Reading Nation in Translation: The Spectral Transnationality of the Malaysian Racial Imaginary

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READING NATION IN TRANSLATION:
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BY

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ABSTRACT

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In recent decades, literary studies has experienced a global turn, often understood as a move beyond national paradigms of analysis, which are deemed to be narrow and particularistic. Although wary of the tacit universalizing tendencies of global frames, scholars of race and postcoloniality have critically embraced the global by arguing for the need to theorize transnationalism from marginalized perspectives. However, casting the global and the national in oppositional terms ignores the fact that national racial ideologies both actively shape and are shaped by globally circulating ideas about race. An understudied site in postcolonial studies, Malaysia—formerly known as Malaya—is an exemplary case that unsettles this binary opposition. Informed by racialized distinctions between “native” and “migrants” inherited from colonial rule, the constitutionalized “special position” of “bumiputera” (literally sons of the earth or autochthonous group) citizens effectively renders race a defining aspect of national identity.

This dissertation presents translation as an entry point into theorizing the relation between the national and the global in the production of the Malaysian racial imaginary. Drawing on theories of cultural translation, I begin with the premise that translation is a process of figuration,
rather than a transfer of uncontaminated cultural essence, from one mode of signification to another. Through analyses of graphic narratives, novels and films, I consider how various modes of translation are used in these texts both to articulate a common national identity that unifies these groups, and, at the same time, to maintain their racialized distinctions. I argue that discerning the modes of translation embedded in the process of national identity formation—what I call, reading nation in translation—elucidates the transnational historical forces, be it the reordering of the British Empire amidst its impending end; the burgeoning global Cold War; or the intensification of global financial capitalism in the late twentieth-century, that shape the national racial imaginary. Reading nation in translation thus contributes toward a critical conception of transnationalism, one that not only presents the nation and the global as oppositional frames of analysis, but as mutually haunting one another. In foregrounding the global forces, both past and present, that animate the national racial imaginary, it also argues for the importance of attending to processes of racialization as a mode of globalization.
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INTRODUCTION

The Specter of Translation

“We lack the cognitive faculty to know nationalism, because we allow it to play only with our imagination, as if it is knowledge.”

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education* (289-290)

Figure 0.1. “Welcome to Tel Aviv.” Police officers barricading the road to Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) during the 2012 Bersih protests in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Photo by Marina Mahathir.
On 28 April 2012, tens of thousands gathered for a protest in the vicinity of Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) in Kuala Lumpur, the historic site where the Union Jack was lowered and the Malayan flag raised as the clock struck midnight on 31 August 1957, signaling the transition from colonial rule to national independence. Known as Bersih 3.0, the event was the third such mass protest since 2007 that called for free and fair elections (“bersih” means clean in Malay) in anticipation of the upcoming General Elections, which would be held in 2013. As with previous Bersih protests, the event received little mention in the state-controlled print and broadcast media, but was widely documented and discussed on the Internet by the public and, to an extent, by the international press. In her account of the protest on her widely-read blog, the prominent activist and public figure, Marina Mahathir, notes the presence of razor wire and barricades surrounding the public square and observed in particular a hand made sign posted on the blockade that said, “Welcome to Tel Aviv” (fig. 0.1; “My Bersih 3.0 Experience”). She appends to a photograph of the signpost the caption, “Pretty apt….” For her readers, assumed to be familiar with the intricacies of Malaysian politics, an explanation of the signpost’s aptness was not necessary. The Malaysian government has long positioned itself as an ally to the Palestinians and has been a critic of Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip. By relabeling the public square and popular tourist destination in Kuala Lumpur as Tel Aviv, a synecdoche of the state of Israel, the signpost suggests that the public square is no longer a symbol of national independence from colonial powers; rather, like the state of Israel, the Malaysian government has become an oppressive force against, in this case, its own people.

Although the comparison of the West Bank and Kuala Lumpur is arguably false, it nonetheless facilitates a productive critique of state violence. Significantly, by identifying the
government with Israel, the aggressor, instead of Palestine, the victim, the signpost makes a pointed reference to the dominant racial ideology of ketuanan Melayu, a central political tenet of the ruling party, UMNO (the United Malays National Organization). Roughly translated as Malay supremacy, the political concept of ketuanan Melayu describes the preeminence of Malays afforded by the constitutional recognition of their “special position” as bumiputera (literally sons of the earth) over the other so-called migrant ethnic groups that comprise the nation. As Marina writes on a separate occasion, the staunch support of Palestinians among Malays, who are also Muslim, is generally motivated by a global pan-Islamic solidarity, which is premised on a mischaracterization of Israeli aggression as being primarily motivated by anti-Islamic bigotry rather than by geopolitical interests (“Treat every victim equally”).1 Ironically, this misperception—along with, one might add, reports of discrimination against Muslims sparked by anti-immigration sentiment in Europe and the so-called Global War on Terror in the United States—have fueled a siege mentality among Malay-Muslims in Malaysia, who view the “special position” of Malays and the sanctity of Islam as being similarly threatened by their non-Muslim Malaysian counterparts. This siege mentality plays to the advantage of UMNO, which presents itself as protecting Malay interests, and further entrenches divisive communal politics within the multicultural nation. Thus, the signpost’s critique of state violence not only lies in its general indictment of the use of police violence to curb the right to assembly and free speech; it also makes the specific point that the state-endorsed concept of ketuanan Melayu and the system of communal politics that it engenders constitute a form of political oppression.

1 Throughout this dissertation, I have adhered to the naming conventions reflected in the place and names of the persons cited, unless the person cited has referred to her/himself in print otherwise. Hence, in the case of Malaysian and Indonesian names adhering to patronymic conventions, I cite the person by her/his first given name after the first full reference. In cases wherein the surname or family name appears first and is followed by the given name, I have maintained that order.
As with protests erupting elsewhere in the world at around the same time, online social media played an important role in broadcasting firsthand accounts of the Bersih 3.0 mass action, as well as documenting incidents of police brutality. In addition, online social media was also mobilized to fashion Bersih as a “global movement” and was used to organize synchronous rallies calling for electoral reform in cities spanning across Asia, North America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Known as Global Bersih, this international network of Malaysians abroad aims, as its website suggests, “to bring global attention to the urgent need for profound change in Malaysia.” In contrast to this conscious staging of national protest in global view, a small group in Kuala Lumpur sought instead to situate the protest as part of a global uprising through various placards and signs. For example, an “#Occupy Dataran” banner mounted on the barricades blocking access to the public square linked the Bersih 3.0 protest to the international Occupy movement, framing the petition for national electoral reform as part of a broader problem of social and economic inequality (fig. 0.2).

The “Welcome to Tel Aviv” signpost, particularly, its mode of critique, occasions an opportunity to reflect on what it means to stage acts of national political protest within a global field of vision. The signpost’s critique of the state-endorsed ethno-nationalist ideology is facilitated by a comparative move to a political scene elsewhere in the world, evoking what Benedict Anderson calls “the spectre of comparisons” (2). The phrase is Anderson’s translation of “el demonio de las comparaciones,” coined by the Filipino nationalist, Jose Rizal, in his nineteenth-century novel, Noli Me Tangere. Returning to colonial Manila from Europe, the novel’s protagonist surveys the botanical gardens and cannot help but see that they are

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2 The image is posted on the Facebook page of the artist-activist, Fahmi Reza, an organizer of what came to be known as the Occupy Dataran movement. Inspired by and organized in solidarity with the 15-M Movement in Spain, Occupy Dataran consists of a small group that held regular gatherings known as the “Kuala Lumpur People’s Assembly” at the square for several months since July 2011. In the weeks leading up to the Bersih 3.0 protests, the group set up an encampment on the square before being kicked out by city hall officials.
“shadowed automatically…and inescapably by images of their sister gardens in Europe”; it is “the agent of this incurable doubled vision,” Anderson suggests, that the novel calls, “the specter of comparisons” (2). As Pheng Cheah explains, Anderson draws on Rizal’s image of doubled vision to argue that “imagining the nation is essentially a comparative process in which the nation is always haunted by something that is at one and the same time both spatially other or exterior to it, but also similar to it in the sense that it is part of it and inhabits the same frame of consciousness” (“Grounds of Comparison” 10). The “Welcome to Tel Aviv” signpost recognizes this process of comparison at work in the fashioning of Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist identity in relation to Palestinian-Muslims in Gaza. Inverting this juxtaposition, the signpost presents a critique of the former by casting the shadow of Israeli aggression against Palestinians on the violence inflicted by the Malaysian state against its own citizens.
However, the signpost also revises Anderson’s translation to something closer to Harry Harootunian’s interpretation of Rizal’s phrase as meaning “bedeviling comparison, carrying with it the association of a bad or difficult comparison, the dilemma of not knowing which way to look” (37). Although the signpost provocatively posits the ethno-nationalist ideologies of Israel and Malaysia within the same frame of comparison, its comparison is nonetheless a false or a bad one seeing as it presumes that the vastly different scenarios of the barricading of a public space at a protest in Kuala Lumpur and the ongoing blockade in Gaza are equivalent. Moreover, as images of signpost circulate the Internet, reaching audiences unfamiliar with the intricacies of Malaysian cultural politics, the signpost risks being bedeviled by its own comparison in the sense that its nuanced meaning becomes lost, its critique of ethno-nationalism likely overshadowed by its false comparison and rendered illegible.

The affordances of the Internet have imbued recent political protests—not just on electoral reform in Kuala Lumpur, but on a variety of issues in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Thailand, the list continues—with a form of global consciousness, whether it is by calling upon the world as witness or by invoking the global as a broader historical frame within which to contextualize a local political scene. Thrust into global view, the “Welcome to Tel Aviv” signpost raises the following question: what kinds of literacy are required to both compose and decode articulations of political meaning that arise out of historically specific contexts but nonetheless have global purchase?

My question follows from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s suggestion that transnational literacy can serve as the means through which to “invent grounds for an interruptive praxis from
within our hope in justice under capitalism” (“Teaching” 16). First introduced in her essay, “Teaching for the Times,” Spivak argues that transnational literacy is a fundamental skill required for the study of ethnic literature, which has become the main entry point for studying globality in literary studies. She cites Frederic Jameson’s reading of Third World literature as “allegories of transnational capitalism” as one such example (16; emphasis original). Spivak affirms Jameson’s approach with the caveat that the use of allegory here be re-defined from its conventional sense, a symbolic representation of the abstractions of capital, to mean a praxis of representation that, in the course of fashioning a fictive ethnic subject, evinces the “constant small failures in and interruptions to [capital’s] logic” (“Teaching” 16). In other words, what transnational literacy enables us to discern is how the fictive ethnic subject is not produced apart from, but is encoded by even as it recodes the forces of globalized capital. Spivak’s larger point, relevant not only to literary critics, is to not mistake the global reach of capitalism—one might substitute this with communism or colonialism, among others—as a universal cause or explanatory framework under which all other historical phenomena can be subsumed. “Literacy,” Spivak writes, “produces the skill to differentiate between letters, so that an articulated script can be read, re-read, written, re-written. Literacy is poison as well as medicine. It allows us to sense that the other is not just a voice, but that others produce articulated texts, even as they, like us, are written in and by a text not of our own making” (“Teaching” 16).

To be transnationally literate then is to recognize that although the “Welcome to Tel Aviv” signpost is muddled by a false comparison in its critique of ethno-nationalism, it is through that very failed comparison that the signpost articulates globality, presenting the national issues leading to the political protest in Kuala Lumpur as a global concern. This articulation of globality might be understood as an act of translation, if we take translation to mean the act of
posing difference as equivalent wherein Kuala Lumpur is rendered interchangeable with Tel Aviv. To understand the false comparison as a form of translation is to conceive of it as always already failing to faithfully reproduce its source. Yet, rather than view this unavoidable failure in negative terms, the signpost suggests that it can also generate a productive critique by compelled a rereading of the political issues underlying the Bersih protests in relation to events elsewhere in the world. At the same time, by evoking globality through a failed comparison (i.e. translation), the signpost does not present the global as an a priori framework in which to read historical events at particular locales. Rather, it evokes the global as a means of disarticulating the nation even as the global is itself disarticulated in being made to account for the local.

I begin with a reading of this scene of protest to call into question the widely held assumption that the national and the global are diametrically opposed to one another, with the former often construed as a narrow, particularistic frame in contrast to the comprehensive scope of the latter. Reading Nation in Translation begins with the premise that efforts to globalize our frames of analysis—which have not only been undertaken in literary studies, but across the humanities and the social sciences as well—requires, as Peter Hitchcock suggests, theorizing transnationalism through the nation rather than simply moving beyond national paradigms of inquiry. The concept of translation has proven to be a productive point of departure from which to examine globality, or, what it means to think in a global frame. Examining Malaysia as a case study, this dissertation theorizes transnationalism through the nation by considering the role of translation in shaping its national racial imaginary. Informed by racialized distinctions between “native” and “migrants” inherited from British colonial rule, the constitutionalized “special position” of “bumiputera” (literally, sons of the earth, i.e. autochthonous group) citizens effectively renders race a defining aspect of national identity. Analyzing a range of literary and
visual texts, including graphic narratives, novels and films, I consider how translation is used both to articulate a common national identity that unifies these groups, and, at the same time, to maintain their racialized distinctions. I argue that discerning the modes of translation embedded in the process of national identity formation—what I call, reading nation in translation—elucidates the transnational historical forces, be it the reordering of the British Empire amidst its impending end; the burgeoning global Cold War; or the intensification of global financial capitalism in the late twentieth-century, that shape national racial ideology. Presenting the national racial imaginary as a site for apprehending globality, thus, brings into view, the spectral transnationality of race, that is, its capacity to formally materialize what is otherwise an abstract, posited sense of the global.

In so doing, my aim is not to argue for the persistence of national categories in the study of literature and culture for their own sake. On the contrary, it is to point out that the understanding of globality as being in contradistinction to national paradigms risks reifying the nation precisely by invoking latter as a self-evident object of critique. Spivak offers a provocative point on the nation’s grip on the discipline’s spatial imaginary despite pronounced efforts of loosening its hold: “We lack the cognitive faculty to know nationalism, because we allow it to play with our imagination, as if it is knowledge” (An Aesthetic Education 289–290). Her phrase inverts the English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s oft-cited remark from “In Defence of Poetry,” “We want the creative faculty to imagine what we know.” Shelley was calling for the elevation of aesthetics as a mode of sense making in a world driven by empirical knowledge. What goes unremarked is how both aesthetic and empirical modes of knowledge can often work in tandem to fuel the imperial ambitions of global capitalist expansion. Inverting Shelley’s claim that elevating the imagination would free us from the constraints of cognitive
knowledge, Spivak suggests instead that our imagination is limited by nation, thereby impeding our understanding of its workings, in particular why nationalism persists as the structuring formation in the social cultural and political life of the world.

Moving beyond an ideological critique of nationalism, I argue that reading nation in translation points toward articulating a critical concept of transnationalism, one that counteracts the tacit universalizing tendencies of global frames of analysis. My focus on Malaysia, an understudied site in ongoing discussions of globalizing literary studies, further highlights processes of racialization as a constitutive mode of globalization. In other words, if globalization, as it is often understood, is a historical phenomenon driven by economic and technological forces, then it also needs to be recognized as a mode of racial production. By positing the history and genealogies of racial formation as central to the concept of globality, I am suggesting that we need to deepen our understanding of the temporal assumptions and dynamics that inform efforts to globalize literary studies, which are often invoked in spatial terms of crossing national borders. In this Introduction chapter, I provide the theoretical grounds and historical premise for my study of Malaysia, explaining how analyzing the significance of translation in shaping its national racial imaginary can yield productive insights of the temporalities of globality.

**Translation**

Translation has proven to be a productive entry point into analyzing globality in literary studies. David Damrosch, in arguing for the renewed relevance of *Weltliteratur*—a phrase coined by Goethe and popularized by Johann Peter Eckermann in the early nineteenth century—in the era of contemporary globalization, proposes that “world literature is writing that gains in translation” (281). Arising from an understanding of literary texts as potential sites of inter-
cultural contact, “the locus of negotiation between two cultures” (283), Damrosch’s conception of world literature calls for a mode of reading that not only involves deciphering a text’s relationship with the historical context from which it emerges, but that also considers how a text travels and resonates with contexts other than its own. A text’s translatability, in other words, is what imbues it with a worldly quality. Moreover, by affirming the value of teaching and researching translated texts, Damrosch seeks to encourage literary scholars to step outside the narrow confines of their specializations and to work collaboratively—as opposed to the monastic model of humanities research—toward developing a literary history that is not bound by linguistic difference or national origin (286).

Yet, if translation presents a solution to the limits of human capacity in language learning and knowledge making, the practical exigencies that shape the transfer of knowledge are not divorced from power. Certainly, this point, is addressed, if not thoroughly explored, by Damrosch. By way of offering a definition of world literature, he presents a 17th-century etching of French archaeologists measuring their discovery of the Great Sphinx of Giza. Made by Dominique-Vivant Denon, the image was published in his popular account of his travels in Egypt. The image, Damrosch suggests, is “an emblem” of “the opening up of the world of world literature: what was once largely a European and male preserve, bounded historically as well as geographically, has become a far broader and less familiar terrain” (300–301). Specifically, Damrosch reads the image as representing the recovery of the language and literature of ancient Egypt amidst the clash between French and British imperial powers, which concludes in Napoleon’s decisive defeat. It is, he wants us to see, the literary legacy of ancient Egypt that survives—or, translates—into modernity in contrast to the fleeting nature of France’s colonial expedition. Although acknowledging the politically tumultuous background of this historical
recovery, Damrosch glosses over how power does not leave its object of discovery untouched. This is evident in Damrosch’s speculation that Denon’s rendition of the Sphinx with African features and a feminized visage can be attributed to the influence of Greek tradition, which gendered sphinxes as females. This may well be the case and it demonstrates Damrosch’s point that world literature requires a form of “detached engagement” (297), one that takes “a degree of distance from the home tradition…to appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away from its point of origin” (300). Yet, Denon’s restoration of the Sphinx’s missing nose and lips is not merely a “detached” encounter between the West and non-West, but a reconstruction of Egypt that reflected Europe’s eighteenth-century race theories (Grigsby). As Abigail Harrison Moore argues, Denon’s images effectively codified and illustrated France’s annexation of Egypt in the European public imagination; France’s military defeat in the hands of the British notwithstanding, Denon’s work fashioned a Egyptian Revival style, signifying wealth among the ruling classes, that became influential in England, thereby shaping an idea of Egypt that reinforced the dominance of the upper class (546–7).

Thus, even if, as Damrosch notes, the world in world literature has broadened beyond the purview of European males, the failure to notice the ways in which Europe presides at the center and determines the conditions by which its Others are included has become a focal point of concern for postcolonial critics. Toward this end, scholars have analyzed how translation, in its capacity to facilitate the global dissemination of knowledge, is wielded as an instrument of power. Writing in the context of British India, Tejaswini Niranjana argues that translation served as a key instrument in colonial subjugation in that it facilitated Orientalist modes of representation, which contained the cultures of the colonized in a prehistoric past. Informed by scholarly and missionary translations of Indian religious texts and literature, the colonial
authorities constructed a homogenized Indian civilization, portrayed as once glorious, but fallen by the time the British arrived on the scene, that morally justified colonial intervention. Moreover, the English education of the colonized elite—implemented “to form a class who may be interpreters between us (the British) and the millions whom we govern,” as Macaulay’s famous Minute on Education puts it (qtd in Niranjana 30)—succeeded in ensuring that the colonized saw themselves the way their colonial masters saw them, thereby naturalizing the colonial discourse of India in a manner that ensured its continuity into the postcolonial era.

Reinforcing a teleological notion of history that situates non-Western cultures as backwards in relation to the West, this colonial discourse of the Other is predicated on the idea of translation as a transparent window through which the “original” can be apprehended.

Recognizing that the colonial subject “exists only ‘in translation,’” Niranjana develops a postcolonial praxis of translation that does not reproduce dominant modes of subject making and teleological history (43). She interrogates the valorization of the original implicit in colonial translation through critical readings of deconstructionist theory, in particular the writings of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Building on Derrida’s insight that the original is always already a translation, she highlights the differential structure of colonial translation and its contribution toward a Western metaphysics of presence, specifically in facilitating the latter’s core structure of recognizing and disavowing difference. Turning to Walter Benjamin’s writings on translation and history, Niranjana argues that colonial translation can be subverted and read against the grain to “[recover] occluded images from the past to deconstruct colonial and neocolonial histories” (42). She reads Benjamin’s famous essay, “The Task of the Translator” as describing “the task of the historical materialist or the critical historian,” and thus argues for a postcolonial praxis of translation that is not a nostalgic retrieval of a lost past (114). Rather, it is
a practice of reading against the grain that is also a “radical rewriting” of history (172). Such a practice exposes the erasure of difference, while at the same time works toward a “nonexploitative recognition of difference” through a historical materialist practice (170).

Like Niranjana, Lydia Liu’s approach toward examining cultural translation between China and the West is shaped by poststructuralist theories of language and difference; however, she asks, “Are the relations of power between [East and West] always reducible to patterns of domination and resistance?” (22). The question hints at the following problem. The argument that cultural difference is articulated through the process of translation refutes the idea of an uncontaminated cultural essence; however, understanding the power dynamics of cultural confrontations in terms of domination and resistance subtly reinstates the logic of cultural essentialism, if not on notions of cultural purity, then on axes of power differentials. As Liu’s analyses of the production of “hypothetical equivalence” between Chinese and Western languages demonstrates, rather than simply constituting resistance, Chinese writers sought to appropriate, transform and legitimize Western ideas in order to construct modern Chinese national culture. Translation, as Liu understands it, is not merely a tool to be used in the service of or against power. Instead, she views these acts of “translingual practices” as historical events, as moments of confrontation that shaped the way Chinese intellectuals understood themselves in relation to the world as they grappled with the experience of modernity.

Nevertheless, and to circle back to the topic of globalizing literary studies, the concern that the turn to globality is a subtle reinforcement of Eurocentric universalism remains valid. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call to provincialize Europe remains a relevant and powerful response to this concern. However, the call to de-center Europe and to attend to cultural difference by no means entails a wholesale rejection of globality. Rather, the challenge at hand is how to think
globality, a task that the history of the global expansion of capitalist modernity demands of us, without reproducing its imperialist tendencies.

Emily Apter’s examination of the seminal moments that shaped the disciplinary foundations of Comparative Literature, in particular the contributions of one of its foundational figures, Leo Spitzer, is noteworthy in this regard. A Jewish émigré fleeing Nazi Germany, Spitzer found refuge in Istanbul, where Jewish intellectuals were welcomed due to efforts by the Atatürk’s government to modernize Turkey via Europeanization. There, Spitzer developed his philological comparatist approach to literature and, together with his Turkish students, promoted the translation of European literatures into Turkish as he sought to learn the language himself. He sought to distance philology from being appropriated by Nazi race theory and to develop the study of languages and literatures that espoused universal humanism. Despite his Eurocentric tendencies, Spitzer’s emphasis on language-learning and multilingualism, Apter argues, “tells the story of … worldly linguistic exchanges containing the seeds of a transnational humanism or global translatio” (46). Although dubious of Spitzer’s faith in philology’s claim to universalism, Apter nonetheless recognizes the immense potential in his devotion to tracing etymological roots and the historical uses of words as a method for producing history.³ Apter’s presentation of the universalist claims of “humanism” and “translatio,” the Latin word for transfer, as interchangeable teases out a nuanced conceptualization of the global, one not reduced to a polarized conflict between Europe and the rest, but as constituting the intermingling of multiple languages, the transnational as “the translation zone.” The juxtaposition of these two terms invites us to question the given universality of humanism and, instead, to recognize the history of its universalization, the historical conditions and the political entanglements that enabled and

³ In her reading of Spitzer’s renowned essay, “Linguistics and Literary History,” Apter identifies a “racial unconscious within [Spitzer’s] humanist philology,” underscoring the urgency of reckoning with the racial underpinnings of European universalism. See Chapter 2 in The Translation Zone.
shaped its global dissemination. In arguing for the treatment of “word histories as world histories,” Apter recognizes language not only as a vehicle of transporting knowledge and power around the globe, but as itself possessing worlding capacities (64).

Therefore, to approach translation as a means of analyzing history, as outlined above, is to understand the global not as an a priori concept, but a historical construct and an epistemological frame developed for the purposes of apprehending the world and staking a claim on it. Sanjay Krishnan offers a useful definition of the global in the latter sense: it is “a mode of thematization or a way of bringing the world into view. It does not point to the world as such but at the conditions and effects attendant upon institutionally validated modes of making legible within a single frame the diverse terrains and peoples of the world” (4). Translation, insofar as it serves as a means of disseminating or globalizing knowledge, thus serves as an entry point into examining how the global in its colonial epistemic form has historically structured encounters with and imaginations of the Other. Moreover, in addition to producing a counter history of the global that illuminates its power-knowledge entanglements, translation can also serve as a critical apparatus that enables us to re-imagine the global. In this regard, Niranjana’s reading of Benjamin’s writings on translation as a praxis of his own concept of materialist history is immensely suggestive, even if her mobilization of this reading remains caught within a dialectic of West vs. the rest and of domination and resistance. While Niranjana was not commenting on globality per se, this dialectic tends to pervades postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric universalism that are countered with the notion of alternative modernities. As noted earlier, despite its critique of Orientalist discourse, the frame of domination and resistance tends to subtly reiterate the logic of cultural essentialism whereby the West is seen as the dominant power against which the East resists. What this obsessive critique of the West tends to overlook is how
the notion of alternative modernities readily lends itself to the culturally essentialist discourse of rising Asia—whether in the form of “the East Asian miracle” or the “Asian Century” to refer to the projected growing dominance of the Asia-Pacific region in the global economy—that emerged concurrently with the rapid rise of East and Southeast Asian economies since the 1980s. As Krishnan notes, such discourse departs from modernization theory’s developmental model that casts Asia as finally catching up with the West by integrating into the capitalist world economy; instead, it views Asia as always already having a propensity toward capitalism embedded in its “cultural forms” and “kinship networks,” thereby eliding the history of colonialism that indelibly shaped the region (11). Once again, Krishnan’s recommendation is worth heeding: “It would help to focus on the global (as) perspective not simply as a tool of European imperialism but as it enacts a powerful style of representation that can be reproduced in ever-changing ways in diverse places” (11). The need to re-imagine globality then remains imperative precisely because an East vs. West frame fails to account for the vicissitudes of power among the elite classes of the formerly colonized and the permutations of imperialism in the era of postcolonial contemporary globalization.

**The National Significance of Global English**

Generally speaking, the notion of globality in literary studies is primarily defined as a departure from national paradigms of analysis. Franco Moretti puts it in the plainest terms: “The point is that there is no other justification for the study of world literature (and for the existence of departments of comparative literature) but this: to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures—especially the local literature. If comparative literature is not this, it’s nothing. Nothing” (68). In noting that “world literature is not an object,”
but “a problem that asks for a new critical method,” Moretti is cognizant of the vexed questions that attend the notion of globality (55). His method of distant reading, which urges the use of narrative and formal properties as organizing principles, attends to the fact that the world literary system is “simultaneously, one, and unequal” (56; emphasis original). Nevertheless, it remains clear that the solution to the problem of world literature can only be obtained by defining “world” in opposition to nation, which is deemed as too narrow and particularistic.

Writing about the “transnational turn” in English literary studies, Paul Jay similarly focuses on issues of methodology, albeit in a less polemical tone. His book, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, is a useful guide in navigating the debates on globalization and its impact on literary studies in English that have emerged in the last couple of decades. While contemporary effects of globalization—the unparalleled global spread of capitalism; new innovations in telecommunication and media technologies; the growing dominance of multinational corporations—underscored the urgency to rethink the discipline, Jay argues that efforts to globalize literary studies can be traced to the emergence of social political movements concerning civil rights, women’s equality, and gay rights, in the United States during the 1960s that coincided with a growing interest in questions about ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, and cultural difference, one deeply informed by poststructuralist theory, in the humanities and social science studies (17). In the context of English literary studies, the attention to ethnic, minority and postcolonial literatures—largely spurred by academics of color—resulted in a critical interrogation of the national paradigms of study, in particular the hegemonic ideas of Englishness and America dominating the studies of British and American literature respectively.

In essence, the transnational turn in literary studies was not only a matter of expanding the canon to include the study of authors and texts from historically marginalized locations. As Jay
argues, the call to globalize literary studies is a radical rethinking of the spatial imaginaries and their embedded assumptions that structure the discipline. In his words:

Globalizing literary studies must involve a radical dislocation of the traditional geographical spaces we have been using to organize work in both the humanities and the social sciences. It begins with a recognition that we create the spaces we study, that there is a reciprocal, constitutive relationship between locations and the act of locating. The locations we study do not exist apart from the human act of measuring, delimiting, identifying, categorizing, and making boundaries and distinctions. As we complicate the traditional attention we pay to nation-state locations by paying attention to transnational spaces and regions, it is important that we develop a clear sense of the constructedness of these regions” (74).

The excerpt above makes clear that Jay’s conception of the transnational turn is primarily spatial, a point further indicated in the metaphors of remapping and border-crossing deployed elsewhere in the book. Furthermore, he neither advocates that national frames of analysis be abandoned altogether (73) nor does he assume that the embrace of transnationalism signal a new post-national historical era (59). Instead, Jay presents the notion of globality, like the national, as a constructed space, albeit one that is critically mobilized to challenge calcified ideas of cultural production in literary studies and even more capable of reckoning with the political and historical realities of the present.

Although rethinking the conventions of space that inform literary studies is important, the conception of globalizing literary studies primarily as a spatial project inevitably leads to a slippery, if not outright contradictory understanding of the global. This is evidenced in Jay’s appraisal of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, a seminal study of Blackness in Europe and the
Americas. Although commending Gilroy’s conception of the “Black Atlantic” in his study of African diasporic culture as a model of transnational analysis, Jay nonetheless notes that it has “significant limitations in terms of conceptualizing a comprehensively global approach to rethinking literature and culture in the Americas”—i.e. the “Black Atlantic” fails to account for the Spanish conquest of the Americas as well as the history of East Indian and Chinese indentured labor in the Caribbean (85; emphasis mine). For my purposes, I am less interested in Jay’s critique per se than his operating assumption of the global as a comprehensive frame, which expands to accommodate all manner of difference hitherto excluded by the discipline’s conventional national paradigms. Although Jay’s conception of the transnational turn carefully avoids tokenism, this notion of the global as a comprehensive frame tends to operate according to the logic of global multiculturalism, ironically, “an extension of the American national model of multiculturalism” (Shih 23).

This slippage in what is an otherwise rigorous conception of the global further highlights the limits of conceptualizing the transnational turn as a call for self-reflexivity of the spatial constructs that structure the discipline. This inward reflexive turn has been propelled primarily by poststructuralist thought, which emerged as a self-critique of Western metaphysical discourse. Jay rightly observes that scholars of race, ethnic and postcolonial studies have mobilized poststructuralist theory to advance their fields. However, as Shu-mei Shih and many others have noted, the producers of poststructuralist theory have largely remained oblivious to “the history of colonialisms and imperialisms that have made the seeming coherence of Eurocentric thought possible”; moreover, the insights emerging from self-critique are often “reinvested” in Western thought to evidence its “infinite complexity” (18). While poststructuralist theory’s introspective gaze allows it to present itself as an anti-totalizing discourse, the slippage between the idea of the
global as a self-conscious, constructed spatial entity and as a comprehensive frame that includes historically marginalized groups reveals the exercise of self-reflexivity to be, in effect, an exclusionary move that reproduces a West/non-West binary. In Shih’s terms, then, the global frame operates as a “technology of recognition,” “[a mechanism] in the discursive (un)conscious—with bearings on social and cultural (mis)understandings—that produce ‘the West’ as the agent of recognition and ‘the rest’ as the object of recognition, in representation” (17).

Though rethinking the presuppositions of space is significant, my point is that conceiving the global primarily in spatial terms—i.e. as a large-scale, totalizing frame defined against narrow, exclusionary national paradigms—risks reinforcing a developmentalist understanding of history. To an extent, Jay refutes such a notion of history by insisting that globalization is not simply a twentieth-century historical development, but the contemporary effects of which is shaped by centuries-long history of colonialism. Nevertheless, his argument that recent historical developments in contemporary Anglophone literature have rendered the national paradigm of literary analysis “anachronistic” subtly re-introduces this developmentalist logic (25). “The remarkable explosion of English literature produced outside Britain and the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century,” Jay contends, “made it clear that ‘English’ was becoming defined less by a nation than by a language” (25). No doubt, as an incontrovertible fact that English does not belong solely to the English or Americans, contemporary postcolonial Anglophone writing challenges ethno-nationalist claims on the language. Undeniable also is the fact that English has become the global lingua franca of our times. Its global status notwithstanding, the significance of English cannot assumed to be same for Britain and the United States as it is elsewhere.
Consider the position of Malaysian Anglophone literature—or, Malaysian Literature in English, as is the more commonly used term in the country—in relation to the category of national literature in Malaysia. As I demonstrate below, the significance of English and the national status of Malaysian Literature in English suggest that the global scope of the language does not necessarily bring us closer to a post-nationalist mode of thinking. Compared to the British colonies of India and Singapore, Mohammad A. Quayum remarks that “the quantum of creative writing in the English language in Malaysia looks discouragingly small, if not downright negligible” (18). Quayum cites the relatively late introduction of English literature as a subject in schools in Malaya—in the 1940s as compared to the 1830s in British India—as a cause (19). While the subject was introduced to Singapore at around the same time, Quayum indirectly suggests that the literary output in English falls short in comparison to its neighboring country owing to the ethnic and language politics of Malaysia (18).

Although the local production and the readership of Anglophone literature are small, English is nonetheless recognized as a major language in the polyglot nation, alongside Malay, Chinese and Tamil. At the onset of formal independence in 1957, Malay was declared the “national language” of the Federation of Malaya, in concert with the constitutional recognition of the “special position” of the Malays (Federal Constitution, Article 152.1). However, a constitutional provision permitted the use of English for legislative and official purposes for a period of ten years to facilitate the transition from British rule to the National Alliance-led postcolonial government (Article 152.2). Education—deemed a significant means for the

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4 In 1963, Article 153 of the Federal Constitution was amended following the incorporation of Singapore, and the northern Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak to recognize the “special position” of the bumiputeras (literally sons of the earth or autochthonous group). The amendment extended the “special position” recognition to the “natives of Sabah and Sarawak”. Following the amendment, as Rusaslina Idrus argues, “the term bumiputera [became] synonymous with being Malay Muslim” (114). Rusaslina further points out that census classifications further created a bifurcation within the category, differentiating Malays from “Bumiputera Others” (ibid).
development of national unity across the diverse ethno-linguistic groups—proved a highly contested site of cultural and language politics. The colonial education landscape consisted of Malay, Tamil, Chinese and English medium schools that were either set up by the government, government-assisted or privately established (Hirschman 488). The National Education Bill of 1957 brought these schools under the purview of a single national system; while Chinese and Tamil were permitted as the primary medium of instruction, the bill mandated English and Malay as compulsory subjects (Report of Education Committee).

In 1963, the National Language Act, was introduced and passed on the occasion of the integration of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore with the Federation of Malaya to form the nation-state of Malaysia. The Act was subsequently amended in 1967 following the end of the ten-year transitional period granting the official use of English. It affirmed Malay as the national language and stipulated its use for official purposes; however, it also permitted the use of translations of “official documents and communications for such purposes as may be deemed necessary in the public interest” (Clause 2). Furthermore, the Act allowed for the continued use of English in Parliament and at other official functions, with permission from the presiding authorities. In essence, the Act demonstrated the political savvy of the National Alliance government in that it managed to formally recognize the official status of Malay while at the same time displayed tolerance of the cultural sensitivities of other ethno-linguistic groups. At the same time, in Margaret Roff words, “all that was to be changed [by the Act] was the descriptive terminology, for language-usage patterns were to be left undisturbed” (324).

The language and education policies of newly independent Malay(s)ia make clear that English was largely recognized as a language that affords socioeconomic mobility and national progress. English was also the preferred language of the postcolonial elite. Despite no longer
bearing official status, it remained the de facto medium in official proceedings and was also the preferred language of Malay legislators and government officials, who were English-educated. Thus, it was less the national language of Malay than translation that served as a key means in creating a common national identity while maintaining the cultural distinctives of the respective ethno-linguistic groups.

However, this arrangement was not without its critics, particularly among certain Malay groups. For example, Roff notes the suspicion, publicly voiced by the chief of the National Language and Literary Agency, that the Chinese written on public notices were “fictional” translations of their Malay sources (Roff 324). The continued use of English, the language of the former colonizers, further fueled a growing sentiment within the United Malays National Organization that the party no longer represented its constituents’ best interests. There were also a few lone voices from the minority groups that demanded that Chinese and Tamil also be recognized as official languages. These conflicting sentiments were, in part, fueled by the tense political climate of the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 only two years after their merger. The expulsion followed from the Singaporean leader, Lee Kuan Yew’s political platform of a “Malaysian Malaysia,” a multiculturalist conception of the nation that contravened the existing Malay ethno-nationalist notion, which renewed heated debates about the civil and political rights of non-Malay citizens.

The fatal racial riots between the Chinese and Malays on 13 May 1969 marked a major shift in national policies and national racial discourse. Official history interprets the riots as a spontaneous outbreak of violence resulting from hostile inter-racial relations.5 The passing of the

5 Kua Kia Soong questions this historical interpretation, which is disseminated in school textbooks, and offers an alternative understanding in May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969. Based on research in recently released British official records on the riots, Kua argues that the “May 13 incident” was above all, a coup d’état by the then emergent Malay state capitalist class to depose [the then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman]
1971 Amendment to the Sedition Act—a 1948 law passed during British Emergency rule during the communist counterinsurgency—effectively curtailed the freedom of expression concerning the national language (Article 152), the “special position” of the bumiputeras (Article 153) and the sovereignty of the Malay Rulers in their respective states (Article 181). Subsequent national economic, education and cultural policies, which were implemented in the next few years, effectively secured Malay political hegemony. Among the policy directives carried out included the provision of affirmative action programs in business investment and property ownership opportunities; the introduction of racial quotas at public universities; and the phasing out of English as a medium of instruction.

The National Cultural Policy of 1971 defined Malaysian culture solely in Malay and Islamic terms. Significantly, it introduced a new term, bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) to replace bahasa Melayu (Malay language), the latter of which was used in the Federal Constitution to refer to the national language (bahasa kebangsaan). These historical developments, Mohamad Quayum argues, ascribed Malay literature or sastera Melayu as national literature, while relegating literatures of other languages as kesusasteraan sukuan or “sectional literatures” (23). Quayum further notes that the post-May 13 historical situation produced a silencing effect on English language writers, whether it be the migration of writers, Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim, to Australia and the United States respectively, or, the turning away from writing in English altogether, as in the case of the poet, Muhammad Haji Salleh (24).

If the 1970s were fallow years in the production of English language literature in Malaysia, Quayum suggests that a shift in policy approaches toward English in the mid-1980s augured well for its future. Under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad, the nation underwent a period of

who represented the outdated Malay aristocracy” (3). Malaysian official documents remain classified under the Official Secrets Act.
economic liberalization, during which the idea of English as fundamental to the nation’s progress and prosperity resurfaced. During Mahathir’s administration, English was introduced as a medium of instruction in Science and Mathematics, and the subject of English literature, which incorporated the works of local authors, was made compulsory at the secondary level. English literacy also became an important criterion for degree completion at the university level. This renewed embrace of English, which had then been framed by Malay nationalists as a colonialist language, occurred within a larger shift in the discourse of national culture. Mahathir summarizes the shift in attitudes toward English as follows: “Unfortunately, some people feel that you should neglect English entirely if you are a nationalist. If you are a Malay nationalist (they say), then you should learn bahasa Malaysia. We believe that a nationalist is someone who has acquired all the knowledge and mastered all the skills and is capable of contesting against the rest of the world. This is a true nationalist” (qtd in Quayum 46).

For Quayum, this shift in attitude is fortuitous for the growth of Malaysian literature in English. Leveraging the government’s renewed appreciation for the global purchase of English, he shrewdly positions English language Malaysian writers as being in an ideal position to develop national literature in a globalized age. He writes: “Given this changing circumstance, in which the world will increasingly acquire an intranational and international syncretic culture, Malaysian writers who have chosen the global language as their medium, and ipso facto explored multiple ways of life and a sense of multiple belonging, are well poised to depict the Malaysian mosaic reality for the growing readers of a transnational world” (28). Citing postcolonial theory and its critiques of nationalism, Quayum further positions Malaysian Literature in English as ideal for overcoming the parochial and communalist sentiments that have framed discussions of Malaysian literature (28). Yet, his is not a post-nationalist argument. In highlighting the potential
global stature that Malaysian Literature in English has the potential to acquire, Quayum is appealing to the government’s desire for global visibility and, in so doing, presents a national multiculturalist counter-argument to the dominant Malay ethno-nationalist discourse so that English language literature, not just Malay, might be recognized as national literature. Hence, one suspects, the persistent use of the mouthful of a term, “Malaysian Literature in English,” which emphasizes that the nation’s literature comprises multiple languages, rather than its alternative, “Malaysian Anglophone literature,” which foregrounds language as opposed to national origin.

Therefore, the historical snapshot of the significance of English language and the status of Malaysian Literature in English in relation to national literature offered above suggests that, contrary to Paul Jay’s claim, the globality of English does not necessarily signal a turn away from nationalism. Rather, as Quayum aims to do, the global visibility afforded by English can be appropriated to advance minority cultural rights within nationalist politics. My point here is twofold. One, it is important to note the significance of the globality of English not just in relation to the national spaces of Britain and the United States, but elsewhere given that its political and cultural implications are often site-specific. Two, language—in this case, English—cannot simply be viewed as a transparent medium or vehicle of literary cultural knowledge that has the potential to either reinforce or disrupt dominant ideological formations. Language itself is loaded with ideological and historical valences even as it is a means of encoding ideological and historical meaning.

Quayum’s treatment of English as a transparent vehicle of meaning illuminates the embedded ideology of historical progress that shapes his national-multiculturalist argument. His characterization of Malaysian Literature in English as providing a window into the “mosaic
reality” of the nation implies the transparency of language in apprehending cultural difference. Naïve-sounding as it may be, Quayum’s argument—that, by virtue of the language’s global reach, English language writers are intrinsically better able to overcome communalist sentiments—reproduces the class distinctions associated with language skills. This line of argument follows from a long-standing belief prevalent among the multiracial postcolonial elite that their English education—which is taught at schools that generally comprise of an ethnically diverse student body—has enabled them to rise above the parochial, racialized sentiments that prevail among the masses. The English language is thus deracinated of its British colonial affiliations and the privileged class distinctions they afford, and is presented not only as a vehicle of economic prosperity, but as a means of achieving social and political progress as well. Such an argument overlooks the fact that Malay, Chinese and Tamil are also regional, if not, global languages. Furthermore, these non-English languages are positioned as inferior within a cultural hierarchy because they are considered only as vernaculars that carry cultural knowledge. This rationale is not unique to the language politics of the Malaysian context, but is also at work in Singapore, where English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil were recognized as official languages. Despite their formal, equal recognition as national languages, they are informally situated in a hierarchical order, with English at the top because it is a language suitable for the attainment of scientific and business (i.e. global, not parochial) knowledge. Hence, the remark by then Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong in 2001: “Our mother tongues carry with them values, ancient cultural heritages and sense of identity. To lose some of this, because we need to speak English, an international language of business and science, is painful, but it is a rational trade-off to make” (qtd in Quayum, 46).
To not see language as a transparent medium is to recognize that the globality of English does not render it a universal means of knowledge production and circulation. This fact is readily evident in creolized Englishes, of which Malaysian English or, Manglish, is one of its many forms spoken around the world. Consider, for example, the following Tweet, composed in both standard and Malaysian English. A couple of days after the 2013 General Elections in Malaysia, held on May 5, a Tweet posted by Jeeteindraa Thuraichamy under the handle @jeetthurai went viral. It said, “Where else in the world can you use 4 languages to form a perfectly acceptable sentence like, ‘Wei, macha. You want to makan here or tapau?’” The four languages making up the sentence are English, Malay (“makan”), and transliterations of words in Tamil (“macha”) and Cantonese (“wei”; “tapau”). Boasting the nation’s cultural diversity, the Tweet meshes expressions from the four major languages spoken in the country into a single sentence. This otherwise quotidian feel-good expression of multicultural nationalism gained particular significance in the aftermath of the elections, which had witnessed the highest voter turnout in the country’s history at almost 85 percent and marked unprecedented gains for the opposition coalition.\(^6\) In addition to being re-Tweeted and re-posted on Facebook by thousands, the Tweet made the cover of the July issue of Time Out KL, the Kuala Lumpur edition of the international magazine franchise. Explaining their decision, the editors write, “His wise words arrived at a time when headlines like ‘Chinese Tsunami’ and ‘Apa lagi Cina mahu?’ [“What more do the Chinese want?”] threatened to create racial tension amongst Malaysians, and Jeet’s tweet has, in a way, united us all by reminding us of our shared values and culture” (‘Wei Macha’). The phrase, “Chinese Tsunami,” was used by the Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak to describe the swing of Chinese voters to the Opposition as an expression of “extremism” that would result in

\(^6\) Although the incumbent coalition, Barisan Nasional, managed to retain a simple majority of Parliamentary seats to form the federal government, which it has helmed since independence in 1957, the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, won an unprecedented 51% of the popular vote.
racial “tension” and “conflict” (Bernama). Similarly, the news headline, “Apa lagi Cina mahu?” referred to that of an article published in Utusan Melayu, the national daily and mouthpiece of the Najib-led ethnic-based party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which proclaimed the Chinese as ungrateful to the ruling government and warned of the limits of Malay patience in putting up with Chinese demands (Zulkiflee). Pitting Chinese against Malays, the rhetoric of these statements subtly alluded to the fatal 13 May 1969 violent clashes between the two groups, a national trauma that was sparked by the elections’ outcome that year, in which the National Alliance government had also suffered a setback against the Opposition in the state of Selangor. Contextualized as such, Jeet’s Tweet, as the Time Out KL editors suggest, reads as a subtle rejection of the government’s racially divisive sentiments in favor of a multicultural embrace of difference in the interest of national unity: “Race, class, ethnicity and gender are divides that are commonly reinforced here [in Malaysia], but we’re celebrating Malaysians who put nationality first and stereotypes second in their efforts to realize a better Malaysia” (“Celebrating Unity and Togetherness”).
I present this Tweet not to highlight the apparent popularity of its multicultural message. My point, rather, is to show how, in 140-characters, this particular use of a digital form of cultural expression presents the English language as at once a global and a vernacular language. The rhetorical question posed in the Tweet is delivered in standard English, but the “perfectly acceptable sentence” that it puts forth is composed in Malaysian English. In order to decode the sentence, one does not need to be well-versed in all four languages, but be fluent in the incorporation and meshing of words from the other major languages spoken in the country that comprise the lexicon of Malaysian English. The sentence is not only intended to highlight the nation’s multiculturalism, but to celebrate its uniqueness as such (“Where else in the world…?”) by demonstrating the formation of a quadrilingual sentence that not only produces a coherent meaning, but is part of the everyday speech of Malaysian-English speakers. By rendering the

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**Figure 0.3.** Jeet’s Tweet. Screenshot of Twitter, 7 May 2013.
framing question in standard English, the Tweet is made partially legible to a global English-speaking audience. However, the quadrilingual sentence also functions as a shibboleth, distinguishing those who can comprehend the meaning of the sentence from those who cannot, even if the latter can still gather the gist of its multicultural significance.⁷

The Tweet’s use of standard and vernacular forms of English—if unwittingly—presents what is taken for granted as one language as a language which is not one. This point is underscored by its online social media form that is produced on the diffuse and global realm of the Internet, where it is easily accessible and legible in part to globalized standard English speakers, and in full only to those who can also read Malaysian English. Significantly, the “perfectly acceptable” sentence makes it difficult for machine translation, such as Google’s, to decode. This emphasizes the point that the globality of English by no means guarantees universal legibility. In other words, what the Tweet shows is how English in its standard form can be used as a means of disseminating an idea to a global audience; at the same time, its vernacular form can be used as a means of drawing a social boundary, of distinguishing within the same language one community from another. In so doing, the Tweet demonstrates the globality of English in two senses. In its capacity to circulate knowledge globally, its standard form is a hegemonic means of constituting globality. In its vernacular form, the creolization of English offers a counter-hegemonic understanding of globality, its intermingling and cross-pollination with other tongues generating a new language that traces its genealogical roots to, while remaining distinct from, standard English.

The takeaway here is not that vernacular English constitutes a means of resisting the dominance of standard English, although it may function as such under certain circumstances.

⁷ The Tweet’s quadri-lingual sentence can be translated into American English as follows: “Hey, bro, you wanna dine-in or do takeout?”
Rather, it is the need to question the prevailing notion of the innate global capacity of (standard) English in bringing about historical progress, as reflected in Quayum’s argument on the national status of Malaysian Literature in English and, to a lesser extent, Jay’s remark on the growth of contemporary Anglophone literature outside Britain and North America. To mistake the global hegemony of English as an indication of its universality is to leave unquestioned the historical conditions and dynamics of power that enable its hegemonic status as such. It is also to posit English as the sole mode of globalizing knowledge production, thereby naturalizing its global capacity as opposed to understanding it as a historical phenomenon. In this regard, vernacular Englishes constitute a living reminder of the historicity of the language’s globality and a testament to the continuance of the past into the present.

Spectral Transnationality

The citation of Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as imagined community and the role the novel plays in imagining it as such perhaps counts among the most frequently used shorthand reference to the constructedness of the spatial entity. Yet, Anderson’s well-cited argument goes beyond Jay’s call to be conscious of the spatial constructions that undergird literary cultural analysis. Specifically, it invites a consideration of the material conditions that enable certain conceptions of space—be it, nation, region or world—as such. Hence, as Anderson argues, the conditions that enable the imagining of a national community “was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity…. The essential thing is the interplay between fatality, technology and capitalism”
(Anderson, IC 42–43). However, the emergence of the novel and newspaper made the national community imaginable not because these media served as ideological vehicles for disseminating a common, unifying idea of what constitutes a political community to a particular reading public, although they may well be used in this manner. Rather, as he explains in Imagined Communities, the very formal structures of the newspaper and the novel render conceivable the idea of a “sociological organism” moving through “homogenous, empty time,” one that is analogous with the idea of a community moving through history (IC 26). For example, Anderson argues that the novel evinces a sociological landscape where characters, unbeknownst to one another, reside within a self-contained frame of representation that, in turn, enables the reader to apprehend her own membership within a larger social entity—i.e. a nation—comprising anonymous individuals (IC 30-32). Similarly, the newspaper approximates this “novelistic format” in the sense that its juxtaposition of reports from around the world conjures a social totality of the world within which different national entities co-exist (IC 33).

Pheng Cheah argues that Anderson’s attention to the material technological forces and, in particular, to their literary formal properties that rendered the nation imaginable points to “the temporal element of nationalism’s underlying grammar” (“Grounds of Comparison” 9). Whereas Anderson relies on Walter Benjamin’s temporal categories of modernity’s “homogeneous, empty time” and “Messianic time,” which the former attributes to a pre-modern era, in Imagined Communities, he turns to the figure of the ghost in his subsequent elaboration on nationalism in The Specter of Comparison. To use Cheah’s summation, Anderson argues that, “imagining the nation is essentially a comparative process in which the nation is always haunted by something that is at one and the same time both spatially other or exterior to it, but also similar to it in the sense that it is part of it and inhabits the same frame of consciousness” (“Grounds of
Comparison” 10). However, in his latter work, Anderson is not only concerned with the nation, but with the condition of haunting that animates the regional spaces that inform area studies. In particular, he presents “Southeast Asia” as an exemplary site in which to examine this idea of spectrality and, in so doing, offers several insights on the comparative method of analysis, which have been outlined by Cheah (SC 3; “Grounds of Comparison” 12). This turn to comparison—a method, as we have noted, often associated in literary studies as a means of moving beyond national paradigms of analysis—foregrounds what was otherwise implicitly suggested in Anderson’s thesis on the nation as imagined community, namely that the nation-form is articulated not in opposition to, but within and in relation to the global frame.

The specter might be understood primarily as a temporal figure in that it alludes to a revenant, an apparition of someone whose time has ended, but who returns from the realm of the dead into the living. The memorable phrase from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “The time is out of joint,” is evocative of this point. Yet, The Specter of Comparison mobilizes the ghost as a spatial figure, emphasizing the fact of its thereness as a quality that cannot be fully grasped within the bounds of rational thought, to elucidate what the work of comparison entails. As already noted in the opening paragraphs of this Introduction, Anderson derives the figure of the specter from Jose Rizal’s novel, Noli Me Tangere, in which the phrase, “el demonio de las comparaciones” is used to describe the experience of seeing double when the protagonist surveys the botanical gardens in colonial Manila and cannot help but see that they are “shadowed automatically…and inescapably by images of their sister gardens in Europe”; it is “the agent of this incurable doubled vision.” Anderson suggests, that the novel calls, “the specter of comparisons” (SC 2). What Rizal meant by this phrase, Anderson goes on to write, is that “a new, restless double-consciousness which made it impossible ever after to experience Berlin without at once thinking of Manila, or Manila
without thinking of Berlin. Here indeed is the origin of nationalism, which lives by making comparisons” (SC 229).

Anderson’s expression, “double-consciousness,” Cheah notes, is evocative of W. E. B. DuBois’s phrase, which describes the split phenomenological or psychic condition of African Americans living under White supremacist rule in the United States, and is here aptly applied to the experiences of the colonized elite classes (“Grounds of Comparison” 10). Part of Anderson’s point in describing the specter of comparison in terms of double-consciousness is to underscore how any consideration of Europe cannot in good faith ignore Southeast Asia, otherwise marginalized from its scope of study, for the history of the two regions are inextricably bound given their colonial relations. Yet, for this reason, Harry Harootunian critiques Anderson’s comparative method as reaffirming the primacy of Europe despite claiming to de-center its position as the default grounds of comparison given that European colonial history is recognized as the specter that haunts Southeast Asia, thereby sidelining other modes of haunting. Moreover, Anderson’s use of the metaphor of the inverted telescope—wherein the usually outsized Europe is diminished in view from the vantage point of Southeast Asia—for the condition of haunting nevertheless equates the relationship between the metropole and the colonies as that between the original and its derivative (Harootunian 139).

Though characterizing the ocular metaphor as “misleading,” Cheah nonetheless maintains that, when disassociated from it, Anderson’s spectral comparativism remains valuable (14). Of the reasons offered, the one most significant for our purposes and also to Cheah is how the figure of spectrality affords a radical rethinking of the nation, one that exceeds Anderson’s own conception. Although not explicitly articulated as such, the metaphor of spectrality—Cheah argues—is already at work in Anderson’s earlier argument in Imagined Communities. As Cheah
explains, spectrality cannot be reduced to a phenomenological condition, i.e., the double-consciousness experienced by members of the colonized elite; rather, it possesses an agential capacity—as Anderson writes, it is the agent of this incurable double vision (SC 2). The specter of comparisons, Cheah further clarifies, is like Adam Smith’s invisible hand, a catachresis for the material conditions that have brought double-consciousness into being—innovations in communications and technology, more precisely, newspaper-print language and long-distance transportation, which have caused the world to shrink for everyone and not just the intelligentsia. These material developments have created ‘quotidian universals’ that make everything comparable for everyone, and cause everyone to compare everything (“Grounds of Comparison”11).

In other words, the catalyst for the production of comparative knowledge does not reside in the experiences of the colonized elite, whose European education and position within a racially stratified colonial society bestows them a unique double-vision; rather, it is the material, technological forces of globalization that are enabling the work of comparison. The agential capacity for comparison is thus not located within the subject who views the world with a comparative gaze, but arises from the worlding capacities of the material, technological forces that demand a comparative approach. In Cheah’s words,

Comparison stems from the disquieting knowledge of material forces at work in the wider world as it disrupts the non-reflective intimate relationship we have with the social surroundings in which we find ourselves immersed. As in Rousseau, comparison is here the progenitor of a reflective understanding of the self, but with the crucial qualification that comparison is something that comes upon and constitutes the reflective self rather
than something that it decides to do. Comparison is a specter precisely because it is a form of inhuman automatism conjured up by capitalism’s eternal restlessness (“Grounds of Comparison” 12; emphasis mine).

Significantly, Cheah’s notion of spectrality casts material, technological forces not as mere instruments that can be used by a subject to carry out an action. Rather, material technology possesses an agential capacity to spectralize, to blur the distinction between the living and the dead, the organism and the automaton. It is this particular conception of spectrality, one grounded in Jacques Derrida’s ontological—or, “hauntological”—philosophy, that leads to Cheah’s radical rethinking of the nation, as detailed in his book, Spectral Nationality. Briefly, Derrida’s concept of spectrality denotes the condition of originary prosthesis, the original exposure to radical alterity that is both fundamental to the constitution of being and to its ongoing survival. The process of spectralization, in other words, refers to the incarnation of what is without form into material form, whereby its materialized formation as such is an inscription of radical finitude on its very condition of being even as it is the very means of its becoming and continuing as being. Despite Derrida’s dismissal of nationalism as mere technicity, i.e. as being on the side of death, Cheah persuasively makes the case that the postcolonial nation is a historical expression of this philosophical concept of spectrality, the condition of shuttling between life and death. An incarnation of freedom from colonial rule and of freedom to self-determination, the postcolonial nation-state is recognized as such upon its integration into a world system of sovereign nation-states. However, the uneven playing field of the global political economy compromises the postcolonial nation-state’s very autonomy given that its survival is contingent on its playing host to transnational capital, thus exposing itself to its potentially life-giving and devastating effects. The spectralization of the nation-state thus occurs
at two levels: first, the mutual haunting between the people (nation) and the state that follows from the incarnation of freedom in the form of the nation-state, and, second, the spectralization of the nation-state by global capital. Cheah explains:

In its desire for sustainable development, the national organism’s relation to the bourgeois state is an interminable experience of the aporia of life-death, where death is irreducibly inscribed within the living present. The postcolonial nation lives-on, in and through a certain kind of death that also renews life. It can only maximize its well-being and come to freedom by attaching itself to the state. Through the state, it is exposed to technological flows, flows of foreign direct investment, cultural images, and so on, transnational forces that are crucial to development. However, in an uneven global system, national development in the periphery is frustrated because of state adjustment to the dictates of transnational capital. The state can resist capitulation to transnational forces only if it is transformed from an inorganic prosthesis into a popular national state.

…However, the exclusionary dimension of popular nationalism can always be manipulated by state elites to hinder postcolonial national Bildung. There is a persistent flickering between death and life, ideology and the people’s spontaneous will. The state is an uncontrollable specter that the national organism must welcome within itself, and direct, at once for itself and against itself, because the state can also possess the nation people and bend it towards global capitalist interest …. The postcolonial nation is a creature of life-death because, by virtue of its aporetic inscription within uneven globalization, the state stands between the living nation-people and dead global capital, pulling on both even as it is pulled by both (SN 391, 394).
Cheah’s conception of the relationship between the nation, state and capital as that of mutual haunting avoids thinking of the nation-state as a monolithic entity. Instead, it invites us to distinguish the multiple forces at play in its constitution as such even as it recognizes that these forces cannot be considered apart from one another. In so doing, Cheah disputes arguments such as Partha Chatterjee’s, which claim that postcolonial nationalism is a “derivative discourse,” “an ideological extension of the bourgeois state, a tool of dead capital” (SN 226). For to view the formation of the nation-state only as the ideological manipulation of the popular masses by the postcolonial elite against their own political and economic interests, Cheah argues, is to fail to see that the actualization of the abstract notion of freedom into any material form, such as the nation-state, is always already susceptible to the possibility of its own undoing. This argument bears important implications to literary analysis because it raises the question of the significance of form and of the literary itself as a force of spectralization in its capacity to give form to something that is hitherto formless. Thus, rather than only consider literature as an ideological reflection or critique, or some such variant, of nationalism, in what ways does the materiality of language and literature, in its various genres and media, shape the political imagination?

Anderson’s specific point that it is the “fatality of human linguistic diversity,” along with the rise of print capitalism, that made the nation imaginable underscores the significance of examining the materiality of language in shaping the political imagination. However, it also renders problematic the logic of seriality that gives rise to the specter of comparison that, Anderson argues, animates nationalism. The logic of seriality is engendered by the standardization of language via print communication technologies, of which the newspaper Anderson views as exemplary (SC 32–34). Newspapers presuppose a global domain, as evidenced by the fact that the reportage of news from the furthest places and of the remotest
relation to the locality of the readership it serves is never out of place. This global dimension is evinced by a standardized journalistic vocabulary, which ensures the comprehensibility of events from around the world to readers located in various contexts. This standardization expresses a serial logic in that it presumes a category that has universal applicability within which local particularities can be situated and rendered comparable to others. Anderson offers two examples to illustrate the workings of serial logic (SC 33). In a speech delivered in Central Java in 1920, the communist leader, Haji Misbach, invokes the Javanese phrase, “balik boeno,” which means “world-turned-upside-down,” to refer to the communist revolution underway in Austro-Hungary at the time; he does so by way of inviting the peasants and factory workers he was addressing in anticipation of a similar fate to befall the Dutch colonial authorities (SC 30). In another example, in the 1950s, the Thai Marxists began to use the term, “sakdina,” which referred to “the traditional monarch-centered status system in Siam,” as an equivalent of medieval Europe’s feudal system (SC 33-34). These pairings—“balik boeno” and “revolution”; “sakdina” and “feudal”—are not exact synonyms, but nonetheless constitute “quotidian universals that seeped through and across all print-languages, by no means in a unidirectional flow” (SC 33; emphasis mine).

The universality that Anderson ascribes to this serial logic, which arises out of the print market, refers to two distinct characteristics. First, it refers to the global reach of print capitalism, out of which emerged a “new grammar of representation,” i.e. the nation-form (SC 34); Anderson’s insistence that the flow of this logic was by no means unidirectional anticipates his critics, who argue that the universality of his serial logic engenders a mode of comparison that privileges Europe as the original and her colonies as derivatives. Second, it is universal in the sense that the seriality that emerges from the print market is “unbound,” made up of “open-to-
the-world plurals,” and is distinct from forms of bound series such as ethnicity, which arise from colonial technologies of governance like the census. The distinction between unbound and bound seriality is thus meant to differentiate the modes in which national and ethnic communities are respectively imagined. Whereas the ethnic community defines its own identity by differentiating itself in relation to an Other, the national community imagines itself as limited but nonetheless universalist in its constitution. Although both forms of seriality are at work in the political imagination of the postcolonial nation-state, Anderson cautions against conflating the two distinct modes of identity formation given his belief that nationalism is, in essence, a progressive vehicle of freedom, but has been contaminated by forms of bounded seriality such as racialism, which was produced by colonial governance and passed on to postcolonial states.

The problem with unbound seriality’s claim of universality is that it takes for granted the formal equivalence of the particular units that constitute a series. In philosophical terms, Anderson’s serial logic accords with Aristotelian universalism, whereby the linguistic cultural particulars serve as instantiations of universality—for e.g. “sakdina” in Siam and “feudality” in Europe evidence the concept of monarchy as a universal or unbound series. Although Anderson acknowledges that units within an unbound series do not have synonymous meanings, they are nonetheless presumed to be equivalent in terms of form so as to be comparable with one another. Such an assumption rests on the notion that linguistic difference distinguishes one unit from another while establishing a formal equivalence between them; however, it fails to consider how equivalence across difference is produced, thereby overlooking the forms of incommensurability between units that problematize their constitution as a series and that bedevil comparison. Thus, rather than conceive of the globality of print capitalism as engendering a universal logic of
seriality, I prefer to think of the flows and forms of knowledge it produces in terms of translation. Nationalism lives not by making comparisons, but through translation.

* 

This abstract proposition can be examined in the historical case of the consolidation of the various colonial administrative units in British Malaya under a centralized federal government following the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945. Before the Pacific war, the colonial administration comprised of the Straits Settlement crown colony, which included Penang, Malacca and Singapore, and the nine British protectorates: the four Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, and the five Unfederated Malay States of Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu. The restructuring was undertaken to redress the weaknesses of decentralized government exposed in the defeat of the British by the Japanese, who occupied Malaya from 1941 to 1945. The formation of the new federal entity entailed fashioning a Malayan national identity under which to unify the multiple ethno-linguistic groups residing on the peninsula. Moreover, it effectively constituted a marked shift from the previous divide-and-rule policy, which recognized the sovereignty of the Malay rulers over their respective territories, if only in name, and identified the Malays as “natives,” who were entitled to special privileges, as opposed to the “alien” racial groups, which primarily consisted of the Chinese and Indians.

Part of a broader re-ordering of Empire, the federalization of Malaya to form the Malayan Union was also an effort to secure the future loyalty of Britain’s colonies under the aegis of the Commonwealth. The Malayan Union extended equal citizenship rights to all races and was intended in part to reward the Chinese, who primarily made up the communist-led guerrilla force, then known as the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army, that fought the Japanese
Occupation. However, the Malayan Union was vehemently opposed by the Malays, who viewed its liberal citizenship plan as an affront to Malay sovereignty and an assault on native rights guaranteed under the divide-and-rule policy. In the Malay states, the British held that “the maintenance of the position, authority of the position of the Malay Rulers must always remain the cardinal point” (qtd in Omar 5). Thus, although a British Resident-General effectively governed the political affairs in each state, the rulers remained as figureheads of Malay sovereignty. Whereas this previous arrangement disguised the true extent of British intervention in the state’s administrative affairs to the layperson, the centralization of government reduced the function of the Malay Rulers to that of mere religious leaders and made stark that sovereignty of the Malay states belonged not to the rulers, but to the British crown. The extension of citizenship to non-Malays, the Malays further argued, constituted a betrayal of the British colonial mandate of protecting the interests of the Malays against the “alien” races, in particular, the Chinese. The proposed Union sparked the political mobilization of Malays against the British throughout the peninsula on an unprecedented scale. In response, the British abandoned its Malayan Union plan and, in consultation with the Malay rulers and political representatives from UMNO, implemented the Federation of Malaya, a centralized administration that continued to recognize the “special position” of the Malays and that imposed greater restrictions on citizenship rights for non-Malays.

The political mobilization of the Malays against the Malayan Union, Ariffin Omar argues, marked a “revolutionary change” in Malay political thought on the relationship between the ruler and the subject, as evidenced in writings published in the vernacular press (52). The state (kerajaan) was previously understood as “being in the condition of having a king or raja”; however, following the Malay rulers consent to the Malayan Union, the kings were accused of
committing treason (*derhaka*) against its own people—this was a remarkable claim given that, ordinarily, to question the actions of the ruler is itself tantamount to treason (Ariffin 53). As Ariffin’s explains, “The sultan could no longer claim to be the embodiment of the state, rather he was under it and answerable to it. He was now a man occupying an office of state, the sanctity and dignity of which he himself had to respect” (54). In place of the king, the identity of the state became centered around *bangsa Melayu*, a term that can be translated as “[the Malay] race, people, community, or even nation, depending on the context” (Ariffin 55). This radical shift is captured in the popular rallying slogan of the time, “*Raja itu Rakyat; Rakyat itu Raja*”—“The King is the People; the People are the King.”

As evidenced above, the political concept of *bangsa Melayu* was an amalgamation of both national and ethnic identity traits. On one hand, the element of sovereignty embedded in the notion of *bangsa* corresponds to the concept of nation; on the other, *bangsa* was also used to assert a collective Malay political identity vis-à-vis other racial groups, who were viewed as infringing on its rights. The racialist aspects of *bangsa Melayu* are, no doubt, influenced by British colonial discourse, which not only used race as an approach to classify the peoples of the region. Indeed, the production of colonial ethnographic and historiographic knowledge was facilitated by acts of cultural and textual translation. Yet, as Sandra Khor Manickam reminds us and as this historical event attests, colonial racial knowledge was not merely an imposition from above, but was also re-appropriated by those whom the colonial authorities sought to subjugate to advance their own political agendas. The adoption of the term, “democracy,” in Malay political discourse especially highlights the manner in which Western ideas were appropriated for local political purposes. Ariffin notes that editorials in the conservative newspaper, *Majlis*, tended to use the English-derived, “*demokrat*,” rather than the Malay equivalent of “*kedaulatan*
rakyat,” which is based on familiar concepts of daulat (sovereignty) and rakyat (people), preferred by the radical press (172). Specifically, he cites an editorial that invokes the notion of democracy as an historical epoch, as in a “zaman demokrat” or “democratic era” that was said to have commenced after the end of the Pacific War (172). Given its conservative viewpoint, Ariffin argues that the preference for the English loan word enables the editorial to sidestep the term’s revolutionary significance, while emphasizing “the modernity and international status of the concept” so as to indicate that a new world historical epoch was at hand. In other words, the conservatives presented democracy as signaling historical progress in general and stipulating a reformed understanding of Malay sovereignty without stipulating the revolutionary overthrow of colonial rule or monarchical power. In essence, language did not only serve as a vehicle of meaning in the process of intercultural knowledge transfer that gave rise to the concept of bangsa Melayu. Rather, language itself bore a particular significance that shaped its codified meaning.

The fact that translation played a crucial role in specifying the relationship between race and nation within the concept of bangsa Melayu puts in doubt Anderson’s argument that the distinction between ethnicity and nationality can be reduced to their respective bound and unbound serial logic. A closer examination of the role that translation played in the naming of the new federal entity further illuminates why. According to a report by the Working Committee on drafting a federal constitution, three possible names were considered as replacements for the “Malayan Union”: “Malayan Federal Union”; “Malayan Federation”; and “Federation of Malaya.” The Committee settled on the third option for the following reason:

[T]he ‘Malayan Federal Union’ was rejected as its translation into Malay involved contradictory terms and also because any title including the word ‘Union’ would be most
distasteful to and suspect by Malays. The ‘Malayan Federation’ was also suggested but opposed by the Malay representatives on the ground that ‘Malayan’ had come to mean people who had some association with Malaya, but did not include Malays, and the Malays took the strongest objection to being called or referred to as Malayans. There was also the further difficulty that the expression ‘Malayan Federation’ could not be translated into Malay. Thus, the final choice was the Federation of Malaya which was accepted because this alternative, which is a strict translation of the Malay title, ‘Persekutuan Tanah Melayu’ and is preferred by the Malay representatives, was found to be generally acceptable. (9)

By insisting on the consideration of the Malay-English translation in the renaming of the federation, the Malay representatives utilized translation to demand British recognition of their status of Malays vis-à-vis the non-Malays. The phrase, “Tanah Melayu,” literally means “Malay Land.” As such, the Malay-English translation renders “Malaya” as equivalent to “Malay Land,” thereby recognizing the country as belonging to the Malays even as it is a political entity that recognizes eligible non-Malays as citizens. Whereas the English name signaled the inauguration of a new political formation that would bestow citizenship to non-Malays, its Malay equivalent denoted that the country belonged to the Malays.

“Translation,” Gayatri Spivak suggests, “is defined by its difference from the original, straining at identity. The management of this difference as identity is the varied politics of the situation of translation” (“Questioned on Translation” 21). Similarly, the use of translation in naming the federation lays the groundwork for how cultural difference would be managed within the nation. The negotiations for the constitutional proposals for the new federation effectively formalized the meaning of bangsa Melayu, a term whose significance was highly contested
among Malay intellectuals at that time. As reflected in the views of the UMNO representatives at the constitutional proposals meetings, the conservatives viewed *bangsa Melayu* as an expression of a sovereign racial identity but not in the interest of ousting the British. Less invested in hastening the end of empire, the conservatives focused primarily on asserting their rights under British protection, which was perceived as being threatened by the foreign races (*bangsa-bangsa asing*). As such, despite accusations of betrayal, their ultimate aim was not to seize power, but to instill accountability in the Rulers on their responsibility to uphold the sovereignty of *bangsa Melayu*. In contrast, progressive anti-colonial thinkers such as Burhanuddin Alhelmy presented *bangsa Melayu* as a cultural identity that would form the basis for a national political identity, *kebangsaan Melayu*, to unite Malays across the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya to form the independent state of *Melayu Raya*. However, when the archipelago-wide unification ceased to be possible, leaders of the progressive Malay nationalist party, Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM), radically revised the concept. Working in concert with the leftist, multi-ethnic coalition AMCJA-PUTERA, PKMM forwarded the idea that *bangsa Melayu* would no longer exclusively signify Malay cultural identity, but a national identity that includes non-Malays. In its earlier articulation, non-Malays could “convert” to becoming Malays by adopting the Muslim faith; in its subsequent rendition, non-Malays would be recognized as *Melayu* regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. By formalizing the conservative meaning of *bangsa Melayu*, the formation of the federation effectively foreclosed the possibilities encoded in its radical conceptions and affirmed the institution of a racialized hierarchy as a means of managing cultural difference within the nation.

As a means of producing identity between difference, translation facilitates what Cheah describes as the “mutual haunting between the nation and the state.” Specifically, race—or, more
precisely, the process of racialization, understood as the inscription of race on bodies as a means of determining their value—is a means of spectralization in the sense that it gives form to the nation-state by articulating the various differences that constitute it and the terms by which they should be managed. By foregrounding race, my aim is to consider how Cheah’s concept of spectrality can be used to think about the process of racialization, even as this particular aspect of nation formation recedes into the background of his analysis. In his 2008 essay, “Crises of Money,” he directly addresses the issue of race by examining how the modes and effects of colonial racist violence are often analyzed through the lens of psychic trauma, with Franz Fanon’s work being exemplary in this regard. Although Fanon radically revises the psychoanalytic concept, otherwise concerned with individual and isolated experiences of trauma, to account for the collective experience of institutionally sanctioned, banalized colonial racist violence, his work nonetheless retains the basic idea of trauma whereby it constitutes an external form of violence that threatens to overwhelm the subject’s interiority. Hence, in order to withstand the traumatic violence of colonial domination, Fanon argues that the Black subject must restore and protect its own sense of interiority through “the formation of a collective political subject (the radical popular nation) that will completely destroy through revolutionary action the material conditions that caused the trauma in the first place” (Cheah, “Crises” 198). However, Cheah asserts that the conception of power as an external imposition, which is presumed by Fanon’s analysis and primarily informs postcolonial theory, is inadequate when it comes to apprehending the modalities of power in the era of global financialization. Rather, the power of global financialization operates along the lines of what Derrida calls autoimmunization. Cheah explains:
In immunization, a body protects itself by producing antibodies to combat foreign antigens. In auto immunization, however, the organism protects ‘itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system.’ Autoimmunization is therefore a form of suicide in which the organism immunizes itself against its own immunity. The autoimmune or suicidal character of hyper development through globalization lies in the fact that the constitution of the self’s very selfhood requires the exposure of the self to the alterity and heteronomy of capital flows. In defending itself against this other, the self is doing nothing other than compromising its own selfhood because its selfhood comes from the other (212).

Although Cheah’s critique may be valid, it nonetheless fails to account for the modes of racialization that cannot be separated from the forces of global capital. As Cedric Robinson argues, racialization is a “material force” and a “historical agency” that shaped the emergence and development of capitalism (2). Building on Robinson’s insight, Jodi Melamed goes on to add: “the emergence of a global order through a world-embracing system of capitalism, nation-states, colonies and imperial rule was able to constitute itself as a global social structure only to the extent that it was racialized” (7). The global financial flows are not merely abstractions; they are also embodied as racialized migrant labor, on which hyper development greatly depends. Indeed, the racist rhetoric aimed at migrant workers often obscures the fact that their labor is integral to the nation’s economic development and constitutes one particular form of the much-desired “foreign direct investment.” If global flows of capital have the capacity to disable the nation’s immune system, to use Cheah’s Derridean metaphor of autoimmunity, then the racialized migrant labor occupies an ambivalent status in that it constitutes a kind of foreign
antigen that threatens national immunity even as its “foreign” or migrant status renders it vulnerable to exploitation.

There is thus an imperative to account for the significance of race in shaping the various modes of power operating in the era of global financialization. To do so, the task of globalizing literary cultural studies must continue to take the nation as an important site of analysis without presuming its status as an empirically existing entity, but as a political formation constituted by complex, material forces of the imagination. Analyzing the role of translation in articulating the nation, what I call reading nation in translation, elucidates the fact that race—or, more precisely, the process of racialization—is the mutable biopolitical vector through which the nation is spectralized by capital. This hauntological condition of the nation gives rise to a bedeviled—as opposed to a double—understanding of the world in a manner that approximates Avery Gordon’s notion of haunting. For Gordon, haunting refers to

those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us (xvi).
By presenting the national racial imaginary as a site for apprehending globality, my aim is not to locate the global in the local. Rather, it is to occasion that sense of losing one’s bearings and of bringing one’s blind spot into view. As I demonstrate in the chapters of this dissertation, analyzing the role of racial difference in articulating Malaysian national identity brings into view the transnational historical forces—be it the reordering of the British Empire amidst its impending end; the burgeoning global Cold War; or the intensification of global financial capitalism in the late twentieth-century—that shape national racial ideology. The blind spot in analyzing globality conjured by reading nation in translation is the spectral transnationality of race. Its pressing demand for attention is what this dissertation seeks to address.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter One, “The Work of Lat in the Age of Globalizability,” examines *The Kampung Boy* series by Lat a.k.a. Mohamad Khalid Nor. The graphic narrative series is an autobiographical coming-of-age tale that consists of humorous ethnographic cartoon portraits of rural Malay-Muslim life and of the nation’s cultural diversity. Read in comparison, I suggest that the original English version and Malay translation of *The Kampung Boy* series constitute a formal resolution to the ideological conflict between the state’s ethno-nationalist privileging of Malay culture as representative of Malaysian identity and its embrace of multicultural discourse in concert with economic liberalization. The small but significant differences between the Malay and English editions expose these conflicting appropriations of the graphic narratives for official national culture: the Malay edition affirms the persistence of Malay(sian) cultural virility amidst drastic social changes wrought by economic development, while the English edition conveys a multicultural ethos that recognizes minority groups as part of national culture. Facilitated by the
supposed equivalence between the two language editions, the production of Lat’s work as a national icon at home evinces a seemingly unified national culture that belies its underlying ideological contradictions. Abroad, his work presents an image of multicultural harmony that reinforces the state’s “Malaysia, Truly Asia” branding of the nation.

Chapter Two, “Epistemological Checkpoint: Reading Fiction as a Translation of History,” considers the role of translation in facilitating British counter-insurgency operations during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) through an analysis of the novel, *...And the Rain My Drink* by Han Suyin. Based on the author’s experiences as a colonial expatriate in Malaya, the novel portrays the forced resettlement of mainly Chinese rural dwellers in camps—or, “new villages”—by the British to contain the communist uprising. Informed by archival research of Han’s personal papers, my analysis examines the first-person narrator’s role as translator and the themes of fidelity and betrayal in various scenes of translation between camp residents, surrendered enemy personnel and the colonial police. I contend that the novel presents the role of translation in war as a form of epistemic violence in the sense that it establishes the Cold War’s Manichean frame of friend and enemy as a means of defining the ethnic Chinese as a national subject of Malaya.

Chapter Three, “Spectral History: Documenting the Cold War Legacies of Malay(s)ian Decolonization,” develops the concept of spectral transnationality through an analysis of the films, *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung?* (*Village People Radio Show*). The films counter the anti-communist sentiments couched in anti-Chinese rhetoric of official history by presenting the nationalist ideals of Chin Peng, in the case of the former, and by highlighting the stories of the exiled members of the Malay-Muslim communist army regiment. The films register the collective amnesia of the left’s contribution to
the anti-colonial struggle for independence by figuring communism as spectral presence, whether by withholding the communist leader from sight or by using editing techniques that make ex-guerrillas vanish into thin air. Despite the suppression of this history within collective memory, the films suggest that traces of the Malayan anti-colonial leftist struggle are in fact translated into the present, if only in fragments, which are discernible in everyday life. Banned at home, the films reliance on the international film festival circuit to raise national awareness of marginalized history demonstrates that transnational cultural economies are not post-national spaces, as conventionally thought, but are important sites for contesting dominant national ideologies and re-imagining the nation. As such, the “trans-” in transnational ought to be conceived less as that which transcends—or, goes beyond—than as that which traverses—or, goes through—the nation.

Chapter Four, “Transnational Archives, National History: On the Limits of Spectral Critique,” looks at the significance of gender in theorizing transnationalism and nationalism through a reading of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s novel. *This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)* is a key text in Benedict Anderson’s elaboration of his influential argument on the role of print capitalism in imagining the nation. While Anderson sees the novel as narrating the rise of Indonesian national consciousness, my reading focuses on an overlooked aspect that expresses the significance of historical events elsewhere and their transmission through newspapers in shaping national identity: the novel’s allusion to the 1950 violent anti-colonial protests in Singapore. The protests were a response to a high-profile court ruling that granted custody of Maria Hertogh a.k.a. Nadrah to her Dutch Catholic biological parents as opposed to her Muslim adoptive mother. The event was a watershed moment in galvanizing Malay support for the *Malayan* independence struggle. This chapter examines the transnational circulation of this
historical event in the news, particularly its translation into Pramoedya’s novel as an event that awakens *Indonesian* national consciousness.
CHAPTER ONE

The Work of Lat in the Age of Globalizability

Picturing Difference

Figure 1.1a. Mina cannot read. Still image from Mina Smiles.

Mina Smiles is a short animated film that tugs at heartstrings and seeks to inspire.¹

Produced under the auspices of the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre (ACCU) for UNESCO, the cartoon is part of a literacy promotion campaign that was launched in conjunction with the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). Mina, a farmer’s wife living in an isolated village,

¹ My thanks to the UNESCO Library for providing me with online access to the film.
is humiliated and exploited because she is illiterate. Unable to read labels, she nearly kills her ill
husband, Jai, when she mistakes a bottle of pesticide for medicine (fig. 1a). With no choice but
to travel alone to a distant town to refill Jai’s prescription, she is shamed publicly when it
becomes apparent that she cannot decipher road signs or documents and is taken advantage of by
an unscrupulous pharmacist because of her incomprehension of numbers. Returning home in
tears, Mina decides to take a night literacy class offered in her village despite Jai’s skepticism
that learning how to read, write and count could benefit their rural farming existence. But Mina
proves him wrong. Her skills improve the family’s livelihood when she exposes the dishonest
market price lists of one of the family’s wholesale buyers. She also prevents a deadly accident by
writing a “Danger” sign to warn a bus driver of a road collapse, proving her newly acquired
literacy skills an asset to her wider community as well. Jai approves of Mina’s newfound
confidence, and the image of Mina leaving Jai at home to care for the children while she attends
class hints at how literacy impacts their personal relationship (fig. 1.1b). Once Jai is convinced of
the importance of literacy, Mina raises the subject of family planning as a means of alleviating
their financial hardships and ensuring that they can afford to send their children to school, a
conversation that suggests literacy also plays an integral role in helping women negotiate the
gender reproductive norms of society.

The film is intended for audiences who identify with Mina and her family’s situation—that is, poor and marginalized communities, and especially women—in the Asia-Pacific region
where the ACCU facilitates literacy programs. As the character, Jai, demonstrates, one must see
the importance of acquiring literacy arise from one’s immediate circumstances rather than as a
foreign imposition. Thus, the studies conducted by the ACCU recommend that literacy
promotional materials reflect situations or environments familiar to its target audiences, and
advocate literacy instruction in the mother tongue, even if the mother tongue is a minority
language with limited scope of use (ACCU Report). This sensitivity to cultural difference, the report further notes, must inform the translation of literacy promotion materials from a dominant language to a minority tongue: “Minority language has words that are concrete and from their daily life. Sophistication of city-life has no place in their daily life. The selection of words for basic literacy material will have to be in clear tangible terms. The words like culture, arts, quality of life are vague for them (sic)” (16).

“Everyone knows, or should know, why human rights are important,” writes John Humphrey on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the UN’s adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (qtd in Slaughter 2). Humphrey’s claim, Joseph Slaughter suggests, captures the paradoxical nature of the discourse of universality. At once self-evident and something that needs to be made legible or learned, this paradox of universality, argues Slaughter, frames human rights not simply as a legal issue, but fundamentally as a matter of literacy as well. The ACCU reports affirm Slaughter’s point given that this paradox of universality constitutes the very heart of its project. Indeed, the ACCU’s mission might be described as promoting literacy to illiterate populations who should, but do not know, of its universal goodness. But, whereas Slaughter argues that the Bildungsroman serves as a primary vehicle for imagining, advancing and naturalizing the narrative of human personal development embedded in rights discourse to a reading public, the ACCU may have found in Mina Smiles a

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2 The consistent grammatical errors and prose of the ACCU reports suggest that English is not the first language of those who prepared them. I point this out not to embarrass or undermine the authority of the writers, but to note that they serve as an index of the politics of language that sub tend the literacy campaign. Namely, that English is the hegemonic language that facilitates regional—and, indeed, global—collaborations. The presence of English words throughout Mina Smiles—such as on the “Pesticide” label that Mina cannot read; the word, “tomato,” spelled out on the chalkboard in her literacy class, which she later recognizes when the middleman at the market tries to short sell her and Jai; or the “DANGER” sign that she writes—affirms this point. The implication is that the requirement for working in such literacy campaigns is fluency in English, which is not equally accessible to every one.
means of widening the hegemonic reach of the universal rights to incorporate the illiterate masses.³

In the film, illiteracy is depicted as the seeing of words as inscrutable images, rather than as abstract phonetic signs that can be decoded for meaning. This point is driven home when Mina hands over a pawn shop chit to the doctor, mistaking it for a drug prescription. The close up shot of the chit invites the viewer to read it, which an illiterate audience cannot do, thereby facilitating their identification with Mina (fig. 1b). For her, the chit—a sign of her illiteracy and poverty—is a source of shame. But by attending night literacy classes, Mina exchanges her shame for

³ A 2006 report notes the success of the animated film in raising awareness about literacy: “Mina Smiles is such an emotional and motivational story that illiterate and neo-literate audiences sometimes shed tears while watching it” (4). The effectiveness of the film has generated a whole series of educational materials featuring “Mina” on issues such as environmental conservation; financial management (to be used in conjunction with a promotional booklet on micro-credit schemes); and water hygiene (ACCU website).
empowerment, prompting the film’s audience to do the same. The emplotment of this distinction—that is, the seeing of words as inscrutable images that is an indication of illiteracy and the reading of words as abstract signs to be decoded for meaning—into the narrative of bildung, as Slaughter argues, is how the right to literacy becomes universalized.

If the writing on the chit only comes across as an image of inscrutability for an illiterate audience, the rendering of the words, “Pawn Shop,” on the chit in four different languages prompts viewers who can read to also see—and not just read—language as a picture of difference. For the viewer who can read, some of the writing also appears only as squiggly lines given the unlikelihood of the latter’s possessing literacy in all four languages written on the chit. The multilingual inscription is a picture of difference in the sense that it conveys the point that the right to literacy is a universal one, one that accommodates all linguistic communities without homogenizing difference. This recognition of diversity is particularly important given that the

Figure 1.1c. Pawn shop chit. Still image from Mina Smiles.
acquisition of literacy necessarily implies a loss of oral tradition. As the ACCU-UNESCO report states, “The people for whom we are going to create materials belong to the world of oral tradition. Our task is to motivate them to accept the new culture of literacy. If they get motivated then they would be entering the new world of printed word and get into the process of transition—transition from orality to literacy” (16). Indeed, what Mina Smiles’s moving narrative of socioeconomic uplift does is emphasize the desirability of acquiring literacy, which in turn evidences its universal applicability.

The film’s diverse set of characters constitutes another picture of diversity. The characters were created by the Malaysian cartoonist, Mohammad Nor bin Khalid, who goes by the pen name, Lat. He is known for his cartoon representations of cultural diversity, as exemplified in his depictions of anonymous crowds while highlighting the distinctive traits of individuals within them in his popular editorial cartoon series, Scenes of Malaysian Life. His signature style is evident in Mina Smiles’ cast of mainly anonymous individualized characters, who have different skin tones, facial features and clothing styles reflecting a pan-Asian cultural spectrum. As with the multilingual chit and tracks on the DVD, the diverse characters acknowledge the range of audiences the film is intended to reach, just as its nameless generic town and rural village settings render the film translatable across different locations within the Asia-Pacific region and the so-called developing world more broadly.

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4 In 2007, 14 years after the film’s initial 1993 English version release, a DVD of the film, complete with “37 language tracks covering the languages of Asia, Africa, Arab States and Latin America,” was issued for the purposes of literacy promotion (ACCU website). The DVD’s multiple language tracks further highlight the importance of recognizing diversity to emphasize the universality of literacy.
My point, of course, is neither to disparage the efforts of ACCU-UNESCO to promote literacy nor to deny the positive gains to be had by individuals, especially girls and women, and their communities in gaining access to education. Rather, it is to underline the point that what is often taken for granted as universal is in fact something that needs to be universalized. Moreover, the process of universalization is essentially an instrument of power given that it is an exercise of recognizing and legitimizing difference. The story of Mina’s progress from being illiterate to learning how to read, write and count is essentially a story of how inscrutable difference becomes legible difference.

The use of Lat’s work in the film to depict ethno-linguistic diversity further suggests that the inscription of cultural difference is integral to the process of universalization. I begin with a reading of *Mina Smiles* to emphasize the globalizability of Lat’s work in that its portrayals of diversity enable his work to speak across cultures and, in so doing, convey a sense of universality.
or globality. In this chapter, I consider how Lat’s work, in particular *The Kampung Boy* series, is used as a vehicle to promote national unity among the different ethnic cultural groups in Malaysia. The graphic narrative series is an autobiographical coming-of-age tale of the artist’s experiences growing up in a rural Malay village or *kampung*; moving to a small town in his school-going years; and living in a large metropolis where he established his career as a cartoonist. The series’ shifting landscape parallels the rapid change the country has experienced, from colonial backwater to hyper-developing economy, in the short span of several decades. The graphic narrative series’s coming-of-age narrative and their international success lend themselves to the state’s appropriation of Lat as national icon. Specifically, Lat’s cartoons are framed by the state as ideal Malaysian representations that convey the message of national unity to its citizenry at the same time that they showcase the nation’s multicultural diversity to the world. In other words, Lat’s work becomes a means of rendering the nation’s inscrutability into legible cultural difference, of translating its amorphous heterogeneity into a unified coherent identity both for its own citizens and for the world.

**The Making of Lat as a National Icon**

Of his prolific body of work, it is *The Kampung Boy* series for which Lat is most well known. The series consists of three books, *The Kampung Boy*, *Town Boy* and *Kampung Boy: Yesterday and Today*. The first two tell the coming-of-age story of a boy named Mat growing up in a *kampung* or rural village, and his subsequent move to a small town during his teenage years. The third book is a nostalgic reflection by the grown-up Mat, now an established artist, comparing his rural childhood to that of his children growing up in the nation’s metropolis.  

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5 Mat is a diminutive of Mohammad, and Lat, also the cartoonist’s childhood nickname, is shortened from the Malay word, “bulat,” which means round.
published in 1979, the first two books in the series have been translated into 13 languages around the world and were made into an award-winning animated series. Lat has become a celebrate national icon, honored by major national cultural institutions. Autobiographical in nature, his work is not only a case of art imitating life, but of art extending into life as well: Lat’s endearing national reputation is as Malaysia’s own kampung boy, a homegrown talent with humble beginnings who, having achieved international fame, has also put his country on the map.

Yet if not for international recognition, Lat may not have achieved the national iconic status he holds today. Lat published his first comic book at the age of 12. Subsequently his work appeared regularly in Majallah Filem and its English edition, Malay Movie News, a monthly entertainment magazine on the nation’s filmmaking scene. By 1968, at age 17, Lat was producing a weekly cartoon strip, “Keluarga Si Mamat,” or “Mamat’s Family,” for the Malay national daily, Berita Harian, which made its debut the year before. After completing secondary school, Lat moved to Kuala Lumpur to pursue a career in cartooning. Unable to find work, he wound up as a reporter, eventually writing the crime beat for the national daily, the New Straits Times, instead. It was not until Lat published “Bersunat,” a depiction of a Malay-Muslim circumcision ritual, in Asia Magazine, an international English language periodical based in Hong Kong, that his cartooning talents were recognized by his editors. Following the international publication, Lat was sponsored by the New Straits Times to study drawing at St. Martin’s School of Art in London. Upon his return, he began his regular editorial column, “Scenes of Malaysian Life,” for the paper.

Significantly, working in the medium of the international lingua franca and that of the nation’s former colonial masters made Lat’s work known to broader audiences, both at home and
abroad. As the notable Malaysian artist and art historian, Redza Piyadasa, observes, the editorial column in the Malaysian English language press is what gave Lat’s work a multiracial readership, a rare achievement for any artist working in the Malay language medium in the country. The column initially featured ethnographic portrayals of the customs of various racial groups and short historical pieces, similarly styled as his first international publication. Over the years, the series’ educational though light-hearted tone evolved to present a more distinct perspective of the artist as observer, its content growing to include travelogue pieces of his work visits abroad as well as single-panel depictions of every day life that served up social political commentary with a sharp sense of humor. These pieces were subsequently collected and published as books, extending the shelf-life of his work beyond the fleeting nature of news and re-framing his work more distinctly as art rather than political commentary. It is a testament to his immense popularity that his books often sold multiple printings.

The art catalogue published on the occasion of the Malaysian National Art Gallery’s retrospective of Lat’s work in 2003 serves as an interesting record of Lat’s cultural import. The catalogue features essays by Piyadasa and Muliyadi Mahamood, an art historian and expert in Malaysian cartooning history. It was originally written in English and Malay respectively, with accompanying translations provided in an adjacent column. The catalogue is notable because the two commentators offer conflicting claims on Lat’s national significance. Piyadasa offers the following about Lat’s place in Malaysian cultural history:

Lat’s real significance within the Malaysian cultural context must certainly lie in his ability to project an all-encompassing portrayal of the total Malaysian reality. In a country where novelists, artist, dramatists, film-makers and musicians have, by and large, been limited by self-conscious ethno-centric perceptions and delineations, his ability to draw his themes and ideas from the wide spectrum of this nation’s complex and colourful
multi-racial milieu marks him out as an extraordinary individual and creative personality. It would be no exaggeration to state that he is perhaps, the best known and best loved cultural personality in this country, admired by old and young alike. His phenomenal popularity and acceptance by the Malaysian public may be explained by the fact that people of all races in this country can readily identify with Lat’s cartoons and comic books and laugh with him.

He is that rare phenomenon—a genuine “Malaysian” in his artistic outlook. Although of Malay ancestry, his depictions of the Malaysian condition have never been restricted to a purely Malay viewpoint but rather, he has consistently projected a broader ‘Malaysian’ vision and interpretation of the contemporary reality (84).

Piyadasa’s emphatic praise of Lat’s depictions of multi-racial Malaysia as opposed to that of an “ethnocentric” one or of a “purely Malay viewpoint” runs counter to Muliyadi’s contextualization of Lat’s work in the nation’s cartooning history. Contrary to the promise of its title, “Sejarah Seni Kartun Malaysia / A Historical Overview of Malaysian Cartoons,” his first essay only focuses on the development of cartooning in the Malay language press, ignoring the work of non-Malay cartoonists published in the English- and Chinese-language press. Muliyadi’s essay presents an overview of comics from their initial appearance in the emerging Malay press during British colonial rule to the development of the local cartooning industry in post-independence Malaysia.6 Noting that the changes in style, content and publication of Malay cartoons over the decades reflects the mutating social, economic and political conditions of the times, the essay presents cartoons as both a mirror of the contemporary moment as well as a contributor to Malay sociopolitical discourse. Predictably, Muliyadi’s second essay in the

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6 A more extended account is provided in Muliyadi’s monograph, The History of Malay Editorial Cartoons, 1930s-1993.
catalogue, “Lat Dalam Konteks / Lat in Context,” reads Lat’s work within the genealogy of Malay editorial cartoons established in his previous essay. Citing as proof the influences of newspaper cartoonists Raja Hamzah and Rejab Had, as well as the beginnings of his own career in the Malay press, Muliyadi portrays Lat as continuing in the tradition of depicting Malay social and aesthetic values as his predecessors are perceived to have done. Although recognizing the influence of both Western and local comics in his work, the essay argues that Lat’s unique contribution to the field is his depiction of a Malaysian environment (“suasana persekitaran”), demonstrating distinctly Malay values at a time when only foreign syndicated comics were being published in newspapers. For Muliyadi, it is Lat’s multiracial cast of characters that constitute the Malaysian backdrop of his cartoons, whereas the metaphorical and satirical elements and its discursive functions constitute Malayness. Put differently, Muliyadi identifies a distribution of functions that correspond to the various aspects of Lat’s work and assigns them an ethnic quality: its multiracial background serves the mimetic function of representing the nation’s ethnic diversity while its Malay aesthetic and social values constitute a discursive, editorial function that renders the cartoons as contributors to sociopolitical discourse, the driving force that defines the national community.

Though the retrospective exhibition institutionalizes Lat as a national icon, the conflicting claims made on his work suggest that the very nature of that iconicity— that is, how his work represents the nation and articulates its form—is far from settled. More precisely, that the issue of race is central in debates about his work alludes to its primacy in determining national identity, with Muliyadi representing the state’s ethno-nationalist hierarchization of race versus Piyadasa’s critique of the exclusive identification of Malays with Malaysia, calling instead for a more egalitarian approach in accounting for race in the construction of national identity. What is particularly striking is that despite their conflicting ideological positions, both Muliyadi and
Piyadasa appeal to the international recognition of Lat’s work as a means of validating their claims of how Lat’s work defines a national ethos, whether Malay-centric or multiracial. The conflictual stances’ common appeal to the global not only suggest that the politics of national identity are never only determined by internal forces, but invite a closer examination as to how it is shaped by international cultural circuits as well.

For Muliyadi, Lat’s international accolades, which include the prestigious Fukuoka Asian Arts and Culture Prize in 2002, are an indication of the overall progress of Malaysia’s cartooning history, whose beginnings trace back to the Malay press. Whereas Muliyadi focuses on Lat’s strengths as an editorial cartoonist, Piyadasa argues that what sets Lat apart is his “novelistic” works, most famously The Kampung Boy series and the less well known Mat Som (94). For Piyadasa, the multiculturalism of Lat’s work does not simply derive from its more diverse depictions of Malaysian life. Even though the cultural milieu depicted in The Kampung Boy is that of Malay rural life, its novelistic quality and its universal coming-of-age tale allows for cross-cultural identification so that even non-Malays can relate to his work. The multi-racial appeal that Piyadasa finds in The Kampung Boy is affirmed in its sequel, Town Boy, in which the protagonist “transcends his own ethnic limitations” as he moves to a more diverse town and establishes inter-racial friendships (95). However, by pointing out the similar themes in Lat’s work with those in Camara Laye’s L’Enfant Noir, Piyadasa not only aims to validate his reading of the series as novels, but to assert that the cartoonist’s achievements in the visual medium are on par with that of the internationally acclaimed novelist. In other words, Piyadasa’s comparison implies that the international reception of Lat’s work attests to the multi-racial dimension of his

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7 Like The Kampung Boy series, Mat Som bears autobiographical resemblance to the cartoonist’s life. It follows the journey of the eponymous protagonist who leaves his family kampung to take up a job as a reporter in the nation’s metropolis. In Kuala Lumpur, Mat Som encounters the artistic scene as well as the stark class differences within the Malay community.
work, one that resists the ethnocentric and parochial claim that the work is merely a representation of Malay-Muslim identity.

However, the comparison to Laye also alludes to the historical trend of the *Bildungsromane* as the genre in which non-Western or historically marginalized writers tend to be first published for a Western readership, as Slaughter argues. Such coming-of-age narratives are not so much universal, as Piyadasa takes for granted, as they are vehicles for universalization, that is, a means for cultural difference to be made legible and commodified for consumption in the literary marketplace. Piyadasa’s reference to Lat’s international success in effect appeals to the liberal multiculturalism of the global literary marketplace to validate the national-multiracial ethos. Yet, in so doing, it fails to account for the different grids of intelligibility in which the work’s international circulation and its significance within national politics operate respectively.

At least two overlapping grids of intelligibility are discernible in Piyadasa’s articulation of the relation between Lat’s work and the nation. The first treats the work as determining a national ethos and, the second recognizes the work as art and as an identifiable cultural representation of the nation in the global sphere. The former can be referred to as the work’s articulation of the nation in the performative register and the latter, the iterative. In linking the national with the performative and the international with the iterative, I do not mean to suggest that the two different registers of the nation can be separated so neatly as such. Rather, my point is to underscore the shift in registers that occurs with regards to a work’s representational function when it travels from a national to an international context. At stake in the former is the politics of national identity formation with regards to the history of racial knowledge production. In other words, the debate between Piyadasa and Muliyadi over Lat’s significance is also a site where the nation’s racial political battles are fought. The latter, however, is disinterested in such national politics and simply takes as a given the nation as a single cultural unit. As Shu-mei Shih
argues, the liberal multiculturalism of the global literary marketplace adheres to the logic of U.S. multiculturalism, whereby a Third World national culture registers as an ethnic cultural object. In effect, the racial politics at stake for the Malaysian nation in Lat’s work are flattened out in the global literary marketplace as simply an ethnic representation of Malaysia.

Consider the marketing of Lat’s work in the United States. Twenty-five years after it was first published, Kampung Boy was introduced to the United States in 2004, followed by Town Boy in 2007. Published by First Second Books, which sees as its “mission” to “publish in the U.S. the great graphic novels from around the world,” the arrival of Lat’s work on American shores, albeit belated, rides on the growing readership of graphic novels (qtd in Haroon 538). The framing of the works operates on the global multiculturalist logic described above. The blurb on Kampung Boy’s dust jacket presents the work as the story of “a Muslim boy growing up in rural Malaysia in the 1950s,” a work that “opens a window into a world that has now nearly vanished.” The blurb on its sequel similarly frames the ethnographic description of the text in a multicultural register. Town Boy is “[a]t once exotic and marvelously familiar, his cartoon world [laying] a bridge to another world, another culture, another time.” The work’s cross-cultural appeal as highlighted by the U.S. publishers serves a very different purpose than Piyadasa’s invocation of it. His false equivalence of the national-multiracial and global-multicultural demonstrates, as Shih points out, the difficulty of translating politics across different contexts, where what is political in one is not necessarily so in another (24). That is, for Piyadasa, the bildung narrative of a Malay boy serves as a universalizing device by which to incorporate non-Malays who are otherwise rendered invisible or second-class citizens in national cultural

8 The U.S. publishers dropped the definitive article from the original title, The Kampung Boy. Unless referring specifically to the U.S. edition, I use the original title.
representations. In the context of the Western literary marketplace, however, the *bildung* narrative frames the text as an ethnic particular that stands in as a representation of the nation.

**The Ideological Contradictions of Malaysian National Discourse**

What is particularly interesting about Lat is the liberal multicultural milieu that makes his work legible in the international literary market also provides a legitimizing force for an ethno-nationalist appropriation of his work. That the supposedly contradictory ideologies of liberal multiculturalism and ethno-nationalism operate in tandem points to a constitutive paradox that lies at the heart of its shared narrative of economic modernity. This paradox is particularly evident in Malaysia’s state discourse in justifying the liberalization of the economy from the 1980s onwards. As Thomas Williamson persuasively demonstrates, the state derives its power and justifies its liberalization programs by emphasizing the economy as a realm in and through which the ethnically divided nation can exercise and develop its collective unity. If the precariousness of postcolonial race relations was made evident in the eruption of racial riots in 1969, the occasion, which culminated in a declaration of emergency and the suspension of parliamentary rule, it also provided an opportunity to implement a new social engineering program that would pave the way for economic liberalization. Attributing the violence to the consequences of Malay poverty, Williamson notes, the state introduced the National Economic Policy in the early 1970s whose aim is to “eliminate the identification of race with economic function” in an effort to promote national unity; nonetheless, its poverty eradication programs were designed along racial lines, primarily targeting Malays. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s “Malaysia Incorporated” initiative of 1981 carried out the NEP’s aims through privatization of state functions to produce a rent-seeking Malay business class. The initiative was
sold as a nation-building effort by likening the nation as a business corporation, whereby the advancement of a few promotes the well-being of the collective whole. The national economic polity implicit in Malaysia Inc. was further elaborated in his 1991 nation-building plan, “Vision 2020,” that set a timeline to develop Malaysia into a fully industrialized economy. As part of his agenda, Mahathir proposed the twin notions of Melayu Baru and Bangsa Malaysia of which the former, the New Malay, a modernized business-driven figure defined against the economically and culturally backwards racial stereotype, would be at the vanguard of the latter, a pan-ethnic Malaysian nation that would effectively constitute “Asia in microcosm” (Harper 242).

As Williamson concludes, “The power of the Malaysian state derives from its ability to define the Malaysian national body as something primarily economic and set in the future” (419). It is significant that the future is envisioned as a racially inclusive wealthy society that can only be achieved, ironically, by present-day policies that privilege the few Malay business elite. Certainly, as Williamson also notes, the incorporation or collectivization of the nation by economic means is contingent upon the volatile forces of global capital, as the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the subsequent destabilization of the Mahathir regime made clear. However, the point is neither simply that economic modernity’s promises of racial equality are false nor that rampant corruption and cronyism curtailed the project of economic modernity in postcolonial Malaysia, as evident by the favoring of a select Malay class. Rather, the articulation of the national body in economic terms underscores its ready openness and vulnerability to global capital flows, thus undergoing what Pheng Cheah calls autoimmunization. Drawn from Jacques Derrida’s later works, the concept of autoimmunization describes the suicidal character of an organism that seeks to protect itself by destroying the capacity of its immune system to
produce antibodies to combat the invasion of foreign antigens. Applied to the postcolonial nation-state, Cheah writes,

The autoimmune or suicidal character of hyperdevelopment through globalization lies in the fact that the constitution of the self’s very selfhood requires the exposure of the self to the alterity and heteronomy of capital flows. In defending itself against this other, the self is doing nothing other than compromising its own selfhood because its selfhood comes from the other (212).

In essence, foreign capital is something that, as Cheah puts it, appropriating Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s phrase, developing economies in the postcolonial South “cannot not want” (214). Yet, in welcoming foreign capital, the postcolonial nation-state is not just risking self-destruction, but destruction in the hands of an other (capital), thereby utterly destroying its own selfhood.

Therein lies the constitutive paradox of economic modernity. If exposure to foreign capital subjects the nation-state to the process of autoimmunization, the persistence of the racial logic alongside the corporatist rhetoric in state population management might be understood as a safeguard against the utter disintegration of the self through the identification of foreign elements that must be contained. In essence, even as the nation-state risks utter disintegration by welcoming foreign capital, it counteracts that process by maintaining a logic of racialism to distinguish a foreign “other” against which to define itself. Williamson observes that Mahathir’s *Bangsa Malaysia* concept emerged at the same time the nation experienced an influx of foreign workers to meet the hard labor demands of the booming 1990s economy. “Malaysian citizenship,” he writes, “is both defined against the relative economic weakness of foreign workers and by the positional advantage citizenship bestows to exploit this difference” (415). While Williamson is correct, the racial production of difference is not only directed at foreign
nationals but also at its own citizens. Although the *Melayu Baru* and *Bangsa Malaysia* concepts are described as representing the now and the future respectively, their side-by-side existence suggests that the economic liberalization programs must be packaged as nation-building, despite the risks described above, by sustaining the discourse and practices of racialism inherited from colonialism and perpetuated through the dominant form of anti-colonial nationalism. In this regard, the *Melayu Baru* concept provides the assurance that the special position of the Malays will be maintained even as the phrase “baru” or “new” advocates the acceptance of modernization. Second, while the historically loaded term of “bangsa” in “Bangsa Malaysia” stirred controversial debate on its implications for the constitutionally guaranteed racial hierarchy, its fuzzy promise of racial inclusivity serves as a signifier of the nation’s political stability and secure environment for foreign investments. Whether or not the promise of racial equality, conveniently postponed to a later date, is genuine, “*Bangsa Malaysia*” served the immediate purpose of functioning as good public relations to attract foreign capital.

Significantly, the constitutive paradox of economic modernity described above is not only made visible at points of crises such as the one triggered by the 1997 currency devaluation, and the political fall-out and regional social disintegration that ensued, although these events foreground it in dramatic fashion. Rather, expressions of the paradox and the mechanisms at work to conceal it can be found in the cartoons of Lat, whose career developed and flourished during the years of the Mahathir regime. Inasmuch as it serves as a representation of Malaysia, Lat’s work, particularly his editorial cartoons, is distinctive, to my mind, for its insight on the effects of modernization on everyday life. While his depictions of everyday scenes are striking for their attention to detail, thus evoking the frequent response that his work has captured some sense of a Malaysian quality, their genius to me lies in how they subtly convey the contradictions of modernity with humor and irony.
Consider the following two examples from his *New Straits Times* column, “Scenes of Malaysian Life.” The first cartoon interprets Mahathir’s *Melayu Baru* concept by offering a comparison between the old and new (fig. 1.2). The figure representing “*Melayu Lama*” or the “Old Malay” is dressed as a *pahlawan* or warrior, a hero figure of the *hikayat* or classical Malay tales. The word labels single out for attention his magical weapons worn on his body to fight evil mystical creatures that come his way – an amulet (“*azimat*”); a talisman (“*tangkal*”) and dagger (“*keris*”). In comparison, the “*Melayu Baru*” figure dons a Western business suit and wields a cellular phone and pager in contrast to the warrior’s spear and dagger, his body armed with a wide supply of drugs to stave off the modern day stressors caused by fluctuating financial markets. The dour expression of the old figure and the haplessness of the new adding visual humor to the piece, the tongue-in-cheek description of the *Melayu Baru* concept also offers a subtle commentary on race. In comparing the old and the new by looking at the way they dress, racial identity is implied to be a matter of adornment shaped by historical circumstances, a cultural performance rather than a fixed, unchanging essence as it is claimed by defenders of the national racial hierarchy. Moreover, the word labels identifying the clothing items of the *Melayu Lama* are listed in Malay and the new in English, with the scientific name of the drugs provided to emphasize the modernity of the age. In linking the old with the Malay and English with the new, the cartoon gestures at economic modernity’s impact on a global minority language that is, at the same time, a local or national majority language that asserts and dominates the national linguistic hierarchy.

The second cartoon directly addresses the issue of language (fig. 1.3). It depicts four scenes; the first three are different slogans projected on billboards used to promote the national language in the span of several decades. The slogans are, in chronological order: “Use our national language!”; “Language, the soul of the nation”; and “Prioritize our language.” The
changing backgrounds in the first three panels reflect the impact of industrialization on the nation’s landscape over the decades. In the fourth, the ironic newspaper headline succinctly conveys the impact of modernization—particularly the prestige attached to English as the global lingua franca of commerce and finance and the pressure to be fluent in it—on the status of the national language as such. In using “Bahasa,” which means “language” rather than “Bahasa Melayu” or “Bahasa Malaysia,” the cartoon sidesteps the debate about what to call the national language, drawing attention instead to the conundrum of what “our language” is. The presence of the schoolchildren and the school bus allude to the fact that educational institutions have historically played host to the battles about the designation of Malay as the sole national language and the implications for the status and preservation of Chinese and Indian languages.\(^9\)

Moreover, the cartoon’s original date of publication suggests the cartoon is a response to the ongoing public debate on whether mathematics and science, the two subjects given top priority for the nation’s development, should be taught in the national language or in English. In an ironical twist, the English newspaper headline indicates that the historical positions of the language battle have shifted, with advocates of Malay urging the need for cultural preservation in view of the pervasive influence of English. Indeed, the Malay v. English language debate puts ethno-nationalist proponents of economic liberalization in a paradoxical position, illustrated by the division within the ranks of the ruling Malay party, UMNO, and its embrace of modernization compelling the push for English as a teaching medium. However, this position puts them at odds with the party’s historical self-image as anti-colonial nationalists against the British and its periodic characterization of English as bahasa penjajah, or, the colonizer’s language, when politically advantageous. Moreover, the acquisition of English as the pathway to

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\(^9\) For a historical summary of the language debate in the decades before and after the 1950s, see Roff, Margaret. “The Politics of Language in Malaya.” *Asian Survey* 7 (5) 1967: 316-328.
modernization indirectly casts Malay as a parochial language, one unable to adapt to contemporary changes.

Figure 1.2. "Melayu Lama vs. Melayu Baru" in Scenes of Malaysian Life. Image from Pameran Retrospektif Lat/Lat Retrospective Exhibition catalogue.
In essence, the cartoons incisively capture the political complexities of language and nation. The exclusive promotion of Malay as the national language over and above other widely spoken languages in the country rightly invites a critique of ethno-nationalism. However, the embrace of English as a strategic common language, especially in view of its status as the global lingua franca of commerce and finance, conveniently forgets the historical lesson of British colonialism, namely that if its mastery promises socioeconomic advancement, it also promotes and maintains class divides for those without access to English. Indeed, the anti-colonial if ethno-nationalist argument against English might be understood as a displaced expression of class anxiety, a theme that plays out in several Malay comic books published in the 1950s. However the cartoons also suggest, albeit indirectly, that the solution to the language problem
not taken, the accordance of multiple languages as national is not a perfect one either. In essence, it is through linguistic difference that the cartoons convey their respective messages: in the first example, the unexpected mutations of racial identity as it undergoes modernization, and in the second, the historical irony of the national language debate. By imbuing language with a specific meaning—with Malay essentially signifying old and parochial, and English new and modern—and distinguishing it from its usual function of transporting meaning in general, the cartoons point to the unequal status of languages, in this case, the dominance of English over Malay. By extension, the cartoons problematize the notion that a certain parity exists across languages in general, or, more precisely, that if a parity amongst different languages is presumed, it is embedded within a hierarchical structure.

But, why is it significant to observe the unequal status of languages in the process of modernization? How is linguistic inequality pertinent to understanding modernity? The doubt cast over the parity between languages yields a more nuanced understanding of translation, on which, as Lydia Liu points out, modernity’s universalizing impulse relies to further its hegemony across cultures. “Universalism thrives on difference,” Liu writes. “It does not reject difference but translates and absorbs it into its own orbit of antithesis and dialectic” (1).

Translation then is the process that determines what constitutes difference and equivalence. The bilingual cartoons suggest that while Malay and English are equivalent in terms of their capacity for signification, they are different, that is, unequal, in status. Thus, translation produces equivalence, but not equality; it makes commensurate and comparable, but it does not make equal. Liu’s observation on translation’s role in universalizing modernity highlights the political stakes involved in the circulation of knowledge across cultural contexts, as well as the conditions of asymmetrical power in which they generally occur. Calling attention to how the “reciprocity of meaning-value” is established or denied across different cultural contexts, Liu
moves beyond the impasse at which poststructuralist theories of translation often arrive—the “impossibility” and “necessity” of translation, as Derrida puts it—to elaborate how this paradox has historically been surmounted to extend the hegemonic reach of modernity (Liu 2; Derrida 4). Liu’s historical examples of translations from English to Chinese and vice versa demonstrate the “coauthorship” involved in establishing or refusing commensurability. Despite the unequal conditions of exchange, it is the reciprocal desire of both parties that drives the knowledge transaction, hence the importance of addressing the question of value—the circumstances under which the making of meaning is meaningful—in translational practices.

**Translation and the “Universal Grammar” of Nationalism**

Remarking on the politics of race and language in the context of economic modernization, Lat’s cartoons thus offer a picture of the reciprocal desire—a coerced desire, development in the guise of economic liberalization being something that the postcolonial nation cannot not want—that arises from an unequal distribution of global economic power. More significantly, it demonstrates the link between the national politics of race and the workings of the global political economy. However, while economic modernization challenges ethno-nationalist racial ideology, it does not necessarily prove that capitalism paves the way for a more progressive, egalitarian society. Quite the contrary. Despite their subtle derision of economic modernization and of politicians, Lat’s cartoons are often celebrated by the state with the artist himself hailed as a national icon; most recently, Lat was the chosen featured artist in a state sponsored art exhibition themed “1Malaysia,” to promote current Malaysian Prime Minister

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10 See also, Liu, *Translingual Practice*, p.16.
Najib Tun Razak’s public relations campaign promoting racial unity.\textsuperscript{11} Given the strict regulation of press and the state’s record of suppressing dissent, it is unlikely that the appropriation of Lat as a national celebrity is an indication of the state’s blindness to political opinions in the interest of recognizing artistic talent.\textsuperscript{12}

Certainly, it is possible to argue that the state may simply be missing the subtle criticisms of Lat, making its celebration of his work doubly ironic. However, the cache behind the multiculturalist ethos of his work should give pause to a naïve underestimation of the state as simply misreading Lat’s work. In addition to the museumization of Lat’s work, the nation’s airline companies, Malaysia Airlines and Air Asia, have also commissioned the artist to produce advertising material. Benedict Anderson has shown how the museum operates as an institution of power that unifies a group of people under a common national identity. For the colonial state, the museum was the site of knowledge production of those it governed, as exemplified by its efforts to restore and preserve “discovered” ancient monuments, and subsequently, a display and amplification of colonial state power when these sites evolved into tourist attractions and whose images were reproduced by and distributed through the technologies of print capitalism. For Anderson, the postcolonial state’s adoption of this colonial technology of governance exemplifies the logic of seriality that constitutes the nation at the same time it provides an

\textsuperscript{11} Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak’s 1Malaysia public relations campaign is an example of how global multiculturalism and ethno-nationalism complement one another. Launched in 2009 with the slogan “People First, Performance Now,” the campaign promotes unity across the races, underscoring its importance for securing a competitive edge in attracting foreign investors to build the national economy. The emphasis on racial unity is a response to the general election results of the previous year, in which Najib’s party, UMNO, and its coalition, Barisan Nasional, lost an unprecedented number of constituencies to the opposing coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, whose platform essentially critiqued the incumbent administration’s race based economic policies. Despite its inclusive rhetoric and symbolic gestures, Najib’s administration has continued to uphold policies that sustain institutional racism. However, Najib’s plans to liberalize the economy, which would involve dismantling protectionist policies favoring the Malays, has met with strong opposition within members of his own party. See Chin, James, “The Rise of Najib and 1Malaysia.”

\textsuperscript{12} The arrest of cartoonist, Zunar, under the Sedition Act and the ban of his work, which is overtly critical of the Najib administration is a testament both to the power of the political caricature and the reach of the state’s repressive regime.
historical perspective of how the nation-state was adopted as the political form in non-European ex-colonial settings. The serial logic of the nation, moreover, insists that the postcolonial state is not simply a derivative of its colonial predecessor, but points to the dialectical nature of its emergence in history—“the nineteenth-century colonial state (and policies that its mindset encouraged) dialectically engender[ing] the grammar of the nationalisms that eventually rose to combat it’’ (xvi). In essence, if the serial logic of the nation explains how the nation-state, riding on the coat-tails of print capitalism, came to be accepted as the universally recognized political entity in recent history, Anderson’s analysis of the museum, along with the census and map, refines the universal thrust of his idea of nation by giving it a historical dimension.

Liu has suggested that Anderson’s dialectical engagement of the universal and historical puts into question his foundational assumption about the nation, that it inherently imagines itself as both sovereign and limited (“Desire”). Similarly, I argue that the function of Lat as national icon offers a more complex picture of sovereignty than the terms in which Anderson articulates it. In my earlier discussion of Piyadasa and Muliyadi, I pointed out that despite their conflicting claims of Lat’s national significance, they both referred to his international success to validate their respective arguments. Lat’s success is thus crucial to understanding his status as national icon, and the use of his caricatures for advertising purposes offers an illuminating insight as to the nature of sovereignty implied in his iconicity. The commissioning of Lat for the marketing campaigns of the nation’s airline carriers complements the state’s branding of Malaysia as “truly Asia” to promote its tourism industry. Much in the same way that his animation for *Mina Smiles* is viewed as conveying a sense of pan-Asian-ness, the pantheon of Lat’s characters effectively communicates the multicultural ethos of the “Malaysia, truly Asia” slogan.

Lat’s international success and his work’s function as a multicultural icon dovetails neatly into the state’s framing of economic modernization as the means through which the
diverse groups constituting the body politic can cohere as a unit. More significantly, it demonstrates how the nation’s political sovereignty is bound up in its economic performance and cannot simply be presumed as a given, but must be earned. This is evident in the multiculturalist branding of the nation, which presents the country as possessing the politically stable conditions to attract foreign investors while inwardly shoring up the incumbent government’s political legitimacy, particularly among its non-Malay constituents. In this manner, the making of Lat as a national icon troubles Anderson’s logic of seriality given that Lat’s museumization by no means constitutes Malaysia as part of the unbound replicable series of nations that traces its past “up historical time” (185). Rather, the narrative of progress and achievement that is embedded in the state’s celebration of the cartoonist suggests that sovereignty for the postcolonial state is not something inherited and self-evident or that which can be taken for granted, but something on the future horizon towards which it must strive and attempt to hold on to. The universality of the “grammar” of nationalism is thus put into question seeing as it is articulated differently in the postcolony. Thus, the language of nationalism undergoes a translation, in the case of Malaysia, the sovereign status of the imagined political community transmuted into economic terms.

To conclude this section, I consider one implication for not thinking the nation-form as universalized through translation, and address in the next section a further examination of the significance of understanding it as such. Earlier, I suggested that Piyadasa’s treatment of the bildung narrative as universal overlooks the historical fact of the Bildungsroman as being the genre in which the writer from the postcolonial South gains recognition amongst a Western readership. Similarly, the acceptance of economic liberalization as a natural and inevitable path of progress ignores the historical circumstances in which foreign capital becomes something a postcolonial nation-state cannot not want. My aim in proposing the figure of translation as a means of understanding the nation-form is to question the acceptance of these narratives as
universal. Given that asking why translation is undertaken reveals how the different linguistic and cultural parties involved relate to each other in terms of power, thinking the process of becoming nation translationally shows the unequal terms on which postcolonial national sovereignty is achieved and sustained, as well as how conditions of inequality are continually enforced. Thus, translation is not only a mediation of difference, but also a means of managing and maintaining the hierarchies it produces.

The following comparison of the English and Malay versions of Lat’s The Kampung Boy/Budak Kampung offers an example as to how the management of linguistic difference through translation can be used to maintain a racial hierarchy enabled by economic modernization. In the Malay version, the text opens with an additional paragraph not present in either the U.S. or Malaysian English editions. The English versions begin with the narrator’s story of his birth, as related to him by his mother. In the Malay version, however, the narration begins with the following two paragraphs, translated as follows:


Tapi ada detik-detik peristiwa kecil yang walau pun kecil teman fikir mustahil dapat teman lupakan. Peristiwa-peristiwa yang kecil inilah yang ingin sangat teman gambarkan dalam buku yang tidak seperti ini...*

My life in the village was not very remarkable. It could be said it was ordinary. Nothing of import happened to me. Besides, I am not a hero. My story is not very different from that of other village children.
But there are moments, insignificant events that I find impossible to forget. These are what I wish to depict in this book, which is not comparable to what is in my memory...

The next sentence, which corresponds with the opening line in English, is slightly modified and includes an additional clause, italicized below and translated as follows:

*Ada pun teman ini berasal dari sebuah kampung di tengah-tengah jajahan Kinta yang sebagaimana kami tahu, terkenal di seluruh dunia dengan hasil bijih timahnya.*

I was born in a kampung in the Kinta Valley in Perak, *which as we all know*, is world renowned for its tin.

Whereas the English versions presume a reader who is unfamiliar with the narrator’s place of origin, the Malay addresses an implied reader who not only knows kampung life, but has probably lived it as well. My translation of the Malay “teman” into the English first-person pronoun, “I,” occludes the former’s meaning of “friend.” The third-person self-reference, commonly used in Malay to signal humility, as is the case here, is further emphasized in the narrator’s modest introduction to his work. However, the humble posture here is not simply consistent with Malay linguistic and cultural practice, but necessary given its implied audience. After all, why would one want to read a work, which is not only set in familiar surroundings, but depicts a life that is merely “ordinary”? In presenting the book as a record of collective memory shared by the narrator and his reader, the introduction further identifies the latter as one who has a common cultural background as that depicted in the text. The appended introduction can thus be read as an aside that the narrator exclusively addresses not only a Malay-reading audience, but one that *ethnically* identifies itself as Malay. It establishes an us-them distinction, differentiating both the narrator and implied reader, who are already intimately familiar with the kampung, from
its general audience, which only becomes acquainted with the place through reading the work. In essence, the introduction points to a different purpose that the Malay translation plays beyond its basic function of providing the Malay linguistic community access to an Anglophone work; it also recovers the text as originating from a Malay cultural community.

As I argue in the next section, *The Kampung Boy* series complicates a progressive narrative; however, the ending of its first book lends itself to a celebratory tale of progress, which the Malay version emphasizes. The first book ends with Mat excelling in his school examinations and earning a place in an English boarding school in the city, a promise of upward socio-economic mobility. Friends and family gather around the village to send him off and his grandmother reminds him to never forget those whom he has left behind. Significantly, the Malay version omits the line, “It was as if I was going for good,” Mat’s departing thoughts as he boards the bus to the city, which is in the English. His thoughts foreshadow the future. For as *Town Boy* confirms, his family’s move to the city suggests that his father had indeed sold his land to tin mining speculators, a peripheral possibility hinted at throughout *The Kampung Boy* both metaphorically and literally as depicted on the page by the monstrous tin dredgers eating away at the land. The sale is significant as it constitutes a breach in his father’s promise—in a pep talk, Mat’s father had presented the land to him as his future inheritance, urging him to take his studies seriously—and the impossibility of ever returning home (fig. 1.4).
This loss of home and childhood innocence not only characterizes the work as a bildung narrative, but also serves as the counteractive force against the nation’s relentless pursuit of modernization, which frames the autobiographical story throughout all three works in the series. The omission of the final line in the Malay version, along with the fact that, to this day, Malay translations of the subsequent two books in the series do not exist, effectively suppress the central theme of loss and figure the kampung as a site that represents Malay authenticity.¹³ This figuration of the kampung as such is a dominant trope in ethno-nationalist discourse used to support the bumiputera—literally, sons of the earth—status of the Malays, thus deserving special constitutional privileges over and above non-Malay citizens. Considered together, the appended introduction and omission in the Malay version frames the work as the product of an artistic talent borne out of Malay culture. The introduction’s description of the kampung’s location in the

¹³ Indeed, only the first book that remains translated in over 13 languages, whereas the second and third have not.
world renowned Kinta Valley hints that the book might have greater significance than belies its humble stature, gesturing to an audience beyond its intimate circle—one to which the English version and its other translations in fact cater. More significantly, the artist’s international success, as the multiple translations of his work prove, feeds into a reading of the text as a triumphalist narrative of individual achievement, the *kampung* boy no longer a pejorative term indicating cultural backwardness, but a sign of ethnic and cultural virility, as well as a privileged marker of national identity.

My point in making this comparison is not to lament the corrupt nature of the Malay version, thereby assuming the English version as authentic and lauding it for not being ethno-nationalistic. In fact, it is difficult to conclude which version of the text is original, since both versions were published around the same time in 1979. Rather, the comparison demonstrates how linguistic difference, with its propensity to further entrench ethnic distinctions, lends itself to maintaining an ethno-national hierarchy when it is sutured to a celebratory narrative of progress in the same way the Malay version frames the story of Mat to intertwine the success story of his artist-creator, Lat. The framing of *Budak Kampung* in this manner demonstrates how ethno-nationalist ideology is made compatible with economic modernization, one that is reinforced by the technology of recognition of liberal multiculturalism in the Western literary marketplace. Paying attention to the function of translation in the process of universalization, specifically, the naturalization of cultural difference and the capitalist mode of economic modernization makes it possible to see how ethno-nationalism and liberal multiculturalism are both sides of the same coin that constitute modernity.

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14 In an interview, Lat has indicated that the work was originally written in English and translated into Malay by Zainon Ahmad, a friend and now prominent member of the Malaysian press, although no translation credit is given in the publication (Haroon 538). Moreover, the lettering in several pages of the English version are word processed compared to the other pages, which are rendered in the cartoonist’s handwriting. All of the lettering in the Malay version is in handwritten form, suggesting that both the English and Malay versions might have been produced concurrently, even if the former had the earlier market release date.
In the previous section, I suggested that the postcolonial state of Malaysia justifies its embrace of economic liberalization by presenting the economy as a realm through which the ethnically divided nation can exercise and develop national unity in the name of progress. Although the state invokes the future possibility of racial unity that economic modernization supposedly promises, its policies nonetheless maintain a racial hierarchy that reinforces ethno-nationalist ideology. I argued the state’s ethno-nationalist tendencies are not at odds with economic liberalization; rather, because the flow of global capital potentially undermines the sovereign status of the nation, as the 1997 Asian financial crisis so dramatically demonstrated, ethno-nationalism is invoked as a means of defining national boundaries through the logic of racialism to counteract the disintegrative effects of globalization. Examining the making of Lat the cartoonist as a national icon and his international celebrity status abroad, I demonstrated how translation can be used to leverage the Western liberal multicultural demands attached with economic modernization to sustain the hegemony of ethno-nationalist ideology, with which it purportedly conflicts.

In this section, I further explore my focus on translation as a means of questioning the universality of the *bildung* narrative and of the nation-state, and of understanding their manifestations in the postcolony as other than flawed copies, malformed mutants of the original. Circumventing the trope of fidelity that dominates translation discourse, I draw on emerging discussions of translation that understand the practice as a means of knowledge circulation and production, that is, as a mode of universalization. Following Lydia Liu, whose thinking on translation is influenced by Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin, I examine the grounds on
which translation is possible and desirable, as well as evaluate the power dynamics attendant in processes of establishing use- and exchange-value.

My comparison of the English and Malay versions of *The Kampung Boy/Budak Kampung* in the previous section demonstrated the role of translation in facilitating a complicitous relationship between multicultural liberalism and ethno-nationalism. Specifically, I pointed out the differences in their prose narratives, the English trilogy presenting a coming-of-age story that culminates in the story of multiracial friendship while the Malay concludes on a triumphalist note of ethno-cultural virility. The fact that both versions are linked through translation, I argued, suggest that multicultural liberalism and ethno-nationalism are not mutually exclusive, but operate in tandem to reinforce the hegemony of global capitalism. Thus, as national icon, Lat can function both as an icon of ethno-nationalism and of multicultural liberalism, despite their contradictory stances, because they are both grounded in the common narrative of capitalist progress.

However, because the question as to which language version constitutes the original is indeterminable, it seems that translation in this case circumvents its usual tropes of fidelity/treachery. What is foregrounded instead is its operation of circulating and reinforcing a particular frame of knowledge. Put another way, translation produces a bifurcation of meaning (ethno-nationalist and multiculturalist)—one that cannot be construed as a mis-translation given the indeterminacy of the original—at the same time it affirms the grounds (capitalist development) on which this difference is made. Thus, to think of translation not in terms of its faithfulness to the original but as a mode of knowledge production, as Liu invites us to do, does not necessarily entail escaping the tropes of fidelity and betrayal. They continue to be in play albeit at a second order and not in mutually exclusive ways, but simultaneously—translation is promiscuous in its indiscriminate proliferation of meaning at the same that it remains faithful in reproducing the
conditions of its own possibility. In this manner, although Liu’s attention to the extraction of value through the (re-)production of meaning reveals a political dimension in translation, its predisposition tends toward viewing translation as invariably serving the interest of the dominant or the hegemonic given its role as a means of universalization.

In this section, I consider whether translation might possess a radical potential to change the conditions of its own possibility rather than simply reiterate them through a reading of The Kampung Boy trilogy. Specifically, I examine its deployment of the comics medium to convey a sense of nostalgia for a way of life no longer possible, that is, to present a sentimentalized ideal of the past at the same time that it functions as an ethnographic text, or as a work that makes knowledge claims about a particular culture. Put simply, the trilogy can be said to translate one mode of writing into another, namely that of conveying a personalized, sentimental view into an objective description of the world and vice versa. I suggest that the trilogy utilizes and foregrounds a translational dimension of the comics form in order to operate in both modes, sentimental and ethnographic, simultaneously.

Before proceeding with a reading of the trilogy, let us further unpack the notion of comics as a translational medium. In what follows, I argue that Scott McCloud’s understanding of comics as “an invisible art” lends itself to thinking about the medium as translational. In his seminal work, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, McCloud develops a theory of comics by extrapolating two conclusions he draws from his analysis of the cartoon form. McCloud assigns specific meanings to the terms, “cartoon” and “comics,” the former a style of drawing while the latter, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). A cartoon rendering of the face, a circle encapsulating two dots and a dash, ☀️, serves as his definitive example, from which he offers the following two points. First, the cartoon blurs the distinction
generally made between word and image, that is, that words are associated with the conceptual realm of ideas, or, whose role it is to “tell,” and images with the mimetic, or, to “show” (138-161). As the ☇ illustrates, the cartoon style is an abstraction of the facial figure to basic line strokes to produce a generic form so that the image performs an iconic rather than a mimetic function. As an iconic style of drawing, the cartoon form approximates the abstract mode of linguistic signification. Other examples include the drawing of curvy lines above the bowl of a pipe to signify smoke and above an overturned trash can to signify smell. The point is that the cartoon style does not ultimately aim to produce a mimetic image but perform a symbolic function. Certainly comics by and large adhere to a distribution of functions that assign words and images the tasks of telling and showing, respectively. However, because comics produce meaning through various configurations of word-image relations, the difference between word and image is irreducible so that, potentially, to show and to tell become two indistinguishable operations (161).

In essence, the cartoon form’s iconicity is derived from the relational and irreducible difference between word and image. This brings us to the second point: the cartoon form requires active reader participation to produce meaning, affirming Marshall McLuhan’s categorization, in his famous book, *Understanding Media*, of the cartoon as a “cool” medium. His influence on McCloud is evident from the latter’s book title. As the example of the face suggests, the cartoon form distills an object to its most basic conceptual shape, inviting the reader to “[fill] up” the form to produce meaning (37). The accessibility of the form, argues McCloud, ought not simply be dismissed as a primitive language that appeals largely to children, or those whose literacy skills have yet to fully develop. Rather, cartoons are an exemplary form of the McLuhanesque idea of media as extension of man insofar as they count on the reader to identify with and inhabit the form in its capacity to produce meaning. In his bid to recognize comics as an art form and to
combat dismissal of comics as mindless mass entertainment, McCloud goes so far as to claim comics as anticipating and embodying the key idea about art and representation as exemplified by Rene Magritte’s famous work, “The Treachery of Images”—the representationality of representation. But whereas the self-referentialist turn in the discourse on representation institutes an elitist divide in its manifestation as abstract Modernist artistic expression—and, one might add, obfuscatory theory-speak—that is inaccessible to a wider public, McCloud sees comics as the unrecognized and unwitting medium through which the representationality of representation, or, the modern idea of the sign, as he calls it, became mass culture. The medium is the message.

In his desire to account for the legitimacy of comics as art and its popular appeal, McCloud inadvertently arrives at a contradictory statement about the cartoon image—that it is at once universal and iconic. It could be argued that McCloud’s choice of the word, “universality,” to describe the cartoon form might be better replaced with the word “generalizability” or even “generic,” seeing as the point he attempts to make about the 😊 is that “the more cartoony a face is ... the more people it could be said to describe” (31). However, the mistaken word choice is an indication of the seductive power of the image to come across as real even as its viewer knows it is not. McCloud’s own seduction by the power of the image—his seeing the image as universal, as self-evident and real—and his disavowal of that desire to see the image as real is dramatized in his explanation as to what structures the process of viewer identification with the cartoon form (figs 1.5a-b).

Having marveled with almost child-like wonder at the human mind’s ability to see a circle, two dots and a dash as a face, McCloud then rationally deduces that the ability to see a face in a variety of image-objects that do not bear an immediate resemblance to a face has to do with intrinsic human nature. In so doing, McCloud moves from being enraptured by the power of
the ☺ image over the human mind—“...you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won’t let you!”—to denying the image’s power over the viewer and insisting instead on the viewer’s control over the process of seeing: “We humans are a self-centered race ...We see ourselves in everything” (31; 32-33). But rather than prove the viewer’s tendency to see herself in everything, the variety of image-objects as face demonstrates the rhetoricity of the image. For in asking the reader to see a human face in different things such as amoeba-like shapes, an electrical socket, a frontal view of a car, or a bird’s eye view of a container of cheese, the power of these images lies in their ability to appear as something other than themselves. Put simply, whereas the iconicity of the image refers to its capacity to signify or contain meaning, its rhetoricity describes its mode of meaning making as a gesture towards something else. The image’s message is mediation. McCloud’s effort to articulate the universal essence of the cartoon form makes clear the entanglement of desires that constitute the reader’s relation to the image. The point is not so much that the desire to see her own self-image disables the reader from seeing otherwise, but that the desire to see the image for what it is leads the reader to see herself in the image. My point in reading the excerpt above is to demonstrate that the image-text vocabulary of comics invites what I call a translational mode of reading. Employing two distinct modes of signification, word and image, comics produce meaning by playing on the relational differences between the two. As such, the reader is required to decipher a link between word and image, a way of reading that might be understood as translational because it involves moving back and forth between two modes of signification, as well as making a connection between the two by working out how an idea expressed in one form plays out in relation to another. In the above excerpt, the verbal claim
being made about the cartoon form can simply be taken at face value, with the images serving as its illustration. But, as I have tried to show, working out the verbal claims on the images in their own terms demonstrates their rhetoricity, which, in turn, foregrounds the unstated role of desire in acts of decoding images. Thus, the rhetoricity of images not only disrupts its own mimetic logic in its iconic function, but in comics, touches upon language’s attempts to reach beyond itself, to that which it cannot quite say. If the task of the translator is to make the leap between two modes of signification, to attend to the rhetoricity of one medium and to find its expression in another, then the mode of reading that comics require might be thought of as an act of translation. In particular, the translational mode of reading demanded by comics foregrounds the active but often unacknowledged role of desire in producing meaning-value.

One might say that to attribute rhetoricity to the image is to think it in terms of language, that is, in terms other than its own. However, the term “rhetoricity” is useful precisely because its connotation of a linguistic operation captures the muteness of the image, its inability to speak except through an other. Recognizing that images only have the power to speak via the other heeds W. J. T. Mitchell’s caution against overestimating the power of the image. It wards off the inflation of the dominance of images in global mass culture, their immediacy and effortlessness at crossing linguistic boundaries, as being equivalent to the power of a universal language that transcends difference. At the same time, because rhetoric is inextricably bound to idiom, pointing to the historicity of language, images as a mode of signification might require a literacy to decode. This literacy should not presume a viewer’s innate mastery over the image but emerges through a translational act of reading. Indeed, the shift in Mitchell’s analysis of images from power to desire to asking, “What do images want?” not only stages the act of decoding images as an act of translation insofar as to invite the image to speak is to transfer meaning expressed in
one form to another. It also demonstrates that the articulation and expression of the image’s desire, rather than intrinsic to the image itself, is a co-production of the reader, text and image combined.
Figure 1.5a. "We see ourselves in everything." Image from Understanding Comics.
Figure 1.5b. “We see ourselves in everything.” Image from Understanding Comics.
As Spivak suggests, reading in general might be thought of as a translational practice (“The Politics of Translation” 197). Are comics a unique case? A more productive question might be to ask about the translational moments in comics, the instances in which the expression of meaning can take place only in crossing from medium to another, index. If, as I have argued, comics generate meaning through the relational differences between word and image, then the task of the reader-as-translator, to use Spivak’s term, is to attend to how the muteness of the image is expressed in language and how the unspeakable is rendered in image form (“The Politics of Translation” 197). This is not to say that what cannot be expressed in one mode of signification can be easily done in another. On the contrary, I am calling attention to how the unspeakable and the invisible—the untranslatable—find their expressions in another form. Of course, what is untranslatable is not necessarily that which is simply the unsaid and the invisible. But if, as in the case of the mute image, the untranslatable, whether word or image, wants to speak and can only do so via the expressive means of the other, what do the translational moments and the relational differences at work in comics index about history, historical form and the history of form?

Analyzing the relational differences between image and text, Mitchell writes, “The image/text is neither a method nor a guarantee of historical discovery; it is more like an aperture or cleavage in representation, a place where history might slip through the cracks” (Picture Theory 104). In the case of Lat’s The Kampung Boy series in particular, what might the relational differences in word and image reveal about the constitutive absences that shape the historical moment as depicted by the works? Let us now turn to a reading of The Kampung Boy trilogy.
Nostalgia: A Translational Image

The move from country to city. The decimation of rural spaces and the rapid growth of urban areas. The characterization of the city as center and the country as marginal. These are commonplace indices of space-time to denote industrialization and capitalist development. *The Kampung Boy* series borrows a similar motif to allude to the larger historical changes that constitute the backdrop of Mat’s coming-of-age story.

The narrative begins in a village setting where Mat spends his boyhood (the first book, *The Kampung Boy*), followed by a move to an industrial town where he passes his teenage years (the second book, *Town Boy*) and culminates in the nation’s capital and financial metropolis of Kuala Lumpur, where the artist Lat, Mat’s creator, has established his career (the third book, *Kampung Boy: Yesterday and Today*). The third book abandons its progressivist plot—it does not assume a title like “Metropolitan Man”—and serves up idyllic images of Mat’s village childhood days to contrast with the artist’s present-day polluted, overcrowded urban environment, suggesting that nostalgia is the structure of feeling that constitutes the experience of capitalist development.

Indeed, the third book’s oppositional positioning of the *kampung* as an idealized site of origin—the image of blissfully unclothed children emphasizing the Edenic nature of their surroundings—versus the congested, polluted metropolis as a melancholic emblem of progress and modernity might be called “a myth functioning as memory” (Williams 43). In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams notes that nostalgia, specifically the feeling of irretrievable loss and subsequent idealization of home, works to disguise the deleterious effects of capitalism, “separat(ing) the consequences from the system” and “ascrib(ing) to social decay what was actually the result of social and economic growth” (82). This might be the case with regard to the third book, whose gripes about city living focus on moral social concerns, with the materialistic
tendencies of and lack of neighborly feeling amongst urbanites as proof of the corruptive force of
city-living absent in rural life. However, the images that invoke a sense of nostalgia also
convey a wealth of historical, ethnographic detail that disrupts the framing of the *kampung* as a
pre-capitalist, uncontaminated space that subsequently disappears with the arrival of
industrialization and capitalist modernity.

The invocation of nostalgia through the ethnographic image produces an interesting
tension. The former is thought to be a distorted view of the past whereas the latter claims to
present objective facts. In this section, I examine how the series produces nostalgia, paying
particular attention to the various configurations of text and image that deploy an ethnographic
mode of knowledge production that, at the same time, generates a bildung narrative. While
Piyadasa is critical of the nostalgic tones of Lat’s third book because it renders toothless a
critique of unbridled capitalist development embraced by the state, I suggest that the series’
production of nostalgia might be read as a placeholder for what constitutes the untranslatable in
the dominant narrative of personal development tied to capitalism. If nostalgia is a yearning for
that which never was, it might also be read otherwise as an invitation to imagine what history
might have been and to consider the possibilities foreclosed by what has become history.
Specifically, I propose that nostalgia, as presented by the *The Kampung Boy* series, might be
understood as a translational image. A riff on Williams’ phrase, “interpretive image,”
“translational image” attends to the mode of reading that the comics form requires to make sense
of the picture of community that emerges from the changes wrought by capitalist development as
marked by the series’ shifting backdrops of the *kampung*, industrial town and financial

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15 Although Lat’s other book-length narrative series, *Mat Som*, depicts city life from the working class perspective
compared to *The Kampung Boy’s* bourgeois point of view, it similarly focuses on moral decay, the forgetting of
one’s cultural and humbler roots in favor of Western-influenced lifestyle even as it focuses on the hardships
experienced by the rural migrant.
metropolis.\textsuperscript{16} Given the national iconic status of Lat/Mat, nostalgia produces a mythical memory to forge national unity and a collective identity to disguise the devastating effects of capitalist development. However, it is the material traces of word and image on the page that produce this nostalgia, suggesting a more complex relationship between the material and the affective than a straightforward critique of nostalgia as distorting the past allows. While such a critique of nostalgia constitutes a materialist analysis—i.e. an analysis of the economic modes of production—of nation formation, my understanding of nostalgia as translational image is attuned to the different registers of materiality, examining also the role of the representational as material in making community.

My analysis is informed by essays on nostalgia and its expression in film and video by Rey Chow and Alexandra Juhasz respectively. While Chow and Juhasz draw different, but not necessarily conflicting conclusions about nostalgia, both note its oscillation between private and public, between its manifestation as feeling and as object. I am also struck by how both essays derive their analysis of nostalgia through a comparison of works from different media—between literature and film for Chow and the photograph and video for Juhasz. Similarly, my appropriation of their analysis on nostalgia in film and video to read comics involves a comparative move. This common thread in methodology suggests that nostalgia is itself a feeling on the move. It is not an arrested state characterized by a fixation on the past, but one that makes itself felt across different media technologies. If, as various scholars have noted, the rapid social and environmental change brought about by late capitalism has also given rise to a pervasive sense of nostalgia in public life, in what ways do media technologies produce, circulate and modulate this affect? As I will show, the figure of translation serves as a useful means of

\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{The Country and the City}, Williams suggests that the physical change the city of London underwent in the 19th century because of the Industrial Revolution offers an “interpretive image” of social life.
tracking nostalgia’s movement across technologies. That is, it tracks nostalgia’s movement across different forms of measuring time and space, in turn, potentially opening ways of historicizing capitalist development that attend to its traumatic effects that nostalgia attempts to efface.

Hiding in Plain Sight

In her analysis of the pervasiveness of nostalgia in late twentieth-century Hong Kong consumer culture, Rey Chow problematizes the idea that nostalgia is a private feeling that obstructs an objective view of the past. Chow inverts the idea that it is “a feeling triggered by an object lost in the past,” and proposes thinking of nostalgia as “a feeling looking for an object” and analyzes the expression of nostalgia in the depiction of place in the 1988 Hong Kong hit movie, Rouge (211). She writes:

Nostalgia is not simply a reaching toward the definite past from a definite present, but a subjective state that seeks to express itself in pictures imbued with particular memories of a certain pastness. In *film*, these subjectively pictorialized memories are there for everyone to see: nostalgia thus has a public life as much as a purely private one. The cinematic image, because of its visible nature, becomes a wonderfully appropriate embodiment of nostalgia’s ambivalence between dream and reality, of nostalgia’s insistence on seeing ‘concrete’ things in fantasy and memory (215).

Although Chow’s insights are drawn from a reading of the “filmic image,” they are worth considering with regards to the comics book form. Important differences will emerge, however, which I will discuss later. Significantly, Chow’s analysis of nostalgia as filmic image is informed by Pier Paolo Pasolini’s work on how the literary concept of free, indirect discourse is translated into the cinematic form. Briefly, whereas the abstract nature of language permits an oscillation
between first- and third-person narration that is denied the filmic image’s concreteness, the latter is particularly suited for metaphorically conveying dreamlike and unconscious memory. As Pasolini argues, films that use the literary technique of free, indirect discourse often adopt the perspective of an “abnormal” protagonist who provides a narrative alibi for stylistic experimentation; this not only imbues the film images with oneiric quality, but renders the perspectives of the filmmaker and the character as inseparable. Chow’s reading of Rouge extends this oscillation between reality and dream world, film auteur and character to an ambivalence between private and public in order to address the role of nostalgia in popular cinematic form in producing collective identity.

Whereas the camera mediates the shuttling between first- and third-person perspectives in film, in comics this oscillation is embodied in the strokes on the page, given that the images depicted always allude to the artist’s hand. In the case of The Kampung Boy series, the shuttling between subjective and objective perspectives and private and public realms also marks a movement back and forth between memory and history, autobiography and ethnography. For instance, whereas the verbal narrative situates the artist in the contemporaneous present looking back in time, the pictures present a view of the past, thereby featuring past and present simultaneously on the page. Moreover, the sequential placement of frames plots a progressive timeline while the verbal text’s retrospective glance produces a Janus-faced effect, one that brings about the loss-of-innocence theme common in bildung narratives. At the discursive level, the texts shift back and forth between the autobiographical “I” to the ethnographic eye so that what is articulated as memory also comes to stand in as history.

The ethnographic tone is particularly explicit in the first and third books, in which the kampung is the primarily featured setting, and much less so in Town Boy. This indicates that spatio-temporal protocols undergird the works’ bildung narrative. The title of the third book,
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*Kampung Boy: Yesterday and Today*, spells it out clearly, as does the allusion to film technology in the images’ grammar of time—black and white sketch renderings of the *kampung* set in the past juxtaposed against the watercolor images of the city in the present. The classification of the *kampung* as belonging in the past is reinforced not only speaking of it only in the past tense, but also by the ethnographic frame, which as Johannes Fabian argues, introduces a progressive “stream of time” that situates its object back “downstream” from the vantage point of the gaze “upstream” (17). The book is a lament against the living conditions of an urban, industrialized setting increasingly becoming the norm in the hyper-developing nation. But the book’s ethnographic portrayal of the *kampung* naturalizes the evolutionary temporal frame that posits capitalist development as inevitable. At the same time as it stages the work as a representation of cultural difference for a North American audience, as previously discussed, the ethnographic frame also affirms an understanding of history as a progressive movement and dovetails neatly with the narrative of personal development.

Significantly, the series also makes the implicit argument that the artist’s public duty is to produce art that preserves in collective memory what is now no longer. Inasmuch as the series presents a picture of landscapes that have since given way to capitalist development, it also paints a portrait of an artist as a young man. In the first book, Mat’s drawing talent is brought to attention and, as earlier mentioned, foregrounded from the onset in the Malay version; in the second, his talent is what distinguishes Mat from his friends. In particular, the different career paths toward which Mat and his best friend, Frankie, are headed illustrate the artist’s role in a society bent on pursuing economic development. Whereas the first book ends on a promising note for his future, the second shows Mat’s prospects as bleak compared to Frankie’s. As with the first, the second book ends with a scene of departure, only this time Frankie is off to London to attend university, leaving Mat behind. Lacking the financial means and the grades at school,
Mat is seemingly resigned to follow in his father’s humble footsteps of working in the civil service even as he dreams of becoming an artist.

The final images of the second book are reminiscent of Mat’s earlier farewell in the first book. In the closing image of *Kampung Boy*, the figures in the foreground are heading to town, leaving the *kampung* behind literally in the background; meanwhile, Mat looks back at his friends as the bus departs, as if to foreshadow the nostalgic gaze of the artist (fig. 1.6a). Following this spatial codification, *Town Boy* ends with Mat riding his bicycle away from the train station and into the horizon, as if to hint at a symbolic return to the *kampung* (fig. 1.6b). It is worth noting that at the end of the first book, Mat’s grandmother exhorts her grandchild to remember those who have been left behind. This call is most explicitly answered in the third book. If the first two books are narrated by an older Mat recounting his younger days, the third book adopts a new narrative persona, that of the artist himself—Mat’s creator, Lat. This switch not only affirms the autobiographical source of the *bildung* story, but also recasts the trilogy as a historical depiction of a bygone era, thus performing the artist’s social responsibility of producing cultural memory of what is now no longer.
Figure 1.6a. Mat leaves his kampung. Image from The Kampung Boy.
Moreover, the “abnormal” perspective of the budding artist, Mat, the outlier and dreamer amongst his peers, comes to stand in for a collective vision of the past. This complicates the seemingly natural progression of a history of capitalist development. Alexandra Juhasz offers an approach to thinking about nostalgia’s radical political potential. Citing Svetlana Boym’s book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Juhasz sees nostalgia as “a rebellion against a modern idea of time” and sees its political potential as embedded in the relationship between affect and technology (qtd in 321). Following Boym, Juhasz also differentiates melancholia from nostalgia, seeing the former as bound up with the individual while the latter concerns the relationship between the individual and the collective (322). Moreover, Juhasz sees “nostalgia as a kind of duration trouble in that one defiantly wants something to endure that cannot and has not” (322). Juhasz examines recording technology, specifically video and her own documentary, *Video Remains*, about James Robert Lamb, a gay man dying of AIDS whose death is symptomatic of the outrageous silence
and inaction about the disease. She posits that nostalgia is a kind of “duration solution in that it allows things to last” (323). Nostalgia, Juhasz argues, allows for the possibility of “queer archive activism” insofar as it recognizes that feelings constitute the grounds or motivating force behind producing an archive so that the facticity of the historical object is always already imbued with feeling. Nonetheless, Juhasz cautions, what constitutes queerness is not so much that archive-making practices are nostalgia-fueled or affect based; rather, it refers to “a kind of movement and stasis—across and still in time, generation, gender, and feeling” (328).

Chow and Juhasz’s different but complementary approaches to thinking through nostalgia offer an illuminating point. To recap, whereas Chow cautions that the oneiric quality of nostalgic images may be appropriated toward ideological purposes to disguise the deleterious effects of capitalism, Juhasz identifies in nostalgia an obdurate will to preserve what is left to fade away in time. Although drawing different conclusions, in part because of the differing nature of their objects of analyses, Chow and Juhasz both point to the ambivalent nature of nostalgia in its oscillation between affect/matter, subjective/objective, feeling/fact, one that, I suggest, speaks of a reticent quality in the image form. Let us return to the example of the rustic figures in The Kampung Boy series. To use Pasolini’s words, the rustic figures are “‘charged with meanings and utter a brute ‘speech’ by their very presence’”; their capacity for meaning making lies in their mute presence, one that does not explain itself, withholding speech, so that it is by their sheer—or, “brute”—presence that they speak (Chow quoting Pasolini, 214). Thus, even as the rustic figures’ mute presence is appropriated to speak of a time past, the reticent nature of their muteness belies something other than their presumed transparency as images of themselves. This persistent reticence—one that resists decoding and is thereby transmuted as brute presence—might be understood as indicative of the defiant will to endure through the passage of time against all odds. Put another way, this muteness is a structuring absence, that is, a constitutive
historical form of something that, in Juhasz’s terms, desires “to endure that cannot and has not” (322).

If, as Chow and Juhasz imply, the filmic image captures the ambivalent nature of nostalgia, then the comics form could be said to foreground the structuring absences that serve as the conditions of possibility of history. More precisely, the mode of reading that comics call for is analogous to a critical attention required to perceive the constitutive absences present in nostalgic expressions of the past. Describing it as “a silent dance” between “the visible and the invisible,” Scott McCloud attributes the unseen as a constitutive component of the comics form, identifying the gutter, the gap between panels, as “the very heart of comics” (92; 66). Like film, McCloud explains, viewing comics requires the act of “closure,” of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole,” that is, of stitching together a series of images into a unified, coherent narrative (63). In film, closure is mechanically facilitated at the speed of twenty-four images per second so that still pictures become a motion picture, rendering the gaps between the images imperceptible to the human eye. But in comics, achieving closure requires “a willing and conscious collaborator”—the reader—who must perform the act, thus making palpable, even if unacknowledged, the invisible structural element of comics (65).

Just as McCloud’s analysis of reading comics foregrounds the function of “invisible” gutters in the production of meaning, so too the muteness of nostalgic images constitutes the structuring absence that enables the bildung narrative of capitalist development to unfold in a seemingly seamless manner. Producing a nostalgic effect, the rustic figures in The Kampung Boy series are evidence of a time past by virtue of their “brute”/mute presence. Hiding in plain sight, muteness does not constitute a lack, but is itself an expression of a time past. In Town Boy, Mat scores a date with Normah, “the hottest girl in Ipoh,” who seeks his help for her upcoming art examination, much to the envy of his friends (TB 90). Embedded in the awkwardness of first
dates, Mat and Normah’s exchange about art and literature contains an implicit primer for approaching the text: whereas art, as the series’ multiple visual gags emphasize, is the art of making visible, reading requires paying attention to “hidden meanings” (*TB* 173). Moreover, pontificating about art and literature to impress his date, Mat quickly finds himself out of depth when Normah presses him further after name dropping Shahnon Ahmad’s novels, *Menteri* and *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*, the latter of which depicts the impoverished existence of subsistence rice farmers and serves up a harsh critique of the structural oppression of the nation’s poor. The reference to the Malaysian novelist not only registers the artist’s awareness of the limits of his own nostalgic narrative, but further suggests that the artist shares a similar aim of social and political critique, albeit in a different, to use Mat’s terminology, “style” (173). In sum, the episode prompts an against-the-grain reading of the series’ production of nostalgia by attending to what is hiding in plain sight, that is, to what has been made visible but whose muteness does not signify loss, but silenced narratives—foreclosed futures and histories that will not have been. Indeed, history is conceivably the present absence at large in *The Kampung Boy* series. Whereas *The Kampung Boy* appears to be located in a timeless past, *Town Boy* situates itself within the series of world historical events that constitute the Cold War. Although the references to these events are tongue-in-cheek and underscore the quotidian nature of Mat’s story, they also destabilize the implicit link between the individual *bildung* narrative and a progressive historical narrative of capitalist development. Indeed, as with Mat’s youth, the early and tumultuous decade of newly independent Malay(s)i)a not only coincided with these world historical events; the very formation of the nation was shaped by Cold War exigencies. It is notable that these events locate history as unfolding elsewhere when in fact the geographic region depicted in the series had witnessed the 12-year Malayan Emergency and the subsequent years of the Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation, a series of military hostilities between the two nations over
the northern territories of Borneo following their incorporation into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, that irrevocably shaped the nation in the decades to come.

One feels the silence on the local events of the Cold War most startlingly in a scene in *Yesterday and Today* (fig. 1.7). In this scene, a newspaper is used to wrap a ripening jackfruit. Its cover bears a headline on the U.S.-Cuban missile crisis, and serves as a temporal marker that inserts Mat’s childhood years into history, briefly interrupting the nostalgic feeling sustained throughout the series’ idyllic scenes. At the same time, the historical reference to a distant location evokes the local events in a spectral manner, made present by virtue of their absence. The rendering of the domestic events in a ghosted manner is significant for the following reason. The historical marker appears in the form of a newspaper, which introduces a different temporality than that of the series’ reigning nostalgic view of the past. Nostalgia corroborates a narrative of historical progress that treats the present as a foregone conclusion. But the seriality of the newspaper, along with the *in medias res* nature of the headline, articulates temporality as incipience, history as yet unfolding and a present still in the making. The ghosting of domestic Cold War events destabilize official state accounts that are premised on a *bildung* narrative of nation, one that presents the crackdown of communist and leftist political activity as being for the greater good of the nation. It might be a stretch to read the scene as presenting a critique of state historiography, but the scene’s ghosting of key events that shaped the nation questions the logic of race and indigeneity on which the nation’s boundaries are defined.
Mat and Normah’s date ends at the movies. Images of a Tarzan rerun on the screen depict the infatuated artist’s unspoken desires for his first crush. A screenshot of Johnny Weismuller as Tarzan executing his trademark cry is reminiscent of an earlier scene in the first book, in which Mat’s father imitates the iconic cinematic hero, albeit with an unintended humorous outcome (figs. 1.8a-d). This Western cultural icon, woven into the fabric of rural everyday life, suggests the kampung is not as isolated or as idyllic a setting as it seems. Indeed, in the third book, a mobile film unit travels to the kampung to screen public service advisories and Hollywood movies that served as crowd attractions, which explains the fluency of rural dwellers in
American popular cinema. Unmentioned in the text is that the mass communications infrastructure—the mobile film units and the radio educational programs—were put in place largely as a result of colonial propaganda efforts to win hearts and minds of rural populations targeted by communists fighting a guerrilla war in the jungles of the interior.

Figure 1.8a. Tarzan in the kampung. Image from The Kampung Boy.

See McDaniel, Drew O. Broadcasting in the Malay World: Radio, Television, and Video in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.
Figure 1.8b. Tarzan in the kampung. Image from The Kampung Boy.
Figure 1.8c. Tarzan in the kampung. Image from The Kampung Boy.
If Tarzan constitutes a temporal marker that evinces a ghosted history, its presence in the Malay version of the first book further undermines the ethno-nationalist underpinnings of the national *bildung* narrative, which are less palpable in the English versions. In both versions, the humorous effect of the sequence comes across visually and is punctuated by sound effects, save for the English word, “Slip,” supplementing the action in the scene. This particularly stands out in the Malay version of the text. As discussed previously, the Malay version frames the childhood narrative of Mat as a triumphalist narrative of ethno-cultural virility by reinforcing the trope of the *kampung* as the authentic site of Malay cultural purity. Together with the Western cinematic icon, the English word undermines this spatial trope by pointing to an otherness that is embedded within the site of ethno-cultural origin. Indeed, though hardly addressed in the verbal
narrative, the images in the first book testify that the kampung is hardly a pre-modern space, but one already integrated into the capitalist mode of production as suppliers of raw materials, as the rubber plantations and surrounding tin mines suggests. Similarly, the tales of mischief recounted in the first book—of Mat venturing into the tin mines, for example—not only convey a sense of nostalgia for simpler times. These landscapes also indicate that space and its relations to its inhabitants are defined and regulated by the interests of capital. Like images serving as mute historical markers, the word, “Slip,” makes visible, quite literally, the slippage in the ethno-nationalist bildung narrative.

Significantly, the translational reading of the word “Slip,” not just as clarifying the action of the scene, but also as a picture of otherness, unsettles the bildung narrative. A clearer example of seeing the word as image is found in another scene, when Mat is sent to tajwid class to learn “the art of reading Arabic with the correct enunciation” for the purposes of reciting the Qu’ran (44). (fig. 1.9a-b). There is an important difference between the Malay and English versions of the scene with the Ustaz or religious teacher and his students. In the Malay, the teacher issues a command for the students to “Baca!”—“Read!”—and sounds out the Arabic alphabet, tha, which the students struggle to repeat. The dialogue bubbles are excised in the English versions at the expense of the scene’s humor. Why is the joke excised from the English versions? Answering this question might also help us consider the significance of language as a picture of difference. As highlighted earlier, the narrative of racial exceptionalism is addressed exclusively to a Malay audience to appease any concerns about the perceived threat to racial identity that capitalist development might produce, while a more widely acceptable multiracial narrative is circulated to its English reading audience. Thus, linguistic difference is deployed to assert racial difference,
thereby translating Malayness as the indigenous essence of nation. Seeing as Islam is inextricably bound up with Malay identity, the dialogue bubbles might be deemed as an inside joke to be shared only amongst Malay-Muslim readers; its omission from the English versions further reinforces the boundaries of ethnic identity.

Figure 1.9a. “Baca!/Read!” Image from Budak Kampung.
However, the joke counts on the reader to see linguistic difference otherwise, in this case, not just as a codification of phonetic sound but also as a picture, spoofing the authority figure’s button nose and curled mustache. As the *tajvid* lesson points to a different way of reading, so too the joke points at the multiple ways that language might be apprehended and appropriated. The differences between the Malay and English versions point to the use of linguistic difference to demarcate racial boundaries so that language literacy determines one’s affiliation to the group (inside or outside). However, the depiction of the letter as an image allows the joke to translate across languages, facilitating the crossing of borders not through literacy in the conventional sense but a pictorial—a translational—reading of language.
With this translational mode of meaning in mind, let us look at language as pictures and consider their significance. In *Town Boy*, Mat visits Frankie’s home for the first time. The rendering of dialogue in Chinese in scenes of Frankie’s home visualizes the cultural difference of the space.¹⁸ The non-Chinese reader is made to identify with Mat, the outsider, whose shyness and unease is compounded by his inability to read the situation. Indeed, Frankie and his little brother share a private joke at Mat’s expense. The awkwardness of this intercultural encounter is immediately overcome when the boys turn to Frankie’s American music record collection, the binding glue of this unlikely friendship. Whereas the Chinese characters demarcate the cultural differences that define the friendship, which are highlighted by the conversation about Mat’s religious dietary restrictions, the English song lyrics of the musical hits bridge the divide. Indeed, scenes throughout the second book are dotted with icons of Western mass culture amidst a backdrop of multilingual signs, so that—especially for the English-only reader—other languages become signifiers of diversity that correspond to the diverse crowd scenes, signature pieces of Lat’s work. However, as the pictorialization of English through the word, “Slip,” highlights, a translational reading of *Town Boy* points to English’s differentiated function in relation to other languages, as the default mediator of cultural difference compared to other languages’ function as pictures of particularized difference.

English as a cultural mediator is conveyed in the form of cultural commodity—as cinematic image and song lyric—and points to the transactional value of the language over and above the others. That English also functions as the text’s medium of communication allows the language to pass as the default mediator between particularized differences, rendering invisible the imperial conditions of its historical presence in the region. Consider also the response given by the U.S. publishers of *Kampung Boy* when queried about their decision to retain snatches of

¹⁸ My thanks to Janice Liao and Rajesh Mehar for translating the Chinese and Tamil dialogue respectively.
non-English text without providing any corresponding translation: that the images adequately translate the content of the Malay, Chinese and Tamil lines for the English-only reader. That is indeed the case. An editorial note in *Town Boy* further informs its reader that its American publisher’s first encounter with the text was with a French translation, which shaped the U.S. editions. Thus, while the English dialogue remains exactly the same as in the Malaysian editions, the narrative passages in the U.S. edition have been scrubbed clean of Malaysian English—or Manglish, as it is sometimes called—expressions. Their distinction further emphasized by the different typeset they are respectively assigned, the juxtaposition of the Malaysian and American Englishes in the U.S. edition, hints at the heterogeneity of the linguistic medium and potentially lays the groundwork for considering the imperial history of the English language. But what of the history of the naturalization of English in the context to which the text has traveled?

Shuttling between the various Malay and English versions and national editions of *The Kampung Boy* series, I have shown that a translational reading of the work demonstrates the possibility of developing, as one would a photographic film, a ghosted history latent in the text. Similarly read in this manner, the sampling of Lat’s work discussed in this chapter brings forth the ghosted text of Cold War history that are embedded in the language, racial and national politics of the postcolonial Malaysian present, alluding to the transnational dimension already present in the nation.
CHAPTER TWO

Epistemological Checkpoint: Reading Fiction as a Translation of History

The Malayan Emergency, a war between the British colonial government against the communists, is cited as a rare model of success in the 2007 *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, a document published by the United States Army and Marine Corp outlining the principles and guidelines of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Dixon). During the Emergency, which lasted from 1948 to 1960, the colonial government embarked on a large-scale forced resettlement program that displaced up to half a million rural dwellers, 85 percent of whom were ethnic Chinese, from the jungle periphery into heavily patrolled camps. Masterminded by the British General Sir Harold Briggs, the resettlement plan was designed to sever the contact between the guerrillas hiding in the interior jungles and their civilian support network, the *Min Yuen* or People’s Movement, on which the former relied for intelligence and food supplies. In addition, the British implemented a national registration system, issuing identity cards to anyone above the age of 12, to regulate civilian movement and to weed out communists; food restricted areas were also designated to curb civilians from smuggling food to the communists. Although initially faced with setbacks, the counter-insurgency eventually forced the communists’ retreat and facilitated the 1957 transition of power to a postcolonial government, helmed by the conservative National Alliance (*Barisan Nasional*) sympathetic to British economic interests. Described by the British High Commissioner, Sir Gerald Templer, as an effort at “winning hearts and minds,” the Emergency measures were effectively presented as a primarily political activity that appealed to the peoples’ emotions and reason, and required minimal military force to win the people’s loyalty to the government. The “hearts and minds” approach has since been recognized as the
distinctive feature of British counter-insurgency and informed recent U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Dixon).

Han Suyin’s novel, *...And the Rain My Drink*, offers a perspective of the Emergency that tempers its narrative of success.¹ Depicting the hardships experienced by the ethnic Chinese as a result of colonial counter-insurgency measures, the novel has been cited in historical and anthropological studies as offering a more critical view of the Emergency’s success.² As the following examples suggest, such citations of the novel express a desire to legitimize the text as historical truth despite its fictional form. In their history of decolonization movements in Southeast Asia, Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper quote a description of an overcrowded camp and its sickly residents from Han’s novel to illustrate the “worst effects of resettlement” seldom mentioned in analyses of the “hearts and minds” approach (526). Similarly, Judith Strauch’s ethnography of Chinese village politics in Malaysia describes the novel as “a more accurate assessment of the Chinese perspective of the period than most other more academic accounts” (64). Leon Comber’s historical account of the Malayan Special Branch, the intelligence agency established during the Emergency, offers assurance of the novel’s historical authenticity by explaining the circumstances of its writing. Comber, who was married to Han at the time, writes, “Han Suyin (Mrs. Elizabeth Comber) was a doctor in the Casualty Department of the Johore General Hospital in the early 1950s, and had first-hand knowledge of conditions in

¹ All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the 2010 edition of the novel.
² Despite a prolific and high profile, if, at times, controversial career of writing fiction, autobiography, as well as historical and political essays, Han’s work has received little scholarly attention within literary studies. In addition to several journal essays, the most in-depth analysis of Han’s work to date is Wang Xuding’s dissertation on her writings about China.
some of the Johore detention camps and resettlement villages at the time through her husband, the author, who was a Special Branch officer in Johore” (ibid).  

These invocations of the novel as testimony raise the question, what kind of historical truth claim can the novel be said to produce? Indeed, the controversy surrounding the novel’s release in 1956 by New York and London publishers underscores the role of representations, literary or otherwise, in managing public perceptions of the ongoing war. The novel’s critical depiction of the counter-insurgency so concerned Sir Templer that he arranged for a London newspaper correspondent to be sent to the colony “to provide a more favorable account of the situation” (Comber 239 fn. 27). More recently, the 2012 revelation that thousands of incriminating government records concerning the Malayan Emergency and counter-insurgencies elsewhere were destroyed at the end of empire further underscores the urgency of considering what it means to use literary texts as counterfactual evidence to dominant historical narratives (Owen).

One is tempted to read the novel as a roman à clef given that Han’s autobiographical writings and drafts of an unpublished sequel to ...And the Rain My Drink offer suggestive evidence that the characters in her fictional work on Malaya are inspired by, if not altogether based, on actual persons. In the 1956 U.S. edition of the novel, the preface playfully blurs the distinction between history and fiction: “This book is fiction. Any resemblance of the characters to anyone alive or dead is pure coincidence. Exception is made for the author, who insists on occasionally appearing in the chapters.” The exception clause, signaling the author’s intrusion into fictional space, might be read as a testament to the historical authenticity of the events in the novel—a point I further discuss later in this essay. One might further presume that the otherwise

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3 Han Suyin is the pen name assumed by Elizabeth Comber, the name by which she is otherwise generally known. Comber directs his reader to the novel for an “unflattering non-establishment view of the [Emergency] situation in Johore [the southern state of the Malayan peninsula] from a Chinese point of view” (169 fn. 20).
standard all persons fictitious disclaimer was intended as a safeguard against lawsuits from persons bearing likenesses to characters in the novel—a reading that the author’s personal correspondence with her publishers in London appear to confirm.

However, the novel’s oscillation between an autobiographical first-person voice and the free indirect discourse of an omniscient narrator calls for a reading of fiction as more than a savvy guise of historical fact for legal purposes. The first-person narrative voice belongs to a Dr. Han Suyin, a Eurasian doctor who has recently arrived in Malaya to work at a hospital. While this autobiographical voice anchors its narrative account in historical reality, the omniscient point of view generates an effect of historical objectivity and narrative reliability that the subjective perspective of a first-person narrator cannot offer. Dr. Han’s firsthand account of historical events is bound by her limited perspective; however, the omniscient narrator is able to convey the thoughts and feelings of a wide range of characters, including the camp residents, communist fighters, British officers, the local police and the colonial elite. In so doing, the latter constructs a complex sense of reality, providing a big picture view of the Emergency, in which to situate Dr. Han’s account. Shifting back and forth between these two modes of narration, the novel deploys the first-person voice to validate the historicity of events depicted on the page even as it uses the literary device of an omniscient narrator to produce the effect of historical reality. The incorporation of fictionalized diary excerpts written by a “communist terrorist,” framed as an archival source obtained from colonial raids, as part of the narrative further contributes to the effect of historicity.

Hayden White proposes that narrative can be understood as a “solution” to “the problem of how to translate knowing into telling” (1). His point—that it is the formal properties of narrative that generate historical meaning—highlights the significance of form in producing

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4 I refer to the novel’s narrator as Dr. Han and to the author as Han.
historiography. *...And the Rain My Drink* appears to affirm White’s argument given that it underscores the extent to which the realist novel’s heteroglossic capacity is especially well suited for the production of historical discourse. Whereas its first-person narrative establishes the novel’s referentiality to actual events, the multiple voices represented in the text express a multi-layered historical reality. However, in the novel, translation does not merely operate as a metaphor, as used by White, for the transcription of history into a literary form. Translation is quite literally the means for telling a story set in a multilingual society to an Anglophone reader. This is especially apparent in the role of translator often assumed by the first-person narrator, primarily to convey dialogue between characters speaking in an admixture of Chinese and Malay. Furthermore, scenes of translation—or, more precisely, mistranslation—between the camp residents, surrendered enemy personnel and colonial police force abound in the novel, emphasizing the centrality of translation in the colonial government’s intelligence gathering operations. In essence, the novel’s depiction of (mis)translation is mediated through the narrator’s acts of translation, through whom the novel’s narrative is made possible.

In this chapter, I argue that *...And the Rain My Drink* is a translation of history in the sense that it constitutes a literary representation of historical events and, in doing so, comes to stand in and speak as if it were history. The novel’s presentation of translation as both its subject and mode of representation delineates what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the two distinct yet intertwined senses of representation—“representation as in ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” and “representation as in ‘speaking for,’ as in politics”—respectively at work in knowledge production (28). Discerning the intractable dynamics of these two senses of representation, Spivak argues, is a means of illuminating the epistemic violence—the foreclosure of alternative modes of knowing and being—that is inflicted through the process of subject
formation. As I demonstrate, a careful examination of how translation elucidates these two senses of representation in *...And the Rain My Drink* illuminates the workings of Chinese subject formation during the Emergency period, which constitutes a form of epistemic violence that proves necessary for the safeguarding of British economic interests in the long term amidst the waning of Empire.

**The Re-Ordering of Empire**

In the years leading up to the Malayan Emergency, the British sought to consolidate its separate administrative units on the Malayan peninsula into a federalized entity called the Malayan Union. The restructuring was undertaken to redress the weaknesses of decentralized government exposed in the defeat of the British by the Japanese, who occupied Malaya from 1941 to 1945. The formation of the new federal entity entailed fashioning a Malayan national identity that would unify the multiple ethno-linguistic groups residing on the peninsula. Moreover, it effectively constituted a marked shift from the Empire’s previous divide-and-rule policy, which recognized the sovereignty of the Malay rulers over their respective territories, if only in name, and identified the Malays as “natives,” who were defined in contradistinction from the “alien” or “migrant” racial groups, which primarily consisted of the Chinese and Indians.

Part of a broader re-ordering of Empire, the federalization of Malaya was also an effort to secure the future loyalty of Britain’s colonies under the aegis of the Commonwealth. The Malayan Union extended equal citizenship rights to all races and was intended in part to reward the Chinese, who primarily made up the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army, a communist-led guerrilla resistance force that fought during the Japanese Occupation. However, the Malayan Union was vehemently opposed by the Malays, who viewed its liberal citizenship plan as an
affront to Malay sovereignty and an assault on native rights guaranteed under the divide-and-rule policy. The extension of citizenship to non-Malays, the Malays argued, constituted a betrayal of the British colonial mandate to protect the interests of the Malays against the “alien” races, in particular, the Chinese. The proposed Union sparked the political mobilization of Malays against the British throughout the peninsula on an unprecedented scale. In response, the British abandoned its Malayan Union plan and, in consultation with the Malay rulers and the leaders of the conservative Malay party, UMNO, implemented the Federation of Malaya, a centralized administration that continued to recognize the “special position” of the Malays and that imposed greater restrictions on citizenship qualifications for non-Malays. Left out of the negotiations on the new federation’s formation, non-Malay groups joined forces with leftist organizations. Among them included the Communist Party of Malaya, which was a potent force in mobilizing plantation and mine workers to stage industrial action, and in agitating for national independence.

The challenges that beset the restructuring of the colonial administration in Malaya not only foreboded the end of Empire. It also made apparent the ideological contradictions and failings of colonial racial discourse. On one hand, the British were forced to concede to the demands of the conservative Malays, whose protests against the Malayan Union were arguably the direct outcome of decades of British paternalism and divide-and-rule policy. Yet, in so doing, the British alienated the non-Malays and effectively drove them toward supporting the cause of the leftist anti-colonial movement, whose ability to disrupt the colonial plantation and mining economies was increasingly felt. The problem at hand for the British was how to integrate non-Malays into Malaya, historically posited as the land of the Malays to justify the distinction
between native and alien races, without facing up to the shortcomings of its own divide-and-rule policy?

Literary representations of British Malaya of this period are a generative site for examining how contradictions in colonial racial discourse are managed. As Adeline Koh argues, British colonial fiction written by authors such as Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham and Anthony Burgess shaped the colonial racial imagination by popularizing tropes of the lazy, beautiful Malay and the inscrutable, menacing Chinese; these racial tropes aided in justifying British paternalism over the idle Malays, who were in need of protection from the unscrupulous Chinese, while obscuring the economic motivations of Empire. ...And the Rain My Drink is distinct from its predecessors in this literary genealogy in that it offers a critique of colonial racial discourse. In particular, it highlights the manner in which the racialized trope of the Chinese as the communist menace was revitalized and mobilized during the Emergency to resolve the predicament that the British faced in integrating the Chinese into the federation.

The novel lends itself to a comparison of its contemporary, Burgess’s The Malayan Trilogy, which was based on the author’s own experiences serving as colonial education officer in Malaya during the 1950s. But, whereas Burgess’s novels offer a view of Malaya from within the colonial ranks, ...And the Rain My Drink offers a narrative perspective of Dr. Han, who presents herself as an outsider with insider access. As a doctor in the colonial medical services, Dr. Han is able to move easily between the rarefied circles of the elite and the ordinary ranks of colonial society. In particular, her ability to speak standard Chinese grants her an affinity with the ex-guerrillas she encounters as her patients, for whom the language is the lingua franca of the different Chinese ethno-linguistic groups in the jungle (34).

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5 For a reading of Burgess’s The Malayan Trilogy, see Chapter Four of Koh.
Thus, in her position as narrator, Dr. Han also serves as a translator who makes otherwise inaccessible and non-establishment viewpoints of the Emergency legible to her Anglophone reader. Given that the author herself was an insider and prolific writer of China’s political scene, one might be tempted to read the narrator-translator’s linguistic affinity with the Chinese in Malaya as signaling the novel’s presentation of an authentic Chinese view of the Emergency. On the contrary, what the novel makes clear is how colonial racial discourse constructs “the Chinese” as a unified, homogenized identity to reinforce the Emergency’s binary logic of war. Indeed, as evidenced through its sweeping cast of characters identified as Chinese—they include those who come from the wealthy elite class; members of the colonial police force; the guerrillas, whether hiding in the jungle, detained or surrendered; and the camp residents—the novel foregrounds the fact that the use of “Chinese” as if it were a unified identity fails to adequately represent and, indeed, obscures the myriad experiences and perspectives of those to whom the term refers.

Indeed, the novel’s persistent re-inscription of the colonial metonym of the jungle as communist menace clearly positions the narrator-translator as offering an anti-establishment perspective of the Malayan Emergency. This is evident in the novel’s title, which derives from a revolutionary song sung by the guerrillas. Its opening line, “I will go to the forest for justice…” associates the jungle with the idea of anti-colonial resistance, in contrast to the sense of wildness that needs to be tamed, as invoked by the British. Moreover, the jungle is re-coded not to signify communism, but capitalism. This point is made by Intellectual Orchid, nicknamed The Abacus for her business acumen, a daughter of the business tycoon, Quo Boon. She reflects on her brother, Sen, who has run away to join the national liberation movement: “He had chosen the forest for justice, the darkness beneath the trees, the horror and the blood spilling….Was it worth
it, all this violence, the nightmare endured for a dream to come? He sang: ‘The wind for my garment, the rain for my drink.’ What had the long years in the jungle done to his soul?’” (212). Although lamenting her brother’s idealism as folly, Intellectual Abacus recognizes that her own support of the colonial government was no less dehumanizing, “But then what did that other jungle, the ravenous, stupid, loud brash jungle of money-making, what did that do to one’s soul? ‘Perhaps I have no soul,’ thought Intellectual Orchid. ‘In this jungle of money I am a machine, counting money, The Abacus clicking as the wheels roll and the rubber goes forth from the factories and estates of the House of Quo’” (212).

Sen’s political convictions put him in conflict with his father, Quo Boon, whose business empire earns him some influence with the British. Viewing him as a representative of the Chinese community’s interests at large, the British General entreats Quo Boon to persuade the Chinese to pledge loyalty to the government instead of the guerrillas. Quo Boon remarks: “‘I suppose I am considered loyal because I have made terms with the setup as it is now, as I have made money out of it. I can read the wind, see the way the leaves blow, and I keep out of the rain. I do not like bloodshed. I build’” (237). That his own son has turned his back on the family wealth to join the guerrillas drives home the point that Quo Boon’s circumstances and political views are hardly representative of “the Chinese” community as a whole. Although his wealth puts him at odds with the communists, Quo Boon nonetheless offers an alternative perspective of the Emergency than that presented by the government. In his view, the Emergency is a war between competing visions of the future of the postcolonial nation and the position of the Chinese within it. Whereas his son’s actions are motivated by a sense of economic and political justice for all, Quo Boon, who sees these ideals as unattainable, argues instead for the
incorporation of the Chinese into the nascent postcolonial nation on the basis of their contribution to its economic development.

Quo Boon’s views are an extension of the colonial racial stereotype of the Chinese as industrious workers without whom the colony would have remained backwards and yet from whom the supposedly idle Malays needed protection. His is one example in the novel of how colonial racial discourse is appropriated by those on whom it is imposed to advance their own interests amidst a time of political upheaval. Indeed, the novel situates the Emergency in Malaya as part of the international wave of Third World nationalism and foregrounds the ways in which colonial racial discourse provides a frame for making sense of a rapidly changing world.

Specifically, the novel demonstrates how the British strategy of framing the communist insurgency as driven by communal Chinese interests serves, paradoxically, as a means of integrating the ethnic Chinese into the Federation of Malaya. While members of the Communist Party of Malaya primarily consisted of Chinese, the party also explicitly presented its political agenda as driven by workers rights and actively recruited non-Chinese supporters to join its cause. By portraying the red threat as a Chinese menace, the British not only obscured the anti-colonial political economic critique advanced by the left. In presenting the Emergency measures as a means of containing the red threat, the British effectively fashioned the colonial government as facilitating the rehabilitation of the bad, i.e. communist, Chinese and the integration of the reformed Chinese into the nascent multi-racial postcolonial nation. This enables the maintenance of the colonial fiction that peaceful co-existence among the races could not have happened without the help of the British even as it allows the British to wash its hands of any subsequent inter-ethnic conflict that would arise.
In her first week at the hospital, Dr. Han is acquainted with the inefficiencies of colonial bureaucracy. Feeling rundown and irritated by the situation, Dr. Han finds herself being written into the Orientalist script of the expatriate suffering the corruptive effects of the colonial outpost by her colleague, Betchine: “In one week, I had become a witch’s cauldron of seething irritation, boiling resentment, and hissing rage. Betchine assured me, unsoothingly, that it was Malaya” (21). Betchine, a British-educated sari-clad “Euro-Indian” doctor is described as embodying the image of the “Woman of Modern Asia”; she represents the voice of the emerging British-educated Third World elite, the class that would assume leadership of the future postcolonial nation following the departure of the British (21). That she serves as the mouthpiece of Orientalist discourse suggests that colonial racial tropes would be folded into the postcolonial national narrative.

In contrast, Dr. Han presents herself as offering a critical perspective of the situation in Malaya rather than one that simply rehearses the Orientalist tropes of Malaya that her colleague unquestioningly adopts. Making her nightly rounds in the hospital, Dr. Han further ruminates on Betchine’s words as she walks down “one long night-filled corridor, the treading of an endless, shallow dark ravine”:

Perhaps it is Malaya, as Betchine says. Everything seems to me out of gear, awry, disproportioned, tedious and grotesque, and therefore unreal. I must not try to make a meaning and a shape out of this. Like my footsteps in this corridor, at the moment there is no resonance to any event, no significance to any gesture, no illumination to any explanation. There is only repetitious exuberance, the raw undiluted essence of growth, a violence in all that I apprehend, in which I must not instill significance, for at the moment it dispenses none. This is Malaya. And there is no pattern as yet. Only confusion (29).
By recasting her colleague’s ontological statement (“...it is Malaya”) into an epistemological one (“Everything seems to me…”), the narrator reveals the ontic fallacy—the mistaking of a phenomenal experience for an empirical object—in Betchine’s statement. Whereas Betchine’s pronouncement presumes an unmediated relation between the perceiving subject and the object of perception, Dr. Han’s reflexive statement foregrounds the colonial lens through which the perception of the East as inscrutable—“out of gear, awry, disproportioned, tedious and grotesque”—is derived. Moreover, by refusing to rely on her initial impressions of her new surroundings and Betchine’s pat explanation for the hospital chaos, Dr. Han presents herself as a reliable narrator who does not unthinkingly toe the line offered by the colonial government, but is able to offer a critical, independent perspective of the situation in Malaya.

Invoking images of wilderness (“endless shallow dark ravine”; “the raw undiluted essence of growth”) in her description of the hospital, Dr. Han appropriates the jungle, a colonial metonym of the communist threat, to describe the state of confusion in the hospital. Poorly built and mismanaged, the hospital serves as a synecdoche of the dysfunctional state of the Emergency. Thus, rather than accept the state of disarray as a natural condition of Malaya—an assumption that is used to justify the paternalistic attitudes of both the colonial and postcolonial elite—Dr. Han suggests that the “confusion” she “apprehends” in fact stems from colonial mismanagement, resulting from the government’s inability to recognize and meet the challenges that arise from governing linguistically fragmented and ethnically diverse colonial populations. Specifically, as the passage below indicates, translation failure is cited as the root cause of the confusion:

From ward to ward, up and down the stone stairs, the sinusoid of sound pursues me.

Words, words, words, all adding up to this soft cacophony, this unending flat
unquietness. Words in all dialects and languages which are spoken in Malaya. Is not so much of what happens in this country a reciprocal confusion, rooted in ignorance of each other’s language and customs, producing blindness, intolerant inhumanity? I begin to feel, uneasily, that Malayan episodes are a comedy of errors due to this division between the ruler and the ruled; not one in a hundred of the rulers can boast to speak well the language of the ruled. A few speak it so badly, and on such a low scale, that thereby only another source of error is created.

Malay, Chinese, Indians, English (count the latter I must, though they persist in not belonging, and place their loyalty not in this land); Chinese, Malay, Indians, three words, three sweeping generalizations out of which it has been planned to forge a nation, to create a country called Malaya, a single people to be called Malayans (always to be confused abroad with Malays, one of the three ingredient races).

The word Malay means Javanese, Sumatrans, Indonesians, people from Minangkabau and many another East Indies island, Arabs and Arab-educated Mohammedans, as well as Malays proper from Malaya itself; Chinese include half a dozen subgroups from the southern provinces of China, by feature and emotion Chinese, but divided by dialect into Teochews, Hokkiens, Hakkas, Cantonese, Hainanese, and smaller groups. Indians include Tamils, Punjabis, Sikhs, Pathans, Bengalis, and many others. ...In each ward the nurses must act as translators as well as nurse, and where they fail, an orderly, or an amah, must be found to interpret with all the inaccuracy and the florid inventiveness of the illiterate Asian. Among the doctors few can speak to all patients, for in Malaya a university education, by its very insistence upon excellence in English, hampers a doctor from acquiring the vernacular languages of this country.
And thus at night, when the patients confide in the darkness and in their own

tongue what they have withheld from physician and nurse, *I begin to understand the
terror, the confusion, the essential need to prevaricate of those who are always at
someone else’s mercy, because they cannot communicate with those who decide their
fate, except through an interpreter.*

In the process, how many deviations, changes, siftings, warpings, and twistings;
how many opportunities for blackmail and corruption, before, transformed, sometimes
unrecognizable, the stories of the poor who do not speak English reach their rulers, who
are handpicked, among their own peoples, on the basis of their knowledge of English.

Pacing the corridors, night dark, of the hospital, I heard the poor talk, Malays,
Indians, Chinese, and asked myself whether out of this babel reassembled, a pattern
would emerge (31-32; emphasis added).

As the passage above suggests, the confusion that arises from translation failure is not simply the
communication breakdown that is likely to occur when two parties rely on an interpreter to
exchange information. Rather, the failed communication is an indication of the fact that
translation is akin to the act of political representation in the sense that the translator speaks on
behalf of one party in the same way that a political representative speaks for her constituencies.
Yet, because translation is categorically defined as a mode of re-presentation or repetition, that
is, as the act of speaking *of* rather than speaking *for*, its latter political function is often obscured.
Thus, the confusion that derives from translation failure effectively functions an obfuscation of
the workings of power.
War and Translation

From the onset of the Emergency, the colonial government recognized translation as crucial to Emergency operations, particularly for intelligence gathering and propaganda purposes. The failure of intelligence operations in British Malaya to anticipate the communist taking up of arms, Comber notes, was attributed in part to “the acute shortage of office staff and translators,” which resulted in “a considerable backlog of CPM documents in Chinese awaiting translation” (42). Knowledge of Chinese was an especially urgent need, as underscored by efforts to recruit British and local Chinese personnel fluent in the language to join the Special Branch. The production of government and communist propaganda materials in the four main languages spoken in Malaya—Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English—emphasized that operating in and across multiple languages was a key weapon in winning the hearts and minds of a diverse ethno-linguistic population.

The Emergency historian, Kumar Ramakrishna, argues that the hearts and minds campaign was successful not so much because it changed the political beliefs of the people, but because it met their basic needs. The disastrous conditions of the camps in the early years of the resettlement plan had deepened the mistrust of government among the rural, ethnic Chinese. Thus, Ramakrishna argues, it was less the use of “propaganda in words”—that is, mass media such as print, radio and film to disseminate anti-communist rhetoric—than the use of “propaganda in deed”—the implementation of policies and social services to improve the resettled populations’ quality of life in the Emergency’s subsequent years, rectifying its earlier missteps—that secured the people’s confidence in the government’s ability to protect their well-being. Interestingly, Ramakrishna presents Karl von Clausewitz’s insights on war as the theoretical grounds for the counter-insurgency’s hearts and minds campaign and, in so doing,
offers translation as a metaphor to describe its operations. He paraphrases Clausewitz’s argument as follows:

…war in real life is waged when the basic passions of the People are harnessed by government and translated into policies as well as military strategies which the Army pursues. It follows that the People are the well-spring—in not only the physical but also the moral sense—of the capacity of the Government and the Army to wage war. To Clausewitz, therefore, the People represents the ultimate ‘centre of gravity’—the ‘hub of all power and movement on which everything depends’—of a country at war. (11; emphasis added).

Ramakrishna’s recognition of “propaganda in deed” importantly foregrounds the material aspects of the war otherwise obscured by the ideological emphasis of the phrase, “winning hearts and minds.” However, by treating “propaganda in words” primarily as an ideological weapon, his distinction between words and deeds overlooks the materiality of language and representation, and their effects on bodies and subjects.

In contrast to Ramakrishna’s invocation of translation as a metaphor to describe Emergency operations, ...And the Rain My Drink’s attention to translation as a material practice suggests that the ideological and material dimensions of war cannot be conceived separately. Alluding to the rocky start of the resettlement plan mentioned by Ramakrishna, the novel describes the unsanitary and uninhabitable conditions of Todak Resettlement Camp, whose residents are at the mercy of corrupt local police officers and contractors in charge of security and building huts, respectively. While the residents’ complaints fail to be heard, the brutal murder of Tommy Uxbridge, an inept and racist resettlement officer in charge of overseeing the camp, forces the authorities to acknowledge the plan’s failings, which they address through the
adoption of a hearts and minds campaign. At the same time, the Emergency’s Operation Starvation efforts, which entailed the imposition of food rations, spot checks and the designation of food restricted areas to curb civilians from smuggling food to the communists, were leading to the surrender of guerrillas, who supplied information to the Police in exchange for cash and a reduction of their sentences.

Ah Mei is one such informer in the novel. Caught in a police ambush of a jungle hideout, Ah Mei earns her freedom by cooperating with the police and eventually comes to work as a servant in Dr. Han’s household. Her role as an informer requires her to translate the information she gathers from her meetings with suspects, conducted in Chinese, into English-written police reports. She is contrasted with the historical figure of Lee Meng, a Captured Enemy Personnel who—like Ah Mei—is accused of carrying a grenade, an offense punishable by death. The reversal of Lee Meng’s acquittal—a verdict reached at an earlier trial presided by Chinese and Indian judges—by two British judges in a subsequent appeal sparked an international controversy that turned her court case into an example of colonial racial injustice. Moreover, Lee Meng’s refusal to betray her comrades and her denouncement of ex-guerrillas as “running dogs” earns her a reputation of courage (185–6). The comparison of Ah Mei to Lee Meng is thus intended to cast the latter as a traitor, her work of translation in her role as informer exemplifying the classic aphorism, *traduttore, traditore*.

The notion of the translator as traitor registers the anxiety of betrayal that beleguers translation, on which the colonial government relies for intelligence gathering purposes. Embodied in the character of Ah Mei, the translator as traitor comes to figure as racial difference, specifically, as a Chinese subject whose loyalty is always subject to question. While preparing a report, Ah Mei invites Dr. Han to check her work for mistakes. Dr. Han finds no
errors, but discovers, in a subsequent conversation with Ah Mei, that the latter has been
supplying false information to the police. In particular, Ah Mei rues the fate of a Chinese girl
accused of smuggling food when she was merely observing the Ching Ming festival of bringing
offerings to her ancestral graves. The cause of error, Ah Mei, laments is not due to
miscommunication, but racial discrimination: “‘But of course the mata-matas [police] are Malay,
the troops are British, and they punish us, the Chinese. There are many injustices today, doctor’”
(92). Urged by Dr. Han to point out the police’s mistake, Ah Mei points to her own precarious
position: “‘they [the Police] would not think I write good reports, if I cannot find something
wrong’” (92). Used for Emergency intelligence gathering purposes, translation is thus always
beset by the inevitability of betrayal. Moreover, the figure of the translator as traitor constitutes
an inscription of racial difference, in particular, of being Chinese. As the case of the girl
observing Ching Ming suggests, to be Chinese is to arouse suspicion in the eyes of the state. Ah
Mei’s circumstances further suggests that this suspicion can never be fully allayed given that
betrayal is necessary to prove her loyalty to the state even as it also puts it in doubt.

The experiences of the residents of the Todak Resettlement Camp, who “stand between
fire and water, between the Police, and the People Inside,” most starkly dramatize the epistemic
violence inflicted by the racializing effects of the Emergency’s logic of translation (42). While
working at the rubber plantations, Meng, a camp resident, is murdered by his fellow residents
who are members of the People Movement for supplying information to the police for a cash
reward, an attempt that goes awry due to a series of mistranslations. His dead body is put on
display for the other residents to see, the murderer announces, as a warning against would-be
informers. Aware of their precarious situation, Neo and his family—as do many others in the
camp—assume a veil of ignorance to protect themselves from either warring sides. When
Meng’s blood-curdling scream pierces the air moments before his death, Neo’s wife, Neo Saw, commands her startled children: “Hush….We have not heard. We never listen. We do not know’” (41). When he is put on the court stand, Neo, who was present to hear the murderer’s warning, maintains his ignorance and remains silent: “He did not know. He could not say…. [He]…could not bring himself to betray a neighbor, and thus betrayed himself” (174). As was noted earlier, Hayden White suggests that narrative is a means of translating knowing into telling. Yet, Neo is unable to narrate not because he does not know, but because the binary frame of the Cold War compels his silence, which is rendered untranslatable. One is either a faithful member of the People’s Movement or a traitor to the communists, a collaborator with or combatant against the state. His silence marking him as an enemy of the state, Neo, along with his Malayan-born son, is “deported” to China, “the unknown land…of his ancestors” (175).

The untranslatability of Neo’s silence within the Emergency’s frame of war compels an alternative conception of war and translation. Emily Apter’s re-inscription of Clausewitz’s notion of war is useful in this regard. Adapting Clausewitz’s famous pronouncement, “war is a continuation of politics by other means,” Apter writes that “…war is the continuation of extreme mistranslation or disagreement by other means. War is, in other words, a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak” (16; emphasis original). Similarly, …And the Rain My Drink suggests that if war is a “condition of nontranslatability” or “translation failure,” then it is so because war is a reductive codification of knowledge—or, of “the passions of the People”—into a Manichean frame of friend and enemy. Moreover, the novel suggests that the cause of war’s violence does not stem from translation’s infidelity to the original per se, but from operating as if the condition of nontranslatability does not exist. That is, acts of translation operate as weapons of epistemic violence not in the sense that Ah Mei has
failed to translate faithfully, but in that the binary frame of war necessitates that she *not* do so in order to survive.

**Duplicity**

My point then is that the novel’s racialized figure of the translator-traitor is a means of foregrounding the manner in which the Chinese—historically cast by the British as an “alien” race as opposed to the Malays, who are viewed as native to the land—are rehabilitated and integrated into the emerging postcolonial nation. Put another way, the novel’s translator-traitor figure discloses the fact that colonial racial taxonomies in operation during the preceding years of British rule are assimilated as the epistemological frame or the technology of subjectification of the postcolonial nation. For this reason, I propose that the novel ought to be conceived as an *epistemological checkpoint* in the sense that its production of the literary figure of the translator-traitor illumines the process of racialization, the inscription of race on bodies, that is fundamental to the constitution of postcolonial national subject.

My use of the checkpoint as metaphor derives from the novel’s depiction of the camp checkpoint, a site where racial difference is articulated and performed. As camp residents exit the camp to work in the rubber plantations, they surrender their government-issued identity cards at the checkpoint to be collected upon their re-entry by curfew hours. A registration program implemented by the government, the identity cards are a means of rooting out and isolating guerrillas among the camp residents. Passing through the checkpoint thus becomes a ritualized test of the Chinese subject’s loyalty to the government. At the checkpoint, bodies are subject to inspection to curb smuggling, a process by which the ideological figure of the traitorous Chinese is ascribed to embodied beings. Women’s bodies are deemed particularly amenable to smuggling
contraband and are thus especially subject to invasive searches. Neo checks his rage, feeling emasculated, as his wife, Neo Saw, is groped by the guards. Another camp resident, Fong Kiap, who is pregnant, titters when a Malay guard places his hand on her bump to make sure that it is not a decoy, their wordless exchange, his grin and her “coy” chuckle, expressing the sexualized nature of procedural body inspections (39). Her flirtation with the guard enables her to smuggle through “a kati of pork between her thighs” (39). The pork marks Fong Kiap’s racial difference in relation to the Malays, who are also Muslims. Her ability to pass through the checkpoint successfully with her contraband undetected signifies the articulation of racial difference as a means of integration into the emergent nation. However, the pork’s manner of concealment on Fong Kiap’s body, along with her flirtatious behavior, marks her as sexually promiscuous, that is, as unfaithful. Indeed, as a pregnant woman living alone in the camp, Fong Kiap earns a reputation among the colonial officers for being a loose woman, an image she maintains in order to protect her husband, a guerrilla in the jungle. The novel’s attentiveness to the vulnerability of women’s bodies to sexual violence at the checkpoint gestures toward the gendered, sexualized aspects of the translator-traitor figure and their significance in shaping institutional and affective structures of national belonging.

The translator as traitor, Lori Chamberlain persuasively argues, is essentially a feminized figure that is grounded in the prevailing marital trope of fidelity and betrayal. She presents the example of the French adage, *les belles infidèles*, which is gendered as such because *traduction* is a feminine word; thus, translation, like women, can be either beautiful or faithful, but not both. Chamberlain adds:

For *les belles infidèles*, fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father or author). However, the infamous ‘double
standard’ operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the ‘unfaithful’
wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of
committing. This contract in short, makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of
infidelity. Such an attitude betrays real anxiety about the problem of paternity and
translation; it mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity—not maternity—
legitimizes an offspring (315).

Ah Mei, who is noted for her charm and beauty, exemplifies the truism not only in the
fabrications in her reports. Following the police discovery that Ah Mei is also Small Cloud, the
much sought after yet elusive courier for the People Inside, she betrays her lover, Sen, a leader of
the communist regiment responsible for the attacks in the Todak area, in order to save herself.

The revelation of Ah Mei’s double identity comes as little surprise to Dr. Han, who,
having observed her over a period of time, grows increasingly suspicious of her behavior. Trying
to put a finger on what it is about Ah Mei that disturbs her, Dr. Han observes: “…I cannot
fathom why Ah Mei switches herself from the third to the first person so often. I get the
impression that she thinks of herself as two people…one in the jungle, when she says ‘she’, and
one now, an ‘I’…I wonder whether she has really split herself into two, so that she can now
betray where she once believed?’” (190). Here, Ah Mei’s duplicity is recoded as a kind of double
conscousness, a splitting of herself into two different subjects in order to survive the violence of
war. This trope of doubling is also applied to Neo, when he is forced to meet with members of
the People’s Movement at the rubber plantations when Meng is killed. Directing his eldest son to
return to the camp with his siblings and mother while he remains behind, Neo’s speech shifts
from first-person to third-: “‘Tell your mother to carry the pails without me,’ Neo instructs his
son and then, speaking of himself as another person, ‘tell her he will be back in half an hour’
(41–42; emphasis added). As indicated by the pronoun shift in Neo’s speech, the act of doubling operates as a protective device, compartmentalizing knowledge so that what “he” knows, the “I” does not, shielding his family from the heightened danger signaled by the scream. When forced to view Ah Meng’s lifeless body, Neo’s mind is described as perceiving the scene as follows: “There is knowledge that is not knowledge, not in words and yet inhabits the mind, informs it with facts and events. And although no one told the story, yet this is what Neo grew to know, without once acknowledging that he knew” (42).

Further proving her loyalty to the government, Ah Mei marries Tong, a Surrendered Enemy Personnel, after she is discovered to be pregnant with his child. The novel ends with the marriage of the couple, which is viewed by the British as a symbol of its victory over the hearts and minds of the people, the legitimization of her unborn child conceived out of wedlock analogous to Ah Mei’s rehabilitation from her communist affiliations. Yet, Ah Mei’s marriage marks her as the ultimate traitor—not just to her party, but also to her past, her lover and herself. Ah Mei’s abandonment of her lover in the jungle, Sen, who is described as one who would “never surrender,” thus constitutes a tale of tragic love in Malaya, described by Dr. Han as a place “where there is no space nor time, nor light nor air, nor any ground to grow the strange weed called love” (253). Within this narrative of tragic love, marriage thus signals, ironically, the absence of love, in its place a sense of loyalty haunted by betrayal.

The signification of marriage as securing a political allegiance underwritten by betrayal is also evident in Luke Davis’s relationship with Maxine Gerrard. Deeply critical of colonial Emergency policies, Luke Davis, a police officer, writes a report recommending that the transition to independence promised by the colonial government be expedited; he argues that the “passive non-cooperation” not just of the Chinese, but of all races in Malaya, signals less an
allegiance to communism than a resentment of colonialism. Davis is dismissed by his superior as “a socialist, …with his damn queer theories on freedom for Malaya” (137). The mention of queerness here alludes to an earlier reference to Somerset Maugham and his homosexual affair with a Malayan boy, a synecdoche of the sex scandals between British colonial officers and locals. Possessing a soft spot for the locals, Luke displays an anxiety about his colonial masculinity, which he represses by proposing marriage to Maxine Gerrard, an English colonial secretary. “With Maxine, he would no longer be able to see much of Lam Teck [his Chinese friend], only in secret, perhaps, feeling half guilty, telling Maxine that he was out working. He would never be sure that he was doing the right thing, here and now. Maxine would save him from all this. She was so sure. Her voice said so” (70).

The impending marriage of Luke and Maxine thus operates as a trope for the repression of colonial racial anxiety, a function that the union of Ah Mei and Tong similarly perform. The latter also signals the impending end of Empire and the integration of the Chinese, historically cast as an outsider, into what would soon be independent Malaya. The containment of the Chinese Red menace, symbolized by Ah Mei and Tong’s marriage, effectively legitimizes the independent nation as the offspring of Empire. However, as a result of the racialized counter-insurgency measures, the Chinese are integrated into the postcolonial nation as the racial Other; thus, the marriage further betrays the repression of the fact that postcolonial racial communalism is a legacy of colonial divide-and-rule policy and its re-articulation during the Emergency. Put another way, what Empire cannot acknowledge and seeks to disavow is its own duplicity in the treatment of the Chinese, whom the British depended on to fight the Japanese yet were subsequently politically disenfranchised. In contrast to the conscience-stricken Luke, who is unsure of whether the Emergency’s counter-insurgency measures constitute a right or wrong, the
British General, in seeking Quo Boon’s co-operation with the government to fight the communists, remains resolute in his refusal to acknowledge the Empire’s shortcomings: “I know that your people have got grievances. The Chinese half of Malaya, your three millions, half the population of this land, have had a raw deal from us in many ways. But it’s no good dragging up the past. We must get together to build the future. And that means, first and foremost, winning this jungle war” (237). Yet, when Quo Boon demands an equal stake with the Malays in shaping the future of the nation, the General denies its possibility by blaming the Chinese and Malays for their respective selfish, communal interests. By presenting the British as benevolent peacemakers who have the best interests of all groups in Malaya at heart, the General effectively disavows the role of colonialism’s divide-and-rule policy in stirring political dissensions along racial lines: “It is because we’re here, Mr. Quo, that you aren’t at each other’s throats. If we were to leave, there’d be terrible bloodshed. Malay and Chinese would be massacring each other, just as Moslems and Hindoos in India. …All this talk about giving a stake in the land, an equal place to Chinese culture…Our only hope is to have one nation, one country, one loyalty. …” (239).

Although the portrayal of Ah Mei as la belle infidèle seems at first to endorse the sexist metaphor, the novel ultimately exposes what Chamberlain calls the “‘double standard’” inscribed in the marital trope of translation that “makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of infidelity.” The novel does so by re-writing the marital trope of translation to expose the colonial racial anxiety that structures its logic of fidelity and betrayal. In so doing, the novel demonstrates that the Emergency’s racialized counter-insurgency measures are symptomatic of Empire’s inability to reckon with the social, material contradictions generated by colonial racial ideology. Thus, on the eve of its collapse and the emergence of postcolonial nation, the British Empire, through its Emergency operations, sought to obscure its own duplicity and the contradictions of
its civilizing mission by figuring the Chinese as traitor, whose loyalty is perennially under suspicion.

Significantly, this critique of Empire is conveyed through the novel’s duplicitous or double narrative consciousness, as signaled by its oscillation between first and third person narrator. Much in the same way that the double or split consciousness of Neo and Ah Mei was a means of survival, the doubling of the novel’s narrative consciousness might be read as a strategy for coping with the consequences of critiquing colonial power. Following the publication of the novel, Han’s then husband, Comber, was forced to resign from his position as a Special Branch officer as was the author from hers in the colonial medical service, and subject to surveillance under the colonial government (*My House Has Two Doors* 92). If in the novel translation literally constitutes a means of survival, perhaps then the transcription of lived history into fiction was a means of apprehending violence while erecting a buffer from its eviscerating effects. Thus, to conceive of the novel as a translation of history is not to say that the work has creative license to be unfaithful to historical fact. Rather, it is to read the novel as a surviving record of the epistemic violence of colonialism and the Cold War that remains inscribed in the postcolonial racial imaginary.

Yet, in speaking truth to power, the novel too inflicts an epistemic violence of its own, as evident in the portrayal of Ah Mei. A comparison of the novel with Han’s autobiography, *My House Has Two Doors*, which details Han’s experiences in Malaya, suggests that the character of Ah Mei is based on the historical figure of Ah Mui, the “stool pigeon” servant girl in the Comber household (91). As Han writes in her autobiography, “Through Ah Mui and all the others [the Surrendered Enemy Personnel that visited her home], through my travels in Malaya and the medical care I brought to the ‘new village’ I had adopted, I began to see Malaya” (92). This point
is notable in light of the author’s correspondence with her publisher regarding the legal ramifications of her novel, which further accentuates the significance of the fictitious persons disclaimer cited earlier in this essay. A letter forwarded to Han from the legal department from her London publishers, Jonathan Cape, concerns the traceable likeness of the novel’s characters, particularly those in government service, to actual persons in the interest of avoiding lawsuits. The letter contains the following comment on Ah Mei: “I assumed—rightly, I gather—that Ah Mei could only be identifiable with someone who would not dare take action...” The traceable likeness between the novel’s character, Ah Mei, and the actual person, Ah Mui, which imbues the novel with historicity and a greater urgency to its critique of the Emergency, is left intact because the latter does not have the means to take legal action against the author and thus suffers a greater risk of representational violence.

Understood as an epistemological checkpoint, ...And the Rain My Drink offers far more than a from-below perspective of the Emergency. What the novel contributes to our historical understanding is how translation operates as a mode of racialization embedded in the process of national identity formation in Malaysia. In so doing, it compels us to further consider how literary modes of figuration contribute to the shaping of the national racial imaginary.
CHAPTER THREE

Spectral History: Documenting The Cold War Legacies of Malay(s)ian Decolonization

The surfacing of fundamentalisms in our time, echoing a long and often suppressed history of struggle, represents not so much a rupture from the received order of time but rather a repressed revenant. Its reappearance reminds us of a historical perspective joined to the present that has always provided the stage for a constant enactment of the past in the present

Harry Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” (476).

The Spectral Communist

The Last Communist (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir), a 2006 documentary film directed by Amir Muhammad, has the dubious honor of being the first Malaysian-made movie to be banned in the country. The film traces the biographical narrative of Chin Peng, the exiled Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) who led the guerrilla uprising against the British, which prompted the declaration of emergency rule that lasted for 12 years (1948-1960). Although it had been initially approved by the Censorship Board to screen at three movie theaters, a series of articles published in Berita Harian, a national daily inclined toward Malay supremacist ideology, compelled the Home Affairs Minister to reverse the decision. Written by journalists who had not viewed the film, the articles accused the film of glorifying communism, as well as threatening national harmony and security. Tinged with racist undertones, the articles further criticized the filmmaker, a Malay-Muslim, for choosing to make a film about a Chinese person and insinuated that the film would incite inter-racial violence amongst Chinese against Malays. The ban generated an outcry amongst artists, activists and journalists, as well as sparked
a lively public discussion in the media about censorship and national history. As a result, a closed screening of the film for Members of Parliament was held to reassess the ban—this event was documented by Amir Muhammad in a short film, *18MP*. The general response to the film, regardless of their position on the ban, was puzzlement. Home Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad remarked that the film’s lack of violence was worrisome as it misleadingly suggested that Chin Peng was not a violent person. The Opposition MP, Kulasegaran, expressed disappointment that the controversial figure was not more prominently featured and angrily complained that the film was “more than boring.”

This sense of bewilderment was presumably invoked by the film’s unconventional approach toward history. Eschewing interviews and archival footage of the iconic figure, the film deliberately withholds its eponymous subject from sight. In lieu of his anticipated presence, the film features interviews of ordinary persons residing in the various places where Chin Peng once lived or passed through. While a few of the interviewed subjects recall what life was like during the Malayan Emergency, others discussed their present livelihoods and other matters that bear no obvious connection to history. The press campaign’s inflammatory remarks and the film’s ban had created the impression that it would present an historical revelation that would undermine the political status quo. These expectations were confounded not only because the film did not do so, but also because it appeared utterly disinterested in the idea that there was a suppressed historical truth to be tantalizingly revealed.

Indeed, as many had pointed out, the film presented a historical perspective that was readily available to the public. The Minister of Culture, Rais Yatim, himself acknowledged that the book on which the film was based, the CPM leader’s memoir, *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of...* 

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1 My thanks to Peter J. Bloom for drawing my attention to this short film and for generously providing me with a copy.
History, was and remains legally in circulation in Malaysia. However, the minister suggested that the film is weak precisely because it offers “no new facts” (“tidak ada fakta baru”), an assessment he artfully framed as an aesthetic evaluation to sidestep commenting on the ban. Dismissing The Last Communist for its amateur production quality and heavy use of captions, the minister sought to discredit the film by suggesting that its aesthetic values did not match the nation’s modern image, and that it fell short of contributing to the progress of the national film industry.

Yet, the very characteristics of the film criticized by the minister are those that are heralded in the past decade by international film festivals as part of the “Malaysian New Wave” (see Wong 91-97). Generally speaking, the “indie” films, which have gained international visibility through the festival circuit as Malaysian cinema, have minuscule audiences at home as well as a vexed relationship with the idea of national cinema. In the case of The Last Communist, which had its world premiere at the Berlinale, its censorship at home has become part of its presentational narrative abroad: festival sites are cast as benevolent arenas of free speech for filmmakers originating from repressive countries. The international visibility afforded by prestigious film venues is often leveraged to shame the authoritarian government at home, thereby fashioning the image of an unevenly developed modern nation—economically advanced yet culturally backward. Within this narrative of modernity, Berita Harian’s anti-communist fear-mongering press campaign is treated by many as an anachronism: the racial ideology underpinning the obsessive revival of a past enmity for present-day political power play is cast as a symptom of the postcolonial nation’s temporal lag.

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2 Khoo Gaik Cheng has written extensively on Malaysian independent or “indie” cinema have laid important groundwork and her essays have laid important groundwork for the field. See, for example, “Just-Do-It-(Yourself): Independent Filmmaking in Malaysia.”
However, the film’s ban, though adding to Malaysia’s appalling record of suppressing freedom of expression, is not merely an affirmation of the postcolonial nation’s stunted political development. As Kathy Rowland astutely points out, it was not the state, which had initially approved the film for screening but “non-state agents,” a vocal few with privileged access to the popular press, who agitated for its censorship. Viewing the ban of *The Last Communist* as part of a larger worldwide trend of “the rise of the citizen censor,” often emerging from religious fundamentalist groups, Rowland urges a more nuanced consideration of how the regulation of public discourse is not always state-directed, but involves a “complex interplay between state and polity.” I would add that the film’s ban also indicates a temporal unevenness that is symptomatic less of a developmental lag than of a disjuncture within homogenous empty time, which underpins modernity’s notion of progress. Rowland’s reminder that Malaysia’s censorship laws trace their genealogy back to colonial counter-insurgency era regulations designed to curb the spread of leftist propaganda points to need to account for how present circumstances are actively circumscribed by the past. Similarly, the revival of anti-communist rhetoric with a racialist subtext can be read to suggest that Cold War structures of feeling and knowing have survived after its formal end, and that their attendant subjectivities are being reproduced in racialized terms.

Harry Harootunian’s observation on the global historical present offers a useful figure for conceptualizing the temporal unevenness described above: “The surfacing of fundamentalisms in our time, echoing a long and often suppressed history of struggle, represents not so much a rupture from the received order of time but rather a repressed revenant. Its reappearance reminds us of a historical perspective joined to the present that has always provided the stage for a constant enactment of the past in the present” (476; emphasis added). Less the consequence of a
failure to modernize than the violent outcome of assimilating into modernity, the figure of the repressed revenant recasts a phenomenon generally perceived as a form of anachronism or contemporaneous non-contemporaneity (“a rupture from the received order of time”) as an historical uncanny in which the distinction between past and present is unsettled, rendering the former not as antecedent to but contemporaneous with the present. Recognizing the repressed revenant as a figure of temporality bears significant implications for historical knowledge production. The temporality of haunting questions the privileging of spatial paradigms such as the nation, which is underwritten by homogeneous empty time, as frameworks for grounding historical analysis precisely because it challenges the presumed linearity of time. More specifically, it demands a mode of historiographic practice that contends with the temporal disjuncture that is disavowed by, but nonetheless haunt the formation of nation.

This chapter reads Amir Muhammad’s recent documentaries, *The Last Communist (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir)* and its banned sequel, *Village People Radio Show (Apa Khabar Orang Kampung?)*, as engaging with national history in a manner that recognizes its temporality of haunting. In dealing with the marginalized history of communist-led anti-colonial liberation struggle in Malay(s)i)a and the overlooked role it played in bringing about the transition to independent rule, the films that present this past as a present absence in the sense that it is here in the now yet not here, articulating a figure I call the spectral communist, which also serves as a metonym for history as haunting. The films’ articulation of the spectral communist, I argue, is an effort at generating a historical practice that unsettles the linear progressive time of the nation narrative.

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3 See also Harootunian’s critique of the area studies model and its reification of the nation-state in Chapter 1 of *History’s Disquiet*. Harootunian’s invocation of the revenant is itself a critical rewriting of Anderson’s specter of comparison, which is a privileging of the spatial dimension over the temporal in analysis and valorization of the nation.
Specifically, the films grapple with what it means to produce a history that engages with rather than effaces the linguistic heterogeneity of the national community. As they make clear, translation is central to the task of making legible the history of the oppressed; yet, in highlighting the incommensurability of linguistic difference, the films’ acts of translation suggest that their very function of rendering multitudinous tongues coherent to bind the national community, ultimately unsettles the very notion of nation itself. Translation thus discloses that the condition of possibility of nation is haunted by its own condition of impossibility. I suggest that the films’ staging of history as haunting is evinced through these acts of translation, which in turn frames their presencing of the past as a translation of time. This reading is indebted to Bliss Lim’s excellent book, *Translating Time*, which argues that “fantastic cinema” is a mode of “temporal translation” that reveals “immiscible time,” the existence of “heterogeneous temporalities” within the hegemonic frame of “homogeneous time” that, “like oil and water, [commingle] but can never fully mix” (32). A means of making legible temporal disjuncture, fantastic cinema, Lim argues, deploys a method of translation that renders perceptible the incommensurable or untranslatable difference embedded within hegemonic time. Likewise, in conjuring the spectral communist, Amir Muhammad’s films mobilize the idiom of fantastic cinema to evince nation-time as neither empty nor homogeneous, that is, not as originary but as always already translated. The nation, as Benedict Anderson notes, is bound by temporal simultaneity and this synchronicity is reified as a spatial unity through diachronic means; its bundling and flattening of multiple times into a temporally homogeneous space is effectively a mistranslation of time as space that moves along a historical continuum. In other words, the films critique the commonly held assumption that the linear, successive time of national modernity is natural, revealing instead that it has taken on universal status through translation, undertaken as a
means of assimilating difference, even as they insinuate that the multiple temporalities subsumed within nation-time bear traces of untranslatability.

**Documentary as Medium**

Self-described as a semi-musical road movie documentary, *The Last Communist* is a travelogue of the places in the Malaysian peninsula where Chin Peng once lived or passed through that is interwoven with musical interludes. As earlier noted, the film foregoes visual or audio representations of the exiled CPM leader and instead narrates his biography in a series of intertitles and captions. The biographical narrative is interspersed between interviews of ordinary persons residing in the various locales the film visits, most of whom discuss their livelihoods and, on occasion, what they know or not about the past. The film also interviews ex-guerrillas, who reside in settlements located in southern Thailand and it was through these exchanges that the filmmaker learned of another village where the ex-guerrillas belonging to the Malayan National Liberation Army’s 10th regiment, the only Malay/Muslim-majority regiment in the Chinese dominated army, currently aside. *Village People Radio Show* primarily features oral histories of these ex-guerrillas and highlights their condition of exile. The oral historical accounts are interwoven with snippets of a Thai radio drama, an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Considered together, both these films address the racial ideology that animates the anti-communist sentiment of official national history.

Amir Muhammad has suggested that the “essay film” rather than the “documentary” better captures the genre-bending nature of his non-fiction work (Cazarro 233). Indeed, the films discussed in this chapter can be read as attempts, in the sense that to essay is to attempt, to grapple with the cinematic apparatus’ documentary function. In their capacity to preserve for
posterity, filmic images paradoxically keep their objects of representation alive long after it is gone even as they produce an embalming effect in the sense that the latter are frozen in a particular moment in time, which can be replayed over and over again. The reflexive mode in which the films explore this paradox not only underscores the fact that historical knowledge production is unavoidably subjective. The recognition that the past can only be viewed subjectively tends to treat the present as a stable vantage point from which to view the past, leaving intact the notion that the past and present unfold sequentially, and are linked through causality (i.e. an understanding of the past illuminates how present circumstances came about). However, the films’ attention to the manner in which film mediates the relationship between past and present opens up the temporal protocols that subtend historical knowledge to scrutiny.

The significance of the films’ intervention in apprehending temporality and historical production can be further considered through a comparison with another documentary that takes a different approach to documenting a similar subject. Released in 2006, *I Love Malaya* focuses on Chin Peng’s lawsuit against the Malaysian government for denying him entry to his country of birth, a violation of the 1989 Hat Yai Peace Accord that the state had signed with the CPM to signal the formal cessation of hostilities. On their website, the filmmakers explain that the lawsuit led them to hear about the former guerrilla fighters settled in the Peace Villages in southern Thailand, a number of whom were born in Singapore and Malaysia, but like Chin Peng remain stateless. “Most of what has been written about [Chin Peng] and the communist guerrillas he led,” the filmmakers’ statement notes, “were from a victor’s or rather, an enemy’s point of view.” The documentary elaborates on the “enemy’s point of view” in its interviews with people gathered outside the court house, where Chin Peng’s case was being heard, protesting his right to return, as well as with a survivor of the communist ambush on the Bukit Kepong police station in
1950, whose parents were killed in the attack. Its man-on-the-street interviews further demonstrate that the public is either generally ignorant of or reticent about discussing the history of the communist uprising. Having presented these mainstream views, the documentary sets out to explore untold perspectives of the Malayan Emergency, recording oral accounts of the ex-guerrillas in Thailand.

Like The Last Communist, the documentary embarks on a journey—one that clocks over 5,000 kilometers of traveling between Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand—in pursuit of Chin Peng’s side of the story. Although it brings to light perspectives and experiences suppressed by the dominant historical narrative, the documentary maintains a conservative view of history insofar as it reifies the nation. In treating the nation as a given historical category in which it seeks to subsume the oral accounts of the ex-guerrillas, the documentary effectively depoliticizes the communist struggle and simply recasts the years of conflict as a form of “reassuring fratricide” (Anderson 201). Derived from a revolutionary song, “I Love My Malaya,”—an excerpt of which is performed for the camera by Huang Xueying, an ex-guerrilla—the documentary’s title presents the communists as patriots rather than enemies of the state. The dropped “my” is intended to register the irony, as the film observes, that there are those, like Huang, who fought for Malayan independence yet are only able to enter Malaysia as Thai citizens, as well as to highlight the precarious plight of others who remain stateless exiles, dispossessed of their citizenship rights and barred from entering the country for which they sacrificed tremendously. In doing so, the documentary seeks to disassociate love for country from an unquestioning loyalty to the state—not an insignificant point to make in Singapore or

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4 Although the capture of the police station marked a victory for the CPM, the incident has gained notoriety in large part because This historical event is often considered because among the casualties in the hours-long battle were women and children. The event also looms large in national cultural memory, having been dramatized in a popular historical fiction film, Bukit Kepong, which takes an anti-communist stance.
Malaysia, where dissent often comes at great personal cost. The concerted effort to humanize the ex-guerrillas is a similar attempt to counter the deeply entrenched anti-communist rhetoric to appeal to audience sympathies. For instance, the documentary emphasizes the ordinaryness of the lives of the other former guerrillas interviewed—they are fond of their pets; deal with domestic squabbles; fall in and out of love; suffer the heartache of separation from loved ones; wrestle with state bureaucracy and so on. Citing his advanced age, the documentary also implies that Chin Peng no longer poses a real political threat to the government, but is merely seeking to exercise his right of return, as stipulated in the terms of the 1989 peace accord, to his birthplace.

Yet, in folding the ex-guerrilla accounts into the national narrative thusly, the documentary renders them as benign figures whose ideological convictions and militant actions are safely confined in the past. Although the interviews with the party’s Central Committee members highlight the movement’s political aims, with one member in particular presenting a brief critique of contemporary capitalist society, the documentary presents itself as a sympathetic but objective lens, refraining from evaluating or interrogating the views expressed. Its aim being to balance out what is otherwise a heavily one-sided view of history, the documentary’s mode of historiography is “additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin 396). Put another way, the work of constructing knowledge of the past requires documenting as many perspectives as possible to obtain a comprehensive understanding of history. The history of the vanquished is thus conceived as gaps within a national narrative to be filled. As a result, the communist struggle is rendered impotent, bearing no relevance whatsoever to contemporary political and social concerns but exists simply as a relic of a bygone era.

To be clear, my aim here is not to dismiss the historical labor of I Love Malaya, which in itself constitutes a valuable archive of oral testimonies by the ex-guerrillas. My point, however,
is to draw attention to the implications of recuperating a history of the oppressed without critically interrogating the existing paradigm of nation that conditioned its exclusion in the first place. Interestingly, what is evident in the film even if it does not seem particularly conscious of it is that the announced aim of redressing the blanks in Singapore’s “history textbooks” at the start of the film turns out to require research of a transnational scope, which led the filmmakers to navigate through the overlapping national histories and territories of Malaysia and Thailand.

The transnational dimension appears to persist in the retrieval of national leftist history. Amir’s foray into Malaysia’s marginalized leftist history was inspired by his time abroad in Indonesia, where he was commissioned to shoot the making of Riri Riza’s feature film, Gie, a biopic on the Chinese Indonesian activist, Soe Hok Gie, a vocal critic of the Sukarno and Suharto regimes. In addition to the commissioned work, Amir also filmed his own impressionistic snapshot of contemporary Indonesia, which featured interviews with the biopic’s cast and crew’s views on, among other things, politics after the Reformasi era in the late 1990s; the anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia; and the history of the 1965-6 anti-communist massacres that was suppressed during the decades of Suharto’s rule. It was the making of this film, The Year of Living Vicariously (2005), that prompted his own investigation of Malaysia’s collective memory of leftist struggle.⁵

While Amir’s films may not overtly critique the national paradigm, their consciousness toward the representational and documentary functions of film generates productive inquiry as to their implications for producing a history of the oppressed and to the temporality of historical amnesia. “Film,” as Rey Chow observes, “is, structurally, a story about the relationship between absence and presence, between disappearance and reappearance” (“Film and Cultural Identity”

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⁵ The film’s title is, of course, a nod to The Year of Living Dangerously, the 1982 Australian film based on the novel by Christopher Koch set in Indonesia on the eve of the military coup d’etat against Sukarno.
Its invention heralded a means of reproducing an unprecedented likeness of the world, creating “a new kind of realism, one that vies with life itself” (Chow 85). Its capacity as such undoes the oppositional relationship between absence and presence, recasting it instead as a supplemental one in the Derridean sense that the filmic representation enhances only to entirely replace that which it represents.

_The Last Communist_ ingeniously exploits film’s structural logic of supplementation by representing absence rather than treating it as a void to be filled. By figuring its historical subject as a visual absence, the film reproduces the nation’s historical amnesia, thereby making absence felt. Moreover, in weaving Chin Peng’s biographical narrative between scenes of everyday life, his absence haunts the present so that he is everywhere even as he is nowhere to be seen. The film’s subject is thus paradoxically hyper-visible yet invisible, reminiscent of Ralph Ellison’s _Invisible Man_, a reproduction of the communist as racialized figure that exists in the national imagination. Amir’s films on the communist insurgency, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues, illuminate and critique official history’s portrayal of communism as a Chinese threat. Affirming the capitalist country’s racial ideology of _ketuanan Melayu_ or Malay supremacy, the racialized stereotype inscribes the ethnic Chinese as national Other, “the enemy within,” while at the same time obscuring the contributions of the communist-led insurgency in expediting the transition to national independence (Khoo 256).

However, the film’s play on absence/presence in articulating a national racialized Other also points to the fact that racial formations are constituted via ocular means—recall Frantz Fanon’s distillation of the production of the racial object: “Look, a Negro!” (109)—and the visual registers of hyper-visibility and invisibility at which racism operates. The ban on the films further underscores the significance of visuality, particularly metaphors and apparatuses of
seeing, in the production of national identity. In these instances, the effectiveness of censorship as a means of regulating national discourse by controlling what enters into collective visibility is contingent on the idea that films are representational forms that facilitate a politics of identification. As an earlier motto of the National Film Development Board (FINAS) goes, “Our Films, Our Image” (Filem Kita, Wajah Kita).⁶ No doubt, the multilingual and multiracial social landscapes featured in Amir’s film are significant because they provide a marked contrast to Malay cultural representations dominating local cinema and thereby redefine its terrain. But in harnessing the supplemental logic of presence and absence toward conjuring a spectral past in the present, the films compel an engagement with cinematic visuality that goes beyond treating it as facilitating the process of subject formation through ideological interpellation. Instead, the films occasion a consideration of the processes of identification generated by film as mediated through the gaze not just in spatial terms, but in terms of time as well.

The films’ display of reflexivity, drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus and to mediation itself, is illuminating in this regard (see video 1).⁷ In The Last Communist, the cameraman stumbles, destabilizing the frame and rousing a chorus of startled cries from those being filmed. On a separate occasion, the camera viewfinder accidentally catches a reflection of the cameraman in the window, who then mutters an audible expletive. Given the imbrication of the visual and racial, the incorporation of these accidental moments of the camera turning back on itself invites reflection on racial formations not just as objects of the gaze, but as sites of mediation. If the self-reflexive gestures of The Last Communist emphasize the visuality of the

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⁶ FINAS offers tax exemption and mandatory screening programs as part of its efforts to promote local films. In the past, only local films in the Malay, the nation’s official national language, qualified for these programs, excluding the growing number of non-Malay language films appearing on the scene, thanks in part to the emergence of digital technologies that made filmmaking more affordable. FINAS has since dropped the language requirement.

⁷ The videos mentioned in parenthetical citations in this chapter are available as supplementary files in the electronic version or on the DVD accompanying the bound hard copy.
cinematic apparatus, those in *Village People Radio Show* underscore its temporality. Both films deploy the spectral figure, but whereas the former conveys its infamous historical subject in the form of visual absence, the latter materializes nameless persons onscreen as apparitions. A woman walking along a path disappears into nothingness. A man in an army fatigue jacket inhaling a cigarette materializes out of jungle foliage and then fades away like smoke. These spectral figures point to cinema’s technical ability for producing optical illusion even as the uncanny effect they generate suggests that the filmic apparatus has the capacity to capture a sense of otherworldliness otherwise imperceptible to the naked eye. Materializing onscreen as ex-guerrillas narrate stories of the dead and of survival in the jungle, these apparitions allude to cinema’s capacity to document and to preserve for posterity, underscoring the film’s function as an archive of oral histories. The presence of these apparitions then suggests that the film’s staging of an engagement of the past is akin to an encounter with ghosts, presenting the visuality of cinema as a medium in a temporal sense, as that which stages an encounter between the dead and the living, disclosing a commingling of the past and the present, to use Bliss Lim’s phrase, a temporal multiplicity that unsettles the unicity of nation time.

Linking together the visual, racial and temporal, the films figure race as a material trace of spectral time. In other words, race or, more precisely, the processes of racialization that are constitutive to the production of Malaysian national subjectivity disclose the disjunctive temporality of haunting that undergirds nation. Indeed, the racist press campaign, which successfully petitioned for the film’s ban, brings to relief such a reading even as it registers the fact that despite its formal end, the Cold War’s structures of feeling and knowing continue to survive, and that their attendant subjectivities are being reproduced in racialized terms. Moreover, the controversy generated by the ban campaign only serves to emphasize that in
documenting absence, the film reconstitutes historical documentary’s preservation function as a site of temporal translation, re-articulating its embalming effect as an act of summoning ghosts.

**Everyday Life as Temporal Translation**

The musical interludes that appear throughout *The Last Communist* are intended, as its synopsis suggests, allude to the colonial anti-communist propaganda films screened during the Emergency era. Composed by Haradesh Singh, with lyrics written by Jerome Kugan, the interludes are performed by Zalila Lee with the accompaniment of a women’s chorus. Interspersed between the travelogue segments of the film, the placement of the musical parodies reference the use of mobile film units that were deployed to disseminate these films across the peninsula, especially to rural communities, as part of the colonial counter-insurgency’s winning hearts and minds campaign. However, the style and substance of the parodies more readily evoke the patriotic songs broadcast on Malaysian public television channels, the latter of which might be called images of “unisonality” that evoke the sense of national “contemporaneous community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s terms (145). The musical parodies’ double references to colonial and postcolonial state propaganda unsettles the break between the two historical periods that the “post-” in postcolonial signifies. More specifically, their mode of double parody calls forth the history of leftist anti-colonial struggle whose suppression facilitates a linear historical narrative that posits the postcolonial nation as signaling the end of colonialism, while obscuring the latter’s insidious persistence into the present.

For example, the film’s first musical number features a rewrite of a well-known patriotic song on the birth of the nation sung by Sudirman Haji Arshad to narrate the birth of the communist celebration, revising the familiar lines of the song, which is often played during
National Day celebrations, “Tanggal 31 Ogos 1957…” (“On 31 August 1957…”) to “Tanggal 1848…” (“In 1848…”), the year Karl Marx and Frederich Engels published “The Communist Manifesto” (see video 2). Sung by a chorus of women decked in ethnic costumes, the campy performance of cultural diversity is a sly critique of the state’s multiculturalist branding of the nation to promote foreign investment and the tourism industry (see video 3). A red-cloaked figure signifying the communist specter lurks amongst the multi-culti chorus, hinting that cold war politics overshadows and articulates the structures of the postcolonial polity in various ways. Resembling Klu Klux Klan regalia, the specter’s red robes further hint that the manufacturing of the red scare is both predicated on even as it reproduces the fear of a racialized other.

Significantly, the musical parodies’ references to propaganda also underscore the use of the audiovisual image of film and television as a means of making the nation legible as such. As Tom Rice notes, the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) was not only instrumental in the colonial anti-communist propaganda war, but was also crucial in facilitating the transition to self-government and nation-building process. In particular, film was deemed a vital instrument for these purposes in its capacity to reach illiterate audiences. In addition to regulating and constituting a national community, the MFU’s productions also circulated internationally, serving as a means of garnering support for continued British military presence in the colony and of disseminating a “rhetoric of colonial development and welfare to other colonial audiences” (Rice). Moreover, they also produced a cultural image of Malaya for an international audience, with several MFU documentary films winning prizes at Asian and European film festivals. As earlier mentioned, contemporary Malaysian films like The Last Communist and Village People Radio Show similarly become legible as national cultural objects because of their circulation at international film festivals, a condition further accentuated by their censorship at home. However, The Last
Communist’s parodic elements mobilize film’s translatability in a manner that presents the nation less as an image of unisonality than as discordant temporalities.

If the musical’s Klu Klux Klan reference is an attempt to make the racial politics of Malaysia legible to an international audience, then it also raises questions about the translatability of the humor embedded in these musical parodies. The Australian film scholar of Malaysian cinema, Benjamin McKay, wonders whether the humor altogether escapes the purview of “foreign audiences.” Noting their irony, one German reviewer surmises that the satirical humor of the songs is targeted at the “fathers of communism” and “can’t help but wonder, being in part amused and in part ashamed, how a few crude ideas initially limited to a few industrialized nations could have gotten to the furthest jungle and caused so much misery” (Hajduk). A review on the World Socialist Web Site derides the film’s “mocking tone” and ultimately dismisses it for not treating communist history seriously enough, huffily concluding that, “In general, when making fun of something, one should take care not to be more foolish than the subject” (Walsh).

Given that the musical numbers’ satirical elements depend heavily on the viewer’s familiarity with the nation’s cultural landscape, their humor might be read as a shibboleth, a means of distinguishing a community of national insiders who get the joke from those who do not. For instance, a mawkish ode to the nation’s abundant natural resources, earnestly delivered by Zalila Lee while wearing a clown wig, is subtly reminiscent of the lyrics of Sejahtera Malaysia, a widely televised propagandist hymn of the nation (see videos 3 and 4). Whereas the

8 My thanks to John D. Boy for translating the German text to English.
9 In contrast, another reviewer, Christoph Mayerl, finds the humor to be successful, noting in particular the delicate nature of joking about sacred political cows. Having watched the film at the Berlinale, that reviewer must have had in mind someone like the WSWS writer when he observed, “I mean imagine the German equivalent: a young documentary film maker describes the terror of the German Autumn, by getting fidgety policemen to sing texts by Ulrike Meinhof. It's a recipe for disaster. But Amir Muhammad pulls it off.” See: http://www.signandsight.com/features/619.html
latter gives thanks to God for blessing the country for its wealth, the former offers gratitude to the colonialists for its economic successes, thus framing the postcolonial pursuit of capitalist development as a neo-colonialist enterprise. Audiences unfamiliar with the state’s televised musical propaganda will likely miss the film’s subtle critique. Yet, recall that the screening of *The Last Communist* discussed at the beginning of this chapter had generated a fair amount of puzzlement among a Malaysian audience as well. Thus, the varied responses to the humor by its home and foreign audiences invite a reading beyond decoding the musical parodies’ critique. In pointing to the way in which humor translates and, at the same time, does not translate across different cultural contexts, these varied responses underscore that even as the film renders the nation culturally legible and formalizes it as such, its parodic elements simultaneously call it into question. As Walter Benjamin puts it, it is “that element in a translation…that does not lend itself to translation” (75). The ironic effect that these musical parodies produce is not merely intended as critique, but as a means of capturing, as Peter Hitchcock puts it, the dissonance that belies the nation’s image of unisonality (142).

In foregrounding the dissonance otherwise obscured by the image of unisonality, the film’s parodic expressions can be said to evince what Elizabeth Freeman calls temporal drag. A critical reframing of queer parody, temporal drag questions the progressive time implicit in the claim that queer parody’s political potential arises from its production of newness, that is, in the “difference” of “repetition with a difference,” even if “repetition” itself—i.e. citationality—destabilizes the idea of the original (Freeman 62-63). Temporal drag, as Freeman posits, indexes the “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present” immanent in queer parody and asserts that the time of queer performativity is not only propelled toward futurity, but is at the same time pulled back to the past (62). Similarly, the musical parodies’ acts of repetitions-with-
a-difference are saturated with citations of the past. For instance, the song about the national identity card pays tribute to a musical sequence about Malayan national unity in a popular studio film released in 1959 shortly after independence (see videos 5 and 6). As the biographical captions preceding the musical number explain, the identity card was first introduced alongside the implementation of racially segregated new villages to isolate communist activity. In citing the feel-good patriotic sequence from the 1959 studio film in relation to the cold war origins of the government-issued identity document, the musical parody imbues national identity with a thickened sense of temporality. Put another way, the musical parodies are repetitions-with-a-difference of national images of unisonality whose ironic effect underscores the discordant temporality embedded within nation that is otherwise obscured. Even if the humor and historical references are lost to certain audiences, the musical numbers resonate, as McKay notes, with scenes of the ex-guerrillas conducting karaoke-machine abetted revolutionary song singing sessions to keep the past alive, thereby alluding to a thickened sense of time.

The film more concretely evokes a sense of thickened temporality by presenting everyday life as a site of historical transcription. If withholding Chin Peng from sight signals the nation’s historical amnesia, the film also suggests that the past is not entirely absent but sedimented in the everyday lives of ordinary people. However, history is not readily evident as such but obtained through the act of reading, as suggested by the film’s forgoing of the impersonal voice-of-God narrative in favor of intertitles and captions to present the biographical narrative of Chin Peng. Based on the communist leader’s memoir, the biographical narrative’s conversational tone emphasize both the subjective position of the narrator-filmmaker and his role as a reader conveying to the viewer an account of what he has read. The captions also situate viewers as readers and further heighten their awareness of being positioned as such during the film’s
interview segments, given that nearly all of them are conducted in a language other than English and made accessible to the viewer through subtitles. This emphasis on reading effectively presents history, the act of engaging with the past, not only as an act of reading, that is, as an act of interpretation, but also one that is mediated through translation, and therefore, as an act of writing as well. This foregrounding of translation warrants further elaboration of the incommensurability of linguistic difference and its implications for history, which I will later discuss in further detail in relation to Village People Radio Show. In The Last Communist, the focus on everydayness as a site of historical transcription is an invitation to think about the work of historical production as the task of temporal translation.

Appropriating the road movie as its template, the film uses Chin Peng’s story as a point of departure rather than destination to facilitate multiple detours across the country. The documentary’s road movie narrative structure is established by the opening shot of a car in motion, with the camera positioned close to the ground to present a close-up view of the tyre’s revolving motion as the straight highway recedes into the background. Reading motion as time, the scene’s juxtaposition of cyclical and linear movement posits a dialectical relation of cyclical time of everyday life and linear historical time, the former’s recursive looping compelling the latter’s forward movement. Constructed out of the emblems of modernity, the car and the highway, the opening scene also reads as an image of modern time consciousness in which the linear progression of homogeneous empty time becomes the hegemonic frame for organizing the experience of time, where “progress in space ... coincides with the passage of time” (B. Lim 10).

On one level, the film inhabits the structure of linear time by using the biographical narrative of Chin Peng as its through line, recounting his boyhood, his political awakening, his rise within the ranks of the Communist party and his contributions to anti-colonial nationalist
politics. However, the film unsettles this hegemonic time by approaching the everyday as a site for conjuring the past in the present. The film undertakes a journey through the various places he once passed through. At each stop along the journey, captions narrating Chin Peng’s biography are superimposed on images of everyday scenes, as if to suggest that the past is inscribed in the present. For example, a caption informs viewers that an old row shop house, presently occupied by a lottery retail outlet, was once the family residence of Chin Peng, imbuing the otherwise unremarkable edifice with historical significance. The shot offers an image of a “thickened present,” what Harootunian, citing Edmund Husserl, describes as “a present filled with traces of different moments and temporalities, weighted with sediments” (476). Interspersed between these captioned segments are interviews with local residents generally discussing their livelihoods. The interviews—to highlight a few: a bow tie-wearing roadside food vendor; a pomelo grower whose modest family business has expanded into a thriving export business; a lotus bun shop assistant with a mythical tale of his confection; and, “The Petai Boys” bean sellers with their race-based marketing strategy—come across as ethnographic portraits that collectively showcase the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the nation.

“The idea,” comments Amir on his decision not to include archival shots of Chin Peng in the film, “was to show that history happens in the present tense” (qtd. in D. Lim). Focusing on the quotidian aspects of life, these interviews collectively construct the everyday as a site, a domain of experience for discerning temporal multiplicity that homogeneous, empty time sought to efface. In particular, these everyday scenes not only represent the present, but hold within it remnants of the past made legible as such by the biographical narration. Following the biographical detail that Chin Peng’s family was in the bicycle business, the film transitions to an interview with Mr. Wong Kok Leong, a bicycle shopkeeper (See video 3.7). In addition to
providing editing continuity, linking past and present, the bicycle is also coded as a fragment of
the past in the present. While giving a tour of his shop, Wong remarks that in an age where cars
and motorcycles are the primary modes of transportation, bicycles have gone “out of fashion.”
“As we progress, we leave the past behind,” he says, succinctly capturing the modernizing
impulse of the age; yet his shop stands as a testament to the persistence of something belonging
to a bygone era in the present. Yet, Wong does not come across as nostalgic or anachronistic, but
is framed as a contemporaneous figure, signaling that the past is in the now.

In actively constructing the past in the present as figured in the everyday, these scenes
refute the idea of history as the work of deriving knowledge from a fixed past as a means of
making sense of the present to produce a linear narrative. Put another way, the film reads the
everyday as if it were a translation of time if, following Walter Benjamin, we take translation not
to mean an act of assimilating a foreign language into a familiar tongue, but of transforming the
familiar to convey that which is expressed in the foreign (“The Task of the Translator”).
Consequently, to read in translation is to be attuned to the way in which a text is already
composed by one that exists prior to it and to the fact that the text itself renders what the original
could not express. Thus, to read in translation is to recognize that the text, though singular, is not
one, but always already multiple and open to other readings, other re-articulations. Benjamin’s
consideration of the original and translation on equal terms, countering the prevailing wisdom
that privileges the original over the copy, is a reminder that the task of translation, and by
extension, of reading, is a political act. Similarly, to think of historical knowledge production in
terms of temporal translation is to consider the grounds of its construction. What counts as
historical knowledge? Which objects are privileged as having historical significance and which
ignored?
In constructing everyday life as if it were a translation of time, the film stages the production of historical knowledge as the task of actualizing a past that has been forgotten yet remains unforgettable. By insisting that traces of the past are discernible in the present, the film refuses the idea that that which has been excised from history has been lost forever. Although absent from historical consciousness, these traces of the forgotten yet unforgettable are embedded in everyday, embodied practices. This is evident in the interview with Mr. Lee Eng Kew, a shop assistant at a confectionary renowned for its lotus flower buns. As Lee explains, the lotus flower bun was baked by a mother in memory of her son, a communist guerrilla fighter who never returned home from battle. The tale is a mix of myth and history, with talk of deities and dreams interwoven into a chronological account that spans the Japanese Occupation to the Malayan Emergency. It brings to mind Benjamin’s remark: “It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated...” (Selected Writings 406). The mythical elements of the oral account of this anonymous fighter and his mother’s memory of him stand in contrast to Chin Peng’s biographical narrative, the latter’s textual form imbuing it with the gravitas of history denied to the former. That the memory of the anonymous fighter not only survives in Lee’s oral account, but in the everyday object of the lotus flower bun—a confection for which the town is famous and one that is sold throughout the country—calls to question the universality of history as a frame of knowledge of the past. It also highlights how the everyday object can be used to stage an encounter of the past in the present. Lee is himself a historian without any formal training, but whose research has been recognized by academics and the public as a significant contribution to the history of Taiping, now a sleepy town that was once a major economic hub in the 19th century.¹⁰ Both his

¹⁰ My thanks to the anonymous reviewer at Concentric for bringing this point to my attention, prompting further reflection on this aspect of the film. Mr. Lee Eng Kew’s historical research is the subject of the documentary, Ah
status as such and the account he presents for the film underscores the fact that subjugated knowledge is not just that which has been denied a place in official narratives within its own terms, as is the case with Chin Peng; it also refers to forms that have been disqualified as knowledge.

Just as time is not homogeneous but filled with multiple temporalities, so too the film suggests that time is not empty, but produced through laboring bodies. If its coda is that which most concretely suggests that *The Last Communist* is a film about time, then it also conveys the fact that time cannot be thought separately from labor. Having traveled the length of the peninsula, the film concludes in Kuala Lumpur’s Merdeka Square on the eve of National Day celebrations where people gather annually, as they did in 1957, when Malaya’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, officially declared the country independent from British rule. Rather than train its camera on the festivities, the film interviews the two workers manning the tower of the historic Sultan Abdul Samad building, who are responsible for ensuring that the clock strikes at midnight, just as the fireworks display is timed to go off. The image of the workers winding the over a century old clock, sweating behind the scenes as the sound of fireworks and cheers erupt in the square, underscores the uncelebrated labor of the ordinary members of the working class behind the nation’s achievements. As the clock bell tolls and the crowd outside breaks into the national anthem, the screen fades to black with captions noting that despite the end of the Cold War and the 1989 peace treaty, Chin Peng remains in exile, unable to return home.

The coda is preceded by a cartoon rendition of the historic 1955 Baling talks. Convened as the transition to postcolonial governance became imminent, the CPM representatives,

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including Chin Peng, met with the conservative nationalist leaders, led by Tunku Abdul Rahman, to negotiate a ceasefire. The talks arrived at a stalemate, the former’s terms that the party be recognized as a legal political entity coming up against the latter’s demand for an unconditional surrender. The cartoon segment includes a dramatized reading of the meeting’s transcript, excerpting an exchange in which the CPM asserted that its armed resistance had contributed to several concessions by the British toward granting independence, a claim that was vehemently rejected by its interlocutors, ultimately bringing a halt to the talks. Though the fighting continued, the talks nonetheless ensured the political dominance of the conservative National Front, which remains in power to this day.

The film’s final sequences effectively cast the state’s refusal to grant Chin Peng entry as a matter of history repeating itself, a replay of the 1955 exclusion of the CPM from national political life. This cyclical time is also visualized by the clock tower staff, whose work is marked by a repetitive motion and rhythm, as evidenced both in the physical efforts required to wind the clock and the routine maintenance scheduled throughout the year necessary to keep it running. The conjoining of cyclical time with the linear progressive time of the narrative of national development, the latter alluded to by the independence day celebrations, points to the assimilation of every day time into nation time, hinting at the heterogeneous temporalities that constitute homogeneous, empty time. While the smooth-running of the national festivities seemingly denote a seamless integration of multiple temporalities into hegemonic nation time, the film’s codification of the image of the clock tower workers as a visual metonym for Chin Peng’s absence suggests otherwise. Just as Chin Peng is banished from the nation, so too the workers are hidden from sight.
Focusing primarily on ordinary people and their livelihoods, the film presents the nation’s workforce as bearing the unconscious memory of the history of leftist struggle. However, it is also careful not to romanticize the worker as providing unmediated access to historical truth and, thus, as a wellspring of political resistance. Consider the interview with Kaliammah, a worker at the Elphil Plantation at Sungai Siput, the infamous site where the murder of three British planters by communist guerrillas took place, triggering the declaration of emergency rule. Whereas the manual labor of plantation work seems to have been passed down generationally, stories of the Emergency have not; asked if she knew of any stories about the Emergency related to her workplace, Kaliammah suggests that that was before her time, though noting that her mother and grandparents might know. Although she indexes a forgetting of history, Kaliammah’s account of her work life serves as an historical inscription of the processes of modernity and its uneven effects.

The musical interlude that precedes the interview with Kaliammah ironically parodies capitalist development’s promise of wealth and happiness for the nation. The interview drives home the point that this future promise applies selectively, if at all, to the working class, their labor crucial to the country’s wealth but their share of it denied. As she explains, although factory work offers better wages, working at a plantation allows for more flexibility in her day to care for her children, who she hopes will study hard so that they do not have to follow in her occupation. Yet, as Kaliammah recognizes, this dream of upward social mobility demands an endless rotation of work that segments her day in a clockwork manner not unlike the factory’s mechanized: rise at dawn, take the children to school, work, lunch, work, cook, clean, attend to the children, sleep—wash, rinse, repeat. Kaliammah’s description of her day captures the
synchronization of everyday existence with the rhythms of capitalist modernity, making apparent its production of unevenness otherwise obscured by the narrative of national development.

Thus, even as it serves as a testament of historical amnesia, Kaliammah’s account is also a living testimony not only of the false promise of national capitalist development, but of the unfinished struggle for liberation. It casts the “last” in *The Last Communist* not as the final or the definitive end, but as the most recent in time, as if in anticipation of another. History, in other words, does not merely reside in the past, but is continuously being made in the present. Moreover, in highlighting the experience of the working class woman in which domestic work begins when waged labor ends and vice versa, the interview with Kaliammah points out that modernity’s production of unevenness is distributed not just along class, but gender distinctions as well. Considered in relation to the film’s absenting of Chin Peng, whose image represents the marginalized history Malayan anti-colonial leftist struggle, Kaliammah’s account underscores the need to highlight the contributions and experiences of women within leftist history.

**Translation and Transnational History**

*Village People Radio Show (Apa Khabar Orang Kampung?)* features oral testimonies of rank and file members of the Malayan National Liberation Army’s 10th regiment, the only Malay/Muslim-majority regiment in the predominantly Chinese army. Like the ex-guerrillas interviewed in *The Last Communist*, they live in the Thai-Malaysian borderland settlements in Kampung Chulabhorn Patana 12. Setting out to highlight the stories of a “minority within a minority” so to speak, the film not only interrogates the dominant construction of Malayness at the core of Malaysian national identity by disarticulating communism and Chineseness; it also brings to light stories otherwise obscured by the Cold War’s Manichaean structure.
The film features Pak Kassim a.k.a. Idris Yusof’s testimony as its centerpiece, along with other oral accounts by rank and file regiment members residing in the settlement. Appearing briefly at the beginning of the film, the regiment’s notable leaders, Abdullah CD and Suriani Abdullah are given a silent nod; however, footage of interviews with the regiment’s Central Committee members were left out of the film (Ramani fn. 6). The film sidesteps a party authorized version of history (Suriani Abdullah is also the author of the regiment’s official historical account) in favor of putting the spotlight on its ordinary members, albeit one that is overwhelmingly male-focused.\textsuperscript{11} As opposed to presenting a counter-narrative of the past, this focus on the ordinary enables the film to discern traces of concealed pasts embedded within the national cultural discourse of the present.

The film’s Malay title is borrowed from a song sung by the popular music artist Sudirman Haji Arshad, which is played in the opening and closing sequences of the film. Addressed to a fellow rural Malay migrant to the city, the song entreats its implied auditor to remain in contact despite being far away from home. The song’s nostalgic image of the kampung or village as a site of communal intimacy affirms the idea of the kampung as the locus of Malay cultural identity, which emerged as a dominant trope in Malay literature and the media following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (1979–1990). Such portrayals of the kampung as a racially homogenous site and bearer of traditional cultural values are often contrasted with images of the city as a place of cultural alienation and moral corruption, as if to criticize the modernizing imperatives initiated during the Mahathir regime, which spurred the migration of rural Malays to the city. Yet, this oppositional positioning of the kampung and the city also resolves the ideological contradictions of Malay nationalism and capitalist development in that

\textsuperscript{11} See Suriani Abdullah, \textit{Rejimen Ke-10 dan Kemerdekaan (The 10th Regiment and Independence)}, Hong Kong: Nan Dao, 1999.
the former serves both as a wellspring of cultural identity and as the narrative condition, a starting point for the story of historical progress to unfold given its codification as a site of pre-modernity.

The film disarticulates race and nation as figured in the dominant trope of the *kampung* described above. Scenes of every day life in the *kampong*—reminiscent of Lat’s *The Kampung Boy* discussed in Chapter One—are featured throughout the film, as if to underscore its cultural signification of Malayness (video 3.8). Asserting the Malay-Muslim identity of the communists, the *kampung* scenes are counterposed with their testimonies discussing the compatibility of their Muslim faith with their ideological beliefs, and the impact of guerrilla life on their religious practices. These accounts not only interrogate the prevalent notion in Malaysia that Islam is antithetical to communist ideology, but also drive home the point that Malay identity is neither homogeneous nor immutable, but ideologically inflected and thus, deeply contested. The hegemonic signification of Malay national identity is further destabilized by the unassuming presence of the Thai national flag in these scenes, decoupling the race-nation dyad that sustains Malaysian nationalist ideology. It also underscores the exilic status of this particular Malay community. The voiceover of an ex-guerrilla, Pak Kassim, the film’s primary interview subject, recounting the rising tide of anti-British sentiment in 1940s Malaya plays over scenes of village school children, descendants of the ex-guerrillas, singing the Thai national anthem as the country’s flag is being raised. This juxtaposition of sound and image—of a Malay account of the past elsewhere and the contemporary Thai setting—highlights the expulsion of a past from collective Malaysian memory.

The film uses sound to draw attention to Kampung Chulabhorn Patana’s condition of exile both from the country and its collective memory. Snippets of a Thai radio play interwoven
throughout the film to emphasize the “disjuncture,” as Amir himself put it, of the geographical location of this Malay kampung, a symbol of the cultural essence of Malay nationalism, in Thailand (qtd in Cazzaro 240). An adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, the radio play is about a king, who falsely accuses the queen of cuckolding him with his best friend and banishes her and their newborn daughter from his kingdom (video 3.9). It is possible to tease out a reading of the play as describing the condition of exile produced by the limits of national ideology. Given that Shakespeare’s happy resolution of the play is left out of the film, one might read the latter’s focus on its tragic aspects as a metaphor for the condition of postcoloniality, the neo-imperialist winter that came after the Malayan Spring, as Han Suyin described the emergence of anti-colonial nationalist politics of the 1940s. However, what strikes me as significant is Shakespeare’s status as a global author. It is as if the film were harnessing Shakespeare’s international recognizability, inviting viewers to consider the significance of this particular story of exile not just in relation to local, but to transnational history as well.

The film’s opening scene sets the stage for locating these historical accounts within a transnational frame. Situated against a world map in the background, a boy wearing a kopiah or kufi cap, a signifier of Malay-Muslim culture, introduces himself to the camera in Thai (see video 3.10). The presence of children throughout the film is a reminder that the production of history is about attending to the future of the present generation. Often caught gazing curiously back at the camera as they are being filmed, the children’s images, which are usually accompanied by voiceovers of the elderly ex-guerrillas’ historical accounts, further underscore the role of film as a translational medium that enables the survival of the past into the present. As the opening scene suggests, the remembrance of this past, exiled from national memory, is contingent on a transnational frame of history.
In addition, the juxtaposition of Malay and Thai languages, and of the old and the young, also highlights the role of translation in ensuring the transmission of the past to the next generation. In this regard, the incorporation of the Thai radio play—which also serves as a tribute to Apichatpong Weerasethakul whose short films on the Thai countryside feature the radio (Cazzaro 240)—can also be read to suggest that the history of the ex-guerrillas struggle for Malayan independence is very much a part of Thai history as well. However, the film also cautions against treating translation as a seamless process of meaning transferral, as intimated by the manner in which the film’s English and Malay titles are rendered. The Malay greeting, “Apa khabar?” meaning “How are you?” or “What’s up?” is not reproduced in the English. Moreover, the literal translation of “orang kampung” as “village people” strips the former of its connotations of familiarity, so that the phrase refers simply to rural folks in general rather than to someone from the same hometown, which the Malay implies. Thus, whereas the structure of address in the Malay title relays a sense of community between its speaker and auditor, the English title implies an ethnographic distance between the viewer and the film, as if the former were an outsider listening in. Absent in the Malay title, the reference in English to the “radio show,” alluding to the Thai radio play which signifies the ex-guerrillas’ exilic status, further situates the viewer without any facility in Malay as an outsider and, thus, ironically, in a similar position to the Malay-speaking exiles in the film.

The discrepancies between the Malay and English titles gesture toward the significance of linguistic difference in nation narration, a prominent theme in Amir Muhammad’s films. For the viewer without Malay, the clunky English title, approximating the awkward phrasing or

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12 Weerasethakul has since produced “Primitive,” a multi-platform project that examines, among other things, the history of state directed anti-communist violence in the northeast Thai countryside. See http://www.animateprojects.org/films/by_project/primitive/primitive. His critically acclaimed and award-winning film, Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, is the culmination of this project.
translatese associated with bad translations, offers a hint. Featuring only the Malay language, the
interviews in Village People Radio Show are anomalous compared to The Last Communist and
Amir’s other non-fiction films, which showcase the multitude of tongues spoken in Malaysia and
often include an interview subject that fluently speaks in a vernacular language other than her/his
own, for example a Hokkien-speaking Malay or a Tamil-speaking Chinese, to highlight the
fluidity of ethnic distinctions. This emphasis on the nation’s diversity of languages suggest that
national history cannot be obtained without translation and that without translation, a history of
the oppressed may not otherwise be made legible. In addition to the subtitles, the audible
snatches of translation happening off-camera to facilitate interviews in The Last Communist
highlight translation as the very means through which this archive is produced.

This emphasis on translation attests to Benedict Anderson’s well-known thesis that the
nation is imagined through language at the same time that it illuminates a fundamental paradox
belied by its elegant simplicity. At one level, the focus on translation points to the implied
translational role of a national lingua franca in bridging linguistic divides, that is, its function of
constituting a political collectivity and of giving form to the nation as such. Yet, the films present
translation less as a binding agent than as a process that makes visible the fact that “language
difference,” as Peter Hitchcock writes, “is the aporia of nation formation” (140). In Village
People Radio Show, a brief sequence of a man fastidiously translating a text on the Emergency-
era from Chinese into Malay suggests that the imperative to translate is not driven by the will to
assimilate difference under a common language to produce national unity. On the contrary, it is
compelled by a counter-hegemonic desire to attend to the multitude of languages that constitute
the nation, an exercise that would unravel its very unity. Rather than unisonality, translation
produces dissonance, concretized in the film as interjections of jarring electronic sounds set
against erratic patterns of light punctuating the serene views of village life. But, in addition to disclosing the hauntological status of the nation, I suggest that the films’ dependence on translation, particularly translation into English, on which it depends to circumvent national ideology in order to foreground marginalized history, discloses the spectrality of transnationalism.

All films released in Malaysia, made locally or elsewhere, must be subtitled in the national language. The marked absence of Malay subtitles, yet another symptom of this history’s exiled status, prompts a closer look at the use of English in *The Last Communist* and *Village People Radio Show*. English serves as the lingua franca in both films, making legible the babel of tongues audible in the film and ensuring the films’ accessibility to a transnational audience. The ban of both films from Malaysia underscores the fact that transnational circuits of cultural exchange, in particular, international film festivals, are vital for the survival of a counter-hegemonic national history. What is striking is the irony that English, not only the global hegemonic medium, but the language of Malaysia’s former colonial masters and the lingua franca of the postcolonial elite, is that which enables the survival of a marginalized history. The films’ use of English earmarks the language as a vestige of the colonial past; as the material conditions of survival, that is, the living on of the past in the present; and as an apparatus of power, carrying with it fragments of the past even as it itself contributes to the marginalization of this history. That is, the films’ translation of the oral accounts into English makes accessible otherwise ignored archives and are a means of circumventing the ideological limits of official national history; nonetheless, they do so by reaffirming the global hegemony of English.

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13 While both films are relatively accessible to Malaysia-based audiences—*The Last Communist* is available in full on Youtube and DVDs of *Village People Radio Show* are discreetly available for sale at certain venues in Kuala Lumpur—the films’ visibility at international venues aids in generating local interest beyond the negative controversy generated by the conservative press.
However, the recognition of English not as a benign medium of communication but a relay of power, as discussed above, compels a more critical understanding of the relationship between the national and the transnational. Rather than presume the transnational as offering a more expansive view of history in contrast to a narrow national view, translation discloses that the transnational is not a pre-existing world but a process of worlding.

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The films’ examination of marginalized leftist contributions to national independence accentuates the need to explore the profound impact of the Cold War on the formation of the postcolonial nation-state. Indeed, the press campaign against The Last Communist as well as its and Village People Radio Show’s subsequent bans, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, indicate that despite its formal end, the residual tensions of the Cold War continue to animate the social and political life of the nation. These films stage such a reckoning not by seeing the history of the vanquished as a void to be filled, but by recognizing that fragments of the past persist in the present and are embedded within hegemonic forms of expression, awaiting activation. The provocation to action, implicit in its presentation of decolonization as an already begun task that has yet to be completed, renders history a political act of redefining the historical present.
CHAPTER FOUR

Transnational Archives, National History: On the Limits of Spectral Critique

The gift of the past is a Trojan horse. One thinks one knows whence it comes and to whom it belongs. But the gift is to others, those the so-called rightful heirs are presently destroying.

There is nothing in human history that is foreign to us.


In a 2013 essay published in the *New Left Review*, Benedict Anderson asks why Southeast Asia remains the only region whose writers are “unrewarded” by the Nobel Prize for Literature’s 110-year history. As the leading question suggests, the essay is intended to draw greater attention to the region’s literary talents, particularly the late Indonesian writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a top contender for the prize whose writing has contributed significantly to Anderson’s thinking on language and nationalism. The essay spells out the widely known if unspoken fact that winners are chosen not only for their literary merit, but to convey political statements on the state of world affairs by the committee. Hence, the award’s shift away from its initial focus on Western Europe in the first half of the twentieth-century to the United States during the Cold War years and then to writers from newly decolonized Third World nations. More interestingly, Anderson highlights the less well acknowledged factor of language politics that circumscribe the prestigious award’s function as a “technology of recognition,” to use Shu-mei Shih’s term. Southeast Asia, Anderson argues, has been overlooked
not only because its lack of a coherent regional identity—it has “no dominant language, no religious unanimity, no political hegemon”—would mean that a winner from the region would convey a barely legible or, perhaps, an unwittingly controversial political message (104). It is also because so few of the region’s widely used languages count as dominant global languages, resulting in the inevitable oversight by the Nobel Committee at the Swedish Academy.

Anderson is not so much advocating for a separation of geopolitics from literary value in the awarding of the Nobel Prize as he is suggesting another way of recognizing the global political significance of marginalized literature. Hence, eschewing the idea of regional representation, Anderson makes the case for why Indonesian literature is particularly deserving of global recognition: “From my limited experience, I believe that Indonesia is, in literary terms, the most creative country in Southeast Asia precisely because it has merged lingua franca and national language in an uncoercive manner” (106). To paraphrase, Indonesian literature has offered an important political contribution to the world because it has facilitated without coercion the use of a common language between the many ethno-linguistic groups in the country, giving rise to a national identity. Indeed, as Anderson notes, Indonesia is exceptional in this regard as compared to its neighbors, whose national languages are ones favored by politically dominant groups and imposed by authoritarian means. Whereas writers from minority groups in those countries have turned to writing in languages such as English in part to protest, Indonesian writers have drawn from various local expressions to enrich their national language. Yet, as Anderson observes, “nationalization of whatever sort also means a kind of seclusion” and, as a result, “[n]one of the national languages of Southeast Asia has any transnational aura” (106). To this point, Anderson offers another reason why Southeast Asian literature has not gained international visibility: the region’s failure to recognize the importance of literary translation.
What interests me in Anderson’s recent essay is how his reflection on the global recognition—or the lack thereof—of Southeast Asian literature indirectly touches on some of the tensions in his previous writings on the relationship between language and nationalism. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argues that the nation is imagined through language in the sense that speakers of the same language constitute a form of “contemporaneous community” (145). The singing of the national anthem whereby anonymous individuals join together in chorus, producing an image of “unisonance,” is a concrete example of this point (145).

Moreover, because it is imagined through language, the nation is conceived as having “finite, if elastic, boundaries” and is thus “simultaneously open and closed” (7, 146). The nation is open in the sense that a language, insofar as it operates as a social boundary, is “always open to new speakers, listeners, and readers” (146). At the same time, it is closed because even though language is always translatable, there is also always an element of untranslatability that distinguishes one linguistic community from another. To illustrate this paradoxical point, Anderson offers a few linguistic examples. The first two are English excerpts that demonstrate the fact that language is not naturally bound to ethnicity or territory and the simultaneous translatable and untranslatable qualities of language. The third example is an excerpt from Pramoedya’s short story, written in Indonesian. Left untranslated, the passage is closed to the English reader; however, Anderson urges his reader to sound out the words on the page to hear the language. The meaning of the Indonesian text may be inaccessible to the reader and so too, membership within that linguistic community; but, in sounding out its words, the non-Indonesian speaker can still hear it as language.

In his subsequent book, *The Specter of Comparisons*, Anderson argues that the nation is imagined through comparison, a thesis that builds on the idea of language’s role in imagining the
national community. In Pheng Cheah’s words, Anderson suggests that “imagining the nation is essentially a comparative process in which the nation is always haunted by something that is at one and the same time both spatially other or exterior to it, but also similar to it in the sense that it is part of it and inhabits the same frame of consciousness” (“Grounds of Comparison” 10). If it is language that gives form to nation, then what makes different languages and, thus, nations comparable is the fact that they possess a formal equivalence. The earlier cited example of untranslated Indonesian in *Imagined Communities* prefigures this point. However, the problem that confronts Anderson in his reflection on the global invisibility of Southeast Asian literature is this: different languages may be formally equivalent, but that does not mean that they are equal in status. If nations, insofar as they are imagined through language, are constituted through the process of comparison, then the hierarchy of languages—again, the English and Indonesian examples in *Imagined Communities* uncannily anticipate this point—suggests that comparison can only ever occur on uneven terrain.

Given its exemplary nature, the case of Indonesia’s national language and Indonesian nationalism has been particularly important for Anderson’s thinking on the subject. Malaysia presents itself as an ideal comparative case in relation to Indonesia seeing as the shared national language bears completely different political significance in the two countries. A regional language in the archipelago, Malay—what would come to be described as Indonesian or *bahasa Indonesia* in the 1920s—was favored by the Dutch as the colonial administrative language of the Netherlands East Indies and subsequently embraced by Indonesian nationalists as the national language. In British Malaya, where English was the language of governance, Malay was—and is still—primarily viewed as the language of a particular ethnic group. Thus, in addition to serving as the lingua franca of the nation, the status of Malay as the sole official national language of
Malaysia also symbolizes the “special position” of the *bumiputera* Malays over and above the other racial groups in the country.\(^1\)

The differing political significance of Malay/Indonesian in these neighboring nations points to the profound influence of the Dutch and British colonial administrations in shaping the national politics of Indonesia and Malaysia respectively. As this comparison of Indonesia and Malaysia suggests, the specter that haunts the two nations are their former European colonial masters. Indeed, in bringing out their distinctive qualities, Anderson’s incisive comparative analyses of both these and other nations that constitute Southeast Asia are an important reminder that the regional entity is less shaped by a common identity shared between the nations than it is a construct made imaginable by the Mercatorian map and the political exigencies of the Cold War. As Cheah argues, in demonstrating that the spatial entities—whether nation or region—that shape our modes of knowledge production are imaginary constructs, Anderson points out that the grounds of comparison are “a form of entropy” given that what is being compared “is not easily arrestable as an empirical thing or presence because ‘it’ is nothing other than the spectralizing processes of capital, forces of upheaval and change that destabilize what is at rest and break down what is organically whole” (5–6).

That the grounds of comparison are inherently unstable and, thus, unpredictable suggests that Anderson’s use of grammar as a metaphor to describe nationalism is flawed (SC 29). Rather than view the global spread of nationalism as adhering to a system of rules, I have argued that it ought to be understood in terms of translation. By translation, I do not mean to suggest that

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1 Although Article 153 of the Federal Constitution was amended to recognize the “special position” of *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the earth or autochthonous group), and not just of Malays, following the incorporation of the northern Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The amendment recognized the “special position” of “the native peoples of Sabah and Sarawak;” nonetheless, as Rusaslina Idrus argues, Malays nonetheless maintained de facto political hegemony given that the term *bumiputera* became interchangeable with Malays on Peninsular Malaysia.
postcolonial nationalism is a derivative copy of the original European model of political modernity. Rather, my understanding of translation is informed by Walter Benjamin’s argument that the act of translation discloses the fact that the original is always already translated, thereby questioning the original’s claim to authenticity and superiority over its copy. Such an understanding, that the act of putting into language is always already a form of translation, is analogous to what Cheah identifies as the nation’s spectral condition. Elaborating Anderson’s point, Cheah argues that the postcolonial nation’s spectral condition does not only derive from being haunted by its colonial past. It also stems from the very fact that the process of coming into formation is a form of spectralization whereby the actualization of formlessness into material form is enabled by the exposure to and contamination by something other than itself. Hence, the nation is ontologically—or, hauntologically—a spectral form in the sense that its very constitution is facilitated by the forces of global capital, something that is fundamental to its survival yet ultimately beyond its control.

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Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Buru Quartet* is a haunted, haunting work, and not only because of how it came about. The quartet’s title derives from the remote island of Buru, a penal colony in the Moluccas where Pramoedya spent almost ten of the fourteen years of his incarceration under Suharto’s New Order regime. A prolific writer and well known among the country’s literary circles, Pramoedya was—like tens of thousands others—arrested for being a communist sympathizer. Prior to his detention, Pramoedya was researching the history of anti-colonial movements in Indonesia; all of his books, papers and manuscripts were either lost or destroyed following his arrest (Gogwilt 220). At Buru, Pramoedya reconstructed his historical research from memory, presenting them as oral accounts to his fellow prisoners. When he was later able
to access pen and paper, Pramoedya wrote the *Buru Quartet* as well as other works during his imprisonment.

The *Buru Quartet* follows the story of the political awakening of its narrator-protagonist, Minke. A member of the European-educated Javanese elite, Minke is groomed to succeed his father as the *bupati* or regent of a province in the Dutch East Indies. However, his encounters with Nyai Ontosoroh née Sanikem, the Native concubine of the Dutch plantation owner, Herman Mellema, and their daughter, Annelies, sets him on a life changing path of anti-colonial political organizing. The first novel in the series, *Bumi Manusia (This Earth of Mankind)*, details Minke’s formative schooling days and his romance with Annelies; it is the tragic end of their marriage, an event that epitomizes colonial racism and injustice, that politically radicalizes Minke and compels him to critically reflect on the European Enlightenment ideals obtained from his education in relation to the realities of colonial life in the Dutch East Indies. The second and third novels, *Anak Semua Bangsa (Child of All Nations)* and *Jejak Langkah (Footsteps)*, describe Minke’s informal political education as he engages with various intellectuals and political activists, and through his various love affairs, including the one with, Ang San Mei, a Chinese revolutionary, that shape his political views. These novels plot the development of his political ideals, including a critique of the complicity of the Native elite class with the Dutch as well as his evolving ideas on what binds together—whether, ethnic, religious or class identity—a collective political identity in pursuit of freedom. Minke’s political maturation is especially reflected in the quartet’s third volume. Recalling Mei’s advice, he establishes a political organization and a newspaper as its mouthpiece, in which he publishes his political writings.

Minke’s first-person narrative of self-actualization is interrupted in the final novel, *Rumah Kaca (House of Glass)*. At the end of *Footsteps*, Minke is arrested on a false charge by the
police, a move designed to curb the growing political influence of his organization following the publication of an article critical of the Dutch East Indies Governor-General in its newspaper. In *House of Glass*, the first-person narration is taken over by Jacques Pangemanann, a Native colonial police inspector who led Minke’s arrest and who is charged with producing intelligence on the burgeoning anticolonial movement sweeping the Dutch East Indies. In the first three volumes, Minke’s first-person account consists of a collation of his writings, correspondences, court testimonies, transcribed oral accounts and newspaper reports; the narrative conceit is that these papers have been arranged to convey a narrative of Minke’s political development. In *House of Glass*, Pangemanann is now in possession of Minke’s papers and it is through his perspective that the latter’s radical political ideals are viewed.

Minke’s exile not only parallels Pramoedya’s own incarceration; the arrested development of anti-colonial nationalism following Minke’s detainment allegorizes Suharto’s military takeover of the postcolonial nation-state. The parallel between fiction and history further implies that the Suharto government is a direct heir of Dutch colonialism and that obstructs the work of national liberation begun by the Sukarno regime. As Pheng Cheah argues, the quartet’s recounting of the national political awakening of Indonesia at the turn of the twentieth-century was not only meant as a corrective to the “historiographical distortions based on Dutch colonial archives and the collective amnesia actively enforced by President Suharto’s New Order government”; by keeping alive the memory of the nation’s radical past, it was also intended to revive the progressive national spirit extinguished by this dark period of Indonesia’s history (253). The task of decolonization, the quartet suggests, is far from over. It is not enough to simply wrest the state away from colonial control; as Suharto’s rule proves, the postcolonial
governing apparatus can also be directed against the interests of its own people for the benefit of the ruling authorities.

Drawing on his essays and interviews, Cheah further suggests that the quartet’s intended aim is informed by Pramoedya’s view that literature contributes to the production of a “critical public sphere” (258). This idea is reflected in the quartet itself wherein the spread of anti-colonial political ideas is attributed to the production of a vibrant public sphere created by the Native and Eurasian press for the free exchange of ideas. In other words, literature does not only represent or memorialize history through reproduction; it can also produce historical change by offering a perspective of the past that intervenes in the present. That Minke is a composite character modeled after the historical figure, Tirto Adi Suryo, a journalist and anti-colonial political organizer who lived at the turn of the twentieth-century, and that undergoes similar experiences to Pramoedya suggests that the quartet was less interested in reproducing the past as it really was than of presenting history as an encounter of the past with the present. As Max Lane, the English translator of the quartet, puts it in his Introduction to the *House of Glass*, “History is not the background to these stories [i.e. the quartet], it is the protagonist” (xii).

However, Cheah argues that the quartet’s form—specifically, its thematization of the rise of the anti-colonial movement and its narrative structure—highlights a paradox in Pramoedya’s views on the relationship between literature and history, and its implications for effecting political change (331). The quartet’s depiction of the rise of the anticolonial nationalist’s movement, Cheah notes, is figured as organismic growth. Reading *House of Glass* against the grain, Cheah notices an aporia that subverts the tetralogy’s own logic of organismic vitalism and the emergent nation’s teleological development. As a whole, the tetralogy’s narrative follows a dialectical logic, which suggests that colonialism is the antithesis of European Enlightenment
ideals, which must be sublated through a revival of those reason-based moral values through the formation of the postcolonial nation-state. If the first three novels depict the emergence of a national consciousness, the fourth tells the story of its undoing, as a cautionary tale to its implied reader, the Indonesian citizen, of the corrupting force of the state and to follow the guiding light of Nyai Ontosoroh, who is figured as embodying the nation’s progressive spirit. Cheah sees the narrative’s negative turn in the fourth novel not as originating from an external force, i.e. the colonial authorities interference with the nationalist movement, but as a consequence that arises from within. Noting that the emergence and spread of national consciousness is contingent on the print medium, Cheah points to the spectrality inherent in technologies of writing or “the aporetic logic of technomedia- tion” (Spectral Nationality 336). If the print medium is the means through which the form of the national community is constituted, then the written materials are not simply a representation of the people who produce it, but are the apparatus without which the collective cannot be said to exist. The material expression of the community in print form is at once an extension of its being and its very essence.

Cheah’s attention to the technical substrate that facilitates the materialization of the nation form contravenes a dialectical understanding of history. This renders the nation a spectral form in the sense that the nation can only be constituted as such through an originary contamination by something external to itself. In contrast, a dialectical view of history presupposes culture as a domain external to the nation as organism, the incarnate form of the ideal of freedom; it is in the realm of culture that the organism works toward freedom. The dialectical view of history asserts that colonialism is a negation of European Enlightenment ideals, which the postcolonial nation sublates to embody the ideals’ true form. However, recognizing the nation’s spectral condition discloses the fact that the boundaries separating organism and cultural technicity are not distinct
to begin with, but always already blurred. This entails a reckoning with the fact that ideals cannot be conceived as distinct from the ways in which they play out historically. Put another way, the historical event of colonialism cannot be viewed as antithetical to Enlightenment ideals; rather, the history of colonialism must be recognized as a constitutive part of Enlightenment ideals. Similarly then, contrary to Pramoedya’s claims, the postcolonial authoritarian state cannot be understood simply as antithetical to the progressive ideals of nationalism and thus something to be surmounted; as Cheah writes, “the national spirit is infected with a certain ghostliness, which the neocolonial state embodies, sometimes to the point where nation and state are no longer distinct entities” (*Spectral Nationality* 264).

What I would like to add is that the nation’s ghostliness also materializes itself in terms of race. Contrary to Anderson’s insistence that race and nation are fundamentally different modes of collectivizing, I argue that colonial modes of racialization are a means through which the nation form is constituted. In the *Buru Quartet*, the figuring of racial inscription as a means of spectralizing the nation is discernible through the incorporation of the historical events of the Maria Hertogh/Nadra controversy, which I describe below, into its fictional narrative. The incorporation of historical events of the controversy, which marks a watershed moment in the national narratives of Malay(s)ia and Singapore, suggests that Pramoedya’s use of history is more promiscuous than generally described. Put another way, the quartet’s translation of history into fiction reveals that the specter that haunts the postcolonial nation does not only take the form of its colonial predecessor, but also of its contemporaries, of its neighboring nations that are also experiencing decolonization, albeit in many different ways. Certainly, there are many moments in which the quartet considers the nationalist movements unfolding outside of the East Indies, such as in China and in the Philippines. These are essentially comparative moments that enable
Minke to consider the situation in the Dutch East Indies in relation to political events elsewhere, as if prefiguring Anderson’s thesis on spectral comparison. However, as I argue, the appropriation of the Maria Hertogh controversy in Pramoedya’s narration of Indonesia’s national awakening ought to be considered as an act of translation, specifically of history into fiction.

This translation of history into fiction differs from Anderson’s earlier described view of translation as simply a means of dissemination or a way of showcasing the exemplarity of Indonesian literature and its political significance to the international public intellectual sphere. The quartet’s act of translation, I suggest, constitutes a historical materialist practice, as outlined by Walter Benjamin, which accounts for otherwise occluded pasts. For Benjamin, the aim of historical materialism is not to recuperate the past as it really was, but to produce historical knowledge that politically intervenes in the present. Tejaswini Niranjana argues that Benjamin’s famous essay on translation, “The Task of the Translator,” can also be read as describing “the task of the historical materialist or critical historian,” as presented in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (114). Niranjana’s claim rests on the recurring tropes and motifs in both these texts, and his writings elsewhere. In particular, she emphasizes Benjamin’s argument that “a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife” and that this idea of the afterlife is explicitly linked to history (Benjamin 71; qtd in Niranjana 115).

For my purposes, Benjamin’s evocative image of translation as the re-assembling of fragments is useful for understanding the work of translation in the Buru Quartet. Benjamin writes:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail
incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (78).

As Niranjana points out, the metaphor describes an approach to translation that is less focused on the reproduction of meaning than on a literal word-for-word rendering of the source. In so doing, Benjamin presents translation not as a vehicle for meaning or content transfer, but as expressing “a greater language” or, as he states earlier in his essay, “the kinship of languages” (72). In keeping with Benjamin’s insistence that the original is always already translated, Niranjana argues that this concept of a greater or pure language is a “fiction…toward which all translations are aimed”; “the amphora or vessel of the original work is either shattered continually or was never ‘whole’ to start with” (156). We might also consider the piecing together of the vessel in relation to the metaphor of fragments of the past implied in Benjamin’s essay on the philosophy of history. In that essay, Benjamin describes the production of historical materialism as “blast[ing] open the continuum of history,” (Benjamin 396). The fragments of the vessel might be viewed as the aftermath of this blast. And just as their reassembling does not restore a former whole, but evinces a mystical “pure language,” so too the work of reconstituting the past is about articulating a vision of the present that radically disrupts the eternal sameness of historical progress and facilitates the possibility of revolutionary change, described by Benjamin in messianic terms.

Furthermore, Benjamin’s recommendation of a literal word-for-word translation, which inevitably results in the obfuscation of meaning and is diametrically opposed to a mode of translation that privileges the transfer of content over form, resonates with Benjamin’s fragmentary and aphoristic remarks on the relationship between language and history in a section
titled “The Dialectical Image” in the paralipomena to his essay on the philosophy of history. In that section, Benjamin distinguishes historical materialism from universal history as it is practiced in the 19th century and seeks to recuperate the latter for revolutionary purposes. “The multiplicity of histories,” Benjamin writes, “resembles the multiplicity of languages” (405). This image of multiplicity follows from his earlier observation that the production of historical materialism requires the historian to be literate in multiple ways. To paraphrase Benjamin, if history is to be viewed as a text, then it ought to be read for its images. Texts, he further notes, are encoded with “a mysterious meaning” that its initial readers are unable to decode and will only reveal itself to future generations (405). Citing Hofmannsthal, who writes, “Read what was never written,” Benjamin incites the historical materialist to do the same (405). This image of multiplicity is thus associated with historical materialism and is contrasted with the idea of universal history, as it was understood by Benjamin’s contemporaries. He writes, “Universal history in the present-day sense can never be more than a kind of Esperanto.” The reference to Esperanto—an invented language introduced in the late 19th century as a politically neutral language with the utopian aim of “[transcending] nationality and [fostering] peace and international understanding between people with different languages” (Wikipedia)—is intended to highlight the fundamental flaw in universal history, which presumes that the past can be encoded into a single medium, one that postures itself as universal. This idea of multiplicity is thus associated with the image of the constellation—which consists of multiple elements coming together in a single moment—that Benjamin ascribes to historical materialism. In this manner, the literal mode of translation, which is intended to express the kinship of languages, bears similarity to the constellation of multiple fragments of the past in a single moment.

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2 For further discussion on Benjamin’s concept of dialectical image, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*. 
While Niranjana’s reading of Benjamin’s mode of translation as a historical materialist practice is immensely useful, her invocation of it as a means of resisting colonial discourse re-inscribes the colonizer-colonized dialectics of recognition that it claims to move beyond. Framed as a postcolonial praxis of resistance, Niranjana defines the task of the historical materialist or critical historian as engaging in the deconstructive reading of colonial discourse (171–172). This entails identifying the gaps between sign and referent in colonial discourse, which conflates the two in its Orientalist construction of the Other. Although she argues that such a praxis of critical reading should also be aimed at discourses of postcolonial nationalism given their complicity with colonial discourse, this obsessive focus on colonialism and its postcolonial derivatives nonetheless re-asserts a domination-resistance binary frame. By reinforcing this dialectic, Niranjana’s primary definition of critical historiography as deconstructionist reading essentially moves along the continuum of historical progress rather than blasting it open.

The *Buru Quartet* offers a contrasting model of translation as historical materialist practice. As noted earlier, the novels depict the construction of the narrative of nation as the piecing together and arranging of notes—the reconstitution of fragments of the past—written by the narrator-protagonist, Minke. Yet, this piecing together of notes is not just a narrative conceit that enables Minke, a European educated member of the Javanese elite, to recollect his own story of coming into anti-colonial political consciousness. Translation is, quite literally, the very means through which the novels’ narrative premise is constructed, as evident in the incorporation of the Maria Hertogh controversy into the fictional plot. Reading Benjamin’s image of blasting open the continuum of history, Susan Buck-Morss suggests: “Past events cannot provide a key to the present unless they are radically separated from a direct lineage of inheritance” (16). Given that the controversy does not directly pertain to the formation of postcolonial Indonesia, the
integration of its various historical fragments into the *Buru Quartet*’s narrative of national awakening is a particularly striking example of how the past is wrested from its “direct lineage of inheritance”—in this case, from colonial and postcolonial Malay(s)ian and Singaporean history—in order to construct a narrative that counters the dominant national history of Indonesia.

Buck-Morss further describes history as a gift of the past to the present. However, she cautions, “The gift of the past is a Trojan horse. One thinks one knows whence it comes and to whom it belongs. But the gift is to others, those the so-called rightful heirs are presently destroying” (17). Read in light of the *Buru Quartet*, this statement cuts both ways. On one hand, the translation of history into fiction—or, the appropriation of fragments of the past from elsewhere into the Indonesian national narrative—constitutes a means of radicalizing the political present. On the other hand, the interception of Minke’s narrative and the arrest of its revolutionary spirit by Pangemanann suggest that the act of blasting the historical continuum is also a weapon that can be utilized for nefarious purposes. My discussion of the Maria Hertogh controversy and the significance of Pramoedya’s appropriation of it in the remaining sections of this essay consider the double-edged sword that is Benjamin’s historical materialism.

**The Maria Hertogh Controversy**

The Maria Hertogh/Nadra controversy, which occurred in 1950, became the center of political battle between the colonial authorities and Malay-Muslim communities in British Malaya and Singapore. The controversy not only strained the diplomatic relations between the British and the Dutch, but also drew the attention of Muslim communities throughout the decolonizing world. My summary of the controversy below draws heavily on Syed Muhd
Khairudin Aljunied’s account in *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and its Aftermath*, an insightful and well-researched account among the sizable body of scholarship generated from the incident. But, whereas Aljunied’s analysis focuses on the shifting security and population management strategies in the colonial administration in its aftermath, my aim in recounting the controversy here is to show how Maria Hertogh came to figure as a symbol of national-racial difference for the various political entities involved.

The controversy concerns a legal custody dispute over Maria, aged 13 at the time of the initial court hearing in Singapore, between her Dutch Catholic biological parents, Adrianus and Adeline Hertogh, and her Malay-Muslim foster/adoptive mother, Che Aminah. Born in 1937 in Java in the Netherlands East Indies, Maria Hertogh was baptized as a Roman Catholic as an infant. Her father, Adrianus, was a member of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army and her mother, Adeline, a Eurasian of Scottish and Javanese parentage, was raised in Java. During the Japanese Occupation, Adrianus was interned by the Japanese; struggling to raise five children alone. Adeline put Maria, then aged 5, under the care of Che Aminah, a family friend. Adeline subsequently lost contact with Aminah, who had moved several times owing to war-time conditions and settled in Kemaman, Terengganu, a small fishing village on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, close to her relatives.

Aminah treated Maria as her own, raising her as a Muslim and giving her the name, Nadrah, by which she came to be known in her village community. After the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945, the Hertoghs initiated a search for Maria through the Dutch authorities when they could not locate Maria on their own. When Maria was found in British Malaya, the Hertoghs filed a custody claim through the British Singapore courts via Dutch officials. Aminah
disputed the Hertoghs’ claim, arguing that Adeline had granted her permanent custody, an account corroborated by Adeline’s brother, who said he witnessed the adoption process (Aljunied 16). The absence of formal adoption papers is explained by the common practice of informal adoptions, including those of non-Malay-Muslim children, among Malay communities in the region. Adeline countered by insisting that she had only placed Maria in Aminah’s temporary care, and that her absence during the Occupation years was the result of her capture and internment by the Japanese. After a series of rulings and appeals, the British Singapore court eventually ordered Maria to be returned to her parents, who were by then living in the Netherlands. As court proceedings were unfolding, Maria, then 13, was arranged to be married following Malay-Muslim customs to Mansoor Adabi, aged 21. Because Maria was deemed a minor and legally domiciled to the Netherlands, the courts deemed her marriage invalid.

The court decision incited riots in Singapore that killed 18 people and injured many more. Authorities attributed the outbreak of violence in part to the press, which generated a great deal of public attention on the court proceedings through various news reports, editorials and photographs. Anti-colonial political activists were especially invested in playing the legal dispute to their advantage; stoking anti-British among the Malay-Muslims, they framed the case as an inter-religious battle. Editorials in anti-colonial Malay leftist-leaning newspapers such as Melayu Raya presented the court verdict as an attack on Islam and as a means for the British and Dutch to reassert their power over in the region (Hussin 569–572). However, newspapers of various languages and political persuasions also provided extensive coverage of the controversy—an indication of the vibrant news industry and the intense competition to attract readers. Notable for causing furor was the publication of images of Maria in a Roman Catholic convent in Singapore, where she was housed during an appeal to stay the execution of her departure to the Netherlands,
in the English press. These images of Maria kneeling in the convent and conversing with nuns were reproduced in the politically Malay independent newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*, with the following captions, “Nadra cried and begs for *Utusan Melayu* reporter’s help” and “I am miserable—forced to wear western dress” (qtd in Hussin 568). The message, that the government was trying to coerce Maria to abandon her Muslim faith for Christianity, further entrenched the polarization of the case as a battle between Malay-Muslims and European Christians.

In essence, the Malay vernacular press effectively portrayed Maria a.k.a. Nadra as a political symbol of unified Malay-Muslim identity that encompassed the various divisions among the Muslim communities in the region. Ethnic Malays are generally Muslims; however, not all Muslims are ethnic Malays and include members of Arab and Indian descent, among others. The symbolic function of Maria/Nadra as such was facilitated by two factors. One, the racial category of Malay was relatively fluid, referring not only to ethnic Malays living on the Malay peninsula, but to various ethnic groups including the Javanese, Bugis, and Banjarese, among others from the Dutch East Indies that settled on the peninsula and in Singapore. Two, the somewhat solipsistic colonial legal definition of Malay—a person who is a Muslim, speaks Malay, and practices Malay culture—inadvertently contributes to the racial category’s fluidity and to the conflation of religious and racial identities. Hence, the use of the phrase, *masuk Melayu* (to convert into or become a Malay), to describe Muslims of Arab or Indian descent who adopt the Malay language and cultural customs. Thus, although Maria was of European and Eurasian descent, the fact that she was adopted by Che Aminah, a Muslim woman, and raised as a Muslim, confirms her representational function of Malay-Muslim identity. Photographs of Maria in traditional Malay dress and wearing a *tudung*, or head covering, both in isolation and
accompanying Aminah or her husband, Mansoor Adabi, published in newspapers further reinforced her symbolic function as Malay-Muslim identity.

In light of the above, the Maria Hertogh controversy bore huge cultural political significance for Malay ethno-nationalism in Malaya. The controversy not only contributed to the growth in popularity of the conservative ethno-nationalist party, UMNO, and its leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who played a visible role in speaking out for Malay-Muslim interests to the British authorities in the wake of the riots and would become Malaya’s first Prime Minister (Aljunied 2). In the long run, the sanctity of Malay identity would primarily be defined as a defense of Islam, thereby rooting racial identity in theo-political terms. However, in the official national memory of Singapore, the riots that followed the court ruling have come to symbolize the moral political lesson that “religion should never be enmeshed with secular and radical politics” (Aljunied 1). At the heart of this view is the stereotypical image of the Malay running amok, inflamed by religious passions. While the Hertogh riots cannot be said to be a direct cause, the dominant view derived from the events arguably informs the state’s Ethnic Integration Policy, which imposed quotas on the percentage of members of ethnic groups residing in a particular area, effectively transforming “ethnic enclaves” into “multicultural constituencies” (Aljunied 129). A more direct consequence can be seen in the dismantling of the British jury system in postcolonial Singapore’s courts by its first and long-standing premier, Lee Kuan Yew. This move was motivated by Lee’s perception that the British juridical system had failed to execute justice following the acquittal of those accused of killing a British Royal Air Force officer during the Hertogh riots (Aljunied 129).

Meanwhile, European responses to the Maria Hertogh controversy reflected fears of racial miscegenation. In the Netherlands, the court case captured the nation’s attention,
provoking all manner of responses, whether from the royalty or from the ordinary members of the public. The Dutch monarch, Queen Juliana, issued a public statement, expressing concern for Maria’s welfare. The Dutch ambassador in Britain criticized the court proceedings in Singapore, sparking a diplomatic row. Catholic activists raised money towards paying for the legal expenses incurred by the Hertoghs. In Singapore, the controversy was further fueled by the proposal of the Laycock Marriage Bill, a law invalidating marriage between any persons below the age of 16. Although introduced prior to the controversy, the passing of the bill in 1950 was a means of allaying the colonial racial anxiety triggered by the court case. As Aljunied writes, “[T]he bill was … a preventive measure to ensure European children were not lured into marriages with non-Europeans. Such unions would, in the long run, threaten the purity and superiority of Europeans in the colony and their natural right to dominance” (19). This European sense of insecurity, manifesting itself as superiority complex, was also evident in colonial reports and press coverage siding with the Hertoghs, which falsely portrayed Che Aminah as a nurse maid who could not provide proper care to Maria, eliding the fact that she was a successful and well-traveled business woman who was also a mother to an older adopted daughter from Japan (Stivens 394). Reports of Maria’s refusal to return to her biological parents were also explained as being “caused by black magic and witchcraft practiced by Che Aminah” (Aljunied 18).

Indeed, as Maila Stivens observes, the public discourse on the Maria Hertogh controversy, regardless of whose side it favored, “made many discursive appeals to ideas and ideals of mother-love and family, the rights of parents, child attachments and to the emotional states of the participants” (391).³ Hence, accounts of the situation largely emphasized Che Aminah’s status as mother, whether it is to emphasize her sacrificial devotion and Maria’s attachment to her, or to fault her mothering skills in a way that recalled the racialized discourse.

³ My thanks to Dahlia Martin for bringing this article to my attention.
of the lazy, backwards Malay. Scholarly analyses of the controversy, Stivens further notes, tend
to overlook this gendered, familial dimension circumscribed by heterosexual norms. This results
in a failure to recognize the fact that national-racial boundaries are circumscribed by normative
discourses of motherhood and family that often bear material consequences on female bodies. In
Stivens’s words, “The tug-of-love between the two mothers can easily be interpreted as a highly
modernist struggle over the colony/emerging nation, which is symbolized in the body of Maria:
she can be seen as literally embodying the colony, with the twin forces of old colonial power and
the modern proto-nationalist Muslim rioters at war over her child/woman body; it was also a
body that could also be torn apart by the passions of the struggle—and by all accounts was
almost so, given her later tragic life” (396). In this manner, Maria Hertogh’s case resembles the
classic situation of the gendered subaltern described by Gayatri Chaktavorty Spivak in her essay,
“Can the Subaltern Speak?” Caught between the Europeans and Malay-Muslims, both of whom
seek to appropriate the political significance of her body for their respective political interests,
Maria Hertogh is effectively rendered mute. This silencing effect is also evident in the passing of
an amended version of the Laycock Marriage Bill to except Muslims from its jurisdiction in
response to protests from Muslim leaders; this move effectively sidelines Muslim women’s
groups who supported the marriage bill and sought to agitate for reform within Islamic law, but
are otherwise deemed as un-Islamic by patriarchal Muslism leadership (Aljunied 19).

The parallels between the incidents of the Maria Hertogh controversy and the plot of the
quartet’s first volume, This Earth of Mankind are especially evident. As I demonstrate in my
close reading below, the character of Annelies Mellema, Minke’s first wife, is modeled after the
historical figure of Maria Hertogh in a way that critically revises her political significance for the
nation. In essence, the novel’s translation of the Maria Hertogh controversy into its fictional
narrative offers a feminist critique of the use of woman as national symbol, one that is consistent with the quartet’s arguably feminist leanings. However, in so doing, the novel inadvertently re-inscribes the Indo or “Mixed Blood” Eurasian as an ambivalent figure that simultaneously represents the postcolonial nation as a political community that embraces all groups regardless of race and its colonial legacy that perpetually undermines its pursuit of freedom.

**Ghosts of Futures Past**

In *Along the Archival Grain*, an illuminating ethnography of the Dutch colonial archives, Ann Laura Stoler cites Pramoedya *House of Glass* by way of introducing her concept of the archive as a dynamic site of knowledge production. The novel, she notes, portrays the archive as a “mausoleum,” a cold and ruthless command center of colonial intelligence whose aim is to kill the growing anticolonial movement (Pramoedya 59; qtd in Stoler 18). However, Stoler puts her finger on the “living pulse” of the archive and convincingly argues that the storehouse of history also betrays a colonial authority founded on “deeply epistemic anxieties,” its knowledge base tenuous and fraught with emotion (19). Although the trope, “house of glass,” serves well to capture the “fragile security of the Dutch police state and the false security of Europeans living nestled in it,” Stoler finds Pramoedya’s treatment of the colonial archive as a dead space to be inaccurate (18).

As Stoler argues, the *Inlandsche kinderen* ignites the feverish production of the archive to maintain colonial taxonomies of race, even as it threatens to disrupt the definitions that distinguish the European from the Native that the archive seeks to affirm. Moreover, in tracking the failed implementations of colonial policies to address the state’s pauperization of the Indo-European population, Stoler conceives of these records of the past as an “archive of implausible
futures” (137). Addressing the grievances of the Indo-Europeans exposed the vulnerability of the epistemologies grounding racial hierarchies, as Stoler infers from the volume of documents produced. These documents were generated as a result of debates concerning the status of the Indo-European population, the state’s obligation to it and how Indo-European enfranchisement would ultimately affect the state’s relation to the Natives. The withdrawal of financial support that ultimately led to the policies’ failures not only suggests the colonial state’s deep unease with its Indo-European population, but evidences the production of the archive as a projection of “implausible futures,” which in turn shapes matters of colonial governance to ensure its implausibility—in this case through state inaction. Thus, in training her eye on the “non-event” that is a failure of policy execution to develop a “historical negative,” Stoler not only gives pause to considering how one’s epistemological frame already determines what counts as an event that gets memorialized as a snapshot of the past (108).

Stoler’s attention to the process of formation, of thinking the archive’s becoming, enables her to make sense of the affective traces in the materials of the archive—otherwise rendered illegible, insignificant or invisible. It is in noticing these affective traces that enable her to reconstruct the knowledge making practices with regards to race in the colony. Significantly, Stoler’s attention to its material affective traces challenge the idea that the archive is an authoritative repository of artifacts of the past from which “students of the colonial,” to use her befitting phrase, can conclusively draw evidence to make historical claims. Focusing on how the *Inlandsche kinderen*, the euphemism for the child of European and Native parentage, threatens colonial taxonomies of race deployed to govern the populations of the Dutch East Indies, Stoler underscores the anxieties that necessarily attends any knowledge object put in service of power. Failure to recognize the vulnerabilities in the production of any knowledge regime is to
unwittingly reproduce the very power structures that they reinforce. The archive is not simply a storehouse from which new knowledge is generated, but a dynamic space we actively inhabit, whether to fortify, preserve, refurbish or dismantle.

Stoler’s use of Pramoedya’s work against which to establish her argument is an effective rhetorical move. However, it comes at the cost of simplifying a complex literary Pramoedya’s work. *House of Glass* is a profound contemplation of archive building and history writing as much as it is a story about the nationalist awakening in the Dutch East Indies. The unexpected switching of narrators from Minke to Pangemanann, who is now in possession of the former’s papers, raises the question as to which authority is shaping our views of the events presented in our reading thus far and alludes to the invisible influence of power that oversees the production of historical knowledge.

Even so, Pangemanann’s well-being and personal life ravaged by the task he executes. At the end of the novel, he turns over Minke’s documents and his own notes to Sanikem Le Boucq, formerly known as Nyai Ontosoroh. No longer the spurned concubine of the Dutch colonial planter, Herman Mellema, she is now happily married to Jean Marais, the French artist who is a friend of Minke’s and whose sense of free spirit guides the latter to follow his heart as opposed to societal expectations. The surrender of documents to Sanikem/Nyai, Minke’s spiritual mother and guide whose newly wedded status accords her French citizenship, casts her as a figure of the decolonizing nation’s promise of freedom. This ending suggests the continuous, never finished, unsettled if not unsettling work of producing history. “Madame is my judge. I accept whatever sentence you hand down, Madame,” writes Pangemanann to Sanikem, in a letter accompanying the papers, “… It is up to Madame now as to what use they should be put to and how to look after them” (*House of Glass* 359). Not only does history continue to be written, but read
differently, potentially opens up new pathways for history’s unfolding into the future.

Documents of the past, as my reading here suggests, are not the dead objects that Stoler suggests the novel portrays them to be. On the contrary, Pangemanann’s unconditional surrender to Sanikem’s judgment suggests that the multiple readings and purposes to which the documents can be submitted renders them as living, dynamic texts. The papers once again shifting hands, from the colonial officer to Sanikem, a radical, outspoken critic of colonialism, underscores the archive’s ever shifting site of commandment and its capacity for generating new points of commencement, of beginning again, to use Jacques Derrida’s founding principles of the archive. Far from the contrary, the novel is in keeping with Stoler’s preference to think “archiving-as-process rather than archiving-as-things” (20).

Stoler’s reading of the Dutch colonial archive is remarkable for showcasing the entanglements of multiple temporalities that constitute it. Yet, what enables a reading of the archive not just as what-was, but what-will-(not)-have-been is the what-has-become, the historical moment in which we now reside, that renders the dynamic site of colonial knowledge production a stable object of analysis. In other words, it is in taking as a given that we have arrived at the postcolonial moment, the moment after colonialism, that enables the stable framing of the archive as colonial. Hence, although Stoler correctly cites Pramoedya’s *House of Glass* depiction of the colonial archives as lifeless, she leaves out the fact that the novel’s treatment of it as such stems from the tetralogy’s overall investment in creating a postcolonial archive. If the persistent pattern of rearranging documents and documents shifting hands throughout point to an understanding of the archive as dynamic, the tetralogy’s naming the archive as postcolonial necessarily depends on inscribing the colonial archive as dead, if not destructive. Read as an allegory of the present historical moment of Pramoedya’s writing, the postcolonial rule of
Suharto, *House of Glass* paints a chilling picture of how the postcolonial nation that was once the dreaded, imagined—“implausible”—future of the colonial state can very well repeat a past from which it intended to break. The project of creating a postcolonial archive cannot quite take the “post” in “postcolonial” for granted quite so easily.

**The Limits of Spectral Critique**

If Minke is the embodiment of the sublation of Enlightenment values corrupted by colonial rule, the very name that he goes by—a racist appellation phonetically approximating the word, “monkey,” bestowed on him by his Dutch teacher—suggests that the modernity that is to come after colonialism unavoidably bears the mark of race. As the only Native at H.B.S., a colonial school for Eurasians, Minke feels the racializing effect of the Enlightenment ideals especially acutely. In addition to the racially motivated attacks directed at him by his peers and teachers, Minke’s exposure to Enlightenment thinking is inevitably accompanied by a sense of inferiority given the constant reminders of the supposed backwardness of the Javanese, who suffered defeat in the hands of the Dutch. This produces a conflict within himself that opposes his “European training” against his Javanese cultural heritage, one that surfaces when he is summoned to his family home to participate in the official ceremony of his father’s appointment as bupati. To his mind, the Javanese court rituals and customs that require Minke to go barefoot (the wearing of shoes being the marker of European modernity) and to kneel in obeisance to his father goes against the very principles of freedom and equality espoused by European Enlightenment thought. The internal monologue that runs as he quietly submits to his father’s demands betrays Minke’s rage, though his anger for not being recognized as an H.B.S. student and being treated accordingly may be a symptom of the shame he feels for not being able to
escape his Nativeness in spite of his European education. On the contrary, his meeting with his mother—to whom he confides that he has no interest in pursuing a career in colonial administration, a path that his enrollment in H.B.S. is designed to take—fills him with remorse for his neglect in answering his family’s correspondence. Considered together, these contrasting filial encounters map out the path that the dialectical movement of history and the nation’s narrative of Bildung must take in terms of colonialism’s legacy of race. On the one hand, Minke views his father with disdain for his proud ethnocentric views of the Javanese, even as he gratingly kowtows to the Dutch officers to receive favor. Throughout This Earth of Mankind and Child of All Nations, this attitude is depicted consistently among Javanese men of high position and is viewed critically for its narrow mindset and selfish motivations, that often produces a significant cost at the expense of women—Nyai Ontosoroh and her niece, Surati, being two examples who were sold by their fathers to be mistresses of colonial officers in exchange for the promise of a career rise. On the other hand, when Minke tells his mother that he desires “to become a free human being, not given orders, not giving orders” (This Earth of Mankind 128), she laments that he has turned into a “brown Dutchman” and calls him out on his internalized shame of their traditional heritage (This Earth of Mankind 130).

The implications of this for thinking the question of race for the emergent nationalist movement are nuanced. To begin with the obvious, the anticolonial resistance cannot be plotted as a conflict between the bad guys and the good guys, the Dutch and the Natives. The injustice of colonialism is perpetuated both by the parochial or kampung mentality of the Javanese, of which Minke’s father is an example, and the failure of European colonials to implement Enlightenment values in a fair and correct manner. Furthermore, colonial education has also categorized knowledge forms along the line of race, marking Enlightenment values as modern, thus
belonging to Europe and the Natives as primitive and backward; it is under the guidance of Nyai Ontosoroh that Minke learns to doubt the raced presuppositions of his education and to question the political interests behind knowledge. Yet, the task of disassociating race from modernity and the values of freedom and equality is no easy one, to put mildly. As the exchanges between Minke and his European friends, who are supportive of the Natives anticolonial resistance, suggest, the very notion of progress—thus also, by its very implication, Bildung—is inextricably entangled with race. Minke’s meeting with Miriam and Sarah, daughters of the Assistant Resident Herbert de la Croix, during which he is first introduced to Dr. Snoucke Hurgronje’s Association Theory, is noteworthy. As Miriam explains, the theory held the view that a certain class of the Natives could be educated in “European ways” to foster a “direct cooperation” between the Natives in the East Indies colony and the Dutch government that does away with the middle-man function of Dutch colonial officer, thus lightening “the burden of the white race” to govern the Indies (This Earth of Mankind 145). The sisters are interested in the cause of the Boers in the South African Wars and their tenuous relations with the natives and the Malay diaspora in South Africa, as well as the radical “Indies for the Indies” movement among the Dutch. However, their endorsement of the Association Theory suggests that they do not think that the Natives are quite ready for self-rule, even if she is aware of the injustices of the colonial administration. The sisters’ admittedly limited understanding of the theory perhaps renders it appealing because it plots an arc of progression that considers the Native capable of advancement and of catching up with the West, and eventually rising up against the Dutch as the Boers are doing to the British. The assumptions that the Europeans stand at the pinnacle of modernity and that the different stages of development can be plotted by examining the situations of other racial groups supposedly trailing behind are taken for granted.
Minke’s response to the sisters’ praise of the theory can not only be read as a milestone in the evolution of his thinking, but as a precursory sketch of the challenge of enabling the conditions to awaken a national consciousness. Unable to respond to the sisters’ earlier taunt that the Javanese mythical explanation for weather phenomena is a sign of backwardness in comparison to the scientific reason of Europe, Minke now points to the political timing of the Association Theory to undermine its veracity. “Why didn’t you come up with this theory three centuries ago? When no Native would have had any objection to Europeans sharing responsibility with them?” Minke asks, “…this fantastic scholar, Doctor…what’s his name again? … he’s three hundred years behind the Natives of that time” (146). Observing that the Javanese had been chronicling the history of their encounter with the Europeans for centuries, Minke indirectly comments on the self-privileged frame of European modernity that obscures the achievements of the Javanese, who are either cast as inherently backward or capable of advancement and cooperation, whichever best suits the colonial agenda of the moment.

A nuanced understanding of difference can be unpacked from Minke’s response above. If the mocking tone in Minke’s voice belies a self-assuredness of his equal footing with the well-educated sisters, Minke’s retort might also be read as the questioning of the self-claimed superiority of his European education. Referring to the Babad Tanah Jawi, the Javanese legendary chronicle of the Mataram Sultanate, as a mark of cultural achievement, Minke obliquely challenges the false binary of scientific reason vs. mythical parable; both are different modes of explaining phenomena that call for specific reading practices. Moreover, as Minke points out, scientific reason is no more self-evidently true than are legends:

According to [Magda Peters, Minke’s teacher], everything comes from being taught…and from practice. Even beliefs. You two [Miriam and Sarah] would not ever
have come to believe in Jesus Christ without being taught and then practicing to believe (143).

Minke’s reference to his teacher not only shows that knowledge systems cannot be taken for
granted to exist, but whose truth value must continuously be performed or put in practice to
maintain its validity; assumed to be familiar with Javanese thinking, Minke’s practice of citation
also shows that a Javanese can also navigate European systems of thought. This logic can be
extended to suggest that the racialized difference of cultural knowledge is neither essentialist nor
inherent. On the contrary, if true knowledge comes from teaching and practice, then the originary
point of truth and knowledge itself is revealed to be, as Cheah might have it, the contamination
of ideality with the materiality of practice that must always be effaced, in this case through a
hierarchical taxonomy of race.

However, Minke’s invocation of religious belief complicates the notion that all
differences are simply epistemological constructs. Minke is less pursuing an ideological critique
of religion; instead, he is arguing that while it is easy to see that scientific reason is one that is
not something given at birth, but something acquired through learning, that is, through Bildung—
a point his interlocutors unwittingly concede if they hold that Natives can be trained in European
thought—, even religious belief, something that cannot be empirically inferred but, exceeding
the bounds of reason, must be obtained through faith, is similarly developed through education.
If racial difference, one that also structures knowledge systems, establishes a hierarchy in the
colonial world, religious difference cannot be as readily co-opted to reinforce European
superiority over the Natives. Although religious difference—particularly that of Christianity and
Islam—is racialized, unlike matters of education, a matter of interest in the public sphere,
religious affairs are relegated to the private realm and are marked as a site of noninterference by
the Dutch colonial administration, as is consistent with the secularist tradition of Enlightenment ideals on which it claims to be founded.

As is implied later in the novel, the passive consent to colonial rule rests on the Dutch’s principle of noninterference in Islamic affairs. Writing in response to the Dutch colonial court’s annulment of Minke and Annelies’ marriage, which was officialized under Islamic law, Kommer’s editorial cautions the colonial administration, in Minke’s paraphrase, “It is dangerous to play with the beliefs of the [Native] people, much more dangerous than to make fun of powerless subjects of the realm or rob them of their rightful property and their women and children” (340). In other words, the administration’s meddling into the Natives’ religious affairs threatened to destabilize the tenuous separation of public and private, economic and religious spheres that maintain colonial hegemony that is in the Dutch interest of wealth extraction, a pursuit plainly associated here with the exploitation of the Natives. Similarly, by raising the subject of beliefs in relation to the subject of Enlightenment education in his exchange with Sarah and Miriam, Minke indirectly points to this tenuous arrangement of power to reveal the selfish economic motivations hidden behind the seemingly noble claims of the white man’s burden argument.

More interestingly, that religion is not simply a private concern but is a truth claim that exceeds the bounds of empirical reason has significant implications for the question that lies at the heart of the tetralogy: on what basis is the political community to be imagined as a means to pursue freedom? Understanding that racial difference, imposed through the claims of scientific knowledge, is a means of establishing colonial rule and dominance of one people over another is one thing. Undoing the inequalities of colonialism is another for it is not enough to simply reveal the ideological structures of colonialism; the greater challenge is in establishing the grounds on
which a collective identity can be asserted in the pursuit of freedom. In Footsteps, the issue is debated between Minke and Douwager, soon after the former founds the SDI or Islamic Traders’ Union to organize the Natives against colonial exploitation. Douwager, an Eurasian and a Christian, objects to the organization’s religious basis and argues instead for “the concept of an Indisch people,” whose collective identity is not founded on race or religion, but bound by a sense of national belonging (341). In response to Minke’s explanation that the SDI is not exclusivist (and indeed, the terms Muslim and trader are loosely defined for membership) but is “preparing the ground for the rise of nationalism,” Douwager replies, “But nationalism cannot be founded on religion. Religion is universal, for everybody. Nationalism is for a single people; it helps define one people from another” (350). If Minke’s interest in Islam and trade is politically strategic, his rejection of Douwager’s proposition stems in large part from its use of Dutch as the medium of communication, one that would invariably exclude a majority of the Indies’ Native populations. Nevertheless, as a proponent of the use of Malay as the common language, Minke is all too aware of the laborious task of re-educating the hearts and minds of his organization members, whose “Javanism” renders them too proud to use Malay, considered an inferior language, but at the same time predisposed to installing heroes to whom they blindly submit rather than thinking for themselves. For Minke, Douwager’s Indische concept is premature if not unrealistic given that the Natives continue to view the world in hierarchical terms, rejecting colonialism only for the lowly status accorded to them. Interestingly, Minke admits that his rejection of Douwager’s idea might also have to do with his own “racial prejudice” against Eurasians (350), an indication that the slow work of undoing the colonial lesson of racism, had yet to be completed within the visionary of a world where humans are free, not given orders or giving orders. However, Douwager’s refusal of Minke’s invitation to assist in the efforts of SDI
on the grounds that he is not a Muslim alludes to a paradox within his own formulation of nationalism. Rejecting the possibility of an alliance on the grounds of religious difference, Douwager’s imputation of religion’s universalism is rendered questionable even as it raises the question as to whether the singularity of nationalism might serve as a grounds for exclusivity, as Minke’s concern for his preference for Dutch as the common language suggests.

My discussion of religion, however, is not to evaluate the merits of Minke’s choice of Islam as a vehicle toward national unity. Rather, it is to point out the article of faith—one not necessarily exclusive to Islam—that is at the very heart of Minke’s vision of a free and equal society. Reflecting on the mindset of people in the Indies, Minke attributes Javanism as an unthinking investment of a “supernatural” quality to an idea or person to which the rest of society is subject versus a carefully considered consensus of a people “to make sacred some object or situation, a symbol or concept” (Footsteps 374-375; my emphasis). In Minke’s view, a world where the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality are properly realized must take as a given the sacredness of a human being for its own sake. However, this assumption cannot be unquestioningly held or be taken as a “supernatural” given, but must be supported by reason; the human being must be viewed as sacred in and of itself not because an otherworldly being made it so but because such an idea leads to a free and equal society. As Minke says to the de la Croix sisters, even beliefs must be taught and practiced. The idea of the sacredness of human beings is a point that cannot be empirically proven but can only be accepted on the grounds of faith and be sustained by teaching it to the people of the Indies and putting it to practice in social and economic spheres.

The challenge of instituting this humanistic article of faith as the foundation for the imagining of the nation, however, is not just to overwrite the bodily inscriptions of race that the
“supernatural” gods of colonialism and Javanism have produced. As Douwager insists, in a manner that echoes Benedict Anderson’s definition, the nation must be imagined as both sovereign and limited, “it helps define one people over another.” Thus, as a foundational principle of the nation for emancipation against colonialism, the humanist ideal that establishes the equality and freedom of humankind as universal must also define the singularity of a particular nation against another. This universal-singular tension plays out in the tetralogy’s discourse on race. More specifically, the overwriting of colonial epistemologies of race by the figure of the modern free and equal human that is nationalism’s universalist impulse is underwritten by the figure of the gendered “Indo” or Eurasian, who serves as the site of inscription that marks the nation’s singularity.

It is significant that Annelies, Minke’s first wife, and daughter of Nyai Ontosoroh and Herman Mellema, serves as both the occasion of the tetralogy’s narrative and the catalyst that triggers the public outcry that would eventually become the anticolonial nationalist movement. As the opening chapter of tetralogy explains, Minke’s notes, which constitute the narrative, are written as he grieves the loss of his wife; as the introductory pages of the subsequent two novels note, Minke continues to carry the memories of Annelies with him no matter how his life has changed since his first encounter with her. More importantly, it is her remarkable physical beauty, the combination of her European and Native facial features, her Indo-ness, which makes Annelies the ideal catalyst of the anticolonial movement. Minke’s description of Annelies at their first meeting can be read as a foreshadowing of the role she would play: “Not only could [Annelies] rival the queen, she triumphed over her. And she was alive, flesh and blood, not just a picture” (TEM 25). It was not just that Annelies’ beauty surpassed that of the Dutch Queen, Wilhelmina—an early scene in the novel dwells on Minke’s schoolboy crush on the young royal,
whose poster Minke spent a great deal of time daydreaming; if the latter is a representation of the advances of print technology, of European modernity, but also an object of wishful thinking, then Annelies stands for the realizable, possible future of the East Indies’ that would far exceed any promised by Europe.

If the wistful recollections of Annelies in Child of All Nations and Footsteps suggest that theirs is the story of a two star-crossed lovers sundered by evil colonial forces, a closer reading of the unfolding of their relationship as recounted in This Earth of Mankind suggests that the romantic plot serves more than to provide a melodramatic twist to the tetralogy. Certainly, Minke’s romantic involvement lays the groundwork and provides the dramatic turn in events that would alter his life path. However, their relationship also serves as an allegory to the question of race that is at the heart of the nation’s narrative. Annelies having fallen ill as a result of his absence, Minke is assigned the responsibility of doctor to his love interest by the family physician, Dr. Martinet, his presence and affections serving as remedy to her poor health. The role is significant given that Minke later decides to pursue a career in medicine, as though to emphasize his part in ridding the East Indies of the European “sickness” that is colonialism (CAN 78) and, as Pangemenann also observes, the distinct feature of the national “awakening of Asia” is that its leaders are doctors (HG 62). Moreover, the East Indies’ portrayal as being asleep and needing to be awakened of its stupor brought on by colonialism and Javanism is similar to that of Annelies’ constantly drugged state and need for Minke as her doctor. That she is the contested object between Minke and Robert Suurhof, whose schoolboy rivalry extends well into colonial politics, also points to Annelies as the symbol of sovereignty of the East Indies.

The emphasis on Annelies’ beauty and helplessness occasions a feminist critique of the masculinist thrust of anticolonial politics. Given the tetralogy’s determinedly feminist leanings,
however, the portrayal of Annelies ought not simply be dismissed as evidence of the patriarchal foundations of the anticolonial resistance movement. The inclusion of the stories of Nyai Ontosoroh, Surati, Maiko and Kartini in the tetralogy is intended to highlight the plight of women in the East Indies, particularly their being treated as objects of exchange that facilitate the circulation of capital and reinforcement of both colonial and indigenous patriarchal authority. The fate of Annelies is cast in like manner—she is plainly the pawn in her half brother, Maurits Mellema’s scheme to wrest his father’s profitable business from Nyai Ontosoroh’s control. What sets Annelies apart from the other women’s narratives is that her status as an Indo casts her not only as property to be exchanged for profit, but also as the battleground on which to determine the ownership of property with regards to both colonial and Islamic law. More precisely, her marriage is the key factor in determining the ownership of Boerderij Buitenzorg’s assets; her marriage to Minke was invalidated by the Dutch courts, even if it meant breaking the government’s policy of noninterference, because it would allow the Mellema estate to remain under Native control. Both legal systems laying claim on her, it is on Annelies that the force of law is written and overwritten.

The annulment of Annelies’ and Minke’s marriage not only points to the management of kinship structures as a technology of governance, but—as Stoler would point out—reveals the anxieties of racial knowledge that undergirds colonial rule. However, if Nyai Ontosoroh embodies the open secret of European sexual and familial mores in the colony, her eloquent court testimony in response to her public humiliation as concubine rendering her the “unofficial prosecutor, plaintiff against the European race,” Annelies, the Indo child, bears an unspeakable secret that can never be brought to light in the public sphere: she has been raped by her brother, Robert (This Earth of Mankind 288). That Annelies reveals the terrible violence committed
against her to Minke as a confession rather than as plaint indicates her precarious position. Her long, enforced silence is not only the result of the shame wrongfully attributed to the rape victim as a result of society’s patriarchal norms, but the effect such news might have on her marriage prospects and her family business as well. Indeed, Annelies’ childish behavior and clinginess to Minke may perhaps belie the high stakes at risk for her in winning Minke’s heart to secure her and her family’s future.

Furthermore, that Annelies demonstrates a determined will in the face of her imminent forced departure to the Netherlands suggests that she is far from the “fragile doll” she is often described to be. Significantly, she insists on taking the very same suitcase that her mother had used when Nyai Ontosoroh had been sold by her father into concubinage: “This suitcase weighs too heavily on Mama’s memory. Let me take it Mama, along with the burdensome memories it contains,” Annelies explains, “...Don’t remind yourself of all those things from the past. That which has passed, let it pass away...” (357). Situating her own predicament as similar to her mother’s past, Annelies offers herself as a symbolic break to the legacy of violence that has befallen the generations of women in her family. Following her plea with a request that her mother provide her with a younger sister that would fill her absence, Annelies, in essence, makes the very same exhortation that Ernest Renan mulls over with regard to the making of the nation: the obligation to already have forgotten the past that it might be reconfigured to a common national destiny.

If, as Renan argues, “forgetting ... is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation,” then Annelies’ marking herself as that which is to be forgotten can be read as laying the ground for the founding of the postcolonial nation (11). To be forgotten, however, does not necessarily mean a total erasure from memory, for as Anderson’s reading of Renan points out, the
paradoxical call to forget what is already assumed to be remembered occasions a forging of history to unif[y a national community. Interestingly, Annelies’ departure and death does not only rally a mass of supporters who are not unified by race or religion, but are bound together by a protest against the colonial injustice directed at Minke and his wife. If the end of *This Earth of Mankind* saw the failure of Minke and Nyai Ontosoroh to prevent Annelies from being taken away, *Child of All Nations* closes with a settling of scores with Maurits Mellema, who returns to the Indies as a war hero and to confiscate Nyai’s remaining assets for himself. In a confrontation staged as though it were a tribunal, Maurits is accused of being responsible for Annelies’ death and for being willing to sacrifice human life for the sake of profit. The gathered crowd witnessing the confrontation learns of Annelies’ death and led by Maysoroh Marais’ mournful wailing, collectively grieve her loss. As the public figure around which the people rally and as the silenced person, on whose behalf others speak, Annelies serves as the face of the modern humanist figure that lies at the heart of Minke’s vision of a free and equal society.

As its face, Annelies personalizes and makes attractive the abstract notion of the modern human, and as a victim of colonialism, she makes clear the promise that the notion provides for the weak and exploited in society. However, rendered as such, the figure of the modern human also conceals the violent rape, which in turn casts the Indo as a deeply ambivalent and monstrous figure that needs to be tamed. If the Dutch court’s breach of Minke’s privacy in attempt to tarnish his reputation turns against itself in the face of Nyai Ontosoroh’s accusation, Annelies’ incestuous rape cannot be broadcast in public lest it reveals the monstrosity that lies at the heart of the nation’s foundation. That each mention of the incestuous rape only serves to underscore the depravity of Robert Mellema (whereas Minke defies the colonial stereotype of Native sexual lasciviousness, Robert, the Indo, is its embodiment) and its subhuman quality (in a letter seeking
Annelies’ forgiveness, Robert describes himself as lower than animals \cite{Child of All Nations 97}, emphasizes the deed as monstrous and unassimilable to the nation’s narrative (even Dr. Martinet, who believes science has no room for moral judgment, is stupefied upon learning of Annelies’ sexual history and fails to come up with an adequate diagnosis of her illness). Thus, the Indo as hybrid figure makes possible a notion of political community not bound by colonial taxonomies of race or indigenous ethnocentric and religious affiliations—rather, it serves as the face of the national community that is bound together in spite of its differences. However, also buried within this figure is a monstrosity capable of undoing the nation’s rationalist and moral claims of freedom, one that needs to be constantly held under check.

Annelies’ muteness not only signifies her victimhood, but also writes monstrosity under erasure. That Robert’s abandoned child with Minem, a worker at the Boerderij, Rono turns out to be mute, further emphasizes the significance of muteness and Indo children in the tetralogy. To Nyai Ontosoroh’s advantage, the appearance of Rono disrupts Maurits’ sole claim on Mellema property, but at the same time, the continuation of the Mellema family line through Robert underscores Minke’s own childlessness, his sterility a much deliberated issue in the tetralogy. It can be said that Minke’s inability to father a child is a counterpoint to the productive results that the news publications he oversees, his “beloved children,” generate, as though to emphasize the non-filial ties that bind the nation \cite{Footnotes 240}. Indeed, that the SDI continues to flourish despite Minke’s death—much to Pangemanann’s chagrin—speaks against the idea of a political formation founded on the authority of a patriarchal figure, endorsing instead an organization whose life stems from its constituents, united for the common cause of the nation.

However, if much of the tetralogy is devoted to the role of the print media in engendering a public that would constitute the national body, a parallel desire for the production of a
normative nuclear family as a cognizable unit in the eyes of the law is also expressed throughout. The persistent nagging absence of Minke’s offspring notwithstanding, the return of Madame Sanikem Le Boucq at the end of the tetralogy perhaps best exemplifies the deep-seated desire to articulate the nation-form as family. The emblematic figure of the principles of freedom and equality, as her arrival from France signals her to be, Madame Sanikem is also a symbol of hope that the nationalist movement gone awry in *House of Glass* would be set on its rightful path now that she is also the guardian of Minke’s manuscripts, of what would be the postcolonial national archive. It would seem that her moral authority as the nation’s future hope is not simply to do with her role as Minke’s “spiritual mother,” but that she no longer bears the shameful title of Nyai and is a constituent of the French Republic as a result of her marriage to Jean Marais a.k.a Le Boucq, no longer without rights in a European court of law as well. Furthermore, Madame Sanikem is accompanied by Jeannette, her issue from a legitimate marriage that serves both as a memorial to Annelies’ final wish but also as a replacement of the void she left behind. The birth of the postcolonial nation is signified by the demise of the Mellema Indo family, both a product of European colonialism and Javanese patriarchy as well as an aberration to colonial and Native legal systems, which is replaced by the legally recognized family of Sanikem Le Boucq. Meanwhile, the sole survivor of the Mellema Indo family, Rono, is all but contained as a muted presence in the tetralogy.

*Cheah’s invocation of the figure of spectrality is ultimately a radical critique of Western metaphysics in the tradition of Derrida. However, in arguing that the postcolonial nation-state constitutes an exemplary form of spectrality, Cheah debunks wholesale dismissals of nationalism—particularly its postcolonial variants—as pathological; instead, postcolonial
nationalism constitutes the historical example that puts into question Western metaphysical notions of being given that in the era of late capitalism, postcolonial nation-states are spectralized as a result of their need for foreign capital investment in order to survive.

Read against the grain, Pramoedya’s translation of history into fiction suggests that the ghost is a figure that does not always unsettle the narrative of nation, but can also serve as a means of consolidating nationalisms. In this regard, my reading of Pramoedya’s *Buru Quartet* is intended to caution against taking for granted that the invocation of ghosts always lends itself to radical critique. The quartet’s figuring of the nation’s future hope as the return of the Le Boucq family helmed by Sanikem suggests that the haunting of the nation does not only come from without, but also emanates from within. In turn, we ought to consider the ways in which emerging transnational circuits of capital and labor that exceed the jurisdiction of the state revive latent histories of race whose origins trace back to the colonial past, as well as how ghosts of colonial past linger on in the postcolonial state machine to disenfranchise its nation-people under the guise of development.
CONCLUSION

Translation as Concept and Methodology

The objects of analysis in this dissertation constitute a multimedia archive. They include a sign at a mass protest, legal constitutional documents, a Tweet, graphic narratives, novels, films, and critical and cultural theories. In various ways, these objects thematize the dissertation’s key theoretical concerns of nation and globality as it pertains to the historical case of Malaysia. The different generic conventions and formal properties of these objects, as well as the reading protocols required to decode them, underscore the importance of literacy in apprehending the formation of the national racial imaginary. That is, because the different objects demand different ways of reading, the question of how the nation is made legible—through what representational modes, in whose interests and why, and, consequently, what is occluded or rendered illegible—is brought to relief.

As I have tried to show, translation is fundamental to the process of imagining the Malaysian nation at different junctures of its history, particularly in defining the terms of national belonging along racial difference. During the re-ordering of the British Empire after the end of the Pacific War in 1945, the unification of the different colonial administrations on the Malayan peninsula into a single federal entity prefigured the territorial outlines that would shape the postcolonial nation following its independence in 1957. The federalization of the different administrations and the granting of a common citizenship to residents in the colony marked a departure from earlier colonial divide-and-rule policies. As the reports of the proceedings on the federalization process suggest, translation played a crucial role in the naming of what would eventually be the postcolonial nation. Specifically, translation was used as a means of
articulating a political entity to bring together heterogeneous ethno-linguistic groups even as it served as a mechanism of naturalizing racial difference formulated by colonial legal codifications.

The Malayan Emergency, the 12-year counter-insurgency war that shortly followed the formation of the colonial Federation of Malaya in 1948, not only decimated the leftist, especially the communist, forces of the anti-colonial struggle. It also legitimized ethno-nationalist structures and the racialized hierarchy of national belonging of the future postcolonial state. As my reading of Han Suyin’s novel, ...And the Rain My Drink demonstrates, the key function of translation in colonial Emergency operations, particularly in the “winning hearts and minds” campaign. Moreover, the concrete practice of translation in the counter-insurgency operations produces the figure of the translator-traitor to signify the racial difference of being Chinese. In order to prove herself as a loyal subject of the state, the Chinese subject—always assumed to be a communist—is required to play the role of informant as part of the counter-insurgency’s intelligence gathering operations. Yet, the role of translator also circumscribes the rehabilitated ex-communist as a traitor, as evidenced in her willingness to betray her political ideals in order to seek amnesty from the state, which in turn casts the loyalty of the Chinese as perpetually subject to question. The novel thus belies the colonial state’s claim that the failure to ensure an equal claim to citizenship for all races in the postcolonial Federation of Malaya can be attributed to the un-evolved stance of the Malays, who insisted on the recognition of their “special position” as bumiputera (sons of the earth) citizens. On the contrary, my reading suggests that the figuring of the Chinese as translator-traitor thus illuminates how colonial counter-insurgency operations facilitated the incorporation of the Chinese into the Federation while at the same time circumscribing her as the racial Other within the nation.
Translation also proves to be useful tool for managing the ideological contradictions that emerge in the postcolonial national racial discourse during the period of economic liberalization from the 1980s onwards. The postcolonial state’s recognition of the Malaysian cartoonist Lat and his widely known depictions of cultural diversity as a national icon signaled its embrace of multiculturalism. The turn toward multiculturalism was an effort by the state to strengthen state ties with a wider non-bumiputera business community and to globally brand the nation as an attractive tourist destination—neatly captured in the tourism board’s slogan, “Malaysia, Truly Asia”—as well as a politically stable site for foreign investment. However, as the small but significant differences of the English and Malay translations of his graphic narratives The Kampung Boy series suggest, the state’s appropriation of Lat’s work is not only used to promote a multicultural image of the nation, but to also subtly affirm the ethno-nationalist privileging of Malay culture as representative of Malaysian identity as a whole. Thus, the state’s endorsement of Lat as a national icon is facilitated by translation’s function of producing equivalence between the two language editions, one further enabled by the cartoons’ image-text form, to evince a formal coherence that belies the ideological contradictions in order to effect a seemingly unified national culture.

By tracing their various uses at different historical junctures of the nation, my point is not only to highlight the importance of translation’s role in shaping the national racial imaginary. More significantly, it is to also make the case that translation can serve as an epistemological instrument and an analytic category for understanding the process of nation formation. I am proposing that translation is a metonym for nation formation. Translation in this sense is not only a form of inter-lingual exchange; rather, it is a movement from one mode of signification to another that allows us to conceive of the transition from colony to nation as a shifting of
epistemological frameworks.¹ Thus, to read the nation in translation is to inquire into the historical conditions that render certain ways of knowing and being as no longer tenable and that necessitate the emergence of new formations of thinking and doing. In essence, reading in translation is a methodological practice for detecting the epistemic shifts that shape the imagining of the nation and how these shifts are efforts at making the incommensurable commensurable. Such a practice not only entails tracing the continuities and discontinuities between the colony and nation. It also considers how the nation is made legible, under what conditions and to what end. In so doing, to read in translation is to not only consider how the past lives on in the present, but to ask what possible futures were foreclosed in the making of nation and what could have been otherwise.

The documentary films of Amir Muhammad exemplify the method of reading in translation, demonstrating that it can serve as a mode of historiographical practice. By figuring the communist-led anti-colonial resistance efforts as a specter that continues to haunt the nation, the films produce a critical account of the past not only by foregrounding a history otherwise occluded by dominant narratives of nation formation, but by presenting the persistence of fragments of the past in the present as activation points for re-imagining the present. The films further underscore the fact that a critical history of nation formation requires a transnational approach, a point my reading of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s Buru Quartet elaborates.

The Buru Quartet invites us to see that thinking transnationally is not just about considering how global forces shape the process of nation formation. The quartet’s incorporation of the Maria Hertogh controversy—a watershed event for the anti-colonial nationalist movements in British Malaya and Singapore—to narrate the rise of Indonesian national consciousness suggests that events that are transnational in scope can bear different, even

¹ My thanks to Kandice Chuh for helping me formulate this point.
contradictory meanings in different locations. At the same time, these events powerfully
galvanize political collectivities in a manner that transcends ethno-linguistic differences. The
figuring of this floating signifier as feminine underlines the importance of examining the gender
politics that undergird the transnational networks of knowledge exchange that shape nation
formation. The quartet’s driving question—on what basis is the political community to be
imagined as a means of pursuing freedom?—remains open-ended given that the history of
decolonization remains unfinished. However, by highlighting the role of the feminized figure in
capturing the popular imagination and mobilizing political movements, the quartet indirectly
suggests that the limits of and shortcomings faced by postcolonial nationalist movements are the
result of the constraints imposed by reproductive heteronormative sexual politics.

The various objects of analysis considered illuminate the ideological, social
contradictions that constitute the process of nation formation. As a critical historiographic
practice, reading nation in translation is a method of inquiry into the material conditions that give
rise to the contradictions that animate the nation. This critical methodology thus insists on the
significance of analyzing cultural, aesthetic objects whether canonical or quotidian—in essence,
of understanding the role of the imagination—in shaping the political process of nation
formation. As a counterpoint to Marx’s skepticism of the ends of interpretive analysis, the goal is
to mobilize the work of interpreting the world toward changing it.
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Thuraichamy, Jeeteindraa (jeetthurai). “Where else in the world can you use 4 languages to form a perfectly acceptable sentence like, ‘Wei, macha. You want to makan here or tapau?’” 7 May 2013. 8:43p.m. Tweet.


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