

Communities and Conceptual Limits: Exploring Malaysian Literature in English

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Abstract

This paper brings questions raised by a recent research project to bear on Malaysian Literature in English as a discrete object of disciplinary study. The first consideration is historical, in rethinking which groups have produced English-language writing in locations within the boundaries of the contemporary Malaysian nation-state. Literature in English at certain historical moments has promoted what Sumit Mandal has termed “transethnic solidarities.” More provocatively, however, the groups that produced such literary works may plausibly be regarded as ethnic groups in their own right, if we resist following colonial and national governmentality in positing the synonymy of ethnicity and race. The second is geographical: can we look beyond the nation-state to a region or a Malaysian diaspora, or within the nation state to discrete local traditions, as Neil Khor has recently done for Penang? The third is materialist: what happens when we think of literature in terms of its social functions and use of information technologies? Malaysian blogs and indie films that make extensive use of English are perhaps functionally closer to the literary journals of the 1950s than the latter are to contemporary Malaysian fiction.

Keywords

Malaysian literature, nationalism, Lloyd Fernando, K.S. Maniam, literary history, English

This paper represents something of a paradox. I’m a scholar who has never published an article, a book chapter, let alone a whole book, on Malaysian Literature in English, yet my paper attempts a broad perspective. Rather than concentrating on analysis of a small number of literary texts, it asks questions about what Malaysian Literature in English is, exploring the communities that have produced and consumed it, and the information technologies that have

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facilitated literary production. It's my hope that such a distant perspective on Malaysian Literature in English by a scholar who might be characterised as a proximate outsider can ask useful questions, causing us to re-examine some of the assumptions we make when we study a literary tradition. The essay is driven by a supposition that thinking about communities, information technologies and indeed notions of what the literary might be may be useful in reconsidering Malaysian Literature in English, and in particular its social and cultural context both nationally and transnationally. As a distinctive field of study, Malayan and then Malaysian Literature in English emerged in the 1960s, in parallel with wider processes of decolonisation, the rise of the institution of Commonwealth Literature, and the resultant formation of new national and regional canons of literatures in English. The concept of a national literature has been productive, and in countries where a large reading public in English has historically existed, for instance Canada and India, national canons have become institutionalised, and come to have central importance in debates regarding national identity and the construction of social imaginaries. However, in other countries and regions, literature in English has remained marginal, though often important in its unconscious or conscious adoption of tactics of marginality. The status of Malaysian Literature in English with reference to the colonial state and the nation-state that succeeded it has surely belonged to this latter category: it has been marginal, but marginal in a variety of productive manners. Indeed, thinking of Malaysian Literature in English as inherently marginal and community-specific may be as productive as thinking of it as a generation-based national literature expressive of some form of national ideal.

The immediate impulse for this paper comes from three occasions in the last few years where I've found myself looking at Malaysian writing in English: I should emphasise that these experiences have intersected and then diverged, rather than converged on a single conclusion, asking questions of each other rather than coming to a single, summative view. First, and most centrally, I have been working with my colleague Rajeev Patke on a regional literary history, now published as *The Concise Routledge History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (2009). The project of constructing a regional history of English-language writing has been a complex one: when Rajeev, who conceived the project, first broached it to me, indeed, I was cautious about its intellectual coherence. Yet the experience of working on it, of plotting connections between Malaysian, Singaporean, and Filipino writers, and also writers in other ASEAN countries and in Hong Kong, has been both intellectually fruitful and conceptually unsettling. Second, I have been supervising a Malaysian doctoral student who has decided not to work on Malaysian and Singaporean print texts, as she originally intended to do, but rather on filmic texts – indie film in the last decade in Singapore and Malaysia. She has convinced me of the importance of these texts in terms of both artistic production and socio-political context.

Finally, I've been part of a group of Malaysian and Singaporean scholars producing an edited volume on racialisation in Singapore and Malaysia, examining in particular the way in which artistic production responds to the demands of a state-sponsored multiculturalism. In the collection, now published as *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (2009), our individual contributors look not just at print medium texts, but also the films of Malaysian director Yasmin Ahmad, and the painting, sculpture and performance-based art of Wong Hoy Cheong.

This experience of research and scholarship has been supplemented by my own reading over many years, and my changing sense of Malaysian Literature in English. While the Kuala Lumpur English-language theatre scene has blossomed over the years, some of the most significant prose fiction by new voices is being written or published outside of Malaysia – recently, for example, Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2008). This trend has grown markedly since the 1990s, and the success of diasporic fiction has largely not been matched in quality or sales by locally published texts, despite the best efforts of local publishers such as Silverfish or Maya Press. In terms of scholarship, much sterling work has been done by Mohammad Quayum, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and others, but much of the resultant research has not gained wide international attention, and has not influenced paradigms of thinking about multicultural or transcultural text.² Indeed, a recent search of the MLA International Bibliography and prominent international journals such as *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing* produced few critical articles solely on Malaysian Literature in English in the last decade.³ We are thus confronted with something of a paradox: the best-known Malaysian prose fiction in English is published in diaspora, and is popular there in terms of sales and critical reception. The most important scholarship on Malaysian literature in English is published largely in Malaysia but is not greatly influential outside the region, despite the efforts of online journals such as Mohammad Quayum's *Asiatic*. This in turn produces a disjuncture. Malaysian fiction published in the United States, Britain or Australia is likely to be analysed through a dehistoricised postcolonial studies vocabulary which emphasises hybridity, mimicry, or migrancy, without paying attention to the Malaysian context of the text.

² Of the many texts that could be cited here, perhaps the most important are Quayum's collection *One Sky, Many Horizons* (2007), his edited collection with Peter Wicks, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (2001), and Quayum and Faridah's *Colonial to Global* (2001).

³ A recent search I performed in January 2009 for the terms "Malaysia" and "Malaysian Literature" in refereed publications in the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* revealed only fourteen critical articles solely devoted to Malaysian Literature in from 2000 to the present.

Criticism of Malaysian Literature in English by those with historical and social knowledge, however, has largely proved unable to enter into a productive dialogue with a larger institution of postcolonial or world literary studies: this contrasts with other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, such as economics, where intellectuals such as Jomo K.S. have engaged centrally with and gained influence in global debates in their discipline.

To think about a framework in which we might view Malaysian Literature in English, and consider the possibilities for critical intervention, we need to take stock. The first move we might make is historicist. Literature written in English has a presence in Malaysia that stretches back over a century and a half. Historically, I would argue, it has been associated with four different elite communities that have coalesced in contradiction to the racialised categories of community incited by governmentality. In talking of Malaysia and a Malaysian past, I include Singapore up to 1965: while Singapore before 1963 was never part of a Malayan or a Malaysian polity, and indeed while it was a separate Crown Colony from 1946 to 1959, all communities that its inhabitants imagined affiliation to before 1965 reached beyond Singapore into what is now Malaysia, either to the littoral and island territories of the Straits Settlements, or to a larger notion of Malaya and then Malaysia itself.

The first community that produced extensive writing in English was, in its own self-description, “the Straits Born.” Publications such as *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (1897-1907), *The Straits Chinese Literary Association Recorder* (1918) and *The Straits Chinese Annual* (1930) might seem at first sight to be parochially concerned with the status of the Chinese Peranakan community in the Straits Settlements, but they were part of a larger social field of publication, the extent of which was marked by the titles of the *Straits Eurasian Advocate* (1888-89) and *The Indo-Chinese Patriot* (1895-1900). While these publications are evidently products of governmentality, of a colonial plural society which separated subject populations into distinct racial groups and thus rule through attention not to individual subjects but to colonised populations, it is also striking how repeatedly such writing attempts to overcome divisions and imagine a shared community. Thus we see the *Straits Eurasian Advocate* changing its name to the *Straits Advocate* because “[s]everal supporters” have noted that the previous name “sounded rather one-sided,” interfering with the weekly newspaper’s mission of “advocating the cause of Straits affairs in general and of the Straits-born community in particular” (“The Straits Advocate” 3). *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, similarly, declares that it is “distinctively Chinese only in name” and that its mission is to “promote intellectual activity amongst the Straits-born people” (“Our Programme” 1), while *The Straits Chinese Literary Association Recorder* imagines a community of “Asiatics” who have been corrupted by “habits of luxury and intemperance through their contact with Western people” (Tan 7). The literature produced by this community is best represented by the

stories in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, all of which negotiate a place for Asians writing in English in the colonial public sphere of the Straits Settlements. The community from which this literature emerges has three key features which we are shared by later communities we encounter. First, it is an elite community, marked by both a commitment to modernity and an anxiety that this modernity might result in alienation from a larger Asian society. Second, it is a cosmopolitan community, cutting across the racialised boundaries of colonial plural society. Third, it is a marginal community in terms of governmentality: the British, indeed, were nonplussed at the presence of Asians who take Enlightenment-inspired narratives of tutelage at face value, and demanded the status of British subjects, the right to bear arms in defence of the colony, and the right for their menfolk to be addressed as “Mr.,” and their womenfolk to be described as “ladies.”

The second community are more familiar to us: let us call them Malaysians. The literature the community produced is well-known: the explosion of creativity at the University of Malaya in Singapore from 1949 onwards, and its diffusion outside the university in the years up to 1965. The community itself is perhaps less well understood, and indeed it was in many ways an artificial one – members of the Singapore Anglophone “domiciled communities” mixed with students from all over Malaya who came from a much wider variety of backgrounds. In an interview in the 1980s, Wang Gungwu, the first of the group of university writers to publish a volume of poetry, recalled a sharp distinction between two groups that he characterised as “Malaysians” and “Singaporeans”: the former stayed in hostels, while the latter mostly stayed at home. Students from outside Singapore thus formed a much closer-knit community and had “a much more enjoyable undergraduate life” (Yeo, “Interview”). Yet both resident and non-resident students were inspired by a common political project: the creation of a Malaysian nation, in which a Malaysian Literature would play a part. Correspondents writing in *The New Cauldron* saw the need for “a common language to be evolved.... A Malaysian language will arise out of the contributions these communities will make to the linguistic melting pot. The emerging language will then have to wait for a literary genius who will give it a voice and a soul, a service which Dante performed for the Italian language” (“The Way to Nationhood” 6).

Of course the journal’s pronouncements flew in the face of political reality: by the 1955 elections, it was clear that the dominance of the Parti Perikatan would result in a new national governmentality based on racialised constituencies, and Wang Gungwu, looking back on the early efforts of the University writers in the 1950s, would judge by 1958 that they had been too “impatient for results,” and had ascribed too great a power to literary texts to engage in social transformation: they had, in Wang’s words, “galloped off in all directions on an old steed that had never been tropicalised” (“Trial and Error”

6). Yet English-language writing continued to thrive in the period up to Singapore's separation in 1965, driven by a broad identification with anti-colonial nationalism: writers in English in this period include the early Ee Tiang Hong and Wong Phui Nam, Edwin Thumboo, Kassim Ahmad, Lloyd Fernando, and Lee Kok Liang. This group again was cosmopolitan, including returned students from overseas, and elite, given the restricted access to university education at the time. Despite their social privileges, this was perhaps the time at which English-language writers in Malay(si)a would have felt least marginal, able to identify with various strands of a national narrative that was still in formation.

Delineating the boundaries of the third community is more difficult: it includes those Malayan writers who began writing in the 1950s and 1960s but who became Malaysians in 1963 and retained this citizenship after 1965. The break from a community of Malaysians is thus not so much generational as the result of political changes that occurred from 1965 onwards: Singapore's leaving Malaysia in 1965, the National Language Act of 1967, and then the traumatic May 13 incident in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, the resultant constitutional changes, and the New Economic Policy in 1971. Several bilingual writers moved to writing more in Malay. The remaining community might be called the "English-educated": most writers found themselves in a state of exile. For some, this exile became a physical one: Ee Tiang Hong migrated to Australia, while Shirley Lim left to the United States. For others, exile was more of a mental state: we can see this in the work of the two finest novelists of the period, Lloyd Fernando and K.S. Maniam.

On first sight it is paradoxical that the finest novels in the Malaysian Literature in English tradition, those written by Fernando and Maniam, are produced at a time when language and cultural policies are possibly the most hostile to literature in English. Yet one might also say that these conditions produce tensions constitutive of literary texts. Fernando and Maniam respond to the changed environment in different ways. Fernando's two novels are works of mourning for a vision of a genuine multiculturalism untouched by political power. *Green is the Colour* (1993) clearly refers to traumatic events similar to those of 1969, and imagines a dystopic aftermath in which the techniques of social control that featured during the Emergency are now turned on a new generation of Malaysians in the 1990s. Yet I think it's also not commonly recognised how much *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) is also a product of living in post-1969 Malaysia.⁴ The novel is clearly set in Singapore in the 1950s, at the time

⁴ Andrew Ng makes a similar point in his recent article "Nation and Religion in the Fiction of Lloyd Fernando." Ng's careful reading also demonstrates that the outburst of violence described in *Green is the Colour* actually occurs much later than 1969, although it has many parallels with the events of 1969.

when Fernando himself was a student at the University of Malaya. Yet it's primarily a work of mourning for the possibilities – and perils – that existed at a time when the nation was in formation and flux, possibilities that were perhaps finally closed off, for several decades at least, in 1969. I've noted in an earlier article that there is something paradoxical in this text: its four racialised protagonists find themselves torn apart by social tensions of nation formation, while non-racialised characters – Sally/Salmah and Tok Said – have a symbolic function but cannot be agents in the text (Holden 165-66). Yet the only space of multicultural exchange is, paradoxically, in a university that is still very much part of a colonial educational apparatus: young students from different communities are united in a collaborative unravelling of colonial narratives. Fernando's paradox is one that Simon Gikandi has noted was shared by a generation of postcolonial intellectuals who studied literature together in a colonial or residually colonial education system. The study of English Literature in the colonies in the age of decolonisation was – accurately – perceived to be an attempt at what Ngugi wa Thiong'o referred to as a "cultural bomb... to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment" (3), a production line for Thomas Babington Macaulay's perfected colonial subjects "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (375). However, Gikandi has also noted the possibilities opened up by such a space. Leavisite notions of literary canonicity based on a nebulous sense of honed cultural taste might easily be appropriated and put to use in the formation and critical discussion of a national culture and canon of which the colonised could claim unique knowledge (626-28). Yet for Fernando, given the cultural climate in which he writes from 1969 onwards, such an experience can only be placed in the past: writing in English can only be a form of remembrance and mourning, a testimony to a vision of the multicultural now overtaken by the new post-1969 political order.

Maniam's project differs from but complement's Fernando's. Novels such as *The Return* and *Between Lives*, as well as plays such as *The Cord*, attempt to write a history of subaltern Indian presence in Malaya, tracing the after-effects of indentured labour in succeeding generations of Malaysian Indian lives. Maniam's work stresses the connections between human beings and the land they work: in making such filiations it implicitly raises important questions regarding what indigeneity means: taking the literal Malay meaning of the word, Maniam's fiction presents Indian Malaysians as *bumiputera*, as children of the soil. Thus Maniam's writing, like Fernando's, adopts a conscious position of marginality, moving – in contrast to Fernando – into the historical experience of a single community in order to question a historical narrative that divides migrants from natives.

The fourth community is a direct result of social policies from the 1970s onwards. The move to Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of education, and admission policies that resulted in a changed demography of students at Malaysian universities, as well as the rise of a prosperous Malay middle-class have resulted in a community that we might identify as “cosmopolitans”: middle-class Malaysians who have been educated, or who have spent a considerable amount of time, abroad. Artists as varied as Karim Raslan, Dina Zaman, Huzir Sulaiman, and Amir Muhammad have all studied or spent significant periods in an English-speaking environment abroad. While previous generations of Malaysian writers also ventured overseas, this new group is significantly different in a number of ways. First, it is not simply linked to the United Kingdom, but to other centres of cultural production: the United States, Australia, and also sites in Asia such as Singapore. The group is also culturally diverse (Huzir, Karim and Amir, for instance, although nominally bumiputera, are from culturally hybrid backgrounds), and works in a variety of languages: English is perhaps less a language to which one has no alternative (as it frequently was for previous generations of writers) as one to be used strategically for specific purposes. If we think of this community as one that embraces the independent news website *Malaysiakini.com*, and bloggers as diverse as Farish Noor, Raja Petra, and Jeff Oei, we might say that its marginality has gained renewed significance – its use of English and other languages a way of circumventing or gaining distance from state governmentality that is now under increasing critique.

Such a division of Malaysian writing in English into four separate communities is, of course, to some degree arbitrary. However, such an exercise is helpful in that it moves us away from a national literary history that describes canon-formation in a limited number of distinct genres, and looks primarily at generically specified texts within the narrative of a literary tradition. If we see Malaysian Literature in English as social product of a series of communities whose marginality has been central to Malaysian political life, and whose experiences have been marked by disjunctures as much as continuities, two important questions concerning redefinition emerge.

The first of these is genre. The rise of the study of English Literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century resulted in the privileging of three genres: prose fiction, with the novel given precedence, poetry, and drama. Yet the experience of the communities we have looked at suggests such generic limitation is untenable. For the first two communities, the Straits-born and Malaysians, the short story had much greater importance than the novel. The reasons for this are clear in a material sense: the short story, published in the pages of a journal, newspaper, or magazine with an established readership, tapped into an established distribution network. The length of the story made its writing less of an investment of time for authors who were often social or

political activists, and it had a more intimate connection with an audience. The end of colonialism or semi-colonialism and the founding of the nation-state, indeed, was the time of the short story throughout Asia. In Indonesia, the *cerpen* (*cerita pendek*) gained popularity; in China short-story writing was a key part of the transformation of the medium of Chinese literary writing from *wenyanwen* (Classical Chinese) to *baihuawen* (the common speech) as part of the more general cultural reform of the May Fourth Movement; the dominant form in the flowering of pre-war Filipino literature in English is the short story. Educational policies added to the short story's popularity: the need to educate future citizens in a late colonial or national language resulted in the widespread use of short stories in school textbooks.

Yet the short story's generic properties also had material affects on its readers. The Chinese word for magazine, [*zazhi*, 杂志], signifying a mixture or miscellany of things, encapsulates much better than the English equivalent the experience of reading such a publication: it is a miscellany of different voices and images, intercut with each other. No matter how hermetically sealed the world of the story might strive to be, the experience of reading it on its original context of publication would be one of dislocation. A reader would skim through a series of essays, news items, and letters to reach the story: if she became interested in it enough to follow the narrative through to its conclusion, she would need to skip pages, flicking past not simply the titles of other stories, but also advertisements, images that embedded a story that often created a specifically national or local ambience within the context of a world of goods. Even in less well-financed publications, such juxtapositions are common. When Lee Kok Liang's "When the Saints Go Marching," a story in which Gothic elements haunt the newly decolonised landscape and the bodies of those who have been – and, in a new national dispensation, continue to be – colonised, was published in the journal *Tumasek*, its last page was followed by an advertisement for the chemical company ICI. One might argue that the short story's form responded to and illuminated its social context: the desire for one's own legitimised narrative in a lifeworld emerging from colonialism undercut by the fractured nature of the quotidian, a world full, in Lloyd Fernando's words, of "soundless fury which confused birth and dying" (67-68). I've mentioned the short story here because it is a genre I have studied extensively, but one could make further arguments for different genres. The essay, for instance, is the literary form with perhaps the longest history in Literature in English in Malaysia, yet its study has been neglected.

The perspective gained by embedding genre within its social context becomes apparent if we move forward a century from the short stories of *The Straits Chinese Magazine* to contemporary literary production. Educational policies in the 1990s that encouraged the acquisition of skills in digital media,

new technologies of distribution through the internet, and above all technological changes in film-making, have resulted in the evolution of surely the most significant form of literary activity in contemporary Malaysia: the independent film, and the short film. The extent to which Malaysian indie films make use of English varies: Yasmin Ahmad uses English extensively in order to establish an intercommunal space outside of the confines of multiracialism; Amir Muhammad employs it as one of many Malaysian languages. Yet it's also interesting how film, through the use of subtitles, can easily become an interlinguistic space. Thus Amir, through Da Huang Pictures, is associated with Malaysian Chinese film-makers such as James Lee and Tan Chui Mui. The porousness of the genre enables Tan and Lee to bring in elements of transnational Chinese cinema, in particular references to the work of Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Malaysian-born Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang. Amir, in particular, exploits elements of social critique enabled by his chosen form in ways that are strikingly parallel to those of earlier generations of story-telling. The authors of the stories in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* cannibalised genres, mixing detective stories, melodrama, ghost stories and travel narratives in a partial mimicry that, in Homi Bhabha's words, might slide quickly into mockery (86). Lee's stories of the 1950s and early 1960s re-situated elements of the Gothic in a Malayan present haunted by narratives of communal belonging and historical trauma inherited from the past. Amir's *The Big Durian* makes a similar move, deconstructing the genre of the documentary from the inside in its interplay between factual reportage and fictionalised reconstructed interviews, and in its problematisation of the role of the narrator/director and the verisimilitude of his narration. His two films on the Malaysian Communist Party, *The Last Communist* and *Village People Radio Show* both use fragmentary and dislocated narrative structures to ask questions of the narrativisation of history. We might extend a discussion of short film to other new genres that have been enabled by technological and social change. Farish Noor's blog *The Other Malaysia*, for instance, is interesting not simply because of its revisionist account of Malaysian history, but also the manner in which it reworks the form of the essay. The interpenetrability of print and new digital media is shown, indeed, in the fact that *The Other Malaysia* has been published in a print edition. English-language blogs seem to have played an important part in the political changes in Malaysia leading up to and after the watershed election of March 8, 2008. If study of Malaysian Literature in English is not to become irrelevant, it needs to find a way of engaging with the literariness of such works.

The second question that historical awareness asks us to consider is the notion of place: the place from which the writer writes, the place of publication, and the place inhabited by the various members of a public that reads each writer's text. The diversity of place in Malaysian writing in English is not new. *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, we might remember, was always already globalised,

distributed in port cities throughout Southeast Asia, and featuring stories set not just in Malaya or the Straits Settlements but the Dutch East Indies, China, and Siam. Gregory De Silva's novels of the 1930s and early 1940s were published by Kelly & Walsh, and thus had a wide distribution outside Malaya; the early Malayan stories and essays of Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, written during the Second World War, were published in periodicals in Britain and the United States. Fanonian notions of a national literature perhaps mean that such transnationalism has been read as immaturity, as a stage before the consolidation of a national reading public. Yet even in what we might describe as the heyday of Malaysian and Singaporean Literature in English as a concept with critical coherence, in the period from 1965 to 1990, it is important to note the transnationalism of literary production. Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* was published originally as part of Heinemann's Writing in Asia Series, a deliberate attempt by Leon Comber, based in Hong Kong, to replicate the success of the same publishers' African Writers' Series; Maniam was first published by Heinemann, and then by London-based Skoob. In the last two decades, writers of Malaysian heritage have achieved success in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and several – most recently Tash Aw – have become internationally prominent.

Such writers cannot, I think, be reasonably excluded from any account of Malaysian Literature in English, yet their inclusion raises important issues in terms of critical reception. How does a writer write for an audience which has little knowledge of the social, historical, and cultural context of his or her text without resorting to exoticism or the recycling of stereotypes? This question has been one that has concerned many scholars given the growth of postcolonial literary texts that are marketed transnationally, and has been addressed in studies such as Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* and Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. In terms of Malaysian writing in English, such questions manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Huzir Sulaiman's *Atomic Jaya* performed in Malaysia is an acerbic critique of the politics of political patronage under Mahathir; in Singapore, it may simply become a confirmation to a Singapore audience of doxological stereotypes of Malaysians.

As we move further afield, such dilemmas become amplified. In considering the effects of place, we might examine three novels by Malaysian writers that have achieved popularity in the United Kingdom or the United States in the last five years: Vyvyanne Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* (2004), Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007). These novels share a series of interesting similarities which are surely significant. Each centres not on contemporary Malaysia but rather an earlier time of national trauma – events before and during the Japanese occupation of Malaya from late 1941 to 1945. Each features Chinese, British, and Japanese

characters, but none has a Malay character of any importance. Yet the novels also differ because of their own context of publication. Loh's novel draws on contemporary American identity politics in plotting a Peranakan character's discovery of an essential Chinese identity during suffering in the Japanese occupation of Singapore: the text moves from English into passages in Chinese at the end of the novel, as protagonist Claude Lim, through a relationship with the anti-Japanese activist Han Ling-li, reclaims his Chineseness. The novel's also interesting in the manner in which racial identity and the rhetoric of anticolonialism are now put into the service of capital: as Arif Dirlik has commented in a recent essay, the failures of the promises of postcolonial nation-states has resulted in "a search for salvation in the global capitalist economy, spearheaded by elites who were themselves 'hybridized' products of colonialism" (1375). Loh's book, using Dirlik's analysis, is thus part of a global preoccupation with and commodification of ethnicity by transnational elites that neglects other structural factors of inequality, such as class: it is surely no accident that it is dedicated to Lee Kuan Yew. Aw's and Tan's novels differ markedly from each other in terms of stylistics, but they share a number of features. Each has a racially ambiguous central protagonist – Philip Khoo-Hutton in *The Gift of Rain* and Jasper Lim in *The Harmony Silk Factory*. Each has a prominent, attractive, but ultimately morally ambiguous Japanese character. And each text, in contrast to *Breaking the Tongue*, is mild in its critique of British colonialism. In *The Harmony Silk Factory* the blimpish Honey Frederick Honey is ultimately overshadowed by the self-indulgent, whimsical, but ultimately sympathetically portrayed Peter Wormwood. If *The Gift of Rain* critiques the behaviour of many British in fleeing Penang in the days before Japanese arrived, it leaves notions of British honour and gentlemanliness untouched; the retrospective narrative encourages "fond memories" (441) of British rule. We might again think of the context of publication: both novels were published in Britain, and must respond to – albeit obliquely – in retrospective nostalgia for empire that still informs much British popular cultural production.

Yet I think it is also possible to see these three novels published in diaspora as being about contemporary Malaysia in a displaced way; each is about racialisation and the need to refurbish or challenge racialised categories at a time of political crisis. We might, indeed, remember Pierre Macherey's argument that silences form the most important part of a literary text, that the "book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a *certain absence*, without which it would not exist" (85). My argument here is that critics located in Malaysia, or with a strong contextual knowledge of Malaysian society, are in a unique position to be able to perform such analysis, and to make a critical intervention into doxological postcolonial readings that are not historically or socially informed.

My argument in this paper has been that the historical experience of Malaysian Literature in English suggests two directions for future work: an expansion into discussion of other genres, and a movement outside the nation while recognising the specific location of literary texts and their relationship to Malaysia. Such an expansion of the field may, of course, create anxieties. The first might be to do with location. There may be a borderline at which literature by second-generation migrants of Malaysian heritage ceases to be Malaysian Literature in English at all: Australian Hsu Ming Teo's *Beyond the Moon*, for instance, has only minor Malaysian characters. Yet we might remember Alain Ricard's injunctions concerning a national literature, written in the 1980s, but retrospectively prescient. A national literature, Ricard wrote, might be seen in three models: as a museum, a mausoleum, or a marketplace. The model of the museum suggests rigid classification: an anxious parsing of texts against criteria of exclusion or inclusion. The mausoleum suggests a monumental tomb: for Ricard this is exemplified in efforts to use literature to incite certain forms of behaviour, to produce normative values for national subjects. Rejecting these models, Ricard suggested the more open model of the market: literature here becomes part of a process of questioning, of continual negotiation with and redefinition of their social contexts. We might thus, inspired by Ricard, resist asking initially whether a text is Malaysian or not, but how it represents Malaysia or issues of urgent importance in Malaysian society.

A second anxiety might attend the generic expansion I have indicated. Cultural studies and the history of the book are two critical movements over the last twenty years that have expanded the generic and contextual scope of literary studies, and my suggestion follows these initiatives. Cultural studies, in particular, has enabled analysis of texts in Singapore and Malaysia to be related to contemporary developments in other Asian societies in a way that literary studies has struggled to do. The danger with both approaches is that the literary itself drops out: at worst, one is either left with distorted anthropology read through the lens of a single literary text, or a history that tells everything and explains nothing, a plethora of publishing statistics that tell us nothing of the way in which the literary text works on individual readers. Yet if we see literariness not in terms of genre or a distinction between elite and popular cultural forms, but rather as a strategy that can be deployed in any genre, the problem is to an extent resolved. In doing so, we have a number of critical resources to draw upon: Theodor Adorno's notion of autonomous art, Vladimir Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation, or, closer to home, Sophia Siddique Harvey's recent deployment of the Minangkabau concept of *merantau* or "travelling to gain experience," to describe both the formal qualities and social context of Singapore short film.

Nor is this call simply theoretical; it reflects emergent critical practices. Some of the most interesting work on Malaysian Literature in English – for

instance Khoo Gaik Cheng's *Reclaiming Adat* or David Lim's *The Infinite Longing for Home* – pushes boundaries in terms of geography and genre, and social context: these works will hopefully be followed by others that respond to the unique historical experience of Malaysian Literature in English, even as they undertake the task of plotting its changing future.

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