeable proportion, would inter-ethnic dissension be kept at a distance" (2002:29). Zamani also believes that the "racial tension which took place [in Indonesia] would not have escalated to the level that we saw [during the late 1990s, for example], had the Chinese been Muslims" (2002:12).[5] As yet another illustration of questionable reasoning, in a reader's letter published on the malaysiakini.com website, the writer rebukes liberal Muslims who, for supporting interfaith dialogue, are deemed to undermine Islam's superior position as "host religion" in Malaysia, as "one above the rest—not first among equals let alone one among equals" (Minuddin, 2006). The writer believes "Malaysia by now should have become a good, tolerant Islamic country where a majority of the population of different races are Muslims," if the government had put more effort into explaining "Islam" to the non-Muslims. He also blames non-Muslims who are implied to "either know that Islam is the truth and reject it out

[5] According to Rahman (1992), author of *The Chinese: An Islamic Perspective*, the Chinese are a great "race of people" who "can give joy and prosperity" to the world, unlike the Jews who "were and have been the bearers of destruction" (1992:17). "Sadly, however, the Chinese prefer to listen more to their hearts' desire, to glorify in passion and ungodly activities and stay contented with what they have" (1992:69).

of pure obstinacy, or else are simply ignorant of it and can be converted by elementary explanations" (Schuon, 1961:64). The writer is exasperated that non-Muslims are not converting to Islam in masses. By his logic, "If most users of Islamic banking [in Malaysia] are non-Muslims, then there is no reason why they can't embrace the faith like the many Chinese and Indians who do so from time to time."

The above examples of self-conceit which Hegel terms Law of Heart, and Alain Badiou describes as "Become like me and I will respect your difference" (2001:25), is evident also in *Namaku Ayoko*, another teen novel by Gunawan Mahmood, which I will now examine briefly before threading the discussion to the effective implications of racial/religious conceit in a plural community like Malaysia. *Namaku Ayoko* is similar to *This Land* in the tragic-ironic sense that they both accomplish the direct opposite of what they set out to achieve. To explain this, consider Zahin, the protagonist in *Namaku Ayoko*. Much like Li Fang in *This Land*, Zahin is projected as a model young Malay-Muslim, whose conduct is held up as worthy of emulation because of the correctness of the way in which he conceives of and relates to 'other' people. Zahin has many progressive qualities; he is educated, conscientious, hardworking and cosmopolitan enough as a New Malay[6] to fit easily into Tokyo where he requested to be stationed for work-training. Yet, as in Li Fang's case, there is something uncanny and ultimately self-undercutting about Zahin's understanding of, and attitude towards 'others'. For instance, although Zahin praises the Japanese as one of the "most advanced races in the world" (*NA* 18), he finds it necessary nonetheless to point out their 'flaws', stressing that there are "many things about them which go against the Malay way of life and Islam" (19). The Japanese drink *sake* (rice wine, alcohol forbidden in Islam), which Zahin does not (13), as if to imply that abstinence somehow places him on a higher rung of goodness. In another display of self-conceit, Zahin "teases" a female Japanese colleague by telling her that "suicide [hara-kiri] is not part of our [Malay] tradition; in fact it goes against our religious [Islamic] teachings" (17).

---

[6] The term 'New Malay' has been conceptualised by several generations of state-aligned Malay ideologues as a towering Malay who is defined by urbanity, professional success and social respectability. The New Malay is the antithesis of the 'old' Malay, who has been pathologised as a backward native who clings to *kampung* (rural village) habits, traits and mindsets. See Taib (1996).

Also, almost to the point of unhealthiness, Zahin thinks constantly about the greatness of the Malay race in the eyes of the world, and the exclusive benefits the race might reap from infusion with "samurai" blood through procreation with a Japanese woman like Ayoko Kimura (*NA* 55). Ayoko, the novel's namesake, is Zahin's girlfriend of Shinto faith who must embrace Islam before he would marry her. Zahin chooses Ayoko, even though he believes but fails to question why choosing her has to mean "taking on a problem"—the problem of having to "work hard to change her identity and way of life" (45). Zahin believes this because, in his view, the Japanese are neither meaningfully knowledgeable about Islam nor faithful practitioners of their Shinto faith, busy as they are with the material world (45, 50). It is also his belief that, because the Japanese do not practice religion as a daily way of life, the younger generation "succumbs easily to Christianity because they want to wear beautiful gowns on their wedding day and because they want to celebrate Christmas like the West" (51).

As it unfolds, Zahin's conversion of Ayoko requires much less work than expected, since Ayoko agrees almost instantly to his condition to marriage, even though she believes but does not question why choosing Zahin means having to "discard her family and the heritage in which her life is rooted" (*NA* 50–51). As scripted by the omniscient narrator, Ayoko chooses Zahin (a foreigner, over a Japanese suitor) partly because she believes that being a Japanese wife to a Japanese man in Japan would not bring her the happiness she seeks in marriage. She cannot accept that the Japanese husband is "free to flirt with *geisha* and the wife can't even complain about it. When the husband's entertainment bill arrives at their doorstep, the wife even has to settle it" (35).

Not long after agreeing to give in to Zahin's desire, Ayoko, like Sia in *This Land*, recites the *dua kalimah syahadat* and is declared a Muslim. She is renamed by Zahin as Amirah, his "princess of Islam" (*NA* 62). But as fate would have it, before Zahin and Amirah can tie the knot, the latter is diagnosed with leukaemia, the cause seeming to be from the fallout from the Hiroshima bombing. The novel ends with Amirah's quick decline and death, which Zahin, although saddened, accepts as Allah's will, glad that he had managed to convert her to his religion (75).

Whither Egalitarian Being-Together?

By representing the Malays/Muslims in the way that they do, do *This Land* and *Namaku Ayoko* provide exemplary guidance to their young Malay-Muslim readership? This, particularly at a time when "so many bright young minds have been thoroughly taken over by the hyperbole and sophistry of religious pedagogues who have no solutions to offer except for empty slogans and longings for some 'golden age' of Islam in the past" (Noor, 2000). Do the texts exemplify Islam as a substantive religion whose glory lies in its historical openness to the plurality of life, to both the sacred and the profane, and to the intrinsic truth of other beliefs? And do they lend to correcting the view that Islam is incompatible with modernity, critical thought and democracy? Or do *This Land* and *Namaku Ayoko* unknowingly testify instead to Ibn al-ʿArabī's insight that, in praising that which he believes, the believer is actually praising himself, "since he is only praising the God of his belief whom he has bound to himself" (al-ʿArabī, 1980:283)? Much later Durkheim posits his classic theory that the object of religious veneration is always the venerating (individuals who make up the) community.

The ideological line emerging from *This Land* and *Namaku Ayoko* is not, as one might hope, a one-off anomaly. Rather it conforms to the wider neo-conservative pattern in Malay literature delineated in Tham's and Hooker's seminal works: that a significant majority of the Malay literary intelligentsia tend to rationalise in their writings the supremacy of Malay identity, the legitimacy of Malay hegemony, the pathology of the non-Malay/Muslim Other, and the superiority of Islam as solution to everything. This includes heavyweights like Shahnon Ahmad and Zakaria Ali, and lesser-known writers like Ariff Mohamad and H.M. Tuah Iskandar.[7] The pattern is related to an even more disturbing trend unfolding on the ground in contemporary Malaysia. Although inter-ethnic harmony generally prevails in everyday Malaysia, and while transethnic solidarities are being forged unsung, the recent years have nonetheless seen an intensification of Islamist self-assertion and an increasing number of reported cases of racial-religious insensitivity and intolerance towards non-Malay-Muslims, as well as Malays/Muslims who reject the ideology of racial-

[7] Ariff Mohamad's *Versi Aria* ('Aria's Version'; 2003) and H.M Tuah Iskandar's *Enrique Mengundang Jauh* ('Enrique Travels Far'; 2003) are but two examples of contemporary Malay novels being preoccupied with the glory of the Malay race.

religious supremacy. To the concern of many Malaysians of all ethnic and religious divides, a narrow brand of Islamisation is creeping into all spaces of life, creating intolerance and inciting discord between communities of faith. Evidence of this is accumulating across mediums, including human rights reports, local print and virtual media, and academic publications.[8]

To cite two extreme examples: an official ban was imposed in 2004 on "all Christian religious symbols [, carols] and hymns that specifically mention Jesus Christ at a national-level Christmas" celebration (Theophilus, 2004b). Issued to safeguard Malay/Muslim 'sensitivities', the ban imposed on the naming of Jesus whose religious event was being celebrated scandalised Christians and non-Christians alike, who saw it as an insensitive encroachment on the constitutionally-enshrined right of non-Muslims to practise their religion without undue interference. In the same year, in a separate incident, a letter was sent to parents of non-Muslim pupils of a primary school in Kuala Lumpur; informing them that "non-Muslim students are altogether forbidden from bringing non-halal food [i.e. food prohibited in Islam, such as pork] to school, [and] forbidden from using canteen utensils, for example fork and spoon" (Jason). The over-zealous school headmaster who issued the letter subsequently clarified that students could bring non-*halal* food to the school but not consume it in the canteen, or dispose of leftovers into the rubbish bin, as he did not want to risk 'contaminating' canteen operators, students and rubbish collectors who were Muslims. The incident sparked protests from parents and a flurry of letters from readers of malaysiakini.com. A reader, pen-named Laila, responds:

> As a Muslim, I am embarrassed when I have to read articles, letters or news reports that suggest that the Muslim normative and needs override all else. Self-aggrandising and righteous undertones really make me wonder how anyone is supposed to feel kindly towards Islam and Muslims. (in Jason, 2004)

Islamic resurgence and state Islamisation in Malaysia, its root causes and effects have been well-covered elsewhere.[9] Instead of rehearsing

[8] See for e.g., Noor (2000); Choo (2003); Chapman (2003); Wong (2003); Jessy (2004); *Malaysia: Human Rights Report* (2004); Idris (2004); Akmar (2005); Rais (2005); and "Mayor Must Get" (2005).

[9] See, for e.g., Nagata (1984); Muzaffar (1987); Stauth (2002); Hussein (2002); and Bakar (2003).

them here, I only want to highlight a contentious point made in Muzaffar's study, whose disconcerting analysis is that "the force behind Islamic resurgence is *ethnic*" and that "many of its manifestations are linked to the assertion of [*Malay*] ethnic identity" (my emphases; Muzaffar, 1987:101). In Muzaffar's view, Islamic resurgence in Malaysia is largely a displaced, self-involved quest of the 'Malay' to redignify-purify their identity through 'Islam'. This is to be achieved by closing themselves off from the surrounding plurality and by disavowing the constitutive historical heterogeneity of the 'Malay' (see Kahn, 2006). Muzaffar's theory is by no means descriptive of all Malays/Muslims. Nonetheless there is deep worry that the Malay community is perceivably not as open as it used to be. Sharing the concern is Zainah Anwar, Executive Director of Sisters in Islam (a non-governmental organisation), who observes that pluralism is becoming more of a threat to more Malays these days, whose ability to embrace change, diversity and their plural heritage "seems to be fast disappearing." She also sees a simultaneous, "almost desperate need […] for the Malays to show they're different from 'others'. That there is this 'other' they're not a part of and don't want to be a part of" (Khoo and Tan, 2005: 20). The problem is that, as this ability fades, as the Malay community folds back into itself, so too the platform for discourse on race and religion narrows, shrinking the space for dialogue on issues that matter most to egalitarian being-together.

The ultimate tragic-irony of insisting upon the specialness of the Malay/Muslim is that it is ultimately most detrimental to those it seeks to elevate. As far back as the 1980s Muzaffar has stated that unreflexive devotion to Islam as a ready-made solution to all human problems "has undeniably retarded the development of social consciousness within the Malay community" (1987:102). It has contributed to the "continuing intellectual underdevelopment of the [Malay-Muslim] community," whose grasp of "many of the major concepts related to politics, economics, science and education remain intellectually shallow and superficial." It would be easy, when confronted with the historicity of Malay/Muslim identity and Islamic thought (along with all sacrilised objects of identification), to react to it as an attempt to *hina* (insult) the Malays or to condescendingly teach Muslims how to become better Muslims. Infinitely harder and more courageous I think would be to take on board the other view in good faith, to rethink the wisdom of over-identifying with one's race and religion, and to "unlearn what theology is about, what religious law is about, what identity is about

when we speak of 'mine' and 'theirs'" (Arkoun, 1999). This, for me, is the real challenge confronting Malaysia, the outcome of which will determine the shape of the community-to-come.

Works Cited

al-'Arabī, Ibn (1980) *The Bezels of Wisdom*. R.W.J., tr. Austin. London: Paulist Press.

Akmar, Shamsul (2005) "Veiled Threat to Nation Building". *Sunday Star*, 13 November, pp. 24.

Arkoun, Mohamed (1988) "The Topicality of the Problem of the Person in Islamic Thought", *International Social Science Journal* 40 (3), pp. 407–422.

Arkoun, Mohammed (1999) "Democracy: A Challenge to Islamic Thought." *Islam 21 Project*. http://www.islam21.net/pages/confrences/june99–1.htm (accessed 23 January 2006).

———, (2003a) *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. London: Saqi Books/the Institute of Ismaili Studies.

———, (2003b) "How Islam and Modernity can be Reconciled: A Pattern of Mutual Support". *Le Monde diplomatique*. http://mondediplo.com/2003/04/16modernislam (accessed 23 January 2006).

Aznam, Suhaini (2005) "Searching for the Iconic Malay". *Sunday Star*, 20 February, pp. 28.

Badiou, Alain (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Peter Hallward tr. London; New York: Verso.

Bakar, Osman (2003) "Islam and Political Legitimacy in Malaysia", in Shahran Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed eds., *Islam and Political Legitimacy*. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 127–149.

"Bar Council Article 'Insulted Islam'" (2004). *Sun*, 4 August. http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=4319 (accessed 7 March 2006).

Beh, Lih Yi (2003) "Umno Youth Blasted over 'Malays are Masters' Statement". *malaysiakini.com*, 2 March. http://www2.malaysiakini.com/news/14609 (accessed 9 December 2004).

"Call for centralised prayer call in Cairo sparks wails of protest and talk of CIA plot" (2004). *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 14 October, pp. 12.

Chapman, Karen. (2003). "Parents to meet dept over racist remarks". *Star*, 20 February, pp. 22.

Choo, Hooi Peng (2003) "Irked over dress code". *Star*, 27 February, pp. 6.

Fernando, Joseph M. (2006) "The Position of Islam in the Constitution of Malaysia". *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37 (2), pp. 249–266.

Hegel, G.W.F (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A.V. Miller tr.; J.N. Findlay fwd. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hooker, Virginia Matheson (2000) *Writing a New Society: Social Change through the Novel in Malay*. St. Leonard's, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Hussein, Syed Ahmad (2002) "Muslim Politics and the Discourse on Democracy", in Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik eds., *Democracy in*

Malaysia: Discourses and Practices. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, pp. 74–107.

Idris, Zainudin (2004) "Nabi Isa tidak akan bangkit semula" [Christ will not rise again]. *al-Islam* May, pp. 20–23.

Iskandar, H.M. Tuah (2003) *Enrique Mengundang Jauh* [Enrique Travels Far]. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan.

Jason, Roshan (2004) "Parents question no 'non-halal' food in school order". *malaysiakini.com*, 23 July. http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/28640 (accessed 8 October 2004).

Jessy, Kuldeep S (2004) "Scarf incident a mistake, says Tan". *Star Online*, 12 June. http://www.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2004/6/12/nation/8199204&sec=nation (accessed 12 June 2004).

Khoo, Eddin, and Jason Tan (2005) "Talking to Mullahs: An Interview with Zainah Anwar, Executive Director of Sisters in Islam (SIS)", *Off the Edge*, August, pp. 18–23, 62–63.

"Laporan Panel Sastera Perdana Malaysia 1996/7, Kategori C: Buku Kanak-Kanak/Remaja" [Panel Report, Malaysia Prime Literary Award 1996/7, Category C: Children's/Adolescent Publications] (1998). http://dbp.gov.my/dbp98/majalah/sastera99/ds051lap.htm (accessed 5 May 2004).

Lim, David C.L. (2005) *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi.

Lim, Kit Siang (2002) *No to 929*. Petaling Jaya: Democratic Action Party.

Liu, Ronnie Tian Khiew (2002) "Media Statement by DAP National Publicity Secretary: 'Malaysia should not be viewed as an Islamic state' ". *Democratic Action Party*, 24 September 2002. http://www.malaysia.net/dap/bul1748.htm (accessed 14 October 2002).

Mahmood, Gunawan (1993) *Harga Sebuah Kematian* [The Price of a Death]. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

———, (1994) *Namaku Ayoko* [My Name is Ayoko]. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan.

———, (2002) *This Land*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan.

Mandal, Sumit (2004) "Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation and Social Equality", in Edmund Terence Gomez ed., *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*. New York: Routledge-Curzon, pp. 49–78.

Mannheim, Karl (1936) *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

"Mayor must get priorities right" (2005). *Star*, 15 November, Metro/Letters, pp. 3.

Minuddin, Baki (2006) "Islam is one above others, not first among equals". *malaysiakini.com*, 11 Jan. http://malaysiakini.com/letters/45589 (accessed 11 January 2006).

Muzaffar, Chandra (1987) *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.

Nagata, Judith (1984) *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and their Roots*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Noor, Farish (2000) "The Talibans in Our Universities." Malaysian Social Science Association. http://phuakl.tripod.com/pssm/Farish1.html (accessed 15 August 2004).

———, (2005) "Welcome to Talibanaysia?" *malaysiakini.com*, 29 January. http://malaysiakini.com/columns/33219 (accessed 29 January 2005).
Rahman, Haji Tajul Ariffin Abd (1992) *The Chinese: An Islamic Perspective*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Hikmah.
Rais, Hishamuddin (2005). "Tanyalah pada Ortopedik Moral" [Ask the Moral Orthopaedist]. *malaysiakini.com*, 25 February. http://www.malaysiakini/columns/33879 (accessed 25 February 2005).
Said, Edward (1996) *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage.
Schuon, Frithjof (1961) *Stations of Wisdom*. London: John Murray.
Stauth, Georg (2002) *Politics and Cultures of Islamization in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia in the Nineteen-nineties*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
Taib, Muhammad Haji Mohd (1996) *The New Malay*. Petaling Jaya: Visage Communication.
Teh, Wan Zahidi Wan (2001) *Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam* [Malaysia is an Islamic State/Country]. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas, Kementerian Penerangan Malaysia.
Tham, Seong Chee (1981) "The Politics of Literary Development in Malaysia", in Tham Seong Chee ed., *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 216–252.
———, (1981) "Literary Response and the Social Process: An Analysis of Cultural and Political Beliefs among Malay Writers", in Tham Seong Chee ed., *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 253–286.
Theophilus, Claudia (2004a) "Don: Discussion on Religion still 'Taboo'". *malaysiakini.com*, 27 August. http://malaysiakini.com/news/29520 (accessed 27 August 2004).
———, (2004b) "Rev. Lim: Excluding carols with Jesus' name is scandalous". *malaysiakini.com*, 13 December. http://www2.malaysiakini.com/news/32072 (accessed 13 December 2004).
Wong, Chun Wai (2003) "Don't Allow Racists to Lead Us Astray". *Sunday Star*, 9 February, pp. 28.
Zamani, Asrul (2002) *The Malay Ideals*. Kuala Lumpur: Golden Books Centre.

LOOKING THROUGH THE CORRIDOR: MALAYSIA & THE MSC

Susan Leong

As part of a development plan-in-progress spanning a total of 25 years (1996 to 2020), Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) provides a unique opportunity to witness a brief and microcosmic unfolding of the reciprocally formative process between society and technology that Lewis Mumford lays out in exhaustive detail in *Technics and Civilization* (Mumford, 1963). The interlocking of national imagining, destiny and progress with a specific group of technologies, information and communication technologies (ICT) is, in itself, worthy of interest. However, what renders the MSC doubly remarkable is its introduction in Malaysia, one of the most well established of contemporary ethnocracies. Within a socio-political environment where the practice of ethnic differentiation is so deeply entrenched the MSC, with its techno-liberal ethos, is a bold even if somewhat bizarre choice of policy.

This chapter reads the development and implementation of the MSC as the text through which the association between nation and ethnicity is examined. Broadly speaking, I argue here that the MSC inflects the imagining(s) of Malaysia at two levels. At the first level where the MSC is understood to be the insertion of a new policy into Malaysia's pre-existent ethnocratic climate, I contend the MSC inflects the nation through its incongruence with prevalent conditions. At the second level, where the MSC is viewed through the position of its Chinese populace, I suggest that the MSC inflects Malaysia (perhaps to a lesser degree) through the re-emphasis it lends to issues of transnationalism and belonging for the Malaysian Chinese.[1]

I argue in the first instance that the MSC is a poor fit with the dominant imaginings of Malaysia as an ethnocracy, so much so it introduces three jarring notes of dissonance into the social imaginary. The first of these dissonances arises from the tension between the MSC's techno-utopian premises and the nation's long-standing policy of pro-Malay

[1] For the sake of clarity I refer to the Chinese in Malaysia as the Malaysian Chinese throughout this chapter.

affirmative action. The second emerges from the discordance between the guaranteed freedom from online censorship and the absolute punitive powers of the state. The third lies in contradictions that inhere within the two practices of the Malaysian nation: through "graduated sovereignty" (Ong, 1999:215–216) and through its pro-Malay affirmative action. I further contend that aside from adding to the number of ways in which the nation is understood and experienced, these inflections or dissonances also have the potential to disrupt how the nation is lived. By lived I mean to denote the realisation of the nation that occurs in and through everyday life.[2]

In the second instance I suggest that the MSC inflects how Malaysia is imagined through its re-animation of one of the oldest dilemmas facing the Malaysian Chinese. Historically typecast as the prosperous other (the 'haves' with whom the 'have-nots' need to achieve economic parity) the Chinese have long been uncomfortable with their appointed role (Heng, 1997). Yet, as statistics indicate while the proportion of Chinese Malaysians has declined, in real numbers there has actually been an increase (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2001).[3] For this ambivalently positioned group, the MSC and its accompaniment of Internet-inspired imaginings of virtual transnational communities and digital diaspora present tempting possibilities and/or alternatives in living the nation. How Malaysia's largest minority might begin to deal with the bounty of choice is only one aspect of the perplexities that the MSC brings to the forefront of consideration for the Malaysian Chinese. There is more at stake here than a mere weighing up of economic advantage and cultural benefit.

Considerations as to how one lives and practises one's nation are not, as commonly perceived, simple matters of personal preference. The affinities we express are always underlined, albeit tacitly, by a sense of what is right, worthy and meaningful. In short, they are the outcome of

[2] Although strictly speaking the state and the nation are discrete institutions, in everyday usage the state and nation are frequently conflated. This is a conflation deeply entrenched within social imaginaries and reveals itself as such in theories that argue the sovereignty of the nation is being eroded or in decline when in fact it is the state whose dominion is being encroached upon (Fukuyama, 1998:3–17; Tishkov, 2000). Because my concern here is with the nation as lived the same conflation is maintained.

[3] In real numbers, the Malaysian Chinese population increased from 4,945,000 in 1991 to 5,762,000 in 2000. This increase of 81,700 should, however, be considered in relation to a growth from 10,647,000 to 14,349,000 (3,702,000) of *Bumiputeras* over the same period (Economic Planning Unit, 2005).

our understandings of "what is the best sort of life a human being can live" (Graham, 2003:176). This is the case even when the preference is one of non-action. Hence, although not usually understood as such, the decision to partake (or not) of transnationalism always entails an act of ethical evaluation. Although space precludes my addressing them in this chapter, these ethico-political issues underlining transnationalism remain at the heart of my concerns here.

Writing of cosmopolitanism the sociologist, Craig Calhoun, critiques its portrayal as freedom from social belonging rather than as "a special sort of belonging" (2003a:532). It is a mistake, he asserts, to understand cosmopolitanism as a sloughing off of the "attachments of locality, ethnicity, religion and nationality". Cosmopolitanism is not an absence of culture but its presence. It might be a broader culture that spans nation-state borders, but it is a definite "participation in a particular …process of cultural production and social interconnection" (ibid: 544). I submit that the same insight can be applied to transnationalism to explain how the situation of the Malaysian Chinese bears innate ethical dimensions.

Before the MSC

It is important to note as a start-point that Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is but one part of a long-term national strategy encompassing all aspects of Malaysian society. As a nation, Malaysia has established a number of practices framed around the conception, implementation and execution of the Malaysia Plans, each of which spans a period of five years. The current one in place is the *Ninth Malaysia Plan* (2006–2010). The Malaysia Plans are complemented by and overlaid with a series of national policy frameworks that have shaped Malaysia's economic direction (Economic Planning Unit, 2006: 3). These intersecting plans and initiatives pre-date the MSC so they shape much of the setting in which its conception, development and reception unfolds.

From the earliest days of independence the Federation of Malaysia has always held its people to be comprised of four main ethnic groups: the Malays or *Bumiputeras*,[4] the Chinese, the Indians and Others. There

[4] Although all Malays are *Bumiputeras*, not all *Bumiputeras* are Malay. The aboriginal people of Malaysia, the Orang Asli, for example, can claim Bumiputera rights if

are many who understand this system of ethnic categorisation to be a legacy of British Malaya's colonizers (Shamsul, 1998, 2004; Wang, 2004). Others argue, as Goh does in Chapter 6, that categories like 'Malay' and 'Chinese' are a consequence of the "ideological fantasy" of British (and modern European) imaginings. Suffice it to say here that the differentiations of ethnicity are both the lines along which Malaysian society operates and the cause of considerable angst.

One of the earliest policies set up to shape Malaysia's economic direction is the National Economic Policy (NEP) formulated in 1971 (-1990) as a response to the racial riots of 13 May 1969, a spill over of inter-ethnic tension into violence (Heng, 1997: 262). The primary motivation of the NEP was to appease the resentment of the Malay majority at the prosperity and wealth of the minority Chinese. As such, one of its main provisions was to "enhance Malay income, employment, and ownership of equity in all economic sectors" (ibid: 269). The NEP was followed in 1991 by the National Development Policy (NDP). Although it was regarded as a mark of further liberalization and the acceptance of market forces, the NDP was also, according to some (Heng, 1997), partially a result of considerable pressure from an ethnic group. In this instance, the increasingly alienated Chinese who moved their capital and families elsewhere in record numbers. The current National Vision Policy (NVP) was established in 2001 (-2010) (Economic Planning Unit, 2006: 3). The need to appease those disenfranchised by inter-ethnic tensions and economic inequity remains a primary objective (Heng, 1997).

The historically placatory genesis of these policies created a distinctive framework for the nation, and expectations from certain sections of society that have since had and may well continue to have many repercussions. One accrued effect would have been the further embedding of the divisions of ethnicity already engraved in the social imaginary of Malaysians. At the same time the formulation and execution also set a precedent for state interference in economics that remains to this day (Haque, 2003). However, this is not to say that an extensive amount of groundwork was not laid down before the introduction of the MSC. The launch of the Multimedia Super Corridor itself was preceded by the Vision 2020 plan outlined in 1991 by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. At that time Mahathir (as he is commonly referred to) had already been Prime Minister of Malaysia for

---

they forsake their way of life and assimilate into the larger Malay population (Ong, 1999:221).

a decade. Vision 2020 was when Mahathir first put forward the idea that the coveted status of developed nation was Malaysia's by the year 2020 if nine strategic challenges were overcome between then and 2020 (Mohamad, 1991). The turn of phrase—Vision 2020—was no accident and, as has been pointed out by Uimonen (2003:300), is both a play on the 20th spot on the list of developed nations that Malaysia aspires to and rich with utopian, temporal and visual associations—perfect vision being commonly referred to as "20–20" vision.

The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)

It was five years after the launch of Vision 2020 before Mahathir announced that a special zone was to be created to the south of the federal capital (Kuala Lumpur) for the development of information and multimedia technology. Bordered by the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) at the northern end and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) at the southern end, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is today the site of the federal government administration centre, Putrajaya and the intelligent city, Cyberjaya, custom-built to accommodate high-tech companies (Mohamad, 1996). Although only 50 kilometres by 15 kilometres in physical terms the establishment of the MSC is and has been positioned since day one as Malaysia's bid to become a "global facilitator of the Information Age" (Mohamad, 1996: 1).

A number of concessions have since been devised to entice would-be investors and entrepreneurs to the MSC. Among them: extremely generous financial incentives based on tax exemptions and the lifting of restrictions on the employment of foreign talent and business ownership requirements—all privileges granted only to businesses with MSC status. By contrast all other private businesses in Malaysia are subject to strict finance, ownership and employment restrictions that stipulate that a certain percentage of each of these elements has to either originate or reside with *Bumiputeras* (sons of the soil) (Heng, 1997: 268).

Additionally, access to the outstanding infrastructure of "intelligent cities" and the high-speed fibre optic backbone are bolstered by Cyberlaws encapsulated in a *Bill of Guarantees* that stipulates amongst other things, a policy of zero Internet censorship within Malaysia (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2007d). A steady procession of Cyberlaws have also been progressively enacted since the start of the MSC to ensure the smooth operation and protection of intellectual property,

telemedicine, digital signatures, patents and e-commerce (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2007a). In short, no effort has been spared to ensure all enterprises situated within the MSC zone experience what is considered the optimum environment and conditions for scientific and technological innovation.

In itself the seemingly unquestioning acceptance that the American Silicon Valley is reproducible appears to rest on the deterministic faith that technology decides how society behaves. Nevertheless, it would be a gross underestimation to dismiss the MSC as yet another among the rash of Asian attempts to import the success of the much vaunted Silicon Valley. As Bunnell points out, Malaysia's MSC is not a phenomenon that can be properly explained as part of a "paradigmatic global shift to a new techno-economic era or in terms of the expansion of a modern 'West' into a 'non-Western' periphery" (2006:3).

I suggest here it might be better to understand the MSC as a bid to engage the trope of progress via technology as part of established and sophisticated practices of nation construction. At the same time, I want to posit the notion that a broad streak of technological utopianism underlines the rationale for the MSC. This is despite it being at odds with the practice of "affirmative action" (Mohamad, 1991) for *Bumiputeras* that has been the nucleus of economic policies since 1971 (Heng, 1997:1). In his articulation of Vision 2020 Mahathir was adamant that rather than following in the footsteps of the other 19 developed nations, Malaysia would be "a developed country in our mould" (Mohamad, 1991: 1). Such sentiments did not, however, deter him from borrowing of the largely Western and liberal imaginings so beloved of technological utopians. Citing as self-evident the observation that "it can be no accident that there is today no wealthy developed country that is information-poor and no information-rich country that is poor and undeveloped" (Mohamad, 1991:3), Mahathir set the Malaysian nation firmly on the path of technological determinism and utopianism.

Utopianism is a common component of nation-technology imaginings and, contrary to West (1996:251), is employed by both undeveloped and developed nations, in conjunction with national competitiveness as the imperative rationale for the adoption of one technology or another. Malaysia's MSC is no exception. Technology reprises its regular role here, with information and communication technologies and the Internet—the stars that would thrust Malaysia into the utopia of developed nation status. The unabashedly techno-utopian

vision colours (and intrudes on) the lived time and space of Malaysians leaving little doubt that technology is to be considered a prime vehicle of national progress (Khalili, 2007; "MSC for the Good of Malaysians", 2006). The developments and literature on and surrounding the MSC are replete with techno-utopian inspired terms and acronyms for home-grown innovations like "Smart School", "Telehealth", "Technopreneur" (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2007b), "ELX" (Electronic Labour Exchange), the "next wave", and MyKad (government multipurpose card) (Economic Planning Unit, 2006:146–147, 252). As a whole the emphasis placed on the knowledge economy and the eventual rise of the knowledge worker is remarkable as is that on science, technology and innovation.

Interestingly, in his 1991 launch of Vision 2020 Prime Minister Mahathir had advocated the establishment of one *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race or nation). This, according to him was absolutely vital if Malaysia was to become "a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny … a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership" (Mohamad, 1991:1). The eradication of the "identification of race with economic function, and the identification of economic backwardness with race" was the eighth of the challenges he identified in that speech (ibid). Yet in apparent contradiction he also maintained there was a need "to ensure the creation of an economically resilient and fully competitive *Bumiputera* community so as to be at par with the non-*Bumiputera* community" (Ibid). However, by the time he launched the MSC in 1996 the Prime Minister made no mention of *Bumiputeras* nor was there any hint of preferences based on ethnicity (Mohamad, 1996). The issue, it seemed, had been subsumed by that of national economic progress through technological innovation.

The *Bill of Guarantees* provides businesses with MSC status the right to "unrestricted employment of local and foreign knowledge workers" (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2007d). And to this day the MSC maintains no ethnic preference in terms of employment, finance or ownership but welcomes instead the recruitment of local and foreign expertise, irrespective of ethnicity. Perhaps Malaysia's long serving Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, was not unaware of the incompatibility between the two policies. I argue that the tension between the premises underlying techno-utopianism and pro-Malay affirmative action forms the first of the dissonances that the MSC has introduced to Malaysia.

As coined by Thomas More (Mumford, 1962:1) the term 'utopia' has two possible meanings: 'no-place' or 'good place'. The conception of Malaysia's MSC employs both aspects to maximum effect. As a national aspiration, the developed nation status is most certainly to be understood as the good place. It is the perfect, fully developed society that Mahathir first envisioned in *Vision 2020: The Way Forward* (Mohamad, 1991). As the specially created zone where the normal rules of governance and restrictions of Malaysian society are not always applicable, the MSC can be seen as a non-place. Chief among the intended effects of the MSC zone then is the notion of a different space in which the normal rules do not apply. Part of this notion is owed to a feature closely associated with the rhetoric of the Internet's own early days as an ungovernable mind-space. The exceptional freedom from certain aspects of governance is thus an intrinsic component of the MSC status' constructed appeal to business. Ong dubs these "sites of transformation where market-driven calculations" are introduced into the "management of populations and administration of special spaces" (Ong, 2006: 3–4).

On one level the relaxed, liberal rules and enhanced conditions of these special spaces can be portrayed as a suspension of normal time and space.[5] At the very least doing so makes it easier to stave off questions as to why the same liberal conditions are not possible (or indeed, desirable) outside of the zone. On another level this shearing of space into a special zone is underlined by the cyber-libertarian notion of Internet cyberspace as 'non-meat' space and its consequential disregard for bodily related rules and conventions. The ordinary limits that apply to those bound up in their mundane, 'meat-bodies' become more acceptable when the MSC is understood as a special zone, created for and inhabited by the exceptional.

Unease exists between the pro-*Bumiputera* affirmative action and the techno-utopian ethos of the MSC because the two contradict each other. While the techno-utopian ethos of the MSC thrives on the energies and efforts of the IT adept, both local and foreign, the pro-*Bumiputera* affirmative action singles out an ethnic group for economic

[5] Governments all over the world participate in this practice when they create Free Trade Zones (FTZs). China, for example, which styles them variously as Special Economic Zones, Economic Development Zones and Coastal Open Cities, provides a number of concessions to those who invest in these special zones including tax holidays, customs duty exemptions and preferential tax rates (Firoz & Murray, 2003).

preference. This contradiction is visible in the perusal of reports such as the *Multimedia Super Corridor Impact Survey 2004* (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2004). Reading between the lines the detailed breakdown of the talent employed along demographic lines, for example, speaks of a continued sensitivity over issues like the ethnic composition of the MSC workforce (ibid: 9).

One of the more remarkable elements of the MSC designed to lure foreign investment is the promise of complete freedom from Internet censorship. Such liberty, as Bunnell notes, can only be partially vindicated by the desire to upstage the rival nanny state of Singapore (Bunnell, 2006:104). In an era where even the home of the *Bill of Rights*, the United States of America, reserves the right to eavesdrop on the dialogue of its citizens, this is truly a mark of distinction. However, as, the publishers of the Malaysian online daily malaysiakini.com and supporters of Malaysia's ex-Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim (Reporters without Borders, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003) have found, the MSC's *Bill of Guarantees* needs always to be upheld in conjunction with Malaysia's other laws. When conflicts occur between the laws of the land there are no certainties.

Certainly, while the promise of freedom from Internet censorship appears to allow for the expression of a diversity of views online, other Malaysian laws like the *Sedition Act* and the *Internal Security Act* seem determined to inhibit the possibilities of such generous latitude (Human Rights Watch, 2000). The *Internal Security Act*, for example, allows the police to detain individuals "without evidence or warrant" provided there is a belief that they have acted, or are about or likely to act in a manner that would threaten the nation's security (Amnesty International, 2003). The recent detention of blogger, Nathaniel Tan, on charges of insulting the King and Islam (Vasudevan, 2007), is a harsh reminder of these contradictions, as is the police report filed against fellow blogger and webmaster, Raja Petra (Chow, 2007). Clearly, the high degree of online freedom strikes a screeching note of discord against the backdrop of such punitive and absolute powers, especially when both are enacted in the name of the nation. This, I posit, is the second of the dissonances that the MSC brings to Malaysia as a nation.

Such aberrations from the norm as the MSC zone and status present cannot fail but have a number of effects on the populace. This is especially so, given the large proportion of working age people—63.3 % of Malaysians are between 15–64 years of age (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006)—who are likely to have some form of access to the

Internet at work. Add to that the conflict between what is intended and the context of its interpretation—a permissiveness that fosters innovation within a socio-political environment more wary of sedition than most—and how the MSC inflects Malaysia becomes even more apparent. Even those who take exception to the exceptions and flatly refuse to buy into the techno-utopianism preferring instead to rely on the bounty of the nation's natural resources (Ong, 2005:349) are impinged upon.

In a space and time where Cyberlaws prevail how is the general populace of Malaysia, user and non-user of the Internet, adherent and heretics of the MSC faith, to regard themselves within the nation? The liberal appellation of 'intelligent' to all things connected with the MSC provides us with a clue; as does the deliberate styling of Cyberjaya and all the other Cybercities custom-built for high-tech companies as intelligent cities with "[w]orld class [p]hysical & [c]ommunications [i]nfrastructure" and a "set of standards and criteria" so exceptional it "differentiates them from any other location" (Multimedia Development Corporation, 2007c). Notably, these are advantages not available to the average Malaysian business or individual, only to the privileged few who inhabit the MSC zone.

Within such a context intelligence is not so much associated with intellectual ability as it is with ICT (Information & Communication Technology) virtuosity, though the two are not mutually exclusive. The envisioning and the implementation of the MSC, therefore, have the effect of valorizing those who are "intelligent" and the converse effect of excluding those deemed insufficiently so. "Intelligent," in this case becomes more than an adjective that denotes superior intellect; instead it is a mark of overt elitism that quite plainly rejects all those found wanting.[6] The nation as lived through the MSC welcomes only those who possess this species of intelligence. It precludes the un-"intelligent" from the processes of the MSC's execution, pursuit, development and experience and places them on par with those who elect not to be part of this turn towards "intelligence".

[6] The displacement of the *Orang Asli*, the aboriginal people of Malaysia made up of a large number of loosely nomadic groups (Kahn, 2006:33), is an example of the exclusion that the employment of technology in national imagining often entails (Bunnell, 2006:124–141). It is an exclusion that has severe repercussions for their subsidiary farming communities' position within the socio-technological imaginary of the nation.

Hence, not only does the enactment of the nation via the MSC privilege a certain form of intelligence above others, it also comes complete with an in-built system of values—one in which the qualities held in highest regard and hence desired of the people of this nation are those linked to the "intelligent" ability to manipulate and derive profit from science, technology and innovation. As Calhoun (2003b:234) reminds us, the import or transfer of technologies is always accompanied by their inherent values. Such was the consequence when the Chinese hauled railways and telegraphs to China in the 19th century and such is the case with the MSC.

The valuation of humans in such a manner is a variant of what Ong labels "graduated sovereignty" (1999:215–216). She describes it as a practice "whereby citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits … enjoy different sets of civil, political, and economic rights" (ibid). In short, this is a "system of variegated citizenship" (Ong, 1999:217). According to Olds and Thrift (2005:275), such practices are already commonplace in many Western states where the creation of "a self-willed subject whose industry will boost the powers of the state to compete economically, and will also produce a more dynamic citizenry" is highly prized. Malaysia's emphasis on the "intelligent" is thus, not exceptional.

Ironically, given the long-standing pro-*Bumiputera* policies, the separation of its citizenry into distinct groups, each deserving of different treatment, is not out of character for the Malaysian nation. Neither is the singling out of the ability to effect positive economic change. The differences lie in the type of traits that are highlighted and the recognition rather than penalty meted out to those gifted with the desired attributes. That is, rather than ethnicity and its purportedly attendant economic disadvantages it is techno-entrepreneurial ability that is singled out. And rather than instituting affirmative action to aid those less gifted in this area, thus penalizing the "technopreneurs" by inference, IT adepts are valued, feted and encouraged. It is in such seemingly minor details that the Malaysian nation as practiced through graduated sovereignty can be understood to be in direct conflict with its enactment through pro-*Bumiputera* affirmative action. This conflict forms the third note of dissonance that the MSC brings to the Malaysian nation.

Although the MSC is characterised as a strategy for achieving common good the enthusiasm surrounding it is tinged with caution. This is wariness akin to that which grips those who approach the unknown, the void of non-space which beckons those who dare to venture into

the Western dominated "borderless environment" of the Internet (Bunnell, 2006:100). Such caution was evident early. For example, even as Mahathir urged the nation to think of the MSC as "far-reaching" in the very same sentence he also emphasized that he was "talking [only] about the way we lived and work *within* the MSC" (Mohamad, 1996:1, my emphases).

One of the strategies incorporated to bolster this change of direction for the Malaysian nation is sometimes referred to as "alternative liberalism" (Ong, cited in Uimonen, 2003:303). Alternative liberalism is a mixture of economic liberalism with cultural communitarianism and is characterised by the understanding and promotion of the common good "in communitarian and material terms" rather than individual rights (ibid). It goes hand-in-hand with an Asian brand of "illiberal democracy" that advocates a prominent role for the state in the lives of its citizenry, a tenet also espoused by Singapore's Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew (Barr, 2000:312). Another is the trope of Asian values, which both Lee (Barr, 2000) and Mahathir (Thompson, 2000) vociferously put forward as the secret to the success of the "Asian tigers" in the early to mid-1990s.

In Malaysia "Asian values" seem to have morphed and combined with alternative liberalism to be translated into the local context as Malay(sian) values. This conjunction is most apparent in the spatial imagining of the MSC from architecture and design to landscape. Additionally, the design and architecture of the Multimedia Super Corridor itself is being imbued with uniquely Islamic geometrical designs (ibid, 70). The intention to construct a uniquely Malaysian variation of liberalism is also evidenced in the document *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) "formulated as an approach that enjoins progress and advancements as an imperative for the people, while being firmly rooted in the universal values and junctions of Islam" (Economic Planning Unit, 2006: 9).[7]

[7] In principle, the marriage of Islamic mores and technological advancement is not incompatible, for Islam has no philosophical or moral objection to science, technology or innovation. As most historians of technology would attest the Islamic civilisation is responsible for many of the most elegant technological solutions to the problems of everyday life including the clock, the water-wheel and, much of higher mathematics (Mumford, 1963; Pacey, 1990). The values of Islam are universal and cosmopolitan. Malaysia is, however, unique in its conflation of Islam with race. It remains the only Constitution where a race (Malay) is identified, amongst other characteristics, through the practice of Islam.

Together, the three notes of dissonance that the Internet adds to the Malaysian nation—the unease between the inherent techno-utopianism of the MSC and pro-Malay affirmative action; the contrast between the high degree of online freedom and the absolute punitive powers of the state; and the conflict between the nation as enacted through graduated sovereignty and its enactment through pro-*Bumiputera* affirmative action—form the main inflections that I argue the MSC brings to Malaysia, the nation. That is, not only does the MSC introduce new ways to enact Malaysia it also disrupts the dominant manner in which this nation can be imagined and enacted (in this case through its people, its laws and its values).

Newspaper accounts that write of the "disconnect between the MSC and the rest of Malaysia" offer some hint of this disruption (Lee, 2007).[8] This article details an MSC-based foreign businessman's difficulties with the mismatch of policies between those within the special zone and those in the rest of Malaysia. The account is indicative of the incoherence that the MSC policy presents, veering away from established practices within Malaysia as it does. Is such disruption inevitable? Ong suggests that one way to view the digital corridor is as the deliberate creation of "a space in which a certain kind of governmentality seeks to break the association between race privilege and citizenship, and instead produce an ethical reflection on the moral figure of the native-born technocrat" (Ong, 2005: 348).

However one might choose to view it, the MSC's potential for disruption depends to a large extent on the dominant imaginings of the nation already active within the social imaginary. In other words, such disruptions and inflections that I posit the Internet has for Malaysia exist precisely because the MSC is part of a focused, sophisticated plan to develop the nation in a certain direction. This is especially so because this new direction diverges widely from previous imaginings and/or enactments of the Malaysian nation. On its own it would be hard to say if the MSC would have as heavy an inflection on Malaysia.

As I write, Malaysia is on the cusp of celebrating another national day, traditionally an event that triggers much soul-searching. One

[8] The tightening of the Printing Presses and Publishing Act in the 1980s, which allows the Home Minister to control, revoke or suspend the distribution of local and foreign publications (Khor & Ng, 2006:143), must go some way towards deterring much of the media in Malaysia who might otherwise make more of the issue.

recent instance is the assertion by the Deputy Prime Minster that regardless of its constitution Malaysia is an Islamic rather than a secular state (Fernandez, 2007). That the Internal Security Ministry has since seen fit to impose a ban on all mainstream media against publishing any news on the issue is highly instructional, especially given the fact that it continues to be discussed online ("Revoke Media Ban on Islamic State Debate", 2007). Nevertheless, what the declaration and its repercussions demonstrate is that it takes very little to scratch the surface of what has been described as a "state of stable tension" (Shamsul, 2004:130). Ethnic differentiation never seems completely absent from the thoughts of Malaysians, least of all those of its largest ethnic minority, the Chinese. What the MSC and its emphasis on the wider horizons of technological entrepreneurship bring to their ambivalent situation is the subject of the next section.

The Malaysian Chinese

That Malaysia is an ethnocracy is no secret. However, contrary to most (Western?) expectations the nation-state's recognition of its minorities has had negative rather than positive consequences for the minorities themselves. In other words, widespread as the affirmative action is it remains the sole privilege of the majority, the mostly Malay *Bumiputeras* (sons of the soil), rather than the minorities. Affirmative action Malaysia style has long been a bone of contention for the Malaysian Chinese and as a recent survey confirms, it remains a source of great dissatisfaction and disaffection with the nation-state (Zappei, 2007).

Historically, the resentment over Chinese prosperity within Malaysia is owed to the (mis)perception of them as an ethnic group whose abiding attachment to China will always place their loyalty to the Malaysian nation in doubt. One consequence of this enduring suspicion of the Malaysian Chinese has been the reification of their difference and the re-inscription of their ambivalence through the institution of the New Economic Policy (NEP). What I want to do here is to use the Multimedia Super Corridor as an opening, a passage-way, so to speak, through the complexities and nuances of the position of the Malaysian Chinese. My argument is that part of what the MSC has affected is a re-animation of unresolved issues for the Malaysian Chinese that though not exactly dormant, are nevertheless buried under habitual layers of market rationalisation and economic instrumentality. And in

the sense that the Chinese, at 26 percent form a substantial portion of the nation's population, the Multimedia Super Corridor can be said to inflect how Malaysia is imagined.

It is important to note firstly that none of the complexities of multiple belongings and ambivalence that challenge the Malaysian Chinese are new or unique to them.[9] Nor is it certain that these issues are purely a consequence of being an ethnic minority. Rather, I suggest them to be the result of a convergence of circumstances, historical and contemporary, that are particular to the Chinese. These include: the heightened visibility that ensues from economic acumen; an inculcated respect for education as the route towards success and; the accepted expediency of familial inter- and intra-dependence. All of which are, arguably, acquired and acculturated rather than natural, essential qualities of the Chinese.

What then, are the issues that inhere in the situation of the Malaysian Chinese? The chief ones I want to highlight here are the related issues of transnationalism and belonging. One aspect of transnationalism that I argue the MSC has imbued with renewed potency for the Malaysian Chinese is the call of Greater China. The term itself has multiple meanings but for our purposes here I employ that of Greater China as "an ethno-economic space that crosses national boundaries because of a primacy of economic interests over national identification" (Mengin, 2004: 1).[10] As has been observed, much of the urge to reconnect with Greater China is economic (Yow, 2005:559). Mainland China presents an enormous potential market that few businesses, Chinese or otherwise owned, do not covet. The opening of the Chinese market since the late 1970s is no small incentive to rejoin the great Chinese family (Yow, 2005:570).

But the allure of Greater China goes beyond economic benefit; it is also grounded on a sense of belonging to a special people with an ancient and unique culture. For the Chinese, race consciousness can be said to precede Western constructions of the notion of race itself. It is an awareness forged in the innumerable border struggles against "barbarians" on all sides (Ong, 1999:56). This is at heart one

[9] The Chinese populations in Indonesia and America, for example, deal with much the same issues (Freedman, 2000). So in a sense Greater China is equally applicable to all overseas Chinese populations.

[10] The term "Greater China" was first coined by Japanese economists to capture the increasing levels of economic integration between China, Hong Kong and Taiwan said to have been brought about by globalisation (Ong, 1999:60).

of the greatest motivators towards sodalities like diaspora and notions like Greater China. That this sense of belonging is distinguished by the assumption of an innate economic savvy and the potential for crucial ethnic connections in business is what prompts descriptions of Greater China as "a transnational space where capital and race are interbraided and brothers long scattered in diaspora are brought into association again" (Ong, 1999:65).

However, the sense of belonging to a special people explains just one part of the attraction to Greater China for those of Chinese descent.[11] And if the claims of those like Yow (2005) are right, it is a sentient sentiment that is fast dissipating for the Chinese of Malaysia and Singapore as increasingly more are born locally and the myriad non-Chinese customs, tastes and ways of their land of birth are incorporated into daily life. Classic examples include the popular dishes of 'Asam Laksa' and 'Rojak', cuisine heavily marked by local flavours like tamarind, pineapple and prawn paste and; the cross-fertilization of local Malay and Chinese cultures, languages and customs that is the *Baba* (Straits Chinese) way of life.

Among the many instances of Malaysian Chinese reaching out to Greater China, the online videos of Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese rapper, Wee Meng Chee, make an intriguing example for consideration here. Of the three productions I want to mention, it is the work titled *Negarakuku* (Wee, 2007c) that has gained the most notoriety. This video features Wee rapping in a mixture of Chinese, Hokkien (Chinese dialect) and Malay to background snatches of Malaysia's national anthem *Negaraku* with visuals comprising a flowing Malaysian flag, landscape, buildings and people. Intended to be a satire of life as a Malaysian Chinese, *Negarakuku* has been viewed at least a million times since its release and continues to be available via multiple sources despite having been officially withdrawn by Wee.

The withdrawal of *Negarakuku* was Wee's attempt to mitigate the flurry of possible injunctions with which he has been threatened since its release. These range from demands for a public apology and suspension of his university scholarship (Sim, 2007; "Apology Accepted but Wee still in Trouble", 2007) to an early recall from Taiwan to face prosecution for his (alleged) mockery of national symbols and/or acts of sedition ("No Recall for Student Mocking Negaraku", 2007).

[11] This is however, an understanding based not so much on factual as it is on "sentient" history (Connor, 2004:44–45).

Aside from *Negarakuku*, Wee has also produced two earlier online videos: *Kawanku* and *Muar Chinese*. In the first he chides his fellow Malaysian Chinese and neighbouring Singaporeans for their pretentious and divisive preference of one Chinese dialect (Cantonese) over another (Hokkien). In the second video, using the same mix of languages, Wee champions the use of a 'Muar' brand of the Chinese language, particular to the region in Johor, Malaysia from which he originates.

At the same time, as Wee himself professes, *Negarakuku* (and we might infer the same for *Kawanku* and *Muar Chinese*) was produced for the benefit of "the Chinese community in Taiwan and China" (Yeow, 2007). Hence, despite his championing of the 'Muar' style of Chinese and the Hokkien dialect, Wee is wide awake to the economic potential that membership of Greater China holds. Such is also evident in the fact that he is pursuing a mass communication degree in Taiwan (after failing to gain a spot in Malaysia, one of the plaints in *Negarakuku*). Additionally, although only three are mentioned here, Wee has produced well over 300 songs and hopes one day to make it big as a singer/song writer ("NameWee's Interview on Taiwan TV with English Translation", 2007).

Together Wee's trio of videos forms the perfect example of the attempts of a Malaysian Chinese to capitalize on his connections to Greater China via the freewheeling space of the global Internet. All three are characteristic of online multimedia content: technically slick, multilingual pastiches of audio and visuals imbued with an irreverent, devil-may-care attitude. Adroit productions born of IT (and musical) virtuosity, they are the very embodiment of the techno-utopian, no-holds-barred and censorship-free understanding of the Internet that underpins the ethos of the MSC.

Undoubtedly, one part of the hostile reaction to *Negarakuku* is due to its very public (let alone global) lampooning of the dominant majority ("Malaysian Defends YouTube Video", 2007). The other part of the incensed response it has provoked in ultra-nationalists is owed to the perceived insult his seemingly flippant employment of flag and anthem as background is alleged to have heaped on the nation. Certainly for Wee, who hopes to return to Malaysia next year, and for his family currently resident in Malaysia, there appears to be much reckoning for his actions in the near future.

Wee maintains that he loves his nation and is, in any case, "only rapping about things Malaysians talk about all the time" (Yeow, 2007). If so, how have his claims to have given public voice to the com-

mon people redounded on the larger Chinese community in Malaysia? It is difficult to gauge at this stage but judging from the lengths to which the state appears prepared to go in order to appease the outrage aroused as well as the column space and air-time that continue to be devoted to the issue, some backlash seems unavoidable. It is equally possible that in exposing an online space almost exclusively the domain of younger generations to pointed socio-political commentary, Wee's music videos may have roused many younger Malaysians (of all ethnicities) from their political apathy and created greater awareness of the socio-political issues that underscore their nation. However, even when set to the youth-appealing lingo and beat of rap, cultural insensitivity is unlikely to advance one's cause by much.

One effect of Wee's works has been the unwanted attention focused on the unfettered freedom of an Internet without censorship. This has increased the pressure on the state to curb such exuberant and damaging liberties. Of course, any future consequences need to be understood within the context of the overall impetus towards enforcing some form of censorship on online content perceived to threaten "racial stability and national security" ("Umno: Insults against Islam, King on Website", 2007). In fact, according to Sennyah and Damis (2007), the no-censorship policy in Section 3(3) of the Multimedia Act is set for a collision with Section 223 of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, governing the "improper use of network facilities or services".

Whatever the outcome, the invective stirred up by this six-minute music video is not about to abate soon. Attempts to subtitle, understand and interpret *Negarakuku* continue to sprout online and both it and *Kawanku* have attained the doubtful distinction of having been pirated under the *Pasar Malam* Hits label ("Negaraku Rap in Pirated Discs", 2007). Not unusually for online content there is little possibility on anyone's part to control their potential effects once they are appropriated by others. However, rapid though the trio of music videos may seem, these are not "rapid-fire interventions" (Ong, 2003: 94) or the glib product of "instantaneous citizenship … activated by a keystroke" (ibid: 99) but expressions of the deeply embedded lived experience of the Chinese in Malaysia. And it is precisely this quality that renders them such profound statements of ethnic and national angst.

Amidst all this it pays to remember too that the attraction of Greater China is not an unrequited affair conducted only by the Chinese overseas. State governments have long been aware of the powerful pull that

family and nation continue to exert on those no longer resident and many make concerted efforts to court these erstwhile nationals. The Chilean government, for example, has even gone as far as to recognise a virtual fourteenth region (in addition to the thirteen existing ones)—*el exterior or el reencuentro* (the reunion)—in order to reintegrate and reclaim the million or so Chileans who left the nation during the military reign of the Pinochet dictatorship (Eriksen, 2007:13–14). Although much of this desire to "bring them home" is attributed to the relative ease the Internet affords such connection, the value of remittances from members of large diasporic communities with bigger wage packets is undoubtedly a vital part of the overall motivation.

According to Eriksen initiatives such as that of the Chilean government are a form of "state-supported Internet nationalism" and for him "[i]n terms of economics and strategic interests, such an enlarging of the national interest makes perfect sense" (Eriksen, 2007:13–14). But as governments such as those of Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India will relate, these extended belongings come at a price. Not only are these transnational diasporas gaining viability as genuine contestants for political legitimacy thus challenging existing nation-state boundaries, they are also leading to the testing of existent ways and new modes of practising the nation. From the reinstatement of voting rights to geographically distant citizens and electronic citizenship (Chattopadhyay, 2003:36) to constitutional patriotism (Delanty, 2001), new and not-so-new strands of belonging are being contemplated and (re)considered.

Specifically, as Sun notes, it is "by no means fortuitous that most embassies and consulates overseas provide free Chinese textbooks designed by PRC [People's Republic of China] educators exclusively with overseas Chinese students in mind" (Sun, 2005:76). The Chinese imaginary is constantly being pushed, expanded and added to with millions of overseas Chinese in mind as both target-audience and would-be consumers. The range includes films, radio and television programmes, newspapers, books, magazines, music, videos, chat rooms, online forums and networks, web sites, blogs and video-clips. These "ethnic media" (ibid: 73) play a pivotal role in reminding the Malaysian Chinese of the alternative subjectivities and communities to which they can claim belonging. As a constant reminder of the possibilities enabled by the latest advances in Internet and related technologies, the MSC acts as both a passage to these beckoning worlds and a passage out of their situation as Malaysian Chinese.

Basically, transnationalism asks that multiple belongings be embraced as reality. Multiple belongings plump with the promise to enrich lives and open all kinds of doors to the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964: 93) and the "inherited worlds" of the "global ecumene" (Hannerz, 1996: 7) while physically sited elsewhere are highly attractive propositions. Multiple belonging can of course be understood as another way of phrasing hybridity but the underlying premise remains unchanged. According to its proponents, there is no need to choose—you can mix and match whatever and whenever you like, because the Internet, satellite dish and countless other electronic paraphernalia make it as easy as ABC.

This, as I intimated in the introduction, is a choice fraught with ethical dimensions. For ultimately, what the recall to mother China advocates is the return to a way of being embedded in lived experiences that are alien to the Malaysian Chinese. It does not, as Calhou's insight on cosmopolitanism reveals, preclude a need to choose, only that the choice be comprised of a particular width and range of belonging. It is not my intention here to argue the rights or wrongs of transnationalism but I do want to bring its ethical dimensions to prominence. That there are others like Ong (2006), who share my disquiet at the ethics of these forms of belonging that are (incompletely) disembedded from lived experience and social milieu tells me that my concerns are not without grounds.[12]

Scholars of Malaysia like Carstens (2005:6) suggest that "Malaysian Chinese identities are always provisional and constantly modified in the different contexts of daily life". Brubaker suggests that one approach to multiple belongings is to rethink the objects of emotional attachment. Instead of regarding them as bounded and enduring entities, he argues that ethnicity, nation, race, culture and religion are better conceived of "in relational, processual and dynamic terms" as "contextually fluctuating conceptual variable[s]" (Brubaker, 2003:555). In place of ossified constants Brubaker argues that emotional fidelity might fare

[12] Much of this concern has to do with the prevalence of disembodied experience that disembedded belongings seem to emphasize (and valorize). This is in part due to the dichotomy between place and space that geographers and philosophers struggle with. Yi Fu Tuan writes in *Space and Place* (1977) that "[p]lace is an organized world of meaning. It is essentially a static concept. If we see the world as process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place". I suggest that it is in the notion of "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991:39–46) that the division between space and place might be breached.

better if it acknowledged that the objects of attachment are fickle and variable. There is much to commend in his suggestion for it provides a much more supple and robust conception of the objects of human attachment—one that is capable of change, growth and challenge.

The Chinese of Malaysia have remained staunchly loyal to the nation, despite decades of vulnerability to "anti-Chinese policies" and disregard for their loyalty. Perhaps, as Ong posits, the state does class them as "lower-class ethnics" who are less able to sample transnationalism and cosmopolitan and therefore, loyal only by default (Ong, 1999: 134–135). I do not share this opinion that the Malaysian Chinese only remain loyal because they have little recourse to other possibilities. It is hard to fathom all the reasons but I would venture to say it is due, not as Yeoh and Lai (2003: 3) believe, to the different set of rules by which transnational subjects are able to operate but rather in how the rules themselves have been expanded and re-interpreted by the Malaysian Chinese.

Conclusion

It has been put to me that much cynicism exists in Malaysia with regards to the MSC's efficacy and hence the inflections that I suggest here might actually be of lesser import than supposed. I do not doubt that the MSC has its fair share of naysayers and sceptics but apart from anecdotal evidence there has been little to support these intuitions. In any case nothing of what is argued here actually hinges on the success or failure of the MSC as a policy. It merely begins with the existence of the digital corridor's conception, implementation and development in Malaysia. Additionally, it should be pointed out that resistance to the MSC is in itself also an instance of the inflections I mention here.

It was suggested in 1997, for example, that with the switch of focus to the MSC, the Chinese-dominated state of Penang, once dubbed Malaysia's Silicon Valley, was about to languish (Mitton, 1997). That Penang has since then become the "country's biggest magnet for foreign investment" in 2006 is illustrative of my argument that resistance to the MSC in itself is also an instance of its inflections. Although it would be a gross overstatement to attribute the turnaround entirely to the MSC, it is not hard to imagine that the determination not to buckle under the loss of 'Silicon Valley' status played some part. At the very least this example argues that when a policy as spread out and entangled in the existing

policy framework as the Multimedia Super Corridor is implemented, the factors and attitudes at play are much more complex than can be fathomed within a decade. There remains much to be observed and ruminated over in this fascinating experiment with technology, race, religion and national community.

Although race, as Lim asserts in his introduction to this volume, does not determine every social relation in Malaysia, it would not be wrong to say that to a greater or lesser degree, this is a nation where "ethnicity affects almost every dimension of life" (Haque, 2003:242). The main objective of this chapter has been to set out how the ethnocratic imagining of Malaysia has been inflected by the Multimedia Super Corridor. My argument is that the relationship between nation and ethnicity in Malaysia has been disrupted by three notes of dissonance, courtesy of the MSC. They are: the tension between the premises underlying techno-utopianism and pro-Malay affirmative action; the discordance between the "guaranteed" freedom from online censorship and the absolute punitive powers of the state; and the contradiction between the Malaysian nation as practiced through graduated sovereignty and its pro-*Bumiputera* affirmative action. What these three dissonances mean and how (if so desired) they might conceivably be brought to conciliation with Malaysia's larger aims remains to be explored.

Works Cited

Amnesty International (2003) "Malaysia: the Internal Security Act". http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280062003 (accessed 29 April 2007).

"Apology Accepted but Wee still in Trouble" (2007) NST Online. http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Friday/National/20070817085139/Article/ (accessed 17 August 2007).

Barr, Michael D. (2000) "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' Debate". *Asian Studies Review* 24(3), pp. 309–334.

Benton, George, & Gomez, Edmund Terence (2003) "Essentializing Chinese Identity: Transnationalism and the Chinese in Europe and Southeast Asia", in B.S.A. Yeoh, M.W. Charney & C.K. Tong eds., *Approaching Transnationalisms: Studies on Transnational Societies, Multicultural Contacts, and the Imaginings of Home*. Boston: Kluwer, pp. 251–300.

Brubaker, Rogers (2003) "Neither Individualism nor 'Groupism'". *Ethnicities* 3(4), pp. 553–557.

Bunnell, Tim (2006) *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor: a Critical Geography of Intelligent Landscapes*. London; New York: Routledge.

Calhoun, Craig. (2003a) "'Belonging' in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary". *Ethnicities* 3(4), pp. 531–568.
———, (2003b) "Information Technology and the International Public Sphere", in D. Schuler & P. Day eds., *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 229–251.
Carstens, Sharon A. (2005) *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
Chattopadhyay, Rohitashya (2003) "The Internet and Postcolonial Development: India's Transnational Reality". *Contemporary South Asia* 12(1), pp. 25–40.
Chow, Kum Hor (2007) "Is KL Cracking Down on Cyberspace?" *The Straits Times*. 25 July. Factiva database.
Connor, Walker (2004). "The Timelessness of Nations". *Nations and Nationalism*, 10(1), pp. 35–47.
Delanty, Gerard (2001) "Nationalism: Between Nation and State", in G. Ritzer & B. Smart eds., *Handbook of Social Theory*. London: Sage, pp. 472–484.
Department of Statistics Malaysia (2001) *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report: Population and Housing Census 2000*. http://www.statistics.gov.my/english/census/pressdemo.htm (accessed 19 April 2007).
Department of Statistics Malaysia (2006) *Population by Age Group*. http://www.statistics.gov.my/images/graf/pop2006.jpg (accessed 19 April 2007).
Economic Planning Unit (2005) *Malaysia: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals-Successes and Challenges*. http://www.epu.jpm.my/New%20Folder/publication/UNDP1.pdf (accessed 12 April 2007).
Economic Planning Unit (2006) *The Ninth Malaysia Plan: 2006–2010*. http://www.epu.jpm.my/rm9/english/Mission.pdf (accessed 12 April 2007)
Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2007) "Nationalism and the Internet". *Nations and Nationalism* 13(1), pp. 1–17.
Fernandez, Clarence (2007) "Islamic State Label Sparks Controversy in Malaysia". reuters.com 25 July 2007. http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSKLR13086320070725 (accessed 30 August 2007)
Firoz, Nadeem N., & Murray, H. Amy (2003) "Foreign Investment Opportunities and Customs Laws in China's Special Economic Zones". *International Journal of Management* 20(1), pp. 109–122.
Freedman, Amy L. (2000) *Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities: Chinese Overseas in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the United States*. New York: Routledge.
Fukuyama, Francis (1998) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon
Gomez, Edmund Terence (2004) "'De-essentialising Capitalism': Chinese Networks and Family Firms in Malaysia". *NIAS Nytt*, 3, pp. 8–10.
Graham, Gordon (2003) *Eight Theories of Ethics*. London, New York: Routledge.
Hannerz, Ulf (1996) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*. New York: Routledge.
Haque, M. Shamsul (2003) "The Role of the State in Managing Ethnic Tensions in Malaysia". *American Behavioral Scientist* 47(3), pp. 240–266.
Hara, Fujio (1997) *Malayan Chinese and China: Conversion in Identity Consciousness, 1945–1957*. Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies.
Heng, Pek Hoon (1997) "The New Economic Policy and the Chinese Commu-

nity in Peninsular Malaysia". *The Developing Economics* XXXV(3), pp. 262–292.
Human Rights Watch (2000) "Repressive Laws". http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/malaysia/2000/laws.htm (accessed 1 August 2007).
———, (2003) "Malaysia: End Intimidation of News Website." 8 October 2003. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2003/10/08/malays6440.htm (accessed 29 April 2007).
Kahn, Joel S. (2006) *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Honolulu, HI: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with University of Hawaii Press.
Khalili, Siti Syameen Md. (2007). "Be Online Ambassadors for Your Country". *New Straits Times*, 8 March.
Khor, Yoke Lim & Ng Miew Luan (2006) "Chinese Newspapers, Ethnic Identity and the State: the Case of Malaysia", in W. Sun ed., *Media and the Chinese Diaspora: Community, Communications and Commerce*. London: Routledge, pp. 137–149.
Lee, Wei Lian (2007) "Net Value: MSC Status but Sleepless Nights". *The Edge Financial Daily*, 29 January.
Lefebvre, Henri (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
"Malaysian Defends YouTube Video" (2007). channelu.tv 8 August 2007. http://www.channelu.tv/default.asp?sec=3&articleidx=534 (accessed 13 August 2007).
McLuhan, Marhsall (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Mengin, Francoise ed. (2004) *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Mitton, Roger (1997) "A State of Decline". Asiaweek.com. 5 September. http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/97/0905/nat5.html (accessed 8 August 2007).
Mohamad, Mahathir (1991) *Vision 2020: The Way Forward* [Transcript]. http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vALLDOC/BA7051FF90767AD848256E84003129CA (accessed 17 April 2007).
———, (1996) The *Opening of Multimedia Asia on Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)*. [Transcript] http://www.pmo.gov.my/WebNotesApp/PastPM.nsf/a310590c7cafaaae48256db4001773ea/682f9d3b1112f6614825674a00223bc4?OpenDocument (accessed 19 April 2007).
"MSC for the Good of Malaysians" (2006) *New Straits Times*. 28 December. 12 April 2007. Factiva database.
Multimedia Development Corporation (2004) *Multimedia Super Corridor: Impact Survey 2004*. http://www.pikom.org.my/docs/hrsig/MSC.pdf (accessed 16 February 2007).
———, (2007a) "Cyberlaws and Intellectual Property Laws". http://www.msc.com.my/cyberlaws/ (accessed 11 April 2007).
———, (2007b) "MSC Malaysia Progress Updates." http://www.msc.com.my/xtras/fact_figures/msc.asp (accessed 31 January 2007).
———, (2007c) "The Multimedia Super Corridor". http://www.msc.com.my/msc/msc.asp (accessed 11 April 2007).
———, (2007d) "Why MSC Malaysia?" http://www.msc.com.my/msc/

whymsc.asp (accessed 11 April 2007).
Mumford, Lewis (1962) *The Story of Utopias*. New York: Viking.
———, (1963) *Technics and Civilization*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
"NameWee's Interview on Taiwan TV with English Translation" [video clip] (2007). 2 August. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thxvvLnhSMc (accessed 3 September 2007)
"Negaraku Rap in Pirated Discs" (2007) *New Straits Times*. 18 August. 3 September 2007. Factiva database.
"No Recall for Student Mocking Negaraku" (2007) *Borneo Post Online*. 10 August. www.theborneopost.com/?p=23116 (accessed 10 August 2007).
Olds, Kris, & Nigel Thrift (2005) "Cultures on the Brink: Reengineering the Soul of Capitalism—On a Global Scale", in A. Ong & S.J. Collier eds., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 271–290.
Ong, Aihwa (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
———, (2003) "Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics Among Transnational Chinese". *Interventions* 5(1), pp. 82–100.
———, (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.
Pacey, Arnold. (1990). *Technology in World Civilization: A Thousand-year History*. Oxford, Eng: Basil Blackwell.
Reporters without Borders. (2004). "Malaysia." 22 June 2004. http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10785
Sennyah, Patrick, & Damis, Aniza. "Bloggers, Netizens must Behave like Adult." 6 August 2007 http://malaysia-today.net/blog/2006/newsncom.php?itemid=7028
Shamsul, A.B. (1998). Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: "Malayness" in Postwar Malaysia. In D.C. Gladney (Ed.), *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States* (pp. 135–150). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
———, (2004). Texts and Collective Memories: The Construction of "Chinese" and "Chineseness" from the Perspective of a Malay. In L. Suryadinata (Ed.), *Ethnic Relations and Nation Building in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese* (pp. 109–144). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
Sim, Leoi Leoi. "Ministry to Check if Rapper Wee in Taiwan on Government Loan." *The Star Online*. 9 August 2007. http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/8/9/nation/20070809130606&sec=nation
Sun, Wanning. (2005). Media and the Chinese Diaspora: Community, Consumption, and Transnational Imagination. *Journal of Chinese Overseas, 1*(1), 65–86.
Thompson, Mark R. (2000). The Survival of "Asian Values" as "Zivilisationstrik". *Theory and Society, 29*(5), 651–686.
Tishkov, Valery A. (2000). Forget the 'nation': post-nationalist understanding of nationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 23*(4), 625–650.
Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977). *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Uimonen, Paula. (2003). Mediated management of meaning: on-line nation building in Malaysia. *Global Networks, 3*(3), 299–314.

"Umno: Insults against Islam, King on Website." *NST Online*. 24 July 2007. http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Tuesday/national/20070724080618/Article/index_html

Vasudevan, V. "Action against 'flaming' blogs: Belittle the King or Islam and You Face the Music." *New Straits Time Online*. 25 July 2007. http://www.nst.com.my/current_News/NST/Wednesday/Frontpage/200725072745/Article/index_html

Wang, Gungwu. (2004). Chinese Ethnicity in new Southeast Asian Nations. In L. Suryadinata (Ed.), *Ethnic Relations and Nation Building in Southeast Asia: The case of the Ethnic Chinese* (pp. 1–19). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Wee, Meng Chee (2007a). *Kawanku* [music video]. *youtube.com* 13 August, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pd70k4enXY

———, (2007b). *Muar Chinese* [music video]. *youtube.com* 13 August 2007 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2d9tsC9UU20

———, (2007c). *Negarakuku* [music video]. *youtube.com* 13 August 2007 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NczMNHodbEQ

West, Joel. (1996). Utopianism and National Competitiveness in Technology Rhetoric: The Case of Japan's Information Infrastructure. *The Information Society, 12*, 251–272.

Yeoh, Brenda S.A., Lai, Karen P.Y., Charney, Michael W., & Tong, Chee Kiong. (2003). Approaching Transnationalisms. In B.S.A. Yeoh, M.W. Charney & C.K. Tong (Eds.), *Approaching Transnationalisms: Studies on Transnational Societies, Multicultural Contacts, and the Imaginings of Home* (pp. 1–14). Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Yeow, David (2007) "Namewee: I did not mean to Insult Malays." *NST Online*. 10 August 2007. http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Friday/National/20070810084200/Article/index_html

Yow, Cheun Hoe. (2005). Weakening Ties with the Ancestral Homeland in China: the Case Studies of Contemporary Singapore and Malaysian Chinese. *Modern Asian Studies, 39*(3), 559–597.

THE IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY OF BRITISH MALAYA: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SWETTENHAM, CLIFFORD AND BURGESS

Daniel P.S. Goh

The nation, Benedict Anderson proposes in *Imagined Communities*, is a cultural artefact of popular imagination. It is a characteristically modern artefact that pictures a secular community in serial space and simultaneous time, replacing the existential certainties of Christendom with the infinite virtues of the Nation. In the revised edition of the book, Anderson (1991:163–185) also argues that Third World nationalisms were crafted according to the grammar of the imaginings of colonial states through the census, map and museum. Apply this to Malaysian nationalism and it tells us that the colonial state first imagined Malaysia as a multi-racial entity that is *essentially* Malay: British Malaya as a balance sheet of countable Malays, Chinese and Indians, as a picture of Malay sultanates joined in a fraternal federation, as a veritable storehouse of artefacts narrating the development of Malay "culture" (*adat*, royalty, Islam). It however does not tell us about the anxieties and pleasures attached to these racialized imaginations of Malay/sian nationalism, insofar as the emotions are linked to a society whose putative traditional "culture" was deliberately invented and preserved by the colonial rulers. If we do not want to explain the passions of Malay/sian nationalism as rising from some primordial racial wellspring, how do we account for them as culturally bound emotions open to deconstruction and transformation?

In this essay, I employ the Lacanian concept of fantasy, as transposed by Slavoj Žižek (1989:87–129) to the sociopolitical domain as *ideological fantasy*, to analyze the colonial basis for the racially emotive imagination of the Malay/sian nation. My main argument is that colonial state-builders did not merely import ready-made Western state forms and transplant them in foreign soils, and that they were as much influenced by their imaginations of the colony and its natives as they were by models and practices of modern government. Furthermore, these imaginations were not predetermined *in toto* by Orientalist discursive formations in the metropole. The imaginations were formative of the

imperial subjects who produced them in exigent situations. The British colonialists are properly called western-subjects-in-Malaya. They did not come to this part of the world with subjectivities fully formed and operative but became who they were in the close colonial encounters they experienced in Malaya.

To unpack this, it would be instructive to recall that, in Lacanian theory, it is a fundamental human condition that the subject is formed around an impossibility. This impossibility is the absolute disjuncture between the ego's symbolic system and the materially real. In the formation of a subject, the ego identifies first with its imaginary *other* to realize for the very first time that it is a complete entity separate from its material environment. This imaginary identification is subsequently overlaid by the ego's identification with the symbolic *Other*, which grants the ego a worldview that organizes its imaginary perceptions and makes them meaningful. The demand of the symbolic *Other* is performative. It generates the desire to act on the materially real but is silent on the end and the means, thereby revealing the gap between the symbolic and the material. The imaginary *other* appears as the object of desire in the subject's fantasy, which has two functions. While the fantasy guides the subject in the performance of the symbolic vis-à-vis the materially real, it also paradoxically produces the gap as traumatic so as to conceal it as such. With the "Malay" *other* as the object of desire, the ideological fantasy of British Malaya guides colonial state formation and produces the gap between the symbolic discourse of Civilization and the transnational material realities facing the colony as traumatically "Chinese" so as to conceal it as such.

To reach this conclusion, I read the stylized accounts of two British statesmen. Frank Swettenham took part in the violent extension of British influence over Perak, from 1874 to 1876, and subsequently became Resident of Selangor in 1882 and Perak in 1889, the inaugural Resident General of the Federated Malay States in 1896 and Governor in 1901. In *British Malaya* (Swettenham, 1948), a semi-autobiographical narrative on the formation of the federation, Swettenham provided a standard historical text cited by historians and colonial officials who sought to formulate policy that remained true to the original purpose of British rule. Although Swettenham published many short Malayan stories, he did not attain the literary acclaim received by Hugh Clifford. From 1887 to 1888, Clifford was instrumental in bringing Pahang under British "protection", and a few years later, in putting down a major revolt there that catalyzed the federation. He was Resident of Pahang

from 1895 to 1903, when he wrote collections of short stories that established his literary credentials, attracting no less a friend than Joseph Conrad. But it was his novel *Saleh* that was the most important, as it provided for the sympathetic imagination of the deracinated native who hopelessly rebels against a colonial rule that has alienated his culture. Clifford returned with great fanfare as Governor in 1927 but resigned in 1929 due to deteriorating mental health. Through the narratives they wrote, Swettenham and Clifford defined the colonialist imagination of British Malaya. As Žižek (1998:196) explains, "fantasy constitutes the primordial form of narrative, which serves to occult some original deadlock". What did the imaginations of Swettenham and Clifford occult? To unpack the inheritance of the original deadlock by the Malaysian nation, I briefly read Anthony Burgess's *Beds in the East*, the last instalment of his *Malayan Trilogy*, which he wrote while he was serving as an education officer in the Malayan Colonial Service from 1954 to 1960. After suffering a mental breakdown, Burgess retired and became a successful novelist best known for *A Clockwork Orange*. Liberal, socialist, anarchist or simply iconoclastic, the difficulty of politically situating Burgess contrasted with the transparent conservatism of Swettenham and Clifford. This was perhaps due to his postcolonial unease at experiencing first-hand the continuation of the original deadlock as the civilizing mission gave way to the Malaysian national project.

Civilization

In the introduction to a compilation of Clifford's stories, William Roff (1993:xi) gives special mention to the reason held by the colonialists for British intervention: "the great benefits which, it was profoundly believed, could be and ought to be brought to the benighted peoples of the earth". There is no doubt that the colonial pioneers sincerely believed in their civilizing mission. But this belief was a retroactive construction of the meaning of what Žižek (1989:101) calls "some mythical, pre-symbolic intention". The imputation of significance to any becoming of a subject is retroactive because the individual is interpellated by the Other, in this case, "Civilization", which organizes the field of meaning for the emergence of the subject. Rather than a stated fact to be ascertained as truth, intention is remembered by the subject after the event of its formation in the very terms of the formative symbolic discourse.

This retroactivity of intention is linked to the nature of the Other in retroactively deriving its own full meaning by first organizing the field of discourse. In the autobiographical short story, "Getting into Harness", Swettenham (1993a:1) announces his appearance in this part of the world plainly with "So, in January, 1871, at the age of twenty, I found myself where I would be". But Swettenham the historian, operating within a specific discourse organized by the Other, gives meaning to the appearance of British civil servants in Malaya:

> The British Government was invited, pushed, and persuaded into helping the Rulers of certain States to introduce order into their disorderly, penniless, and distracted households, by sending trained British Civil Servants to advise the Rulers in the art of administration and to organize a system of government which would secure justice, freedom, safety for all, with the benefits of what is known as Civilization.
>
> (Swettenham, 1948:vi–vii)

Here, "Civilization" functions as the master sign in a discursive formation. It halts the metonymic chains of "disorderly", "penniless", "distracted", and "justice", "freedom", "safety", and organizes their significance vis-à-vis each other. "Civilization" then takes its meaning, retroactively, from this prior organization of significance, as though in the beginning it was already the *logos* embodied with full meaning.

The western-subject-in-Malaya was formed in this interdiction of meaning. There are multifarious possibilities in the reading of social realities but subject formation requires meaningful closure. For the subject to come into being, multiple possibilities must be reduced to the certainty of singular meanings. There were many ways to understand the Malays, but Clifford specifically saw them as situated on a linear scale of Civilization at the medieval point. "Until the British Government interfered", writes Clifford (1993a:12) in the "The East Coast", "the people of the Peninsula were, to all intents and purposes, living in the Middle Ages". He doubts whether the Malays will be able to progress along this scale if let alone, since "the energy of the race" is not sufficient for the peasantry to defeat the tyranny of feudal chiefs (Clifford 1993a:14). This foreclosure of Civilization therefore opens up a space for the incarnation of the western subject. Clifford writes of himself in the state of Pahang, thinly disguised as Norris and Pelesu respectively,

> Then, upon a certain day, the deluge would precipitate itself, as though the sea had been upset, and evil-mannered native kings and hopelessly

> rotten social and political institutions would suddenly be found jostling one another on the surface of the flood. In the State of Pelesu at this period the storm, which had long been brewing, was very near to its breaking … it needed no gift of prophetic vision to recognise in Mr. John Norris, political agent, the stormy petrel, the forerunner of the tempest. ("At the Court of Pelesu"; Clifford, 1993b:44)

The context was the antagonism between the despotic Raja Bendahara of Pahang and Clifford, who was sent to persuade the former to accept British protection. The pretext was the foreclosure of Civilization, which already assumed the inevitability of an encounter with Civilization "upon a certain day". In this inherent teleology of Civilization, the western subject took its place simultaneously as agent, prophet and forerunner.

Yet, in all the coherence of the (hi)stories told in the name of Civilization, an ambivalence afflicted the western subject. Swettenham (1993b:205) writes in "Local Colour", "'The old order changeth', and, in the case of the Malay, the change amounts to something like regeneration … The outward signs of the people's life have changed, as the face of the country has changed and is changing; but at heart the Malay man and the Malay woman are very much what they were". It is extremely curious that the British civilizing mission sought to limit itself so as to leave the "savage" essence of the colonized intact, and all for aesthetic reasons. Swettenham (1993b:206) goes on to describe this Malay heart as "patriotic and self-respecting, courageous, generous, homely, and compassionate", and if not fairly "noble or deeply religious", definitely "strictly upright or more than moderately moral, according to Western standards of morality". Is this not ethics rather than aesthetics?

If we read closely, the Malay heart describes the *ideal ego* of the late-Victorian Anglo-Saxon male. Imaginary identification is "identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves" (Žižek, 1989:105). The ethical attributes are precisely those marking an image familiar to the late-Victorian middle-class ego, one bemoaned by the romantics of that age as lost and buried under the crass and mass civilization of the industrial age: the chivalrous man with a noble heart. The *ego ideal* prescribed by Civilization entailed the bourgeois values of rationalized order, material self-interest and focused industry. Thus, Swettenham describes the Malay states as "disorderly, penniless, and distracted households" (quoted above). On the other hand, the *ideal ego* assured the late-Victorian male that he was still every inch a gentleman

who deserved every ounce of respect and friendship from the cultured man of noble blood. In the colonies, bureaucrats such as Swettenham and Clifford came from the fringes of the middle class or the marginal nobility. Many aspired to the status of the aristocratic ruling classes at home but found their way blocked by distinctions of birth. Identification with the native of putative noble blood thus became a form of vicarious wish-fulfilment.

In short, "Malay" does not refer to any actual ethnic category but a narcissistic *image*. What we see here is the imaginary identification of the Anglo-Saxon male with the Malay nobility he had to face down as the British penetrated the Malayan hinterland. We have two ambivalences linked to the "Malay" image. The first is that it appears in the symbolic formation of Civilization as a negative and aesthetic residue ("not Civilized") surrounded by the positivity of the Other but preserved against its demands. The second is that the image itself produces the ambivalence of attraction and censure, of inexorability and transgression. The first is a texture of ideological fantasy, the second with the logic of imaginary identification itself. Since ideological fantasy draws its elements from the prior imaginary identification of the subject, I deal with the latter first.

The "Malay" Image

The Malay was fundamentally the Oriental in the discourse of Civilization, the Manichean antithesis of the westerner, the spontaneous and indolent native. But in the image of the Oriental, the British colonialist also saw the courageous and noble Malay, a likable apparition of himself. The other was at once the image in which the ego saw itself as likable and the counterpart which negated it. There was therefore illicitness to the liking of the image. We find traces of this illicit love for the other in Swettenham's and Clifford's writings, particularly in the Malay boy, who in his youth is not yet fully the negation of the Anglo-Saxon ego. Swettenham (1993c:18) describes in "The Real Malay": "… the Malay boy is often beautiful, a thing of wonderful eyes, eyelashes, and eyebrows, with a far-away expression of sadness and solemnity, as though he had left some better place for a compulsory exile on earth". The focus on the eyes is remarkable as it points to the specularity rather than the objectivity of the Malay. That Swettenham sees in them a distant look is even more remarkable because this imagination of the

glassy-eyed Malay shows his inability to face the immanent stare of the other. Beauty is therefore obtained without the discomforting threat.

The tragic consequence of obtaining the full illicit beauty of the "Malay" image is vividly portrayed in Clifford's novel, *Saleh*. He introduces the protagonist, who is playing with a group of Englishmen in the Thames, including Norris, Clifford's alter-ego,

> When he rose to the surface he found himself close to the man they called "Sally." His face—the boyish, hairless face of a young Malay—was turned towards him. The great, black, velvety, melancholy eyes of his race looked at Norris from their place in the flawless, olive-tinted skin in which they were set. The mouth, somewhat full, with mobile, sensitive lips that pouted slightly, had just that sweetness of expression that is most often seen in the face of a little child. The features were clean-cut, delicate, giving promise of more adaptability than strength of character: the whole effect was pretty and pleasing, for this was a Malay of rank and breeding, the offspring of men who for uncounted generations have had the fairest women of their land to wife. (Clifford, 1989:5–6)

In Clifford's imagination, Saleh's face becomes a "Malay" face, a sensuous image pulsating with intense sexuality accumulated in the imagination of countless liaisons between the noblest and the fairest. Like conventional narratives of illicit affairs, the story is therefore preordained to end tragically. Saleh returns home to Pelesu after finishing his western education. Feeling alienated from his land and people, he resents the British for his deracination. In the final sequence of the novel, Saleh recovers his Malay essence and rebels against British rule. Running amuck with "the delirium of savage wrath" (Clifford, 1989:252) at British troops led by Norris, he is shot down. The novel ends with Norris looking one last time at the face of Saleh: "The lips were drawn back over the gums, exposing the locked teeth, the facial muscles were taut and strained, the cheekbones stood out prominently, but in the glazed eyes there was still a light of fierce joy" (Clifford, 1989:252). Again, the focus is on the eyes, which radiate with intense beauty against the frozen aggression of the Malay other.

In Lacanian theory, aggressivity is found in the condition of the Oedipus complex, arising from the contradiction of identifying with the imaginary other which negates the ego (Lacan, 1977:1–29). It is no coincidence therefore that the Malays in Swettenham's and Clifford's stories, when they are not portrayed as beautiful or picturesque, are described as fierce warriors who only respect equally aggressive adversaries. The deracinated Saleh recovers his Malay essence only by running amuck, reconciled to his true nature only in suicidal aggres-

sion. In a different scene but in a similar vein, Swettenham describes Raja Mahmud, his one-time adversary in Sungei Ujong as the British extended its influence into the state:

> I have good reason to remember Raja Mahmud as he walked into my dilapidated stockade at the head of a dozen men who, like their master, feared God, but had no sort of fear of man … He had a fine open face, looked you straight and fearlessly in the eyes, and you realized that he always spoke the truth, because the consequences of doing so were beneath consideration. He was very smartly dressed, with silk trousers and a silk sarong, a fighting-jacket, a kerchief deftly and becomingly tied on his head, and in his belt the famous kris *Kapak China*—the Chinese hatchet … Raja Mahmud's strong personality, his straightforward manner, and his fearless courage attracted me immensely. We made fast friends, and though I took him to Singapore, and he accepted the Governor's order not to leave that place for twelve months, I also took him back to the Malay States, and in all the years which followed he never failed me …. (Swettenham, 1948:191)

Swettenham's attraction to Raja Mahmud is already being disciplined in the discourse of Civilization. Imaginary identification is a necessary stage in the formation of the subject. Symbolic identification transforms the imaginary ego into the subject, overlaying the imaginary *ideal ego* with the symbolic *ego ideal*. I mentioned previously the *context* of the antagonism between Clifford and the Raja Bendahara of Pahang, the dialectic tension between ego and its imaginary other. It is neither intrinsic nor extrinsic to the text, but is "with the text". The subject only emerges when symbolic identification overlays imaginary identification, subordinating the dialectical tension to the semantic demands of the Other—context becomes subtext. The fearsome Raja Mahmud submitted to exile in Singapore and, we are told, was rehabilitated as Swettenham's loyal bodyguard. In "A Personal Incident", Swettenham (1993d:101) narrates how this "mighty man of valour" protected him when he escaped the Perak Malays who had murdered Resident Birch in defiance of Civilization. The Malay, dangerous and likable, became the object of a civilizing mission to turn him into a loyal friend. Aggression and attraction were not dissipated but reconfigured under Civilization.

British Malay-a

The symbolic demand of the Other is ultimately performative. Thrown into the position, the subject, Žižek (1989:113) writes, "is automatically confronted with a certain '*Che vuoi?*", with a question of the Other". Civilization calls the western subject to the civilizing mission, but what does Civilization *really* want? The British were clueless for a rather long time. The ten years preceding the appointment of Hugh Low as Perak Resident in 1877 were marked by indecision, disagreement and a messy war against dissident Malay chiefs in Perak. Desire emerges in the gap opened up by the unanswerable demand of the Other. "What does Civilization want from me?" provoked the desire to do good, but it was an inchoate desire that did not know where to go.

What Low did, by incorporating traditional Malay chiefs into the government and allowing Chinese tin capital and labour to work unhindered to obtain tax revenues, was to provide both the target and direction of the desire. Swettenham, Low's understudy, articulated the fantasy that established the performative as ideological. And it is here that the imaginary identification of the western subject reappeared to produce the formula:

> I draw a distinction between what, for want of a better word, may be called the political problem, and the administrative problem presented to the British Residents. The first was solved by the Residents identifying themselves with the Malays, by speaking their language, sympathizing with their customs, shewing consideration for their prejudices, consulting them about everything, making friends with them and getting at their hearts. The other was done by developing the country before the means of paying for it were actually available. (Swettenham, 1948:292–293)

The constitutional fiction was established that the British were not the sovereign power in Malaya, that they merely advised the Malay rulers how to govern their land and protected them from the vagaries of the world, that they achieved this by winning the noble Malay heart. "Malaya" no longer denoted a geographical entity but Malay-*a*, with "*a*" representing the *objet petit a* of Lacanian theory, the object of desire. Malay-*a* imaged the land as Malay and the Malays as sons of the soil. There were two images in play. The first was the image of the country, its rivers, soil, trees, hills and boundaries. The second was the image of the Malay, the imaginary other. The two were so fused that the invocation of one evoked the other.

Swettenham begins *British Malaya* through the eyes of a traveller

making a voyage from England, through the Straits past Penang and Malacca, to Singapore. The histories of Malacca, Penang and Singapore are recounted, providing us with the events leading up to the establishment of British control. Next, the history of the Settlements is told in two parts, the East India Company phase and the Colonial Office period from 1867 to 1873. Then a curious chapter on "The Malay", a synchronic imaging of the other, breaks the diachronic flow of Swettenham's narrative. After this chapter, the narrative continues with British intervention in 1874 leading up to the Federation of 1895 and the projection of its future. The location of this chapter at the threshold of British entry into the hinterland serves to mark the land that the western subject was just about to step on, crossing from the Settlements, as Malay. And the threshold of British entry, of British Malaya, is the threshold of the symbolic Other and the imaginary other. Swettenham (1948:133) introduces the chapter with a caveat, "The Malay of Malacca, Pinang, and Singapore is a different being to the Malay of the Peninsula". This distinction marks the threshold and shows that "Malay" is not an ethnic category but a narcissistic image. The urbane Straits Malay represents natives no longer in their pure state, but completely submerged in the symbolic order of Civilization. The peninsular Malay, at once attractive and aggressive, is the imaginary other preserved against Civilization.

We can now return to the first ambivalence that is a texture of ideological fantasy. The imaginary other must ultimately be brought under the symbolic order of the Other, otherwise Malaya would remain Malay-*a* and not *British* Malaya. At the same time, Malaya would lose its effectivity of being the object of desire, of being Malay-*a* if it would become wholly British like the Settlements. British Malaya thus became a phantasmal balancing act. The inchoate desire of Civilization was given its purpose in this fantasy: the fetishistic desire for material progress for the Malay land and cultural preservation of the Malay being. The British would develop the country while preserving the heart of the Malay. Developing Malay land corresponded to the "British" valence and the Other ("Civilization") of the fantasy; while preserving Malay being corresponded to the Malay-*a* valence and the other ("Malay" image) of the fantasy. Aggressivity was reorganized in the phantasmal order of the colonial state. Malays were brought into the police force and the military. The *kris* became a museum showpiece, decorative symbol, and enunciative object of state regalia. In turn, the Malay rulers donated the battleship, *HMS Malaya*, in time for the Battle

of Jutland. At once beautiful and dangerous, it represented the aggressivity of the imaginary other disciplined and instrumentalized for the service of Civilization, becoming the very sign of British Malay-*a*.

Racial Symptoms

British capital was not forthcoming to fulfil the desire to develop the Malay land. Swettenham (1948:262–263) laments in *British Malaya*, "it is worth remembering that British capitalists declined to risk even small sums in the Malay States till years after the enterprise and industry of the Chinese had established and developed the mines". The nascent administration depended heavily on Straits Chinese capital to exploit rich alluvial tin deposits. Labour was also not forthcoming from the native population. Malays were independent agricultural producers and saw no incentives to toil for wages when they could easily produce surplus goods for trade. Swettenham (1948:137) writes that the abundant providence of nature and the tropical climate "accounts for the Malay's inherent laziness". Here, Alatas' (1977) "myth of the lazy native", the racialization of the labour problem faced by the colonial state, applies. In other words, the figure of the Lazy Malay was a symptom arising from the apparent lack in the essential ingredient for material progress. The colonial state allowed the flow of Chinese labour to continue. Thus, Swettenham (1948:292–293) describes the Chinese as "heaven-sent toiler" and "the bone and sinews of the body politic".

However, the Lazy Malay was also a symptom of a contradiction inherent in the fantasy. To wrench the Malay masses from their fields was a possibility but went against the desire to preserve the Malay being. We can therefore read Swettenham's "heaven-sent" adjective in another way. Chinese immigrants resolved the contradiction for the British administrators, as they did not then have to extract labour value from the Malay being to bring material progress to the Malay land. The racialized symptoms took their respective positions in the fantasy, to labour is Chinese and to *be* in Malaya is Malay: "you cannot graft the Chinese nature on to the Malay body … The Malays are 'the people of the country'" (Swettenham 1948:305).

The material progress achieved through Chinese capital and labour created yet another contradiction. This one concerned the image of the Malay land. In "Evening", Swettenham (1993e:211) invites us to the top of a mountain to survey the sublime landscape of "the home of the

Malay, the background against which he stands", but punctuates his hyperbolic prose with a disruptive anti-aesthetic,

> Only at our feet does the hand of man make any mark on the landscape. There, amid trees and gardens, nestle the red roofs of Taiping. You might cover the place with a tablecloth for all its many inhabitants, its long wide streets, open spaces, and public buildings. And those pools of water all around the town, what are those? They are abandoned tin-mines, alluvial workings from which the ore has been removed, and water mercifully covers, in part, this desolation of gaping holes and upturned sand. (Swettenham, 1993e:213)

Chinese industry had torn holes in the pristine landscape enjoyed by the western subject, a beatific landscape forming the backdrop to the aesthetic "Malay" image. Swettenham's impulse is to cover the blemish with an imaginary tablecloth. Clifford's response, by contrast, goes deeper to take up the burden of guilt. In *Saleh*, Clifford (1989:199) shares the guilt through the eyes of the protagonist who saw the capital of Pelesu as "a place from which the combined efforts of the white men and the Chinese had contrived to eliminate almost all traces of its Malayan origin". As Holden (2000:54–55) observes, the Chinese represents rapacity in Clifford's stories.

Swettenham (1948:296) offers the resolution to the holes in the landscape: "a settled agricultural population and a body of Europeans who will bring their brains, their energy, and their money to convert our jungles into extensive estates of permanent cultivation". From the closing years of the nineteenth century, the colonial state encouraged European plantation capital, brought in indentured Indian labour, and sought to replace Chinese tin capital with machine-intensive European mining. European plantation ventures floundered until the state-sponsored discovery of rubber agriculture raised their fortunes. Furthermore, the colonial state fought a running battle against Chinese secret societies, which were basically political-economic organizations complete with their own symbolic codes and governing rules. The colonial state sought to displace the Chinese in all things political and economic. Despite all signs to the contrary, the British held on to the belief that the Chinese were itinerant workers and did not seek permanent *being* in Malaya.

The "Chinese" Trauma

Through the racial symptoms, we reach the impossibility of the western-subject-in-Malaya. The lack of Malay labour and the presence of Chinese holes in the landscape were manifestations resulting from the British Malay-*a* fantasy concealing the gap between Civilization and transnational realities. The Lazy Malay and Rapacious Chinese were racial symptoms but not the racial pillars holding together the fantasy. The gap between the symbolic and the materially real emerged with the western subject as the subject was formed in the confrontation with its imaginary other, in the initial penetration into the hinterland. The fullness of its being, the finality of its becoming was in the very beginning impeded by the interfering presence of *another*. Fighting between Chinese secret societies and their Malay allies over the control of mines in the 1860s and 1870s caused the political unrest that first drew the British into the peninsula. This fighting had spread into Penang, alarming the white genteel society besieged in a largely Chinese town, and threatened to engulf the whole west coast. The "Chinese" was present in the very beginning of this violent formation of the western subject. *It* was already there when the Anglo-Saxon ego met its imaginary other in the violence of imperial expansion, becoming the *incarnation of trauma*—in Raja Mahmud's belt hangs the *Kapak China* (Swettenham, quoted above).

"Chinese" capital and labour were already "developing" the country when the British intervened: "They were already the miners and the traders, and in some instances the planters and the fishermen, before the white man had found his way to the Peninsula" (Swettenham, 1948:232). Arriving in Malay-*a*, the British stumbled upon larger processes involving transnational capital and migration that were already shaping the materiality of their tropical enjoyment (of the "Malay" image). These processes were part of the pre-colonial world economy centred on "China" (Frank, 1998), the primal origins of western colonialism that launched the first *conquistador* sailings. They depreciated the symbolic demands of Civilization, intruded upon the affective resonance of the Malay imaginary and, most importantly, were the real forces drawing the British into the hinterland and forming the western-subject-in-Malaya. They brought the British to "settle" in the Straits in the very first place, providing the springboard for capital and labour to enter the Malayan hinterland. In other words, the very existence of the British in Malaya was not founded on Civilization but was brought

about by the transnational processes. The transnational invariably produced violent anarchies, pulling in the British colonialists to stem the chaos, which inevitably produced more violence as the British sought to shape Malayan society to Civilizational order and render the transnational processes manageable. The transnational processes were the *traumatic kernel* and they were made manifest by the western subject, filtered through his racial sensibilities, as "Chinese".

Even in remote Pahang, the "Chinese", that is, in terms of trade networks connecting the river-basin economy through the port and political centre at the river mouth, was present at the onset of British rule. Speaking of agents sent to hostile corners to represent Civilization, Clifford (1993b:44) imagines in "At the Court of Pelesu", "if any native potentate were so imprudent as to mistake their loneliness for impotence, Great Britain occasionally moved one ponderous step forward over their mutilated remains". Yet it was not Clifford who was mutilated by the Raja's henchmen but a Chinese merchant, who would become the agent that moved Great Britain's ponderous foot: "if only Ah Ku could be made to hang on to life until the first ship of the season arrived at the mouth of the Pelesu River, if he could thereafter be sent to the neighbouring British colony, his scarred face and wrecked body would tell their tale with an eloquence that is denied to mere written dispositions" (Clifford, 1993b:67). Like its "Malay" counterpart, "Chinese" is not an ethnic category. It is the embodiment of the materially real of British Malay-*a*, the *surplus* and the *trauma* of the identity of the western subject, the formative transnational accompanied by violence, Ah Ku, the merchant with gaping wounds.

It was not Civilization that brought on British rule but the transnational processes. It was not Civilization but the transnational processes that grew the wealth which the British prided as coming from their racial genius. This constituted the gap between the symbolic and the materially real that the British Malaya fantasy sought to conceal. Hence, we can detect a kind of castration anxiety in Swettenham's history:

> How far the present prosperity of the Federated Malay States is due (1) to Chinese, (2) to Europeans, and (3) to British officers in the service of the Malay Government, is an interesting question which admits of an unhesitating reply. Chinese enterprise and Chinese industry, as has been explained, supplied the funds with which the country was developed. But without the British officers to secure order and justice, the Chinese would never have entered the country in tens of thousands …. (Swettenham, 1948:301)

The "interesting question" reveals the chronology of presence but the "unhesitating reply" reverses it, creating a history that represses the traumatic kernel. By saying that "the Chinese came because we opened the door for them", Swettenham lays claim to the triumph of Civilization in bringing the transnational processes under control, erasing the gap that lies between the symbolic and materially real. The western subject's fantasy of exercising his will over the transnational to make British Malay-*a* a reality could not have been constructed without first incarnating the violent transnational as a traumatic object to be managed. The traumatic "Chinese" is that object. British Malaya is really British-(Chinese)-Malay-*a*, the "Chinese" traumatic object being occulted in the narrative of the fantasy.

The Nation

Over fifty years after Swettenham and Clifford published their first stories, British Malaya encountered an "emergency". With scant respect to the phantasmal political space of imperialism, and operating on their own temporal plane, the transnational processes had made a left turn. Labour unrest transfigured into a full-scale Communist revolt, which imagined a Malayan Malaya utopia as part of an international collective. Instinctively, the British called the insurgency "Chinese", transforming the violent transnational into a familiar trauma that could be dealt with. In *The Malayan Trilogy*, Anthony Burgess attempted to capture the *zeitgeist* of this historical moment at the threshold of Civilization and Nation. He portrayed a tea conversation between education officer Victor Crabbe, Burgess' alter-ego, and his Anglicized Chinese friend:

> "Oh, Cheng Po, you're such a wet blanket. You're so damned Chinese."
>
> "Chinese?" Lim Cheng Po looked offended. "What do you mean by that remark?"
>
> "You've got this sort of divine disdain. You don't really believe that all the other Eastern races are anything more than a sort of comic turn. That absolves you from the task of doing anything for them. You've no sense of responsibility, that's your trouble."
>
> "Oh, I don't know," said Cheng Po slowly. "I've got a wife and children. I've got a father living in Hounslow. I give tithes of all I possess. I work so damned hard precisely because I've got a sense of responsibility. I worry about my family."

> "But you've no nation, no allegiance to a bigger group than the family. You're not quite so bad as Robert Loo, admittedly. He's completely heartless. His only allegiance is to the few quires of manuscript paper I bought him. And yet, strangely enough, it's he who's convinced me that something can be done in Malaya. It may be pure illusion, of course, but the image is there, in his music. It's a national image. He's made a genuine synthesis of Malayan elements in his string quartet, and I think he's made an even better job of it in his symphony. Not that I've heard that yet. I must get it performed."
>
> (*Beds in the East*, Burgess, 2000:416–417)

The occasion of the rebuke is Lim Cheng Po's cynical response to Crabbe's belief that the racial political troubles facing Malaya are not intractable problems. Burgess' parting shot to the Malay/sian nation was a piercing indictment of the racial symptoms of the fantasy that he served. The characters he created in the *Trilogy* disabused the essentialisms of the Lazy Malay and Rapacious Chinese. In a liberal fashion, he painted bad and good Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and Europeans, and revealed everyone as prejudiced.

But he too did not escape the clutches of the fantasy that lead us to misrecognize "race relations" as the problem when they are only the symptoms. Treating the symptoms, he left the racial pillars of the fantasy intact: the "Malay" image and the "Chinese" trauma. In the same conversation pitting liberal against cynic, Crabbe defends the history of British rule, "And, remember, there was no imposition of British rule. People just came because the British were there. Even the Malays. They flocked in from Sumatra, Java …" (Burgess, 2000:415). One can read this as a liberal disavowal of the *bumiputra* notion, but I read it as a pernicious denial that glides over the gap between Civilization and the transnational, one which renders Malaya an empty space and British colonialism an historical accident born out of incidental transnational migration. It is no wonder that "so damned Chinese" means a "divine disdain" that is characteristic of "irresponsible" transnational processes. After all, Lim Cheng Po represents the perfect embodiment of transnational capital: the late-Victorian, middle-class, English-educated male who is moral and responsible to a fault. It is only after rebuking Lim for being "Chinese" that Crabbe reveals his new fantasy, a vaguely national one, an image that may be "pure illusion", which he desires to perform, inspired by Robert Loo.

The nation was performed but not in the way Burgess would have liked it. The performance was pitched in the racial symptoms he criticized. The Lazy Malay became the Malay Dilemma; the Rapacious

Chinese became the Confucian Gentleman; the traumatic kernel of a mobile and disfiguring transnational capital was buried in the phantasmal imagination of national progress and cultural preservation of post-1969 Malaysia. But today in Vision 2020, Burgess might be aroused like Crabbe is inspired by a "heartless" Chinese: Robert Loo, a talented artist and son of a *towkay* who is completely alienated by Malaya and everyone, who is characteristically un-Chinese in every way and sees his music at "the blinding moment of climax" when making love to a Malay prostitute (Burgess, 2000:534).

The amorphous vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* is an unheard music born of the violent transnational laid bare, stripped of its "Chinese" traumatic incarnation and shorn of its beatific "Malay" dressing. It is a postcolonial fantasy built on the shambles of British-(Chinese)-Malay-*a*, admitting the noble "Malay" aesthetic image and the "Chinese" trauma only so as to synthesize them in a carnivalesque ritual of reversal—the un-Chinese Loo laying with the Malay prostitute. It does not deal with the transnational processes and the violence wrought by them but is predicated on them, papering over their material rawness with the vision of multiracial union, an imaginary *bricolage* of the Nation. It is a dream that remembers race as cultural heritage (see Lim, Chapter 8), so that we will not awaken to the burning disfigurement of the materially real. It combines the intense feelings of fear ("Chinese" trauma) and sublime affection ("Malay" image) to obtain security and gratification in the face of recurring transnational processes ("globalization"; see Ambikaipaker, Chapter 7). It remembers 1969 to forget 1997, without guarantee that the combination would not disarticulate to return the passions of the trauma and the sublime to the surface of our everyday lives.

Works Cited

Alatas, Syed Hussein (1977) *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. London: Frank Cass.

Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso.

Burgess, Anthony (2000 [1959]) *Beds in the East*. In *The Malayan Trilogy*. London: Vintage.

Clifford, Hugh (1989 [1926]) *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

———, (1993a [1899]) "At the Court of Pelesu", in William Roff ed., *At the Court of Pelesu and Other Malayan Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 40–92.
———, (1993b [1897]) "The East Coast", in Roff ed., *At the Court of Pelesu*, pp. 10–22.
Frank, Andre Gunder (1998) *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Holden, Philip (2000) *Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts: Hugh Clifford and the Discipline of English Literature in the Straits Settlements and Malaya, 1895–1907*. Greensboro, North Carolina: ELT Press.
Lacan, Jacques (1977 [1966]) *Écrits: A Selection*. Tran. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton.
Roff, William (1993) "Introduction", in Roff ed., *At the Court of Pelesu*, pp. vii–xviii.
Swettenham, Frank (1948 [1906]) *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*. Rev. edition. London: George Allen and Unwin.
———, (1993a [1942]) "Getting into Harness", in William Roff ed., *A Nocturne and Other Malayan Stories and Sketches*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–15.
———, (1993b [1900]) "Local Colour", in Roff ed., *A Nocturne*, pp. 203–210.
———, (1993c [1900]) "The Real Malay", in Roff ed., *A Nocturne*, pp. 16–22.
———, (1993d [1895]) "A Personal Incident", in Roff ed., *A Nocturne*, pp. 88–102.
———, (1993e [1900]) "Evening", in Roff ed., *A Nocturne*, pp. 211–216.
Žižek, Slavoj (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
———, (1998) "The Seven Veils of Fantasy", in Dany Nobus ed., *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Other Press, pp. 190–218.

GLOBALIZATION AND BANGSA MALAYSIA DISCOURSE IN RACIAL CRISIS*

Mohan Ambikaipaker

Introduction: Victims Remember

On 8 March 2001, violent clashes erupted between Malays and Indians in neighbourhoods that line Old Klang Road on the periphery of Kuala Lumpur. These events which engulfed some of the capital city's most marginalized squatter settlements came to be known as the Kampung Medan clashes. In statements and narratives rendered to lawyers, the victims recall that nothing other than a phenotypical identification as Indian served as a basis for attack.[1] They remember being hailed with shouts of "*Ooi Keling!*"[2] and "*India! India!*" before attacks commenced (Daim and Gamany, 2001).[3]

The attempt to fix racial identities by the attackers was not an exact science. As everyday life in Kuala Lumpur contained a greater complexity of social difference than a racist gaze could determine, the perpetrators confronted their own incompetence in determining the specific Indian embodiment upon which they wished to inflict violence. Hence one victim remembers being asked "*You Muslim ke, India*?" (Indian—are you Muslim?) before his culpable attempt to escape pro-

* My deepest thanks to the kind and generous sharing of research data by Yeoh Seng Guan. I am also indebted to the assistance of Bruno Pereira, whose experience in organising labour in the plantations informs sections of the paper. The paper also benefited from critical feedback given by Joao Costa Vargas, Sharmila Rudrappa and Briana Mohan.

[1] Kamaruddin Said (2002: 36) carried out ethnographic research among Malays residents in Kampung Medan following the clashes. He also concludes that the attacks were aimed at symbolic racial targets determined by phenotypical characteristics, especially skin colour difference.

[2] The word "keling" is a pejorative slur for Indians. Its etymological roots trace back to the pre-modern association of Indians in the Malaysian peninsular with the kingdom of Kalinga in Tamil Nadu, but its contemporary usage carries no connotation of respect.

[3] The legal firm Messrs. Daim and Gamany documented eyewitness statements from fourteen victims warded in University Hospital on 14 March 2001.

vided the requisite sanction for his attackers to resolve his racial and religious identity. An Indian national, who operated a tea stall in the area, was also attacked despite protestations that he was Muslim, just like his attackers. Unconvinced, the attackers responded with shouts of "*Jangan tipu kita*" (Don't fool us) before they set upon him (*Star* 24/3/2001:4).

These episodes underscore the fact that racial attacks polarize, essentialize and absolutize identities in the moment of violence (Werbner, 2000). In the victims' accounts there is no memory of inter-subjective exchanges before the attacks. Victims were violated after a crude and hasty determination of their ascribed racial status. A generalized interpellation as Malaysian-Indian, and secondarily as non-Muslim, was sufficient to license brutal violence.

K. Muneratnam, V. Segar, A. Ganesan and S. Vaithlingam died in the Kampung Medan violence, as did P. Chandran, an Indian national from Trichy. Working as bell-boys, bar-tenders and bus drivers, they constituted an Indian working-class positioned within the bottom rungs of Kuala Lumpur's complex and gendered division of labour. The other fatal victim was an Indonesian immigrant worker who was left unnamed in newspaper records (*Star* 1/6/2001:15). Indonesian immigrant workers are yet another disparate fraction of a widely differentiated class composition in contemporary Malaysia. Some 78 people were reported as injured in the clash as well, most of them resident within the peripheral squatter settlements of the city (*Star* 11/1/2002:10). According to police detention figures, at least 327 people—206 Malays, 109 Indians and 12 Indonesians—were suspected to have participated in the violence that occurred throughout March 2001 (*NST* 1/8/2001:9).[4]

The Kampung Medan clashes in 2001 form part of an emerging conjuncture in Malaysian race relations; the paradigmatic event in the chain of racial conflict is, of course, May 13th 1969.[5] A dominant

[4] The outbreak of racial violence and attacks occurred in two phases. The first phase occurred between March 8–13, and a second phase which involved adjacent neighborhoods (Kampung Petaling Utama and Taman Sri Manja) occurred two weeks later.

[5] Previous noted instances of Malay-Indian working class clashes are the 1978 Kerling incident where eight Indian youths were tried for murdering four Malay-Muslim youths who had attempted to smash Hindu deities in a temple. This incident followed what seemed to be a spate of attacks on Hindu temples in other parts of the country in the period and the official response was to critique the deviant teachings of Islam that were seen to motivate these actions (see Yeoh, 2001:58). More recently, there was the 1998 Kampung Rawa clash which had a Hindu-Muslim axis, and which

interpretation of May 13th views the event as a rebellion by underclass Malays which was fuelled by unresolved socio-economic inequalities stemming from colonial racial policies. The policy of so-called 'benign neglect' towards a native Malay population has been linked to colonial policies that favoured immigrant Chinese participation in commercial sectors of the economy. The intellectual apotheosis of this interpretation was Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma*. Mahathir sought to explain the outbreak of mass violence by Malays as symptomatic of superficial racial harmony in a nation where "racial grievances" had escalated due to the state's failure to "correct the real imbalance in the wealth and progress of the races" (Mahathir, 1970:13–14). The analysis, along with Mahathir's rehabilitation and the rise of a middle-class-led bloc within UMNO, became embedded through the racial redistribution programmes of the New Economic Policy.[6]

But in March 2001, racial violence unleashed itself on Indians, whose marginal socio-economic and political power is institutionally embedded (Loh 2003). How did Indian bodies come to signify as targets for racial violence? Despite the presence of a strong nationalist and anti-colonial discourse in Malaysia, there is no preferential targeting of expatriate white bodies, which are largely associated with the interests of global capital in Kuala Lumpur. And the phenomenon that occurred in Indonesia during the same time of the Asian financial crisis—where ethnic Chinese bodies symbolically associated with elite capitalist roles were attacked as "convenient scapegoats in hard times" (Tan, 2001:950)—did not constitute the axis of racial conflict in Kampung Medan. The Kampung Medan violence did not target bodies that would be understood in a common-sense view as privileged actors in capitalist social relations. This aberration suggests a break with the May 13th paradigm of comprehending racial conflict in Malaysia. What are the material and symbolic processes that produce the social disenfranchisement of the working-class Indian body? What social mediations

---

has been rigorously analyzed by Francis Loh (2003). *New Straits Times* journalist Tony Emmanuel (3/18/2001:5) also produced a localized analysis of the long continuum of clashes and violence that had been generally occurring in the Kampung Medan vicinity in recent years. The article attributes the earlier clashes to drug-related gang disputes and "social ills."

[6] The policy was designed to "achieve the intended objective of national unity through the eradication of poverty, irrespective of race" and through a racial restructuring of society, where modern economic functions were also disassociated with racial identification (Hussein Onn, 1976:3).

enable the Indian body to be "slashed on the face, arms, and legs" (*NST* 18/3/2001:4), "badly beaten up" and run over by a motorcycle (*NST* 18/2/2004:4), or "slashed with a parang" (*NST* 16/3/2004:4)? How has racial violence come to be understood, discussed and responded to, in the present historical moment?

The study of Malaysia's multiethnic social dynamics has long been beholden to frameworks bequeathed by Orientalist epistemological regimes, such as Furnivall's "plural society" thesis which conceives of "race" in Malaysia as an ontological and primordial feature of society, an illiberal "passion" so-to-speak, characteristic of a pre-modern non-West (Ambikaipaker, 2002). In more recent turns in European social theory, deconstructive and postmodern tendencies have critiqued essentialised categories of identity and framed cultural hybridity and transcendent subject-potential as the privileged object of poststructural agency. There has also been a recent opening in Malaysian studies to challenge sociological reifications of hermetically sealed Malay-Chinese-Indian identities and to present primordialist forms of racialisation as the object of critique (Loh, 2003; Mandal, 2004).

A longer engagement with these positions is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to make a critical point that neither a primordialist conception of race nor the heterodoxy of anti-essentialism in social analysis is sufficient to understanding the material force of commonsense or demotic constructions of race at the political, social and everyday levels. The cultural studies project (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980), which examines race not as a "passion" but as material-ideological discourse, allows us to open a necessary horizon of intervention. A reiterative process of racialisation within the Malaysian social formation is part of the subject and value-forming process necessary for the operations of globalised capital accumulation.[7] As Stuart Hall (1980: 339) has argued:

> At the economic level, it is clear that race must be given its distinctive and 'relatively autonomous' affectivity, as a distinctive feature. This does not mean that the economic is sufficient to found an explanation of how these relationships concretely function. One needs to know how different racial and ethnic groups were inserted historically, and the relations which have tended to erode and transform, or to preserve these

[7] Yan Hairong (2003) has persuasively drawn on the notion of value-coding to describe how subject-forming processes are critical to neoliberal development projects that displace and mobilize people for labour roles within new domains of surplus production.

> distinctions through time—not simply as residues and traces of previous modes, but as active structuring principles of the present society. Racial categories alone will not provide or explain these.

The intersection of a shifting Malaysian racial discourse with the processes of class formation and economic development in the present moment shapes a framework for the enabling conditions which set the stage for the Kampung Medan clash.[8]

Globalization and the Myth of the Lazy Indian

It is through the passageways of globalization-related economic development in Malaysian history that we arrive at the Kampung Medan event. The globalization-linked restructuring of production in Malaysia corresponds with the official emergence of neoliberal Bangsa Malaysia nation-building discourse by the state (see Jomo and Gomez, 2000:166–176). The debut of Bangsa Malaysia as a state-endorsed discourse for nation-building is marked by a speech given by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to the Malaysian Business Council in February 1991. In this historical Vision 2020 speech, Bangsa Malaysia discourse is sutured to the launch of a new phase in the nation's economic development dubbed the "Accelerated Industrialization Drive" (Mahathir, 1991: 5). This turn in Malaysian developmentalism explicitly embraces neoliberal capitalistic goals such as increased private sector accumulation, relaxation of NEP redistribution rules, privatization of welfare state provisions and a general commitment to the "full discipline and rigor of market forces" (ibid).

The application of increased free-market structural adjustment on Malaysian society had adverse implications for Indian workers who were already in the process of becoming displaced from their historic labour roles in the traditionally important rubber plantation sector. A

[8] This framing of the Kampung Medan phenomenon cannot claim to capture the visceral pain, trauma and oppression experienced by the victims of these racial attacks. It also does not claim to pursue a positivistic course of inquiry in order to unveil the singular single cause and effect, the immediate trigger-events and suspect perpetrators. Many popular theories circulate about the causal reasons for the racial clash: a mob-manipulation by the ruling regime to unleash political repression, organized crime and turf wars in the drug trade, and so on. This examination, however, looks at a particular level or moment in the production of the violence, whereby the social conditions that give rise to the generalised racial configuration of the conflict come into play.

long-term reorganization of production in the plantation sector had set in motion the progressive replacement of the Indian family-based system of labour that eventually supplanted indentureship during the colonial period of accumulation. The Indian-based class composition in the plantation sector energized social struggles for improvements in housing, Tamil-language education and health. The reorganization of the plantation sector after 1957, however, saw the fragmentation of large colonial estates and the increased conversion of rubber estates into suburban real estate. Indian labour was also fast becoming supplanted by more vulnerable and non-family based immigrant labour and the utilization of new technologies.

By the 1990s these shifts had already forced the majority of plantation-based Indians to seek new labour roles within the growing urban-based industrial economy. The twenty-year-old squatter settlements of Kampung Medan and its surroundings (Kampung Lindungan, Kampung Ghandi, etc.) are the spatially expressive results of this labour displacement. Squatting or land appropriation became part of the repertoire of survival for a newly recomposed class of Indian workers in the urban industrial sector. As Harry Cleaver (1985) argues, land appropriations by peasants or urban workers are "appropriations for self-valorization", where "space and resources for community self-development" and the reconstitution of a specific communitas are enabled.[9] While the rural plantation settlements remained home for the older generation, the young gravitated towards the cities in search of work. In these spaces, they engaged in struggles to appropriate social rights to housing as a strategy to wrest autonomy from the valorising circuits of capital and its naturalized regimes of private property.

The process of accelerated industrialization that occurred between 1987 and 1993, however, created a gap in industrial labour shortage that was unmet by the pre-existing rates of rural to urban migration of both Indian and Malay workers. Labour shortage was a problem for multinational capital which sought to integrate Malaysia into the expanding global circuits of industrial production. It was also problematic for the Malaysian state which was interested in capturing a

[9] Such appropriations, Cleaver further adds, are "neither simple redistribution to gain greater income security nor simple rupture of capitalist accumulation" but have the possibility of "subordinating production to community needs rather than accepting the subordination of their own time and energy to the requirements of capitalist development."

share of the new accumulation leveraged by the North to South relocation of industrial production in the world-system. In the mid-1990s the World Bank had outlined a comprehensive strategy that would correct what it found as "disturbing" trends in the Malaysian labour market. The Bank identified three critical labour pools that could be created in Malaysia to "relieve labour shortages and the pressure on wages" (World Bank, 1995: v). The external source for new labour was to be had through the "importing of foreign workers," especially from neighbouring regional countries where acute patterns of immiseration meant that labour was motivated to become transnational in its survival responses. In the domestic arena, more labour was to be sourced by creating social conditions to increase the rural-urban migration rates.

To speed up this internal migration, the World Bank recommended a systematic attack on the living conditions and social rights of plantation workers. The Bank specifically called for "the repeal of laws mandating housing and other fringe benefits for the plantation sector" (World Bank, 1995:45). This attack on what it termed as "non-wage costs of labour" was essentially the strategy needed to disable Malaysian rural workers from pursuing a viable lifestyle in the rural sectors of the economy. By constituting new enclosures on social gains, such as mandated housing and medical care, which had partially offset the lack of adequate wages in the plantation sector, the World Bank strategy was poised to destroy historical plantation Malaysian Indian communities and leverage the desired rural to urban flow of workers.[10]

In the 1990s it was the plantation sector that was initially reorganized to source workers for the urban-based industries. The preferential choice of the plantation sector as first casualty of the industrialization drive has much to do with how the plantation sector is signified as an Indian domain in national politics. Global capital and the Malaysian state's collaborative attack on rural working-class communities proceeds apace with representations that build on the marginality of Indians in national electoral and cultural domains. Melissa Wright,

[10] The onslaught of globalization on the social rights of rural Malaysians affects communities in ethnically inflected ways. As has been observed by grassroots social activists, the rapid depopulation of the rural sectors was first implemented on the plantation sector to spare "dislocating traditional kampungs" (Devaraj, 2002:80) which symbolically formed the Malay cultural heartlands. Currently, however, dislocation of Malay kampung life is also underway, with the Asean Free Trade liberalizations on agriculture and the new Badawi administration's initiatives for industrializing agricultural production (Khor, 2001).

drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and on feminist theory, makes the point that "perceptions of the subject inform perceptions of the value promised by that subject's labour power" and this in turn works to shape "the differential valorisation of the labour force" (Wright, 2001:133). The process of surplus-value creation depends on racial representations that code Indian labour as fit only for marginal labour roles in globalization-linked restructuring. Common-sense or demotic race theories that are historically specific to Malaysia provide a force-field for enabling transformations of value that reproduce stratifications between racially distinct class fractions and work to maintain the overall social command of capital over labour.

The macro-level effects of global restructuring pass on to the cultural and symbolic realm through the development of racial representations and dominant common-sense that transform the value of the Indian worker as excess or waste in the context of the emergent new economy. In 1999, during a parliamentary debate concerning the one- hundred-year struggle of plantation workers to advance from the controls of the daily-rated wage system to a regular monthly wage, the Primary Industries Minister, Dr. Lim Keng Yaik (quoted in Lim, 1999) made a controversial statement in Parliament that indicated an emerging national common-sense about the diminishing returns on the value of Indian estate workers in the age of globalization:

> Estate workers are not like factory workers. In a factory, there's a supervisor who sees whether or not the workers have got work to do, and can take appropriate disciplinary action. But in an estate, it is difficult to see whether the worker is working or not. What he does behind the trees, I don't know (laughs). In front of the tree, you can see him, behind it, you know-lah. (Hansard in Lim, 1999)[11]

The image of plantation workers as indolent signals a shift from the colonial image that signified indentured Indian plantation labour as industrious and compliant. This representation was counterpoised in the colonial mythology as an analogue to the mythology of Malays as "lazy" natives who refuse to enter into the civilizing systems of capitalist work (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1977). A reaffirmation of the racial significance of the minister's comment can also be discerned in the pub-

[11] The anxiety over maximizing labour control has little correspondence to the reality of highly developed labour and social control systems within the Malaysian plantations. Yong (1995:13) explains that plantation owners in Malaysia have already developed a "time-tested management system which features several levels of supervision-mandore, field conductor, assistant estate manager and estate manager."

lic reception that readily understood the pejorative comments directed primarily against Indian workers.[12] As a noted commentator within the minister's own Gerakan party stated: "it smacks of ethnic and prejudicial innuendoes towards Malaysian rubber tappers of South Indian origin [and] because of the colonial past, there continues to be some prejudice and discrimination particularly towards those Indians who belong to the 'under-class' and who happen to be dark-skinned" (Abraham, 2004:13). In the ensuing weeks following the Minister's initial reluctance to issue an apology, his comments elicited protests from within the Indian element of the ruling coalition (Malaysian Indian Congress or MIC), Indian-led trade unions like the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) and opposition parliamentarians (Lim, 1999). While the minister's comments did not go uncontested, the racial character of the protest underscored an ongoing struggle to assign a hegemonic interpretation for the social reproduction of Indian marginality.

The image of the lazy Indian estate worker projected by the minister shapes the public perception of Indian workers as they are structurally transferred from one value-producing domain (plantation work) to another (urban work). The link between dominant racial discourse and material effects is critical. The minister's depiction of Indian workers as lacking high value enables a material-ideological dynamic where the value of Indian labour does not appreciate over time. Instead it dissipates through the passages of globalization-linked restructuring, which helps to valorise greater surplus as Indian workers are re-assigned to the marginal urban fringes. The value of the Indian worker can therefore be "used up, not enhanced" (Wright, 2001: 127).

Racial representations that underwrite the reassignment of Indian labour to low-wage relations in the urban sector build on a nation-building narrative where the position of Indian labour is rendered invisible and its historical role is rewritten as one of waste. The Indian worker's flexible displacement and disposability can therefore be effectively mobilized as a legitimate exigency in the urgencies of Malaysia's nation-building and economic development goals.

[12] According to Jeyakumar Devaraj (2002:123), 37 % of the threatened plantation workforce is Malay and 14 % is Chinese.

The Rise of Neoliberal Bangsa Malaysia Discourse

> Umno Youth would explain the May 13, 1969 racial clashes to the younger generation who are unaware of the incident. Umno Youth will touch on the concepts of Bangsa Malaysia, Rukun Negara and Vision 2020 when explaining the importance of unity (*Sun* 30/3/2001:3).

The unveiling of the Vision 2020 speech in 1991 announces a shift in the Malaysian state's economic development regime. It is a moment that signals a change in orientation from strong state involvement in economic development and Malay capital accumulation towards more free-market oriented strategies. Departing from an overt tone of Malay-centric ethnonationalism, Vision 2020 projected a developmentalism based on transracial national identity formation. The primary Vision 2020 challenge was "establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one 'Bangsa Malaysia' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation" (Mahathir, 1991: 1).

This departure from ethno-nationalistic nation-building does not represent an absolute break from the past, but as Johan Saravanamuthu (2002:1–13) argues, it is a "disjunctive continuity" from previous modes of nation-building pursued by the Malaysian state.[13] Bangsa Malaysia discourse has a long genealogical history prior to its moment of ascendance. Previous ruling regimes also deployed supra-racial discourses in order to manage Malaysia's social formation. The Alliance government's social contract, the *quid pro quo* deal of Malay special rights for non-Malay citizenship (1957–1969) precedes both the assimilationist *budaya kebangsaan* (national culture) strategy of the NEP era (1970–1991) and the emergent Bangsa Malaysia mode (1991 onwards).

An important precursor to Bangsa Malaysia discourse is arguably the anti-colonial nationalism that emerged from multiethnic worker and student movements after World War Two. For example, proposals by the University of Malaya students to institute a creolized form

[13] It is worth distinguishing, as Chua Beng Huat (1998) does, the difference between Western modes of multicultural discourse which aim to empower minority ethnic and other groups by redressing discriminatory practices (a politics of recognition), and other contexts where multiculturalism or multiracialism is a means of disempowering sectarian racial identities in favour of a national collective. Bangsa Malaysia discourse gestures towards a de-amplification of sectarian racial identities in order to articulate a common national identity.

of Malay (*Engmalchin*)[14] as the linguistic basis for Malayan nationalism never secured a hegemonic position, but it illustrates early intellectual attempts to utilize cultural hybridity and bricolage as the basis for a common national identity (Brewster, 1987: 138). Intellectuals like the writer Lloyd Fernando, who were part of these early nationalist discourses, continued exploring the ideal of cultural syncretization as a basis for Malaysian nationalism. The discourse of national cultural hybridity was counter-posed to consociational politics, where discrete racial groups conduct elite-led inter-racial bargaining.[15]

As a critical counter-model to racial consociationalism, Bangsa Malaysia discourse grows within multiethnic formations that coalesce around left-wing socialist politics and in trade union struggles. The poet laureate, Usman Awang, was a key bridge-builder in this counter-public sphere and his metaphors of united fronts forged between rural peasants and urban workers assist in the critique of the polarizations enabled by the institutionalization of the post-1969 racial category of *bumiputera* (sons of the soil). The poem "*Sahabatku*" (1979/83) in particular protests the schismatic effects of the *bumiputera*/non-*bumiputera* construction:

Sahabatku,	My friend
Suatu bangsa merdeka yang kita impikan	The free nation that we dream
Terasa masih jauh dari kenyataan	Feels far from reality
Kemarahanku menjadi kepedihan	My anger becomes sorrow
Bila kita dipisah-pisahkan	When we are torn apart
Jarak itu semakin berjauhan	The distance between us grows
Aku dapat gelaran 'bumiputera' dan kau bukan.	I am called 'bumiputera' and you non.

Addressed to fellow left-wing ally and Labour Party leader M.K. Rajakumar, Usman casts the question of a post-independence national identity within the framework of Bangsa Malaysia: "*Bilakah semua warganegara mendapat hak / Layanan dan keadilan yang sama / Dikenal dengan satu rupa*

[14] Engmalchin is an amalgam of English, Malay and Chinese.

[15] Racial consociational systems are representative political systems which utilize race-based political parties in forming coalitional governments. The ruling Barisan Nasional in Malaysia is comprised primarily of the Malay-based UMNO party, the Chinese-based MCA and the Indian-based MIC. These parties become symbolic representatives of the major communities that comprise Malaysia's populace, and elect elites to conduct inter-racial bargaining within a parliamentary framework.

nama: Bangsa Malaysia?" (When will all citizens receive equality, and come to be known with one name: Malaysians?)

Read as a critique against the polarizing effects of the New Economic Policy, it is indeed surprising that Bangsa Malaysia discourse (which had largely been circulating in oppositional politics, arts and cultural fields) should pass over to the state realm to become its preferred nation-building idiom. The ascendance of Bangsa Malaysia discourse in the 1990s, however, was not without contestation. Countermovements to re-assert Malay racial primacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) or Malay linguistic nationalism in the wake of the state's capitulation to the global domination of English for science and business were two critical Malay-based responses. Reservations among the Chinese expressed themselves through resistance against the proposed Vision Schools initiative, which was seen as an attempt by the Malay-dominated state to compromise the relative autonomy of Mandarin-medium and community-controlled vernacular schools.

Academic literature has provided two divergent interpretations surrounding the character of this new hegemonic discourse of nation-building. M.A. Quayum (1998:40) in linking the contributions of Lloyd Fernando to Bangsa Malaysia discourse argues that the principal feature of Bangsa Malaysia discourse is the removal of the "binary impetus and hierarchy of human variations" and the recognition of the "possibilities of cross-fertilization of cultures and their continual and mutual development." The tendency of prior modes of nation-building in Malaysia where racial categories are aligned in binary oppositions (Malay/Non-Malay, Bumiputera/Non-Bumiputera) is contested within the idiom of a supra-racial Bangsa Malaysia national identity. Similarly, Sumit Mandal (2004) also sees a potential political drift towards "transethnic solidarities" drawn from the everyday cultural hybridities of Malaysian life and developed through the workings of multiracial formations in the political, arts and cultural fields.[16]

Bangsa Malaysia discourse, however, has also been critiqued as an ideological state tool to suture material contradictions that have arisen in neoliberal economic development and modernization. A modernization perspective views Bangsa Malaysia discourse as a necessary pivot for achieving developed nation status. James Jesudason (1996)

[16] Mandal (2004:50) conceptualizes "transethnic" solidarity as the "variety of efforts whereby Malaysians actively participate in society without respect to ethnic background and rejecting primordial notions of ethnicity."

argues that full national integration into global capital and modernity is blocked by fractious racial particularism. He views Bangsa Malaysia discourse as the pivot to move the nation towards the utopia of liberal democracy, largely pictured in an idealized image of Western social democracy.

This modernization perspective is shared by Abdul Rahman Embong (2000) who also sees in Bangsa Malaysia discourse the historic motor to achieve national modernity. However this modernization also results in class fragmentations and alienation brought on by the rapid growth of industrial capitalism, and disarticulates previous modes of communitarian identity. Halim Salleh (2000) is also concerned with the alienating effects of modernization with attention focused especially on the Malay segment within the national whole, and views Bangsa Malaysia discourse as an ideological displacement of the ongoing crisis of class fragmentation among the Malays.

These critiques not only point to the insoluble tension between modernization and the fragmentation of Malay communal solidarity, but also suggest material-ideological forces working against the lifeways of minoritized communities who also bear the burden of globalization-linked economic development in Malaysia. The effects of neoliberal economic development are not only negatively experienced by the Malay fraction of the national social formation. An adequate account of the national requires analytic attention to how processes of racialized differentiation link and express complex unities and disunities within the Malaysian formation as a whole. The role of minoritized groups like the Indians, and many other groups such as the Orang Asli (indigenous) and immigrants constitute critical elements of the national.

The uses of Bangsa Malaysia nation-building can be conceptualised as a mediation that is necessary to the maintenance of state hegemony in a multiethnic social formation, under conditions of unstable capital accumulation. The articulation between greater economic liberalism, faster rates of capital accumulation by elites and concomitant expansion of class relations and political authoritarianism came to a breaking point in the capital accumulation crisis provoked by the Asian financial meltdown in 1997. The crisis effectively unravelled the hegemonic bloc which held together disparate political factions within UMNO, unbalanced the coherence of the ruling Barisan Nasional's elite-led interracial bloc and the general consensus on state authoritarianism. Within this political context of unsettled state formation, Bangsa Malaysia discourse was called upon to do its work.

Bangsa Malaysia Discourse as Crisis-Control

During personal exchanges with Indian residents immediately following the clashes in Kampung Medan, I often heard narratives that interchanged hopes for Bangsa Malaysia solidarity with simmering fears about racial violence. A single Malay woman who lived in a vicinity where her neighbours were all Indian stated that she had initially feared being the target of retaliation after the first spate of clashes. But she was reassured by her Indian neighbours that she would not be harmed and they subsequently promised to ensure her safety. In a multiethnic low-cost housing flat, Indian residents narrated incidents of how fights between neighbourhood youths routinely escalated when Malay adults asserted their majority racial presence to intervene on behalf of Malay youths. These everyday tensions form part of the broader lack of cross-ethnic political organization and the presence of what Yeoh Seng Guan has noted (2005:20) as the prevailing structures of "quotidian violence" in the area.

However, when the Kampung Medan incident was first reported in the *New Straits Times* (*NST*), the initial strategy deployed by the newspaper, following cues issued by state actors, was to deny the racial character of the clashes.[17] The 140-year-old *New Straits Times* (*NST*), whose coverage of the Kampung Medan clash is emphasized in the analysis below, is owned by Fleet Holdings, a company with interests intrinsically related to UMNO, the dominant Malay-based party that runs the state. The editorship of the NST is usually politically appointed and group editors have often been replaced in tandem with power shifts that have taken place among UMNO factions. The NST's readership is distinctive for its multiethnic composition, where 42 % of its readers are Chinese, 36 % Malay and 22 % Indian.[18] Its readers are mainly comprised of government officers, professionals and the general white-collar middle classes. As such NST readers are concentrated in the

[17] The media's role as a secondary definer of social phenomena follows the primary role played by state institutions and the authoritarian control exerted upon them by political parties and national politicians. The newspaper field in Malaysia has direct links to political parties and indirect ownership allows the state to supplement 47 repressive laws that constrain media autonomy with direct proxy control (Watkins, 2002).

[18] The NST has an AC Nielsen tabulated readership of approximately 500,000. Readership statistics are drawn from NST Online (2005).

major urban and market centres in Malaysia, with the majority (56 %) in the greater Kuala Lumpur area where the Kampung Medan violence occurred. The hegemonic work done by NST therefore is critical to maintaining a consensus among the capital city's influential and well-positioned multi-ethnic middle-classes.

Within this context, however, it is important to note that the assertion of negotiated autonomy by journalists enables gaps and contestation within the overall context of a repressive media ethos.[19] Hence no essential coding of the Kampung Medan crisis was able to hold within the unfolding trajectory of the NST's coverage between the tenth and thirty-first of March, 2001. Frequent shifts in the NST's explanatory frameworks, sometimes in contradiction to the designs of state authority, point to a complex process by which the meaning of the Kampung Medan clashes was settled. For example, on March 18th, an investigative piece by a multiethnic team of NST journalists appeared to gingerly contest the state's official line that the violence was not racial: "But if the clashes were not racial, how could it have spread so fast and violently?" These moments of instability usually generated new hegemonic strategies to re-present the meaning of the clash within the bounds of dominant ideological frameworks and without calling into question state legitimacy.[20]

Under control and Non-racial violence

The denial of racial violence in the initial phase of NST's coverage was critical to the state's need to present the unfolding crisis as a problem of lax social control and to reassert its repressive functions through a "law and order" campaign that involved a mass sweep of suspects. The police sought to re-focus social anxiety through the creation of a folk-

[19] See William Atkins (2002:21–23) for a historical overview of the relationship between state control and media in Malaysia. The everyday relative autonomy of news journalists in Malaysia occurs through internal contestations with editors and alliance-building with other journalists in the decision-making structures of news production.

[20] The other English language publications, namely *The Star* and *The Sun*, are also politically owned by Barisan Nasional parties or politically-linked entities. But at the same time these other papers also differed from the NST through a quicker willingness to categorize the Kampung Medan event as a "racial clash." Comparison studies between the English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil press is an important area for further research. A summary of the Tamil press' coverage appeared in *The Sun* (18/3/2001:29).

devil or criminal type—the "rumour-monger." Individual culprits were sought out to criminalize the circulation of unofficial interpretations of the clashes as a Malay-Indian racial conflict. The spread of rumours through the internet was especially of concern. The police then exercised their repressive functions by arresting rumour-mongers, banning political *ceramahs* (forums) and increasing the monitoring of mosque *khutbahs* (sermons).

What the police endeavoured to do was to reassert state control over the channels of oppositional politics within the Malay community and the broader political hegemony challenged by the *Reformasi* (Reformation) movement that was ongoing at the time of clashes. At the time UMNO was in the midst of trying to suture its crisis of Malay legitimacy by conducting Malay unity talks with PAS. The announcement by one of the *Reformasi* leaders that continuous street demonstrations would be utilized to topple the government further augmented a climate of crisis in authoritarianism and hegemonic consensus for the UMNO-led state formation. The initial public image that was therefore allowed by the crisis-ridden state was the simple narrative of "clashes between residents" (*NST* 12/3/2001:1). The strategy of denying the racial character of the clashes was the cue given by the national leadership, with both the Prime Minister and the Home Minister issuing press statements to this effect (*NST* 10/3/2001:4). The national leadership insisted that these were "incidents which took on a racial undertone merely because those involved are of different races" (*NST* 12/3/2001:6). The involvement of individuals from two different racial communities, Malay and Indian, was seen as circumstantial, occurring due to the happenstance racial mix in the housing settlements involved. Further augmenting the non-racial theme was the apparent absence of a visible organizational or formally coordinated character—"it was not planned by a group of people from one race to fight with members of another race."

In this early coverage there was a great urgency to disavow any linkage between the racial crisis and the government's development policies. The spectre of the Malay Dilemma thesis, which posited mass Malay violence as the ultimate sign of the failure of elite Malay leadership, would exacerbate the state's hold on legitimacy. Correspondingly NST journalists staged a narrative closure between their reporting voice and state authority that worked to de-link the crisis from the *Malay Dilemma* mode of interpretation (*NST* 13/3/2004:4):

> On whether the clashes were ignited due to the socio-economic standing of the different communities, Abdullah said: "There is no other reason except for a minor misunderstanding. It was neither premeditated nor planned."

This strategy of disavowing the racial nature of the clash was similar to the strategy taken by the Tunku Abdul Rahman administration in the wake of the May 13th 1969 race riots. The alternative bogey that was advanced during the Cold War era was the scapegoat of communism rather than the state's failures in addressing interethnic disparities and antagonisms. In yet another moment of political crisis for UMNO in 2001, the Malay Dilemma thesis threatened to rear its head again, this time within the context of Mahathir's own administration, and hence the initial media sensitivity against entering into a critique of government policy.

Bangsa Malaysia and Transracial Indians

Within the ideological manoeuvrings that mediated the state's crisis of legitimacy among the Malays, the minoritized position of Indians assumes a secondary discursive importance. The representation of Indians in the NST required the switching on of neoliberal Bangsa Malaysia discourse, aimed at a cross-ethnic middle-class readership. When Indians are signified in the coverage of the NST, they become visible only in a variety of discursive roles reaffirming the nation-building project of Bangsa Malaysia. This visibility, however, required a transcendence of their racial subjectivity and a jettisoning of any critical analysis of the economies of racial violence.

The Bangsa Malaysia framework was often invoked in special opinion pieces and through letters to the press from the public. The significance of this discursive stand within the *NST* (11/3/2001:8) enabled the quick return to peace and multiracial conviviality:

> I recall scenes of 1969, when as a schoolboy, I played football with friends in Tenaga Nasional quarters where I lived. The rest of the city was under curfew, but Apu, the Leong brothers, Bala and Roslan and many others were happily playing without fear of quarrelling or fighting with each other.

The same *muhibbah* or national unity trope is also invoked in the context of inter-racial relationships and through the signs of cultural hybridities and racial integration. This narrative of conviviality and inter-

racial harmony is also coupled to tropes which demonstrate the presence of transethnic solidarity in the midst of racial violence.[21] Several articles recount actual stories of how Indians were rescued by Malays who proactively intervened to forestall attacks. Calls to transracial solidarity are also often made as a way of quickly moving beyond the facts of racial violence. In one op-ed piece, an Indian worker with Tenaga Nasional reasons with his Malay colleagues: "*Abang, kita semua cari makan, Apa fasal kita mau gadoh. Itu bodoh punya kerja*" (Brother, we are all trying to survive, what is the point of fighting. Its stupidity) (*NST* 25/3/2001:8). A poignant quote by R. Suresh, a nineteen-year-old vocational college student and part-time pizza delivery worker who had gone out simply to buy a burger from a neighbourhood stall and who was then summarily attacked was also often quoted. "The saddest thing is that I know my assailants. They are my neighbours with whom I played when I was young. I just want them to be the same again" (*NST* 25/3/2001:6).

In the image of the transracial Indian deployed in the Kampung Medan coverage, we find a double constitution; the Indian victim is both a sign of the failure of the neoliberal-Bangsa Malaysia project as well as its restorative interlocutor. The function and value of the Indian victim's voice are in moving forward the desired transcendental Bangsa Malaysia discourse and its premise of multiracial conviviality as a way of suturing over the unresolved questions of racial violence and racial injustice. In the rare instance when social justice is raised as an issue, the Indian voice is paired with counter-voices which insist that they are not seeking any form of state intervention: "I am not demanding financial help or assistance from the government. I just want peace and an end to the violence" (*NST* 16/3/2001:4). The general disavowal of state assistance and the reaffirmation of free-market subjectivity become the controlling image of the ideal Indian response in the aftermath of suffering and disenfranchisement engendered by racial violence. This neoliberal image of transracial Indians who do not require protection or specific attention by the state enables the deployment of 'universals' which bypass the racialized inequalities and power imbalances that operated in the Kampung Medan violence.

[21] Sumit Mandal (2004:49–50) makes a distinction between the notion of transethnic solidarity and the language of inter-ethnic harmony or what I have referred to as *muhibbah* discourse, which can be traced as a residual state discourse stemming from the national unity programmes of the post-1969 period.

Urban Poverty and Social ills

Once the violence appeared to have passed and signs of everyday normalcy returned to the celebration of the media, more analytically-oriented feature pieces began to appear that endeavoured to explain the "root causes" of the conflict. The first official acknowledgement of the social (rather than the individual-criminal) character of the violence appeared in an *NST* editorial some six days after the clash.

Explicitly contradicting earlier reportage that there was no correlation with government policies, the editorial conceded that there were problems, even though "the government's development programmers through the years have always emphasized the improvement of living standards for the people, including those in the rural areas and the urban fringes." This concession can also be attributed to the preceding work of various counter-definers who had begun to cast the clash in social terms, but whose perspectives were not allowed to penetrate into media discussions in the first week of the crisis. Opposition politicians, NGOs such as the Group of Concerned Citizens, rival English newspapers and the Tamil language press had been active in proposing this link, but even UMNO Youth (the in-house source of dissent within the dominant party) was a contributor to the emergence of a development policy critique.

The contradictions of development, however, were defined as technocratic and bureaucratic problems involving the "slow to filter" or "dislocation" of development funds to marginal areas. At the same time the maintenance of the non-racial theme within the context of social justice discussions was ongoing: "At no time has any community been sidelined in these [development] plans which are designed to bring the fruits of development and progress to Malaysians" (*NST* 14/3/2001:12). The critique was framed instead in terms of efficiency in the delivery of development goods, especially in terms of physical amenities, low-cost housing and community integration programmes.

The development theme, however, underwent a significant shift after a second wave of racial attacks took place between March 22 and March 26, when new groups of Indians and immigrant Pakistani workers were attacked. A day after, four Indian men were separately targeted and attacked in areas adjoining Kampung Medan. The Prime Minister, who was officiating at the Malaysian Hindu Sangam's anniversary meeting, issued a cue that poverty was to be regarded as the primary root of the ongoing clashes: "We know this happened in an

area where people are very poor and poor people are often stirred to violence" (*NST* 24/3/2001:1). While the framework of urban poverty had been raised before by experts and feature-writers, the Prime Minister's sanction of the theme enables a firmer shift from the newspaper's earlier stance that the clashes "may have been triggered by events that have nothing to do with poverty" (*NST* 14/3/2001:12).

In the universal framework of urban poverty, race emerges as a factor, but it is largely cast as a primordial and irrational instinct unleashed by the determining socioeconomic environment. A coding of race as irrational sentiment, feeling and emotion let loose only within the context of the culture of the poor, becomes sublimated within technocratic considerations of economic development (*NST* 25/3/2001:2). Racial and social inequality is understood as the poor's failure or lack of free-market attributes. Hence the subsequent move by the Prime Minister to locate a solution to the crisis of urban poverty through the magical feat of skills training, which would better incorporate the urban poor into the structural imperatives of the globalization-linked economy.

The discourse of urban poverty cast in terms of the cultural deficiencies of the poor was also augmented by the rapid production of moral panics that came to describe the environment of Kampung Medan: Indian gangsterism, uncollected garbage, open sewers, petty and organized crime, drugs, and illegal Indonesian immigrants. The cluster of moral panics worked to reinscribe the urban poor as objects for "redevelopment" (*NST* 16/3/2001:12). The presentation of a "squalid" social dystopia that was a "breeding ground" for social ills and pathological behaviours was mobilized to propel the intervention of redevelopment projects such as the clearing of all squatter housing in the state by 2005. The narrative of squatter colonies as "seedbeds" for deviancy and as an inhibition to urban capital investment has been on-going since the 1960s (Yeoh, 2001:110). This narrative is not new but the discursive framework of urban poverty and social ills nonetheless mobilizes "high symbolic capital" (ibid) to drive developmentalism as a universal strategy to deliver social justice.

This re-coding of the poor as culturally deviant, however, opens a critical passageway to moral policing and the reassertion of social control. Middle-class social actors such as the Malaysian Hindu Sangam moved to position themselves as symbolic representatives who sought state funding to deal with the social ills of the Indian working-class. Other established racial representatives like the Malaysian Indian Congress leader, Samy Vellu, and the MIC social research wing, the Yaya-

san Social Strategik (YSS), coupled service delivery (compensation to victims, non-squatter housing and public infrastructure improvements) with new modes of instituting social control over "dysfunctional urban poor families."[22] These actors worked within the framework of a dominant middle-class that linked markers of material affluence such as house ownership and consumption as productive of normative behaviour. This narrative was further reinforced through academic commentary that interpreted poverty and social inequality as psychological pathologies (NST 18/3/2001: 5):

> Urban alienation is a dangerous affliction … Some of the symptoms of people suffering from lack of psychosocial needs are irritability, susceptibility to fatigue, lower thresholds of emotional tolerance, and increased family and neighbourhood misunderstandings.

This narrative strand of unruly psychosocial pathology that was environmentally determined made no link to the structural contradictions inherent within developmentalism. Warning of dire consequences, article after article drove a panic that the poor were somehow constitutionally susceptible to "emotions" that could explode into "irrational violence," or "snowball into suspicions and racism" (*NST* 18/3/2001:5).

The spectre of the unruly poor also bore another implicit message within the middle-class oriented NST commentary. The implosive violence within working-class environs of Kampung Medan could also easily become externally directed. The stark juxtaposition of globalization's prosperity with globalization's poverty now revealed itself as unstable social order. This spatialized tension was a "clear danger to the continued harmony in the country" and presented the "dangerous possibilities of urban poverty and wealth co-existing in such close proximity" (*NST* 18/3/2001:4).

There was an urgency to contain working-class violence or at least to make sure that there was a sufficient distance from its reach. In the long term, the replacement of housing settlements with low-cost housing flats located further away from the city centre was presented as

[22] The MIC-linked YSS actively participates in the coding of the Indian poor as culturally deviant, and argues for a range of social control measures against them. YSS (2002) proposals include utilizing police lists of criminalized Indian youths, domestic violence cases as well as school-lists of "students with disciplinary problems, underachievers and absentees" to create an expansive state surveillance system against so-called dysfunctional Indian families.

the ultimate solution to class tensions that was merely the "unravelling horizontally" of the working-class and their reconstitution "vertically in high rise megaliths" (Yeoh, 2005:2).

The spatial relocation of the urban poor upwards and far away, which is engendered by the dominant representation of their conditions within the framework of social ills, resumes the control culture critical to the processes of social reproduction and the continuation of neoliberal development. Key to this process of containment was the disarticulation of housing as a common entitlement, and the campaign to move squatters into housing provided by private developers and insertion into the debt-based controls of long-term mortgages and low wages. A widespread rumour that emerged among the squatters that low-cost housing would be provided free by the state was vigorously contested by anxious state actors: "There is no such thing as free houses for squatters … it is just a trick to get squatters to vacate the area and to persuade them to take legal actions against the Government should the Government fail to provide the houses" (*NST* 4/4/2001:14). The state was at great pains to block the circulation of an immanent development discourse that could think of housing in terms of a commons.

Conclusion

The production of race and racism cannot be examined in isolation from shifts in the social formations that support particular regimes of economic development and capitalist accumulation in Malaysia. The production of contemporary forms of racial representation in the public imagination does not mysteriously arise from primordialist forms of racialization. Emergent racial representations articulate with the changing imperatives of globalization-linked restructuring in Malaysia which repositions Indian labour as bottom-rung social prosthetics for the new economy. Indian labour's cultural significance to nation-building is cast in a discursive regime that provides visibility only in terms of their market-oriented functions.

Correspondingly, racial violence against Indians workers in a neoliberal regime comes to be represented through the deployment of 'universals' like the problematic of urban poverty and its attendant forms of cultural pathology. The deployment of social universals as explanations for racial violence articulates with emergent transracial modes of

nation-building. Bangsa Malaysia discourse actively functions to suture over the destabilizing significance that the extinguished and maimed Indian body presents for Malaysia's regime of capitalist accumulation. The value that the extinguished Indian body acquires in the Kampung Medan coverage is as a surplus being whose disembodied limbs and fingers can be subsumed into the more urgent master narratives of economic development and the ideals of nation-building.

The denial of modes of racialized stratifications active in the present configuration of the supposedly more liberal Malaysian state enables the construction of common-sense images about poor Indians as the other of Malaysia's globalization-linked development. Common-sense discourses of social difference are powerful enablers of implicit racial projects. As Joao Costa Vargas (2004:209–210) argues,

> Perceived differences in race, class, ethnicity, age and place of residence, to name only a few are central to how social organization is conceived—and they become clearer in volatile circumstances. Conceptualizing differences allow social actors to not only place themselves in the large polity, but also reaffirm their commitment to how various social groups should relate among and between themselves. The shared interpretation of social differences … reveals blueprints according to which society should operate—it reveals projects of social organization.

Seeing the Indian worker as redundant and waste in the traditional plantation sector, and pathological and criminal in a neoliberal urban economy, authorizes state projects of policing, removal and redevelopment. It is no wonder then that poor Indians are becoming the disproportionate targets of the extraordinary rates of state violence articulated in practices of police brutality (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Suaram, 2004). The combination of repressive responses to Indian marginalization and Bangsa Malaysia-induced economic development reinserts poor Indians into the valorizing circuits of capital accumulation and forms a control culture which restricts the horizon of Indian politics and claims for social justice.

Racial representations utilized in the public sphere are commonly shared systems of meaning-making that articulate a contradictory link between egalitarian Bangsa Malaysia discourse and the inequalities produced by globalization. A cross-cutting common-sense about poor Indians is not only utilized by the Malay-led state, Chinese ministers in the cabinet or middle-class Indian social actors. Such an appeal would not be received if these representations of poor Indians did not also circulate among social actors at the street and popular levels. At loose

is a common sense which provides racial license to discipline the Indian body—"*Ooi Keling!*" "*India! India!*"—within the rational and objectifying gaze of violence.

Works Cited

Ambikaipaker, Mohan (2002) "'A Dream is Like Life": Reading Ideology and Identity in the Plays of Leow Puay Tin." MA Thesis. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Abraham, Collin (1999) "Restructuring of Estate Industry Can Make for Monthly Wages." *New Straits Times* 11 June, pp. 13.

Asian Human Rights Commission (2003) "Malaysian Indians Alarmingly the Highest Number Being Shot by the Police". http://malaysia.ahrchk.net/mainfile.php/shootings/29 (accessed 18 September 2004).

Atkins, William (2002) *The Politics of Southeast Asia's New Media*. Surrey: Curzon.

Brewster, Anne (1987) "The Discourse of Nationalism and Multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia in the 50s and 60s". *Ariel* 24: 136–150.

Butcher, John (2001) "May 13: A Review of Some Controversies in Accounts of the Riots". Jomo K.S. ed., *Reinventing Malaysia: Reflections on its Past and Future*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp. 35–56.

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1980) *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain*. London: Hutchinson.

Cleaver, Harry. "From Development to Autonomy" 1985. 12 September 2004 ⟨http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/devauta.html⟩.

Chua, Beng Huat (1998) "Racial Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen". in Joel S. Kahn ed., *Southeast Asian Identities*. London: ISEAS, pp. 28–50.

Daim and Gamany (2001) *Statements of the Victims of Kampung Medan Incident Warded at University Hospital, March 14th*, unpublished.

Devaraj, Jeyakumar (2002) *Speaking Truth to Power: A Socialist Critique of Development in Malaysia*. Ipoh, Malaysia: Alagail.

Embong, Abdul Rahman (2000) *Negara-Bangsa: Proses Dan Perbahasan*. Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Gomez, Terence and K.S. Jomo (2000). *Malaysia's Political Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.

Hall Stuart (1980) "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance", in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO.

Hussein Onn (1976) *The Third Malaysia Plan, 1976–1980: A Plan for National Unity*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information, Malaysia.

Jesudason, James (2001) *The Management of Segemented Citizenship in Malaysia*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Center for Ethnic Studies.

Kamaruddin M. Said (2002) "Etnisiti atau Anomie? Analysis Sociologikal Peristiwa Pergaduhan Beramai-ramai di Petaling Jaya Selatan". *Akademika*

60, pp. 21–39.
Khor, Martin (2001) "Globalisation hits Malaysia's Rural Sectors". www .twnside.org.sg/title/et1003.html (accessed 1 September 2004).
Lim, Kit Siang (1999) "Media Statement" dated 25 May. http://www. malaysia.net/dap/sg1768.html (accessed 10 March 2004).
Loh, Francis (2003) "The Marginalisation of Indians in Malaysia: Contesting Explanations and the Search for Alternatives", in James T. Siegel and Audrey R. Kahin eds., *Southeast Asia Over Three Generations: Essays Presented to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 223–243.
Mahathir Mohamad (1970) *The Malay Dilemma*. Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications.
———, (1991) *Malaysia: The Way Forward*. Kuala Lumpur: Center for Economic Research Services, Malaysian Business Council.
Mandal, Sumit (2004) "Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation and Social Equality", in Edmund Terence Gomez ed., *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*. New York: Routledge-Curzon, pp. 49–78.
Mohammad A. Quayum (1998) "Imagining 'Bangsa Malaysia': Race, Religion and Gender in Lloyd Fernando's Green Is the Colour" *World Literature Written in English* 38:29–41.
New Straits Times (Malaysia). Issues from 10–31 March 2001.
New Straits Times Online. "Demographics". http://adtimes.nstp.com.my/demographic/nst.html (accessed 31 March 2005).
Salleh, Halim (2000) "Globalization and the Challenges to Malay Nationalism as the Essence of Malaysian Nationalism", in Leo Suryadinata ed., *Nationalism and Globalization: East and West*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 132–174.
Saravanamuttu, Johan (2002) "Multiculturalisms in Crisis: Reflections from Southeast Asia". *Macalester International* 12:3–36.
Suaram (2004) "Police Brutality, Shootings and Deaths in Custody" 2004 Human Rights Report. http.malaysia.ahrchk.net/mainfile.php/General/68?print_yes (accessed 18 September 2004).
Star (Malaysia). Issues from 10–31 March 2001.
Sun (Malaysia). Issues from 10–31 March 2001.
Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. London: Frank Cass.
Tan, Eugene K.B. (2001) "From Sojourners to Citizens: Managing the Ethnic Chinese Minority in Indonesia and Malaysia". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24:949–978.
Usman Awang (1995) "Sahabatku", in Dinsman ed., *Koleksi Terpilih Usman Awang*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp. 89–91.
Utusan Malaysia. Issue from 10–31 March 2001.
Vargas, Joao Costa (2004) "The Los Angeles Times' Coverage of the 1992 Rebellion". *Ethnicities* 4:209–236.
World Bank, Malaysia (1995) *Meeting Labour Needs: More Workers and Better Skills*. Washington D.C.: World Bank.
Werbner, Pnina (2000) "Essentialising Essentialism, Essentialising Silence: Ambivalence and Multiplicity in the Constructions of Racism and Ethnicity", in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity:*

Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism. New Jersey: Zed, pp. 226–256.

Wright, Melissa (2001) "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras", in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff eds., *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 819–845.

Yayasan Strategik Sosial (2002) "Violent Crimes Urban Poverty" http://www.yss98.com/02_research/2002/news/disp_ar.php?file=02050000-20020123-0101.html (accessed 26 April 2004).

Yan Hairong (2003) "Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labour Recruitment Networks". *Cultural Anthropology* 18:493–523.

Yeoh, Seng Guan (2001) "Creolized Utopias: Squatter Colonies and the Post-Colonial City in Malaysia". *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in South-East Asia* 16:102–124.

———, "Quotidian Peace (and Violence) in a Squatter Colony in Malaysia", unpublished.

Yong, Tiam Kui (1999) "Is Monthy Wage the Answer in Estates?". *New Straits Times*. 30 May, pp. 13.

"YOUR MEMORIES ARE OUR MEMORIES": REMEMBERING CULTURE AS RACE IN MALAYSIA AND K.S. MANIAM'S *BETWEEN LIVES*[*]

David C.L. Lim

Introduction: Remembering Culture as Race

We are often told and we generally accept as true that our past is our heritage, and that we must never forget the past that is our heritage because to forget is not only to deny who we are but also to betray those whom our memory commemorates. Underpinning this imperative to remember is the understanding that memory's relation to the past is not merely a relation of knowledge, it is more importantly a relation of action. That is, to count as remembering properly, we must not only incorporate this or that narrative of the past into our memory, we must also act in such a way that we always remain faithful to what our memory commemorates. Few would have a problem in accepting this logic if the object of remembrance is, to take an example from K.S. Maniam's first novel, *The Return* (*TR*), the advice of a woman to her grandson prior to her demise, "Never let anything break your spirit" (7). If the latter remembers and acts on the advice, then he would not only benefit from it, he would also be honouring the memory of his late grandmother. What, however, if the object to commit to memory is something as slippery and problematic as 'culture'? What does it mean to remember 'our' cultural roots, and what are the politics and ethics of claiming them as one's own in a country like Malaysia where cultural characteristics are often represented as biological endowments? This paper is an attempt to think through these questions using Maniam's novel, *Between Lives* (*BL*), as the main point of reference.

To begin, I want to clarify the term 'culture' and examine its relation to memory and subjectivity. As we know, it is commonplace to observe

[*] First published in Troy, Maria Holmgrem; Elisabeth Wennö eds., *Memory, Haunting, Discourse*. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press, 2005, pp. 185–198.

in contemporary academic discourse including postcolonial studies that the culture of an ethnic community is neither internally homogeneous nor bound by clear-cut boundaries that separate it from other cultures, but is rather a contested object discursively constructed and continually reconstructed within a given configuration of power relations. Interestingly, although the concept has become almost banal within much of academia, it does not seem have much currency in dissuading the majority of individuals on the local level of lived experience from subscribing to what Seyla Benhabib calls "the reductionist sociology of culture" (2002:4), that is, the belief that each culture is naturally and irreducibly unique to an ethnic or racial group. To illustrate this in the Malaysian context: If I were identified as Indian, I would generally be expected to remember the Indian culture as mine, if not also consume, defend and disseminate the ideas, attitudes, symbols, beliefs, religion, dispositions, norms and rules, practices, and language deemed to have originated from and as belonging to my people. Hence if I cannot speak an Indian tongue, or if I do not feel a special affinity toward Indian things (such as the sacred Indian epic, the *Ramayana*), I should ideally feel contrite and make amends. At the very least I should not deny that they are my roots, otherwise I might be seen as being untrue to myself and my heritage. In extreme moments I might even be assaulted. As reported recently in a Malaysian newspaper, an 'Indian' Malaysian woman was scolded all the way to her destination by the Indian driver of a taxi she had boarded because she could not communicate in her 'own' Tamil language, the dominant Indian language in Malaysia ("Truly Chinese", 2004:21). The same woman also had the misfortune of being slapped by another stranger, a drunken Indian man who was incensed that she could neither understand nor reply to his question in Tamil even though she was Indian in his eyes. The newspaper article reveals that the woman did not know Tamil but could speak fluent Cantonese (a Chinese dialect) because she was brought up from birth in the ways of her adoptive Chinese family.[1]

[1] Incidents such as this seem to occur more often than is suggested by the rarity of their reporting in the mainstream media. In a case study published by *Aliran* (an independent human-rights publication based in Malaysia), a Malay man was reportedly arrested by the Special Branch under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) for converting his faith from Islam to Christianity (see Ramakrishnan, 2001). While in detention he was stripped naked, forced to enact the crucifixion of Christ, made to crawl on the floor, and castigated for being a shameless Malay who had the audacity to deviate from his culture by renouncing Islam, the constitutional and 'natural' religion

The above is an extreme case, as qualified earlier, but that does not detract from the fact that the imperative to remember one's culture is deeply ingrained and generally, albeit unevenly, heeded across Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious communities. This applies irrespective of whether the community is Malay (the dominant majority, often constructed as the 'rightful' owner of the country) or non-Malay (a negative referent applied to the Chinese, Indian, indigenous and mixed communities). Of course, this is not to suggest that Malaysians only practice the culture regarded as unique to their ethnic group. It is not the case whereby you only do Indian things if you self-identify as Indian, Chinese things if Chinese, and so on. The reality is that you are more or less free to consume any culture, but you must also at the same time remember 'your own culture', implicitly understood as the unique way of life of your people, people of the same *race* as you.

In Malaysia (as in other places including Singapore, Britain, and North America), race is neither overtly registered nor responded to as a pseudo-scientific index of natural sameness that disavows its constitutive plurality. By ignorance or misrecognition, it is not seen as an ideological construction that brings together in self-conception individuals who would otherwise have little of significance to do with each other. From parliament and the mass media to the coffee shops, race is used interchangeably with ethnicity and half-grasped in the essentialist sense as something real, heritable and more important than other categories of difference like class and gender. The prevailing belief is that each race has its own culture, and one's mother culture is the culture of one's race, which one ought to remember as one's own, even if one does not practice it. This reductive racial assumption has remained largely unquestioned in Malaysia's popular discourse, even though it has come to function as the overarching epistemic foundation upon which political parties are formed, national policies drawn, and racialised subjects relate to each other.

Between the over sixty ethnic groups in Malaysia, however, it is arguably the dominant group, the Malays, who face the most vigilant state and social policing to ensure that they never forget their race,

---

of the Malays. (All Malays are Muslims by the definition of the Malaysian Federal Constitution; a Malay who renounces the Muslim faith is no longer considered Malay.) It is worth noting that conversion to Islam by the Chinese in Malaysia is also widely regarded as an aberration. See Chuah (2001) for documented cases of strong prejudice against Chinese Muslim converts.

and the culture and religion (Islam) that define it.[2] Ironically, although the Malay race (*bangsa Melayu*) did not exist until it was first invented by colonial discourse (see Milner, 1995; Watson, 1996; Shamsul, 1997; Reid, 2001), Malays of all ideological persuasions are today routinely exhorted to close ranks and to defend, cherish, valorise, advance and remain faithful to the Malay race and its heritage. They are also reminded to stay true to the Malay cause of overcoming the historical humiliation that the Malay race is said to have suffered at the hands of other races. In political gatherings and through the mass media, they are told that they need to be reminded to remember their race because they have a treacherously short memory. This reminder is disseminated in a variety of mediums, including verse, as exemplified by "Melayu Mudah Lupa" ("Malays Forget Easily"), a poem originally written in Malay by Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Recited by him with choked emotions to a full house of delegates during a political summit in 2001, the poem (which was subsequently turned into a Malay pop song) warns the Malays that they would be left behind or, worse, re-colonized and trampled upon by non-Malays if they forget that their dominant position in the country is far from secure.

There is evidence to suggest that this type of racial stoking, repeated and echoed over time with varying degrees of chauvinism, has helped to create a more inward-looking, reactionary and defensive Malay-Muslim community, even as it becomes increasingly modernised (see Muzaffar, 1987; Noor, 2001; Pereira, 2003; Wong, 2003). Not surprisingly, it has also served to accentuate the otherness of the non-Malays and to deepen their insecurity as minorities located within the hegemonic Malay scheme of things.

Maniam and the Memory that Makes Us 'Us'

K.S. Maniam may not have interrogated the cultural foundation of race, as have theorists like David Theo Goldberg, Etienne Balibar and Walter Benn Michaels, but he has dealt extensively with the intersecting discourses of culture, race and memory in both his fictional writ-

[2] Examples of the call to remember the Malay race and to advance the Malay cause abound in the Malay(sian) media. See for instance Mohamad (2001a; 2001b); Mohamad (2004); and "Profesor Diraja Ulas Isu" (2004).

ings and essays. Directly and indirectly Maniam has written on ethnic relations, the Malay-dominated state and its formulation of racially discriminatory and heavily pro-Malay national agenda, and the lack of a genuinely inclusive multicultural policy in Malaysia. He has also examined the problematic transmission of cultural memory and the perils of over-passionate identification with one's supposed 'true' culture: how the latter traps people in their cocoons, prevents them from expanding the horizon of their self-understanding, and ultimately aborts the birth of *Bangsa Malaysia*, an imagined egalitarian national community freed from its racial and religious hang-ups.

Consider, for instance, Maniam's first two novels, *The Return* (*TR*) and *In a Far Country* (*IFC*), which examine the implications of the Indian-Malaysian protagonists' failure to defer to the dictates of the Hindu-Indian cultural memory they are expected to inherit. Ravi, the protagonist of *The Return*, is the eldest son in a quintessentially traditional, working-class Hindu family that expects the firstborn male to "give more" (*TR* 156). Forced to choose between being a good Hindu son (by sacrificing everything to help his tradition-bound father realise his dream of building the family home) and pursuing his own dream of acquiring formal western education which he sees as his only escape from a life of poverty and insecurity, Ravi chooses the latter. This deviation opens up the path towards the realisation of his goal but his success is marred by a gnawing feeling of irrational guilt arising from the knowledge that there was little he could have done to prevent his father from dying a broken man, defeated by the larger sociopolitical forces with which he had been on a collision course. The second novel, *In a Far Country*, explores the same underlying tensions. Rajan, the protagonist, does not identify with Hindi-Indian culture, hence his refusal to structure his life around it. For wanting to be "just himself" (*IFC* 155) and for believing that he has "inherited nothing" (157), Rajan is harried by his wife, his "people" and friends from other "races". In a dream sequence, he is accused of being "one of us and yet … not one of us", admonished for "fight[ing] everything our culture gave us", and branded as an ingrate: "When you were born did your mother leave you naked? … She wrapped you up in the clothes of our culture. See how it has fed you and strengthened you. Gave you mind and spirit" (155).

What makes these two novels interesting is that they do not make it clear if Ravi and Rajan's radical break with culture is right or wrong, or good or evil. They do not tell us with certainty if the protagonists

are traitors or heroes for refusing to lay claim to the cultural memory they are told is theirs. Maniam, despite his strong views on the state of affairs in Malaysia, stops short of prescribing how one ought to live. He seems content to stir up an ethical dilemma, leaving it to the reader to work out what is ethical and what is not. With Maniam's third novel, *Between Lives* (*BL*), however, there is little ambiguity as far as the narrative intent is concerned. The way in which the text resolves the problematic it frames suggests that its aim is to convince the reader that one should not forget one's own culture because to forget is to be exiled from oneself. That this is authorially intended is without doubt. In a recent interview, Maniam explains that one of the ideas he tries to convey through *Between Lives* is that one should neither completely forget the culture one inherits nor fixate on it (Lim, 2004:44). What one should do instead, he says, is to build or maintain some kind of affective link with it or risk living an ungrounded life.

It would be easy to take *Between Lives* at face value, read it in light of Maniam's extra-textual comments and gather textual evidence to support the authorial line of argument. But I think that taking this approach would not be doing justice to a text which is far more complex than a literal or authorially guided reading might suggest. Hence what I propose to do here is to reframe what is presented in the text as a proposition into a problematic. In other words, if *Between Lives* poses the question of whether one should integrate into memory a particular cultural past beyond one's personal past, and answers in the affirmative, I want to read that not as a prescription to be accepted without question but as the inscription of an ethical dilemma to be resolved by the reader. My intention is not to argue, contra Maniam, that we are able to cut ourselves off completely from the past. Rather I want to examine how our memory of the past comes to be ours in the first place. I want to question firstly, if the roots we remember as ours really do precede and determine us in ways beyond our control; second, if they are not in fact a euphemism for race; and third, if our roots/culture/race are not ultimately ours to remember only insofar as we volitionally posit them as ours in an act of decision for which we are always fully responsible.

Remembrance as Performative Return

BL is set in Malaysia and tells the story of the collision and radical transformation of two lives: Sumitra, a self-assured, vivacious, modern

young woman who does not trouble to identify with the Indians or to follow their way of life; and Sellamma, a much older Hindu-Indian woman who lives in ghostly seclusion on a patch of land, alone save for the companionship of her faithful dog. The latter is simultaneously faithful to and haunted by her memory of the past, of the magical early years she spent growing up on the land with her now lost/deceased parents and siblings. It is a past she longs to redeem, uncannily, by somehow bringing her family back to her side because she sees that as the only way to banish the great loneliness that she has lived with for the longest time. But her time is running out, for she is being removed, albeit gently, from the land which, although legally hers, has been earmarked for a multi-million ringgit development project. To the frustration of the state and the land developers, Sellamma refuses to budge. So the task of removing her in the name of progress and the greater good of the nation is channelled to an Orwellian state apparatus called the Department of Social Reconstruction, where it is assigned to an elite social worker, namely Sumitra.

Sumitra's job is to use psychological methods to get into Sellamma's memories, find out what it is that makes her cling so tenaciously to the land, and use what she learns to convince the old woman to willingly give up her land and move into a welfare home. Sumitra is initially cockily confident that the old woman will succumb easily to her methods. She even sees herself as "doing the old woman a service" (*BL* 32). As she says, "I'll be taking her out into new realities. Memories can be painful burdens, and if you don't watch out, turn into obsessive fantasies and fears" (32). Little does Sumitra realise that as she probes Sellamma's memories, she is also unconsciously "reaching into [her] own intuitions, thoughts, and fears" (242). Gradually, despite the cynical distance she maintains towards the old woman, and despite her office reputation as a "monarch of inner detachment" (8), she begins to forget herself, allowing for the old woman's "thoughts, tendencies, phobias, likes and dislikes, loves and hatreds, [to] somehow seep into" her (151). In the end it is Sumitra who is converted. Instead of leading Sellamma out of her "misguided" (152) notion of herself, she takes on the very personality the Department wants her to abort. As if that is not enough to scandalise the Department, Sumitra also inherits the coveted land from Sellamma, who passes away soon after executing the transfer papers, her mission in life accomplished. Staying true to Sellamma's memory, Sumitra takes over the fight to prevent the authorities from taking over the land. Clearly in the end victory belongs to Sellamma

and Sumitra. Through sheer tenacity they manage to keep the land from violation. That much we know on the literal level, but what does it all signify and what exactly do these two women have to be triumphant about, if we read the novel symbolically?

It is important to underline first of all that land in Maniam's writings is never simply the actual-physical land on which people build houses.[3] On the symbolic level, land is culture, the values, beliefs and history that root a person to firm ground and serve as his or her anchor in life. In *Between Lives*, the land is the essentialised Hindu-Indian culture defended by Sellamma and transmitted to Sumitra as her roots, so that by inheriting the land from Sellamma, Sumitra inherits the Hindu-Indian culture. But her inheritance of it is not something she passively receives. Rather it is transacted via Sellamma's memories as a performative return to what is always already hers. To say that Sumitra inherits her culture by returning to it is to imply that, prior to her return, she had travelled on "the false road".[4] It implies that she had been deculturalised. From the novel we learn that Sumitra does not at first see herself as living a deculturalised life. Nor does she seem to care if others should think that she is not "living properly" (68), to use Sellamma's words. In fact she does not awaken to the apparent reality of her improper life until she meets Sellamma and learns to see through her "memory-eyes" (42).

Willing to "do almost anything to help [Sellamma] play out her illusions" (*BL* 77), Sumitra humours the old woman by listening to her stories. She allows herself to be confused for Sellamma's lost/deceased sister, Anjalai. She sheds her "city clothes" (80) for traditional Indian clothes smelling of moth-balls so that she is properly attired to participate in the old woman's *puja* or religious rites performed in the worship of Hindu gods. Despite her reservations, she accompanies Sellamma on excursions through the fecund land, bathes naked with her in the river that runs through the land, and experiences first-hand the sensual rhythm of life she is said to have forgotten. At Sellamma's request, Sumitra also tills the land with a hoe, awkwardly at first but slowly losing her city-awkwardness the longer she engages in the act. By the end of it, she even earns praise from Sellamma, who says approvingly, "Your earth hands are coming back" (63). These acts are described in the novel as "remembrance ritual[s]" (351)—rituals Sumitra is inducted

[3] For a discussion on the symbolism of land in Maniam's writings, see Lim (2005).
[4] Taken from the synopsis of *Between Lives* on the first edition dust-jacket.

into performing by Sellamma as a way of getting her to remember her lost connection to the land that is her culture. For Sumitra the entire experience which she later calls a "baptism" (68) is so absorbing that she soon forgets that her job is to remove Sellamma and not to share her appreciation of the land.

Going on excursions through the land, bathing naked in the river, and working with a hoe—these are all acts alien to the urbanised Sumitra. Although they literally signify nothing beyond themselves, they immediately acquire symbolic meaning when read in light of the *Ramayana*, the ancient Indian text and icon of Indianness, whose pervasive presence in *Between Lives* is impossible to ignore. The *Ramayana* is the cultural frame through which key characters in the novel apprehend their world, as well as the archive that provides them with the language to communicate their intimate experiences. It is the sacred book that Sellamma's Hindu father read and gently encouraged his children to read in the colonial days because he wanted them "to feel the magical plentifulness of the land, and to treat everything that grew with … the greatest respect" (108). It is the source from which Sellamma's father drew the name "Ravana", which he used as a codeword shared with his children in referring to the marauding colonial Japanese troops. It is also from the *Ramayana* that the fertile centre of Sellamma's land, the "Rama-Sita Grove" (113), gets its name. The *Ramayana* motif appears in numerous other places in *Between Lives* and it is invariably tied to the notion of Indianness, constructed as a fecund, creative and nurturing force, and as a sensual, organic connection to the land. Read this way, we might see that Sumitra, while engaged in all those mundane acts like tilling the land, is symbolically being reconnected to and revitalised by the Hindu-Indian culture imputed by Sellamma as hers to remember.

Interestingly, Sumitra is not the only one drawn into taking part in Sellamma's remembrance rituals. In the subplot of *Between Lives*, Sumitra's mother, father and grandmother are also brought to the land and socialised into "remembering properly" (*BL* 288), a process negotiated through the old woman's haunting/haunted, land-rooted memories. Like Sumitra prior to her conversion, they are initially portrayed as having made fatal compromises in their lives and strayed from what they could have been. Disconnected from some vital part of themselves, they have become stiff and restrained; they have lost the organic sensuality invoked by the *Ramayana*. But as a result of participating in Sellamma's rituals, they too are awakened to the goodness of returning

to their culture. As Sumitra's father says to Sellamma after his conversion to her way of seeing things: "Your memories are [now] our memories" (298). These successful conversions represent a triumph for Sellamma, and the triumph of the Hindu-Indian culture which is not only successfully defended but also transmitted from one generation to the next. They may even be taken as attesting to the futility and fatuity of denying that who we are is essentially determined by something in us that is simultaneously beyond our control: our race. This suggestion is amplified by the 'awakening' of yet another character in the novel: Christina, Sumitra's colleague and friend who eventually joins her in turning against the Department of Social Reconstruction. After witnessing Sumitra's performative recuperation of her cultural memory, Christina too comes to realisation that she had been "neutered" (349) as a result of attempting to disavow the Chineseness she has inherited in her blood, in the same way that Sumitra was a deculturalised "nothing" (350) prior to her remembering. As Christina confesses:

> I was Lee Siew Mei. I didn't want to be like the rest of my [Chinese] family. I didn't want to be like my kind. Didn't want to be typecast. Didn't want to be in business like them … I became Christina. Tina. If you can't be yourself, why have a real name? I'm not even a Christian, but I'm Christina. Tina. Tiny. Neutered. I've lived a neuter. (*BL* 349)

The Ethics of Remembering Culture as Race

Having thus framed my argument apropos *Between Lives*, I want to consider now, in the context of Malaysia's identity politics, the ethical implications of remembering culture in the racial sense elaborated above. I concede that it is often necessary to strategically and provisionally deploy essences such as race and culture in struggles against political exclusion and domination, particularly if one happens to belong to a minority such as the Indians, historically one of the most neglected and disempowered communities in Malaysia. In this sense, Sumitra is justified in defending the right of minorities like the Indians to retain the things that give meaning and value to their lives without their being levelled by the state which, as noted previously, has historically placed Malay interests above others. What I take issue with, though, is not Sumitra's defence of Sellamma, or even her decision to take up Hindu-Indian cultural practices (or any cultural practice for that matter); it is rather her understanding of the significance of her action. As a highly ranked expert in ideologico-psychological warfare and erstwhile elite

member of the Department, Sumitra can be expected to recognise, but shows no sign of recognising, that neither the Hindu-Indian identity she reclaims as hers through Sellamma's memories nor the culture she inherits (as the land in which her reconstituted identity is rooted) is 'objectively' hers to remember. After all, she has learned during special training that neither our identity nor the roots which underpin it is a given fact or a found condition that chains us to the external world (*BL* 151–153). She has learned, but fails to apply to her situation, that our identity is not so much found as it is ultimately determined by ourselves in a free act of decision which retroactively produces the grounds, roots and memories that justify its necessity. As Sumitra's trainer puts it succinctly, "It depends entirely on you" (152).

In arguing that our identity is determined by our roots only insofar as we volitionally determine our roots as ours, I am not suggesting that we are entirely free from determination. On the contrary, we are always already structurally determined as Indian, Chinese, Malay and so on by forces and institutions within a discursive field which is not wholly of our choosing. We are also constantly reminded of our apparently immutable racial genealogies that stretch back to time immemorial, as well as the respective cultures that should go with them. We have seen this in the earlier examples of the 'Indian' woman who was assaulted by her 'people' and Mahathir Mohamad's poetic wake-up call to the Malay race. However, it is crucial to stress that we do not spontaneously become the bearers of our race and begin to act accordingly, as if we were mere passive effects of causal determination. The true "genesis of the [racial] I" (Žižek, 1993:75) does not occur until, in a moment of reflexivity following an 'objective' evaluation of the situation, we decide to dot the 'I'. In this precise sense, "the determination of the subject by the other is always the subject's self-determination. A decision is … simultaneously dependent on and independent of its conditions: it 'independently' posits its own dependence" (Žižek, 1993:126). If we agree with the foregoing argument, then we will see that Sumitra, although correct to defend Sellamma, is mistaken in assuming that her remembrance of the culture of her race is an exercise of agency and the attainment of freedom, as is implied in the closing lines of the novel where she intimates that, by following the twists and turns of her memories, fearlessly, she has been able to return from "exile" (*BL* 388).

Of course, one could pose at this point: What does it matter if Sumitra lacks the self-knowledge that would have prevented her from internalising Sellamma's memories as her own in the way that she does, if

the cause is just and she benefits from it in the end? Why shouldn't she regard the Hindu-Indian culture she returns to as her "cord-blood", to use Maniam's metaphor (see Lim, 2004)? Maniam has said in an interview that he sees culture as something like cord-blood, that is, blood stored in a bank after it is drawn from the umbilical cord of a mother who has just given birth. "In case of emergency", he says, "when something happens to the child later on, that's when you use the stem cells for regeneration … culture is a bit like that kind of bank. If something happens or goes wrong later, your referral point is there" (Lim, 2004:44). On the emotional level, it is understandable that we should want to remember 'our' culture so that we may fall back on it if the need arises. Maybe "we fear (perhaps mistakenly so) that if we were to [lose our culture], we no longer would possess the necessary faith and creative power to find an equivalent" (Halbwachs 1992:120). Notwithstanding this, the problem with conceiving culture as cord blood is that it is far from harmless, for the reality is that we always live in one state of crisis or another. Someone or some force, real or imaginary, always poses an ever-present threat to our sense of identity and security, as we saw in the example of the Malay-majority being harangued to remember and defend their race against a multitude of enemies. What this means is that we will never be short of reasons to slip into paranoid insecurity and to flee to our cord blood bank for refuge, to the culture of our race. In Malaysia it means that the Indians will always remember themselves as Indians, the Chinese as Chinese, and the Malays as Malays; which is to say that the 'races' will remain cocooned, locked into their respective immutable origins. This would not be a problem if we ground our ethics in some simple egotistic calculus of pleasures or gains. That is, if we find it reassuring, pleasurable and/or expedient to act as if the culture we should remember is determined by our race, then the act would be ethical. Similarly, if we take moral relativism as our ethical standard, that is, if we measure the act by the moral standards of the society in question, we would also have to conclude that it is ethical to remember the culture of our race. As we have seen, the predominant depoliticised notion of the good in Malaysia is to subscribe to the racial conception of culture and the myth of natural racial/cultural separatedness. However, the case would be entirely different if we were to base our ethics on the ground that "there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, [and] no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize" (Agamben, 1993:43). If we take this as our starting point, then we will see that there is literally no culture that we must

remember or return to; in which case there would be no need to "cling to the culture to which one supposedly belongs, and to then say that one cannot live without it" (Lim, 2004:43). Our culture will simply be "whatever beliefs and practices we actually happen to have"; if we do not follow those beliefs and practices, or if we have stopped or have yet to follow them, then they do not belong to our culture (Michaels, 1992:683).

If we accept the foregoing, then we will see that the only thing to remember is to be our "possibility or potentiality" and not to commit what Giorgio Agamben terms the ethically "evil" act of living "in a deficit of existence," that is, to regard "potentiality […] as a fault that must always be repressed" (1993:44). It is only then that we will get the opportunity to live a fuller, self-responsible existence beyond the limits of 'our' race and culture.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio (1993) *The Coming Community*. Michael Hardt tr. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Balibar, Etienne (1991) "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?", in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London; New York: Verso, pp. 17–28.

Benhabib, Seyla (2002) *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chuah, Osman (2001) *Chinese Muslims in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Goldberg, David Theo (1993) *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Oxford; Cambridge MA: Blackwell.

Halbwachs, Maurice (1992) *On Collective Memory*. Lewis A. Coser tr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lim, David C.L. (2004) "The Path of the Imagination: A Conversation with K.S. Maniam". *Wasafiri* 41, pp. 40–45.

———, (2005) *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi.

Mohamad, Mahathir (2001a) *Malays Forget Easily* [Speech delivered at the 55th UMNO General Assembly on 21 June 2001]. Subang Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk.

———, (2001b) "Melayu Mudah Lupa, Dibacakan oleh Presiden UMNO, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad di akhir ucapan penggulungannya pada Perhimpunan Agung UMNO di Pusat Dagangan Dunia Putra (PWTC) pada 23 Jun, 2001 [Malays Forget Easily, Speech by UMNO President at the Closing of the UMNO General Assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) on 23 June 2001]". *Utusan Malaysia*, 24 June. http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/SpecialCoverage/UMNO2001/index.asp?pg=melayu

_mudah_lupa.htm (accessed 20 July 2004).
Maniam, K.S. (1993) *The Return*. London: Skoob.
———, (1993) *In a Far Country*. London: Skoob.
———, (2003) *Between Lives*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press.
Michaels, Walter Benn (1992) "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity". *Critical Inquiry* 18 (4), pp. 655–685.
Milner, Anthony (1995) *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Muzaffar, Chandra (1987) *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.
Noor, Farish (2001) "The Other Face of Political Islam". *Malaysiakini*, 10 November. http://www.malaysiakini.com/Column/2001/11/2001111001.php3 (accessed 11 November 2001).
Norraesah Mohamad (2004) "Menang Bentuk, Kalah Isi [Win in Form, Lose in Substance]." *Utusan Online*, 8 August. http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/archive.asp?y =2004&dt=0808&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec =rencana&pg =re_01.htm&arc=hive (accessed 18 August 2004).
Pereira, Brendan (2003) "Silent Majority Behind Rising Religious Intolerance". *Malay Mail*, 4 January, pp. 19.
"Profesor Diraja Ungku Aziz Ulas Isu 'Menang Bentuk, Kalah Isi': Melayu Tidak Kisah Bangsa [Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Comments on Issue 'Win in Form, Lose in Substance': Malays Don't Care About Their Race]" (2004) *Utusan Online*, 15 August. http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/archive.asp?y =2004&dt=0815&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=rencana&pg=re_01.htm&arc =hive (accessed 18 August 2004).
Ramakrishnan, P. (2001) "Abuse of Power Under the ISA." *Aliran*, 14 August. http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/monthly/2001/11d.html (accessed 19 July 2007).
Reid, Anthony (2001) "Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities". *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32.3, pp. 295–313.
Shamsul, A.B. (1997) "The Making of a 'Plural' Malaysia: A Brief Survey", in David Y.H. Wu, Humphrey McQueen and Yamamoto Yasushi eds., *Emerging Pluralism in Asia and the Pacific*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia Pacific Studies, pp. 67–83.
———, (1998) "Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: 'Malayness' in Postwar Malaysia", in Dru C. Gladney ed., *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey and the United States*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 135–150.
"Truly Chinese" (2004) *Star*, 20 February, sec. 2, pp. 21.
Watson, C.W. (1996) "The Construction of the Post-Colonial Subject in Malaysia", in Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv eds., *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, pp. 297–322.
Wong, Chun Wai (2003) "Don't Allow Racists To Lead Us Astray". *Sunday Star*, 9 February, pp. 28.
Žižek, Slavoj (1993) *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

A PASSION FOR OTHER LOVERS: REWRITING THE 'OTHER' IN OOI YANG-MAY'S FICTIONALISATION OF MULTIETHNIC MALAYSIA

Tamara S. Wagner

The fear of and fascination with the idea of the 'other' lover inform English-language literature set in postcolonial Malaysia in multiply contradictory ways that pinpoint at once the diversity of colonial cultural legacies and the pitfalls, as well as the potentials, of what Benedict Anderson (1983) has so influentially termed "imagined communities". Ooi Yang-May's recent novels fascinatingly engage with the problematics of representing the 'other' and, by extension, 'othered' groups and communities in postcolonial fiction. Colonial traditions and postcolonial revisionism with all their attendant clichés are provocatively fused to engender an important ambivalence that forces a significant revaluation of racist, nationalist, and also traditional literary stereotypes. To the pairing of ethnically 'other' lovers, Ooi's second novel, *Mindgame* (2000), moreover adds another level of 'otherness', as it were, as homosexuality is treated both as a central social concern in Southeast Asia that is regularly associated with 'Westernisation' (as a synonym of cultural corruption as well as of globalising modernisation, which is in itself a conflicted duality) and, at the same time, as an extended metaphor for alterity. The ways in which other, alternative, communities in Malaysia can be imagined are critically tested out with reference to the function the 'other' has in differently imagined communities. The vital question is not what such imaginaries put in, but what, and whom, they leave out. Ooi's dystopian scenarios play out multiply othered embodiments of, in Bhabha's words, the "death-in-life" of communities defining themselves through exclusion (1990:315).

By focusing on the ways in which Ooi's novels juggle with stereotypes in order to expose them, this essay aims critically to re-examine the representation of passion for otherness and sameness in novels by Malaysian women writers more generally and, particularly, how these conflicting desires make the idea of the multiethnic community problematic. Orientalism has of course long been seen as capitalising centrally on discourses of effeminacy and working through

the female or feminised 'other' as representative of colonised spaces. Despite the indisputable usefulness of such readings, recent calls for a "post-postcolonial" criticism (O'Connor 2003) have, however, importantly picked up their unfortunately rapidly standardised patterns to question the viability of the typecasting such institutionalisation can inadvertently involve.

Recent Malaysian literature in English forms a particularly revealing conduit for the increasingly self-reflective reworking of both orientalist and occidentalist stereotypes. Occidentalism in postcolonial Malaysia, in fact, does not simply work along the lines of clichéd dualities, such as the foreigner versus the local, the coloniser versus the colonised, the neo-imperialist 'Westerner' or 'Westernised' versus the nationalist. Instead, it is further made problematic by the duality of the Malay and the non-Malay in a systematic marginalisation of the Chinese-Malaysian, the Indian-Malaysian, and in an additional complication, the aboriginal population, the *Orang Asli*.[1] It is these intersecting discourses of otherness that are shown to clash fruitfully in Ooi's fiction, generating the revaluation of typecasting state rhetoric that constitutes such a central theme in both her novels. Their heroines, we must not forget, are Chinese-Malaysians, a hyphenised identity that has further been influenced by their education abroad, in 'the West', where they have entered into close relationships with 'Westerners'. As they return to the changed places of the past, they are confronted not only with a hostility to the 'local' girl's 'Western' lover, but more importantly, with the dismantling of their 'Asianness' as they become newly categorised as 'non-Malay' and, at the same time, as a 'Westernised' local. This stereotyped story is, however, intriguingly transformed as their othered lovers come to embody what Bhabha has usefully termed "the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other" that constitutes the reverse side

[1] Lo significantly situates the negotiations for Malaysia's independence in a commercial bargain before she explores the workings of nationalism in 1980s theatre productions: in 1957 the United Malays National Organisation-led Alliance government guaranteed the protection of British investments in the country by setting up a Malay/non-Malay dichotomy that established the political hegemony of the Malays while protecting the economic interests of a predominantly Chinese bourgeoisie (2004: 9–10). *Bumiputeraism* then received its most significant thrust after the race-riots of 1969, leading to the establishment of the 1971 National Cultural Policy, which identified the principles of Malaysian culture as: (1) based on an indigenous/*Bumiputera* culture, (2) able to incorporate "pertinent" elements from the other cultures and, (3) focused on Islam as an important element in the formation of the National Culture (2004:15). *Bumiputera* status was extended to include the *Orang Asli*, but not the Chinese or Indians.

of "the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth" (1990:2). *The Flame Tree* (1998) juxtaposes an exotically upper-class Englishman and a local white man; *Mindgame* (2000) pairs white women. It is especially the double twist epitomised by the lesbian couple in the latter that interests us here. While tapping into one of the most controversial issues in Malaysia (and indeed, in Southeast Asia generally), the novel's use of homosexuality also forms a narrative device that knots together differently the prevailing strands of colonial and postcolonial fiction. As Robert Aldrich shows in *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (2003), as he explores connections between—however exclusively male—homosexuality and imperialism through the lives of selected figures, the seduction of the colonies engendered in their life-narratives has created persistent associations of colonial homosexuality with imperialist (or neo-imperialist) exploitation and orientalist emasculation. They have at once fed on and into discourses on the feminisation of 'the East' through the oriental native and, conversely, on relationships with the 'other' more generally.

Ooi's *Mindgame* negotiates a twofold otherness of the desired lover and of the threat she is perceived to pose to multifariously defined communities. In this, it takes the structures that *The Flame Tree* already plays with a step further. As the following reading of both of Ooi's novels seeks to situate them in these contrasting discourses of otherness, it also aims to cast a different light on fictional representations of Malaysia, its ethnicities and the issues of a multicultural community as multiply contested—disputed, defended, re-appropriated, and exploited—imaginaries. At their best, literary uses of racist clichés, whether instituted by orientalist (primarily colonial) or by occidentalist (nationalist) rhetoric, expose typecasting as discursively constituted in order to engender self-referential expositions on the problematics of writing about and marketing multiculturalism. At their most blasé, they only reiterate them. To illustrate the ways in which Ooi's novels work out a creative way of working through and against stereotyping, I shall compare them to a number of very different locally and globally published fictionalisations of Malaysia. I shall then proceed to trace the methods they harness to transcend a mere juggling with stereotypes and specifically with the increasingly clichéd figure of the exotic lover as an epitome of cross-cultural exchange and the difficulties of the multiethnic community. First of all, however, it is necessary to outline and draw into question the idea of 'the West' that forms such a convenient, yet fluid, 'other' in otherwise very different conceptualisations of postcolonial imaginary communities.

Where Was 'the West'?—Re-imagining the Occident

Despite the rich potential of multiethnic relationships in Malaysia, in the majority of their literary representations, the 'other' lover comes out from 'the West'. This amorphously defined exotic location is multiply redeployed, often in a deliberate inversion of orientalist representations of 'the East', ironically indicating a dangerous reaffirmation of the very typecasting for which orientalism has been so rightly condemned. What is 'the West' and 'the Westerner', including the 'Western-educated', is perhaps the most vexed, but also the most vital, problematic in recent reassessments of occidentalism in all its diverging versions: whether seen as an emulative reduplication or a retaliatory reaction. The discursive field of postcolonial studies often rides an idea of 'the West' that is taken up as unproblematic, even while the orientalist imagination of 'the East' is carefully deconstructed. It is only very recently indeed that the need to dismantle the notion of the Occident, as Edward Said has put it, and furthermore to engage newly with the overlaps between orientalism and occidentalism has become an acknowledged project of the field itself, partly to work out its own impasses.[2] As the bogeyman of occidentalist re-imagining of nationalist communities, 'the West' has

[2] At the centre of occidentalism's recent proliferation in literary and cultural theory is really the oscillation of its meaning between a study of the 'West' and a revisionist strategy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists only one meaning of "occidentalist" as "one who favours or advocates Western customs, modes of thought" or "studies the languages and institutions of Western nations." Dictionary definitions aside, it has become undeniably common to use 'occidentalist' and 'occidentalism' to describe a primarily hostile reaction to 'the West'. Although Said, in his seminal *Orientalism*, emphasised that "no one is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to orientalism called occidentalism" (1978:50), this discourse, or field of discourses, has flourished and this despite its proliferating definitions. In one of his last interviews (in Goldberg and Quayson, 2002), Said moreover significantly retracted his, one might well argue, rather imperious caution: "I say even the notions of the Occident and the Orient are ideological fictions and we should try to get away from them as much as possible" (2002:3). Clearly scholars did not feel the need to wait for this retraction. Instead, its very meaning diverges into such diametrically opposite directions as to mark out capturing it as a discourse as increasingly impossible. James Carrier already called for the critical analysis of the "stylised images of the West" in "the East" and their production in "the East" and "the West" (1995:1). As I have already argued elsewhere, in a recent article entitled "Emulative versus Revisionist Occidentalism: Monetary and Other Values in Recent Singaporean Fiction", part of my recently published book on "the financial straits", and in an essay on Said's legacy for the occidentalist imaginary, written for an anthology of reassessments of his work, edited by Silvia Nagy-Zekmi, any theory of occidentalism would demand first of all a much-needed distinction between its emulative and revisionist modes (Wagner, 2006).

after all become so amorphous as to render any alignments that use the concept equally nebulous, not to say shapeless. As Neil Lazarus has provocatively pointed out in "The Fetish of 'the West' in Postcolonial Theory", the concept of "the West" as commonly used in postcolonial theory "has no coherent or credible referent": as "an ideological category masquerading as a geographic one," he points out, it is not a polity or a state, but "something altogether more amorphous and indeterminate" (2002:44). Stuart Hall has similarly suggested that "the West" is "no longer only in Europe, and not all of Europe is in 'the West'" (1996:185). This seems commonsensical enough, yet occidentalism as a retaliatory strategy continues to associate 'the West' not only with specific geographical locations or imaginaries, but with people from or residing in these areas, with vaguely defined value-systems, rendered homogenous from the outside. The result can be simply bizarre, yet sometimes disconcerting, disturbing, dangerous. Occidentalism is constantly in danger of inadvertently re-establishing stereotypes in its affirmation of cultural alignments, as it at once contributes to a prevailing confusion about 'the West' as a geographical or ideological entity and fosters the very conflation of 'the East' or Orient that occidentalist discourses set out to disperse in the first place. As James Rice puts it in an essay pointedly titled "In the Wake of Orientalism", "we now live in the wake and, if you will, 'counter-wakes' of Edward Said's landmark work" (2000:223), so much so, in fact, that this critical framework can be seen as a trope itself. "This is a time," Rice maintains,

> when seemingly every academic volume, paper, and conference panel uses Said's critical framework as the *de rigeur* point of departure, a trope —positive or negative—for any critical exercise embracing Asia, at least through the lens of culture or any of its manifestations. (Rice, 2000:223)

What makes Ooi's novels so fascinating and indeed central to a much needed reassessment of these proliferating discourses of otherness—and their marketing—is precisely their capitalisation on this twofold essentialising of marketed otherness. As they reproduce the familiar play with local and foreign affairs, they brilliantly highlight a meshing up of expectation that then nicely spices up their own selling of Malaysian fictions, but with an intriguing self-reflexivity.

A Child of the East: The Flame Tree

Most strikingly perhaps, Ooi's novels proceed to turn orientalist clichés of the 'other' woman or the 'other' lover inside out. But while this is surely nothing particularly new, they go further in exposing the popular occidentalist, revisionist, redeployment of the paired effeminate ('native') and domineering (foreign, colonising) 'other' lovers as simply the reverse version of the same story. Premised on the much beaten metaphor of the effeminate, emasculated, or raped Orient, such occidentalist literary representations tend to turn the racial alignments of the personified subjugation literally upside down. The result: the other side up. In Lloyd Fernando's by now classic 1976 novel *Scorpion Orchid*, Ellman (a name that plays with feminisation or androgyny) is quickly identified as a degenerate version of the belated colonial: "he drank more than was good for him and was rapidly falling into the mould, he told himself sardonically, of the old time whisky-drinking colonial" (1976:88). More recent novels by Malaysian (or Malaysian-born) women writers have taken up precisely this stereotype of the 'other' male lover, imported into Malaysia in the aftermath of the degeneration of Ellman and his ilk, in order to turn it upside down, as it were.[3] In Ooi's *The Flame Tree*, Jasmine's choice between Harry Taunton and Luke McAllister, two contrasting white exotic males, is an attempt to balance out precisely such inverted polarisations of racist prejudices.

The Flame Tree, moreover, is foremost a thriller that renders the themes of multiculturalism, racial stereotyping and the very selling of sameness and otherness by a globalised alterity industry, which has turned the representation of the 'other' into a corporate enterprise, essential to the plot. Indeed, the novel at once works and reworks eminently sellable multicultural myths. It opens with a seemingly happy end but only to undercut it. With an Oxbridge degree, newly made

[3] A number of them significantly celebrate the (sexual) freedom they see as embodied by white males, with the list of nasty husbands ranging from the soft bore in Shirley Lim's *Joss & Gold* (2001) to the violent bully of Josephine Chia's first novel, *My Mother-in-Law's Son* (1994). Set in 1950s Malaysia, the latter neatly polarises 'Western' individualism, identifying it rather confusingly with both feminism and romance on the one hand, and a traditional understanding of Confucian patriarchy on the other. Evaluation aside, the stereotyping is just the same as in novels that condemn any individuality. In the words of the eponymous wicked mother-in-law: "It was their western education which encouraged them to be so arrogant and individualistic" (Chia, 1994:154).

the youngest corporate partner at a law firm, Jasmine, features as "reinvented stunningly and dressed for respect" (Ooi, 1998:15), divorced from her family by a cunningly devised fiction of orphanhood; her past rendered doubly remote in rural Malaysia. "They were lying together, happy and in love, in an English glade in summer and the credits should be rolling. Only, the house-lights were coming up too soon and she was back in the old Lido cinema […] and, all around, the air stale with the garlicky sweat of the tropics" (Ooi, 1998:6). Both orientalist and occidentalist typecasting are exposed as sets of ideologically as well as commercially exploited constructs. The replayed records of cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-class relations are revamped. Taking up this reworking of stereotypes as a theme, the novel inserts the discussion of multiracialism in Southeast Asian discourses into an internationally marketed thriller.

This is not to say that Ooi's novels easily transcend the discourses in which their critical analysis is necessarily embedded. In a sense, there is no going beyond them. In *Mindgame*, for example, the heroine at least at first fully endorses the polarisation that aligns freedom, individuality, and sexual liberation with an ideologically constituted, geographically shifting 'West', and tradition, custom, and suppression specifically with the fictitious AVA, the Asian Values Alliance: "Fei had tasted freedom there: the freedom to talk and argue, to step out of tradition and custom and be whoever she wanted to be. She had felt a curious sense of safety and peace in London that she would never feel in Asia" (Ooi, 2000:14). Having returned to Malaysia with a prestigious law degree, like Jasmine in the earlier novel, but with a secret girlfriend instead of a prestigious engagement to one of the former coloniser's upper crust, Fei is accused of having become corrupted by 'Western' ideals: "Be more gentle and sweet and maybe a good man will want to marry you and make you a proper woman" (Ooi, 2000:30). It takes the whole book to disentangle these neat alignments, which indeed brilliantly highlight occidentalism's various impasses. The focus on the lesbian couple is after all at once an extension of the theme of multiracial relationships and necessarily detracts from it. *The Flame Tree*, by contrast, is more direct and more subtle in its penetration of occidentalist discourses. Jasmine's betrayal of her love of the past is an international corporation's leverage of ethnicity:

> "Jasmine is to go to KL [Kuala Lumpur] with Viscount Danesleigh. The press will pester you for comment. You dismiss [Luke's] report in the light of the evidence which you will present to them. Assert all

> confidence in our design and Luke McAllister will never work in Asia again." Jasmine was speechless. Jordan grinned. "It's rough and ready, Nick, but I like it. Of course Jasmine! She's one of them. Coming from her, it'll hit just the right note." (Ooi, 1998:196)

Appointed spokesperson for the other, Jasmine is rendered speechless. Reduced to a puppet in the company's power-games, she becomes part of "a smear campaign" that is "all half-truths and manipulation of facts" (Ooi, 1998:196), but nicely feeds into expected discourses on racialised nationhood and 'Western' interference in local affairs. Representing a corrupt international company, Jasmine is sent back to Malaysia to put a stop to an independent consultant who questions an ambitious proposal for a private elite university in the midst of the Malaysian jungle. This millennium project is set up to effect Malaysia's "upgrading" through a rainforest university complete with "golf course and theme park—like Disneyland" (Ooi, 1998:114), as an anxious representative of the *Orang Asli* community pointedly puts it. Symptomatically, Kampung Tanah (the Village of the Land) obstructs progress. Jordan Cardale, Carruthers' most important client, knows that there is a fatal flaw in his ambitious design and mobilises international investigators and local thugs to cover up the consultant's reports. Sending an Asian woman to negotiate is part of his master plan to cover up the orientalist exploitation that is deeply engrained in the occidentalist emulation of—quite comically, literally—towering educational institutes as embodiments of 'world-class' status.

Jasmine's foil, however, turns out to be a childhood friend and her first love, another 'Western' man: Luke McAllister, the locally-born child of a heavily stereotyped expatriate couple (American father and miserable, drunk, English mother). Raised in rural Malaysia, this man of the past represents all the passion she has given up for one all-consuming ambition: the desire for prestige, money, power, for having made it. Yet, as Jasmine finds out when she looks for ways to rubbish him professionally, simply because of his ethnicity, he can all too easily be lumped together with those "Western environmentalists who are like Victorian missionaries, [who] come in with their own agenda to take up a local cause and twist it to fit what they think is best for you" (Ooi, 1998:118). This passion fails to resonate with the locals he wishes to fight for: "Wong finished his drink. He thought the young man typical of these greenies he had heard about—full of nice ideas but laughably unrealistic. Profit was everything and anyone who didn't know that was a fool" (Ooi, 1998:118). Money is the only passion that

counts. It is alternately set against the "laughably unrealistic" passions indulged by "Westerners" and regarded as something universal, as the only workable binding passion in international relations that are all about finances and power.

There is, however, a second 'other' lover in the story, and this is surely important for the novel's negotiation of otherness. As opposed to the sloppy consultant who has gone native in a peculiarly stereotyped fashion, Harry Taunton embodies the sleek success sought by Jasmine herself. A member of the upper classes and an exotic white male, Harry is Jasmine's prize for having cast off "the claustrophobia of her servant class" (Ooi, 1998:17). Class overrules race—yet another collapse of the reader's expectations. When Jasmine's real identity is exposed, his orientalist conceptualisation of his exotic wife sees a marked twist: "I fell in love with a lie! Fucking little whore, pimped by her parents, most likely! Dirty bloody Chink coolie!" (Ooi, 1998:409). His original orientalist typecasting might be the opposite of this outburst of violent racism, and yet it is not that different, indeed prefigures the easy collapse, as the exotic virgin is turned into sullied whore: "She was going to be my creation, my pure woman. A child of the East, uncorrupted by our English hypocrisy" (Ooi, 1998:263). With a double irony, it is her emulative study of the hypocritical, of the superficial, the trappings of prestige, that both enables her to stage this deception and makes her entry into high life a denial of her once passionate endorsements of the underdog: "She had a copy of *Debrett* and a book on English etiquette, both well hidden. She mimicked the manners and speech of those with whom she wanted to be seen" (Ooi, 1998:31). When Jasmine mocks Luke as "still slumming it among the natives", he cannot but

> give her the game she wanted. "Of course I've gone native." He waved a hand at her designer image. "Adapt to their customs and habit of dress and the locals are more likely to treat you as one of their own. You've gone native quite successfully over in old Blighty. I'm just doing what you're the expert at." (Ooi, 1998:39)

In their passionate encounters, in which they work through their angry parting years before and flaunt their changes as global issues appropriated as personal weapons, clichéd perceptions of the 'other' rival each other. If Jasmine accuses Luke of having gone native when he looks after her mother, of "play[ing] Big White Saviour to the poor of Asia", he counters by calling her a mimic woman who has let her husband turn her "into his own Eliza Doolittle" (Ooi, 1998:133–

134). These readily available allegations eat up personal passion while they fuel their ambiguous entanglement in ideological constructions that fester on worse passions—on greed, the hunger for power, investments in money, ambition. What they need is a passionate rejection of these constructs despite their usefulness as easily attainable instruments to damage each other. Expectedly, the novel does have a happy end after all, once the spectre of violating white male bodies is exorcised with the deaths of Harry and Jordan. In the character of Luke, however, the novel writes against the grain of two familiar clichés: the choice between local and foreign men and the twofold representation of the white male as either violator or pathetic victim. It nicely breaks through the confines of straightforwardly revisionist occidentalist fiction, yet when it reinstates the development-project, albeit less ambitious and taken up by a Malaysian company, it becomes too careful a balancing-act. This split into good and bad companies unfortunately re-establishes the easy divisions of selves or projections of values onto the foreign and the local that the novel otherwise eschews so passionately. In *Mindgame*, this collapsing explosion of occidentalist stereotyping becomes significantly extended as it represents alternative worlds, passions, and ultimately also, communities.

Mindgames*: Alternative Worlds, Communities, and Passions*

When the ambitious development-project in the Malaysian jungle literally collapses in *The Flame Tree*, Luke as the much maligned 'greenie' emerges from the rubble as the heroine's true love. Together Jasmine and Luke help to rebuild dismantled dreams. In a similar cataclysmic ending, an underground laboratory beneath a tropical sanatorium explodes in *Mindgame*, obliterating all traces of the mind-control experiments funded by the villainous Asian Values Alliance. The power over minds promised by these experiments are significantly coveted equally by the Pentagon and mainland China as well as by the novel's arch-villain, a hybrid Asian who has appropriated millennial ideals to suit his redefinition of 'Asian' values, because he "had once been a fervent 'born-again' Christian in Sydney" (Ooi, 2000:34–35).

As I have shown in more detail elsewhere, in both *The Flame Tree* and *Mindgame*, millennial paranoia and utopia form an integrate part of the exploration of occidentalist clichés, tying in with an emerging interest in experiments with different genres in the re-presentation of

Southeast Asia more generally.[4] But *Mindgame* also avoids offering more of the same in redirecting attention to the lesbian 'other' lover. As in *The Flame Tree*, racial typecasting is erased, but additionally, a homosexual triangle displaces the juxtaposition of exotic and local men as embodiments of value-judgements. Fei, the heroine in *Mindgame* who is a Chinese-Malaysian lawyer working in Kuala Lumpur, needs to decide between two (white) female lovers, while they are caught up in a witch-hunt instituted by the peculiarly evangelical Asian Values Association. By taking up the controversial issue of homosexuality in the region, the novel moreover pinpoints perhaps one of the most sensitive aspects in postcolonial discourses about 'the West' and the corruption embodied by the 'Western' or 'Westernised' other. *Mindgame* is thus remarkable for three reasons: it finds new ways to explode the clichéd cross-cultural love-triangle, it addresses the treatment of homosexuality, and it plays out the potential escalations of millennial discourses on coming communities, of the ideal, or to borrow from Benedict Anderson (1983) and, in his wake, Homi Bhabha (1990), imagined communities and those they leave out or more pointedly seek to exorcise. The doubly othered lover usefully embodies the exclusion underlying the imagined nationalist community, while at the same time foregrounding the controversial issue of homosexual communities in Malaysia. The novel therefore needs to be seen also in the contexts of recent interest in these subcultures as well as of their metaphorical status of otherness.

More than ten years ago Laurence Wai-Teng Leong wrote in the introduction to *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services* (1995) that scholarship in Asia and the Pacific was almost exclusively anthropological or historical, examining ancient societies with social orders that bore little resemblance to their modern successors. Such traditional forms of expression of homosexuality, they argued, had little to do with a newly emerging subculture in Asia. Instead, this new "social movement" radiated out from affluent social classes, from primarily men with international experience, "influenced by Western culture" (Leong, 1995:1). The association of homosexuality with 'the West' and 'Western' permissiveness, individuality, human rights, and increasingly also feminism has, in fact, worked both ways and still continues

[4] Compare my analysis of a growing tendency in locally produced fiction, both in Malaysia and in Singapore, to experiment with the genres of the thriller, science fiction, or horror-stories in order to break out of the confines of the postcolonial exotic (Wagner, 2007:passim).

to do so, and it is in this context that the doubling of otherness in *Mindgame* has to be rethought as well, without of course reducing it to a mere fictionalisation of social problems. Both promoters and denigrators use gay rights to define 'the West' and 'Westernisation' to characterise the new homosexual communities in Asia. Fictional representations in the region, I shall show, further underscore this alignment—an alignment that strikingly brings out the sameness of emulative and revisionist occidentalism as both its versions deploy the same discourses, even with opposing value judgements. Governments in many parts of Asia "tend to deny the existence of homosexuality in their respective nations: same-sex preference is most often seen as a decadent Western import" (Leong, 1995:12). More recently, Peter Jackson has similarly argued, in an essay in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community* (1995), edited by himself and Gerard Sullivan, that "new gender/sex categories and erotic cultures" have emerged in the contexts of globalising market capitalism that have intensified the "hybridisation of local and Western culture/discourse" (Jackson and Sullivan, 1995:1). Jackson proceeds to emphasise the wide variety and disperse forms of homosexual experience and communities in Asia—stretching from traditional transgenderism in Thailand or the Philippines to the heteronormity and marginalisation of 'other' sexualities in Korea or Singapore—and, more importantly still, the dangers that a stereotyping of "Caucasian-Asian erotic relations" that becomes marked by the related discourses of racism and fetishisation has caused Asian homosexual communities to be "minorized" by "What Rice Queens Study!" (Jackson and Sullivan, 1995:10–11)—subsumed as part of a postcolonial exotic in 'Western' queer studies.[5]

In the same collection, however, Ismail Baba analyses three case studies in Malaysia specifically. While he acknowledges that this sample can of course not claim to be representative, it might usefully "reflect some aspects" (1995:144). Most importantly, the main criteria in their selection is their "long-term commitment" (Baba, 1995:144), thus significantly undercutting some of the most virulent stereotyping practised by the Malaysian mass media, which continues to foster a popular align-

[5] In his recent book on colonial homosexuality, Robert Aldrich has importantly cast a different light on the association with the 'Westerner'/'Asian' divide in the legacies of colonial representations. Of particular interest is his analysis of Rajah Brooke of Sarawak, who "went through", as Aldrich puts it, various shipboard companions and a Malay prince before "falling for" Charles Grant (2003:101).

ment of irresponsibility, lack of commitment, decadence, homosexuality, and of course 'the West': "Culturally, many Malaysians consider that gayness and lesbianism is a product of the western world" (Baba, 1995:146). Similarly in a recent study, Tan Beng Hui has even more significantly set out to expose the violence ingrained in 'Asian Values' discourses in which, in the same vein, the lesbian and the 'Westerner' figure as convenient scapegoats for a wide array of social problems. The last decade, Tan emphasises, has seen attacks on female sexuality and anti-Western stereotyping, as women have been blamed for a variety of social ills (Tan, 1999:281). As Tan suggests, the main point here really is the easy shifts in the evaluation in order to make it suit various dichotomies: "By intentionally glossing over its heterogeneous nature, this rhetoric portrays the West as a source of danger, contamination, and disease. The point here is that what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' is carefully constructed to suit the objective at hand" (Tan, 1999:286). It is this tendency that Ooi's novel takes up, as it focuses on career women (a doctor and a lawyer) confronted with a policing of female behaviour. The AVA's "Cure" for homosexuality as well as all other social "ills", a mixture of hormonal treatment and mind-control techniques, is to "tone down that confidence to a lady-like demureness. Give [Fei] some old-fashioned values" (Ooi, 2000:157–158). It is symptomatically meant as a cleansing from all kinds of "Western" corruption:

> You studied in the West. You fell in with Western women. This sickness of yours is not an Asian thing. Asian women aren't—um—they don't do such things-lah. You just got corrupted. We take you away from the Western influences, make you properly Asian again, and then you can be happy. (Ooi, 2000:415)

What is "properly Asian" is addressed as a contested issue in the novel, with both sexual and racial otherness rendering visible more opaque forms of suppression both in 'Asia' and in 'the West', and this is precisely where *Mindgame* takes stereotyped alignments further into ironic twists—ultimately to dismantle them in a mindgame of narrative ironies. The AVA's appropriation of ideals, morals, and solutions as 'Asian' distorts its meaning with almost comical effect. At first introduced as a fairly harmless collection of "dorks", it forms an expanding "pan-Asian organisation rallying Asia to old-fashioned values which they believed made Asians superior to westerners […]. Fei's circle called them dorks" (Ooi, 2000:26). Yet these dorks turn out to pose a very real threat once they tap into the experiments of a significantly American monomaniacal scientist who is also wanted in different ways

by the Pentagon. At the same time, the parochial thrust of its redefinition is comically accentuated as the media flaunts Asian's very own version of the "Mad Cow Disease": "'Asiatic CJD' has a nice regional ring to it and that helps in this current political climate" (Ooi, 2000:247). Even more intriguingly, the AVA's evangelical elements show the limitations of its appropriation of values and diffuse associations between oppression and particularly *Asian* moralising. Its leader "had once been a fervent 'born-again' Christian in Sydney" (Ooi, 2000:34–35); the mad scientist who has developed the Cure, an American who uses his child's gruesome death as an excuse to pursue his longstanding interest in eugenics. His sister, Ginny, moreover supports him out of guilt, as her lesbianism discredited her statement after her niece's rape, thus underscoring 'Western' double standards: "It destroyed Ginny's testimony. [She] had lied in court and she was a degenerate, the defence claimed: how could the jury convict on the testimony of someone like that? […] The media tore Ginny apart" (Ooi, 2000:350). Ginny's hatred of her own sexuality, the court's biased ruling in the States, the AVA's reuse of evangelicalism, and the Pentagon's interest in mind-control techniques reveal the complexities that easy polarisations in both occidentalist and orientalist discourses tend to obscure or deny with a brilliantly twisted irony that turns the addressed social issues into a gripping plot.

With a final twist, in fact, the exposure of an American mercenary and double-agent pointedly underscores the emphasis on money as the one ruling passion (and ideology) in a final shattering of expectations: hunted down by the AVA, the multiracial, lesbian lovers have trusted him "… because … because—why? Because he had been white. An American. Swamped in all the AVA's anti-Western polemic, they had instinctively turned to the man who had been other" (Ooi, 2000:432–433). Clearly otherness alone is no redeeming quality. It is the suggestively named thug Han who sums up this collapse of ideologies with his customary delicacy: "Asian Values or the fucking American Dream. There's no damn' difference" (Ooi, 2000:423–424). Cultural stereotyping, as used by both the AVA and its opponents as well as by the developers and environmentalists in the earlier novel, are shown to nourish racist passions. In exposing them through narrative irony, Ooi's thrillers help to initiate a long overdue, re-examination of such rhetoric, even as they feed on and into an interest in the complexities of alterity. In other words, the imagination of a millennial community premised on exclusion makes a good thriller, but those who are left of disparate ethnic

communities are scattered like dispersed body parts after the educational tower's collapse or the laboratory's climactic explosion. For them it leaves only rubble.

Works Cited

Aldrich, Robert (2003) *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Anderson, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Baba, Ismail (1995) "Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia", in Gerard Sullivan and Jackson, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park, pp. 143–163.

Bartolovich, Crystal, and Neil Lazarus, eds. (2002) *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bhabha, Homi (1990) *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge.

Blackwood, Evelyn, and Saskia E. Wieringa, eds. (1999) *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Carrier, James G., ed. (1995) *Occidentalism: Images of the West*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Chia, Josephine (1994) *My Mother-in-Law's Son*. Singapore: Landmark Books.

Fernando, Lloyd (1976) *Scorpion Orchid*. Singapore: Times Books International.

———, (1993) *Green is the Colour*. Singapore: Landmark Books.

Goldberg, David Theo, and Ato Quayson, eds. (2002) *Relocating Postcolonialism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hall, Stuart (1996) "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power", in Stuart Hall et al, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 184–227.

Hall, Stuart, et al., eds (1996) *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Jackson, Peter A. (1995) "Pre-Gay, Post-Queer: Thai Perspectives on Proliferating Gender/Sex Diversity in Asia", in Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park, pp. 1–25.

Lazarus, Neil (2002) "The Fetish of 'the West' in Postcolonial Theory", in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43–64.

Lim, Shirley Geok Lin (2001) *Joss & Gold*. Singapore: Times Books International.

Nagy-Zekmi, Silvia, ed. (2006) *Paradoxical Citizenship: Edward Said*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

O'Connor, Erin (2003) "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism." *Victorian Studies* 45.2: 217–246.

Ooi, Yang-May (1998) *The Flame Tree*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

———, *Mindgame* (2000) London: Hodder & Stoughton.
Rice, James P. (2000) "In the Wake of Orientalism". *Comparative Literature Studies* 37.2: 223–238.
Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
———, (2002) "In Conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and Ania Loomba", in David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson, eds., *Relocating Postcolonialism*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1–14.
Sullivan, Gerard, and Laurence Wai-Teng Leong, eds. (1995) *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park.
Sullivan, Gerard, and Laurence Wai-Teng Leong (1995). "Introduction", in Gerard Sullivan and Jackson, eds., *Gays and Lesbians in Asia and the Pacific: Social and Human Services*. New York: Harrington Park, pp. 1–10.
Sullivan, Gerard, and Peter A. Jackson, eds. (2001) *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*. New York: Harrington Park.
Tan, Beng Hui (1999) "Women's Sexuality and the Discourse on Asian Values: Cross-Dressing in Malaysia", Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa, eds., *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 281–307.
Teo, Hsu-Ming (2000) *Love and Vertigo*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
Wagner, Tamara S. (2004) "Emulative versus Revisionist Occidentalism: Monetary and Other Values in Recent Singaporean Fiction". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.2: 73–94.
———, (2005) *Occidentalism in Novels of Malaysia and Singapore, 1819–2004: Colonial and Postcolonial Financial Straits and Literary Style*. Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press.
———, (2006) "Occidentalism: Edward Said's Legacy for the Occidentalist Imaginary and its Critique", in Silvia Nagy-Zekmi, ed., *Paradoxical Citizenship: Edward Said*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
———, (2007) "Singapore's New Thrillers: Boldly Going Beyond the Ethnographic Map". *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 37, no. 2–3.
West, Donald J., and Richard Green, eds. (1997) *Sociolegal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*. New York and London: Plenum Press.
Winks, Robin W., and Alaine Low, eds. (1999) *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V: Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

INDEX