

Retrieving Lost Histories: Spaces of Healing, Spaces of Liberation

Carol Leon,¹ University of Malaya, Malaysia
Gladys Koh,² Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Abstract

A major theme in postcolonial fiction is the struggle to forget the traumas of colonisation and that is why issues related to memory and history frequently emerge in contemporary texts. Tan Twan Eng (1972-) is an acclaimed Malaysian author who deals with the theme of memory particularly with regard to the Chinese community in Malaya during the Japanese Occupation. Using ideas of space and spatiality, this study investigates the postcolonial reclamation of history and home through the medium of memory in *The Gift of Rain* (2008). In this context, the notion of space used by Tan includes the physical landscape and the psychological landscapes of memory and history. In *The Gift of Rain*, the memories of the characters are sometimes in conflict with official historical narratives. This article argues that the slipperiness between personal and public narrations of history opens up a space that allows for a renegotiation of identity and understanding of self.

Keywords

Tan Twan Eng, *The Gift of Rain*, postcolonial fiction, memory, space, history

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history, then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history.... The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. (Kundera 2)

In these oft-quoted lines from the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera reflects on the nature of power and memory. Written from the perspective of a Czech community fighting against the Communist regime, this novel appeals to memory as a tool of empowerment which enables a person to cling to a sense of self. It is only by remembering who we are and where we are from that we

¹ Carol Leon is Associate Professor of English at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. She is the author of *Movement and Belonging: Lines, Places and Spaces of Travel* (2009) and has presented papers and written articles on postcolonial literature and travel writings.

² Gladys Koh is Lecturer in English at the Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. She has presented and published papers on a diverse range of topics from postcolonial literature to semiotic studies.

can regain power over ourselves and resist the threat of being obliterated by colonialist versions of history.

The orchestration of collective amnesia and collective remembering is central to the sustainment of a national narrative. However, in representing the past and attempting to foster an image of solidarity and a collective sense of belonging, national narratives often veer towards a singular, ethnocentric point of view that is preoccupied with glorifying the nation. Invariably this often leads to prejudice, stereotyping and the othering of people based on race. Counter-narratives to limited, often oppressive, versions of history are the personal memoirs or diary and fictional writings which deal with the past, because they have the power to retrieve alternative stories and to “rescue” people or, in the context of conflict, victims, from what could be described as the “forgetfulness” in national discourse. The rehabilitation of the past is imperative to the healing process caused by trauma because survivors experience “a sense of an estrangement from a past that is all but impossible to reconcile with the present” (Reavey and Brown 6). The process of healing then can only begin with the recuperation of lost histories.

Victoria Burrow argues that the historical fiction genre has the capacity to excavate the memories of war victims and to exonerate them of misplaced guilt and regret. However, the act of reliving such memories is at once traumatic and liberating. In order “to be released from trauma’s encryptions, a narrative (personal and social) has to be constructed and then psychically released through the act of being compassionately listened to and affirmed” (Burrows 164). This explains why a primary concern among postcolonial writers is to unearth lost histories that are not included in the grand narrative of History. Tan Twan Eng is one such author who deals with lost histories. The characters in his novels face or have faced the trauma of war but recover a sense of belonging and self in the spaces prised open by history and memory. In the historical fiction *The Gift of Rain* Tan reconstructs the narrative of his homeland Malaysia, in a similar way as Rushdie evokes his “imaginary” India. Such fiction challenges and subverts history because it “refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction” and denies “the view that only history has a truth claim” (Hutcheon 93).

The protagonist in *The Gift of Rain*, Philip Khoo-Hutton, has lived through the trauma of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and recounts his experiences during this tumultuous time.³ As he searches for truth and understanding in the telling of his story, the uncertainties and slippages between personal memory and historical narrative open up an “in-between” space in which identities emerge and are even re-made. This “in-between” site has the

³ In Tan’s second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, the protagonist, Teoh Yun Ling, is a woman traumatised by the Japanese Occupation. She finds understanding and self-acceptance by retelling her story.

potential to be what Homi Bhabha calls “a space of subversion, liberation, and agency” (Attwell 102). This article focuses on the role of memory in the recuperation of the “lost” history and heritage of colonised victims and looks at the way in which identities and a sense of collective belonging are formed and redefined in the therapeutic process of forgetting and remembering which opens up spaces for healing.

Forgotten Memories in a Lost Past

Uncle Lim used to tell me stories about China, about its many dynasties and its Imperial House. I had found them fascinating at first, but as I grew older the stories seemed to stagnate and I became tired of them. (*The Gift of Rain* 117)

In *The Gift of Rain*, the protagonist Philip Khoo-Hutton, who is of mixed blood, hovers between the different worlds of Malaya, China and England. Although he is half-Chinese, he has never felt a sense of kinship with the Chinese community in his hometown of Penang. The premature death of his Chinese mother, Khoo Yu-Lian, meant that he grew up without knowing an important part of his heritage. He had “the sense of not being connected to anything” (46). The homeland of his maternal ancestors, China, seemed distant and the only link he had to China came in the form of Uncle Lim, a servant in the house who would entertain the young Philip with wonderful stories of the motherland. Although Philip initially finds the tales and fables “fascinating,” he loses interest in them as he grows older. Soon, he begins to both fear and desire his need to identify as part-Chinese in order to belong to the Chinese community in Malaya. This community pictured in his mind is something imagined, because he has neither met nor interacted with his maternal kinsmen, yet he constantly craves their acceptance.

Philip’s opportunity to reconnect with his past comes when his maternal grandfather whom he has not seen since birth invites him to visit his house in Ipoh. Despite his longing to reclaim his rightful heritage, Philip is reluctant to see his grandfather: “The thought of establishing a connection, an understanding between my grandfather and myself, did not appeal to me” and he laments that they “would have nothing in common” (109). With trepidation he eventually accepts the invitation to visit Ipoh. The act of revisiting his past eventually opens up spaces which enable Philip to redefine his identity and reclaim his homeplace.

Khoo Wu An, Philip’s grandfather, reveals amazing stories from his youth which was spent at the Forbidden City during the decay of the Ching Dynasty:

Most people think I'm a crude, uneducated coolie who found my fortunes in the mine.... I was thirty years old when I arrived in Penang, part of an endless wave of people fleeing the chaos in China. I was different from them though, for in my bag I had a small fortune in gold ingots, taken from the Imperial treasury in the final days of the Ching Dynasty. (117)

Although he appears to be a "large stocky man" with bulging "muscles in his arms" (112), there is more to the old man than his rugged physique. Before he migrated to Malaya, he lived with the imperial family in Beijing and even helped to shape the history of China behind closed doors. Even more spectacular to Philip is the detail that his grandfather was an intellectual, assigned as royal tutor to the Chinese emperor. This story about Grandfather Khoo's past as a respectable scholar is initially met with great scepticism because it radically differs from one's conception of a rough ex-coolie. Here it is noteworthy to call attention to the author's creative treatment of history by setting up the character of Philip's grandfather as a guardian of secrets from the past. As the grandfather shares his memories which are peppered with obscure details, historical facts are embellished, distorted, re-written.

'No one can escape history,' I said.
'You are wrong,' he said. 'I often think of one who has been written out of history. I see his face, eternally young as it was on the day we first met in a courtyard of the Forbidden City. (117)

The forgotten emperor of China is introduced as a historical figure in the tale of Philip's grandfather, but he was not Pu Yi, as the official records show because he was "written out of history" (118), censured and ultimately silenced. Installed as a puppet monarch, the Emperor Wen Zu was said to be the distant relative to Empress Dowager Tzu Xsi, the real authority behind the throne. After a failed political uprising, he committed suicide and his name was erased forever from historical annals by his enemy. What happened to him is a good illustration of Foucault's notion of social discourse: "Truth isn't outside of power.... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. Each society has its regime of truth... that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true" (131). Following the Nietzschean philosophy that all knowledge is an expression of a will to power, history then is a discourse constructed by political and ideological imperatives.

Indeed, the posthumous removal of a monarch's name from official documents was a fairly common practice in Roman tradition, known as "damnatio memoriae," whereby a deceased emperor's memory is condemned to

oblivion.⁴ According to Sarah Bond, the posthumous disgrace is motivated by “revenge, humiliation,” adding that the “Romans saw it as a punishment worse than execution: the fate of being forgotten” (“Erasing the Face of History”). This was the fate of Wen Zu who suffered “*damnatio memoriae*” under the orders of the Empress Dowager. Grandfather Khoo’s retelling of the turbulent Chinese period known as the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 makes use of both historical fact and imagination, fudging both the known and unknown. The interweaving of fiction and non-fiction allows him to create a gap or “in-between” space from which he could articulate self, using his own voice – he is neither the roughneck Chinese coolie forced to labour in British mines nor is he the nasty grandfather who disowned Philip’s mother. He is all of these and something else.

By revealing different aspects of self, he disassociates himself from the known stereotypes attached to him, becoming someone new to Philip. His effort to bridge the gap between Philip and himself succeeds, as the former begins to see the older man from a new perspective: “this strange tale, had made him human, a man with a history, not the caricature of a controlling, narrow-minded man” (136). The exclusivity of this information makes Philip realise that he could never be indifferent to his grandfather again, knowing that they now share a special bond. Furthermore, the disclosure of his ancestral connection to the motherland opens up space for Philip to negotiate his own Chinese heritage and Chineseness. In the words of Grandfather Khoo, “I want you to know your history.... I want you to know you have a long tradition behind you” (136).

However, another dilemma presents itself: in order to embrace his Chinese roots, it is also necessary for Philip to identify with the Chinese community in Malaya, to tap into a collective sense of belonging which, in this context, also entails a divide between the Chinese/Us and, the enemy race, the Japanese/Them. “The core meaning of any individual group, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity” (Gillis 3). Using the medium of creative fiction, the *Gift of Rain* narrates the often untold stories of the Communist resistance against Japanese rule from the perspective of Philip who, though he works for the Japanese, is sympathetic to the agenda of the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). His best friend, Kon, is a Communist guerrilla hiding in the jungle. They are sponsored by the British to wage war:

⁴ The Latin phrase *Damnatio Memoriae* literally means “Condemnation of Memory,” and is a punishment reserved for only the vilest Roman emperors. Eric R. Varner believes the term accurately describes “the Romans’ preoccupation with the manipulation of memory and posthumous reputation” in his article “Portraits, Plots, and Politics” (41). Some notorious rulers who were historically censured were Nero, Caligula, Livilla, Messalina, Domitian, Commodus and Poppaea.

“The British government had made a deal with the leaders of the MCP – ammunition will be supplied to them if they work in tandem with Force 136 to carry out attacks against the Japanese” (338). When Philip hears about the Japanese plans to ambush Kon’s team in retaliation for their destruction of a radar station, he wants to warn his friend. However, he is thrown into a moral dilemma because he is considered a Japanese collaborator, and great harm would befall his father if he betrays the Kempeitai (the secret police). He mulls over the “problems of a rescue attempt on Kon” (360), but there is a turning point for Philip when he suddenly realises that Kon has made the correct decision in joining the guerrillas:

More and more often now it occurred to me that Kon was living the life I should have lived, making the choices I should have made.... He would return from the war a hero, welcomed by everybody – and what would they say of me? (374)

The trauma of loss and the retrieval of a silenced past which lead to healing not only affect individuals like Philip and his grandfather, but whole societies and nations. Historically, the deep wounds nursed by the Malayan Chinese can be traced back to the mass murder and persecution suffered by their community in the motherland against the Japanese imperialist regime. One particular black spot in Chinese history was the notorious Massacre of Nanking.⁵ Internationally-renowned author Iris Chang wrote in her controversial book, *The Rape of Nanking*, that “The Japanese as a nation are still trying to bury the victims of Nanking – not under the soil, as in 1937, but into historical oblivion” (220). It was, and still is, a human tragedy. Unfortunately, this incident has emerged as a cornerstone in the definition of the modern Chinese identity:

Nanjing for better or for worse has become a central plank in the construction of the modern self-identity of the Chinese. To discuss Nanjing is to threaten this self-identity. (Askew 1)

Much of the spill-over effects of this war in Malaya can be seen in *The Gift of Rain*, where the Nanking Massacre is mentioned as one of the key events which drives a wedge between Philip and his Japanese mentor, Endo-san. It taints their friendship with suspicion as Philip finds the cruelty perpetuated by the Japanese troops incredible: “I steadfastly refused to believe that any human race could be so barbaric, so bestial” (145). He also reflects on the fact that

⁵ In the article “Extreme Mass Homicide: From Military Massacre to Genocide,” Dutton et al. (2005) described the Massacre of Nanking as “the largest short-term mass extermination in history” which became “famous for the cruelty in which the victims were dispatched” (p. 449). The authors estimated the number of fatalities to be around 250,000. Despite the notoriety of this incident, the Japanese government has officially denied that such an event had occurred.

“Decades later most Japanese would deny all knowledge of the appalling things that were done there” (151). The author, Tan, has a tendency of inserting his own voice into the narrative, by revealing modern historical facts that would not be known to his characters. Sometimes it is difficult to single out the character’s point of view from the author’s as Tan tends to adopt a non-linear narrative style that alternates between flashbacks and flashforwards, disrupting the chronology of events. Most of the time this happens when the author inserts a random historical fact into the text using the voice of Philip: “Years from now historians would reveal how unprepared the British government had been, how carelessly it had disregarded Japan’s plan of invasion” (277). This narrative strategy resembles the way memory operates, oscillating back and forth. This movement further blurs the line between what is considered as facts/reality and fiction, or in this context, other realities. To put it simply, memory has the capacity to question single versions of reality or truth.

Trauma Narratives as Narratives of Healing

Unapologetically, *The Gift of Rain* depicts the first-hand account of torture and oppression of the Chinese community under the brutal Japanese regime in Malaya. Told from the mouth of a survivor, Philip, the story is a re-living of the painful experience of war. As the story unfolds, the narrating of the past provides cathartic release from unresolved emotions and possibilities for healing and closure. The voice of Philip becomes the narrative which also articulates his community’s anguish and search for restitution. The reader is made to listen to Philip’s confession and testimony of the war crimes committed by the Japanese invaders, much in the same way a court of law listens to an eyewitness account. Hence the narrative emerges as a re-enactment of actual historical events, and this reinforces the porousness between private and public histories. Therein lies the potential for rewriting history from the perspective of the victims, enabling them to reclaim their “lost” voice by giving them the power to speak for themselves. Haunted by memories of guilt and regret, Philip needs to discharge his responsibility of speaking the truth in order to exorcise the ghosts of his past: “No one could ever understand what I had gone through” (411). His story can only be told from the “in-between” gap, a space of freedom from the dictates of colonial history. This is also a space which can offer a reinterpretation of the role he had played in the Japanese Occupation, for he was reviled as a “running dog,” a Japanese collaborator who had betrayed his own people in the war. His reputation was sullied beyond repair, but unbeknownst to others, there was another side to his story that had escaped history and public knowledge. He chooses to reveal this secret in his narration:

I was choosing the path that had the strongest chance of saving all of us, all of my family, and I would take it. There was a war on and surely no one could blame me – or would even remember when it was all over. (274)

In order to protect his beloved home and family, Philip volunteers to collaborate with the Japanese imperialists, becoming a traitor to his community when he does so. In exchange for the lives of his father and sister, he serves as an interpreter and liaison for the Japanese army. Part of his duties include acting as an intermediary between the local Penang community and the enemy. His position is literally that of a go-between and he tries to justify his decision: “surely no one would even remember when it was all over” (274). But he has underestimated the power of memory. Judgement comes swiftly, as the people of Penang rain down their curses on him: “I felt their loathing of me. In their eyes I was still Chinese enough and I was no better than a stray dog scrounging for scraps” (306). It did not help that the Japanese took immense pleasure in displaying him in public as some form of trophy because Philip was the son of Noel Hutton, an important corporate figure in Malaya. Mounting hatred from the Penang people turns Philip into a total outcast, a pariah. His community did not know his reasons for making this decision:

It was a high pressure game I had placed myself in – on the one hand I appeared to have betrayed my own people, but on the other I was also betraying the Japanese. There was no one I could confide in.... (336)

In the re-telling of this story, Philip reveals his role as a double agent, i.e. he was trying to rescue the people of Penang. While he was pretending to work for the Japanese, he was also secretly leaking information to Towkay Yeap, the head of a Chinese underground triad who was also the father of his best friend, Kon. Spying on behalf of the Chinese gang, he was able to forewarn Chinese families of any impending danger from the Japanese army. This arrangement was a success: “I knew I had saved countless lives through the information I have been supplying to Towkay Yeap. But I could not save all of them” (342). His heroic role is sometimes mentioned by surviving victims of the Occupation who are old enough to remember: “Many people think he was a Japanese collaborator in the war, but he saved my husband’s life, as well as many of my neighbours” (373). This double role-playing requires Philip to wear a deceptive mask of collusion with the colonisers, being superficially obedient yet inwardly he was subversive, evoking what Bhabha refers to as the “reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (“Of Mimicry and Man” 126).

However, due to his half-Chinese appearance, Philip comes across as a mimic man, undermining the trust the Japanese have placed in him. The menace of mimicry lies in the ambivalence or “in-betweenness” of his identity

which challenges the notion of absolute certainty. As a result, his Japanese superiors are constantly suspicious of him, especially Fujihara, the chief of the Kempeitai: “Who did you show the list of names to?” he shouted at me” (322). He accuses Philip of abetting the Chinese: “Someone had informed them. I lost three on the list.” (322). By virtue of his partial identities, Phillip is not trusted by either racial side, the local community or the Japanese. The irony is that the more he tries to maintain the *status quo*, the more he threatens to destabilise the power structure.

Once again I was caught between two opposing sides, with nowhere to turn. When would I find a sense of myself, integrated, whole, without this constant pulling from all sides, each wanting my complete devotion and loyal? (283)

Philip’s sense of self is fragmented to the core, torn between feuding parties. He yearns to be “integrated,” and “whole,” but the colonial discourse of identity is premised on dichotomy. He tries to salvage the shattered parts of himself that are lost but he does not feel complete: “It was the war, I thought. It had fractured and dislocated everything I had known” (274). It seems that this freedom that he desires can only come from the in-between space of overlapping narratives where he is not under the control of colonial history or colonised memory. Philip’s divided self is reflected in the fluid nature of the text which is neither objective nor subjective. Public and private histories are conflated in *The Gift of Rain*. The interplay of historical facts and recuperated memory opens up a space which allows Philip to re-negotiate his identity, to both embrace and reject the otherness in himself.

‘Among some people you are known as a war criminal who somehow managed to escape justice. Is that perception true?’... ‘The problem, Mr. Hutton, is that in your case there are just too many facts. All of them conflicting.’ ‘Therein lies the truth you seek,’ I said, seeing him appear even more confused. (184)

Yet in all the recounting of personal history, core to Philip’s sense of self is his relationship with Hayato Endo, a Japanese diplomat who teaches him aikido. Always conscious of his half-caste ancestry, Endo-san’s strict physical and mental regime helps Philip to come to terms with his own otherness. But eventually he finds out that Endo-san is a spy and he was instrumental in enlisting Philip as an informer. This betrayal, together with the treachery of the Japanese Occupation, is a source of trauma for Philip and disables him from coming to terms with his past. However, ultimately it is a Japanese, this time a woman, an old widow who was once the love interest of Endo-san, who helps Philip revisit and comprehend his past. Michiko Murakami gently leads Philip to

ponder the contradictions and challenges embedded in his friendship with his aikido master and in the war. Indeed Murakami plays a pivotal role in the healing of Philip. In this, we witness Tan moving away from the self/other binary which shapes colonial discourse. Alongside the story of Japan's inhuman war history, are tales of friendships between Japanese and other cultures and the richness of Japanese traditions, art and philosophy.

Though Philip knows that his name would go down in history as a traitor and collaborator, the telling of his personal history partially liberates him from the burden of shame and guilt. The "truth" about his self can be found in the spaces of memory and history and these sites help bring together diverse aspects of his identity. In this multi-faceted space of truth, Philip speaks without fear of judgement. The hybrid space exonerates him from the shackles of colonial stereotypes.

The Physical Dimension of Memory

Philip's story is not just the story of an individual but the story of a community and a nation. The smaller narrative of Philip's life is nestled within the larger narrative of Penang as a homespace. The re-enactment of the historical events in the novel requires the imaginative reconstruction of Penang. For a dose of reality, the author uses landmarks and monuments that are unique to Penang: "La Maison Blue, the Manchu's House, got its name because its walls had been dyed with indigo obtained from India" (163) and "the Temple of Azure Cloud, where hundreds of pit vipers took up residence" (61). The buildings mentioned in the text do exist in Penang, and are popular tourist spots to this day. Philip's memory is rooted in the realities of geography. There is a distinctly physical and geographical dimension to memory; memories do not exist in a vacuum but are anchored to places: "Tied to and shaped by place, memory consists of an ongoing dialogue between the material and symbolic aspect of the past and the continuously unfolding present; working to crystallize identity" (Baker 26). Place-memory opens up spaces of communication with history, where the past and present continue to overlap to form identity. It is through the interlacing of memory and materiality, the intertwining of the symbolic and physical aspects of place that identity is formed. Sites of memory operate by reinforcing our sense of personal and collective belonging.

Place and its landscape become part of one's identity and one's memory....
For all of us the landscape is replete with markers of the past – graves and cemeteries, monuments, archaeological sites, place names, religious and holy centers – that help us remember and give meaning to our lives. (Sack 135)

The similarities between the micro-narrative of Philip and the macro-narrative of Penang are striking indeed. Like the fragmented self of Philip, Penang "was

divided into Chinese, Indian and Malay quarters. Each had its own characteristics, its own temples, clan associations, guilds and mosques” (57); this is reflective of the separated ethnic quarters of colonial plural society. The connection between place and people is further emphasised when Philip believes that his middle name, Arminius, is derived from a road in the city called the Armenian Street. This is an apt assumption as the word “Arminius” is located at the centre of his name and thus acts like a road that bridges the gap between his birth name, Philip, and family surname, Khoo-Hutton. In other words, Arminius connects his sense of self to his family, much like the way roads link places. Earlier Philip is embarrassed by this middle name and for years tries to suppress it. This could be read as Philip’s rejection of the otherness of his lineage and heritage. This is why references to roads abound in the text, as if mirroring the desperate need of the narrator to search for a sense of connection and belonging. Philip’s gradual free-floating sense of self is imaged in a walk he takes through Penang island:

Within the island I can move from world to world merely by crossing a street. From Bangkok Lane I could walk to Burmah Road and Moulmein Road, down Armenian Street, then to the Indian areas of Chowrasta Market; from there I could enter the Malay quarters around Kapitan Kling Mosque, then to the Chinese section of Kimberley Road.... One could easily lose one’s identity and acquire another just by going for a stroll. (78)

A sense of belonging then occurs at the intersection of the personal narrative of experience and the public narrative of place. By acquiring new memories and new perspectives of a place, Philip reformulates his attachment to Penang and, subsequently, redefines his own sense of self: “I had taken the beauty of Penang island for granted for a long while now and it was only through acting as Endo-san’s guide that I learned to love my home again with an intensity that surprised and pleased me” (66). Endo-san, the Japanese other, acts as a medium through which Philip can re-experience place. Just as his shifting perception of place happens when he communicates with the space of his hometown, so too does the reconfiguration of his identity. Philip disclaims his middle name, Arminius, and, by extension, a part of his past and culture. The recuperation of his lost heritage, therefore, requires re-forging bonds to a rejected past. This he does, quite literally, through the restoration of his full name, Philip Arminius Khoo-Hutton: “When I heard my name – my complete, dear name, given to me by both my parents and by my grandfather... I experienced a feeling of integration and fulfilment that had eluded me for all my life” (443). With the recovery of his full name, he can claim his painful past and the process of healing can begin. But the significance of the Arminius name goes beyond the literal. Grandfather Khoo informs Philip that it is associated with the sixteenth century spiritual

teachings of Arminianism, which proposed that “a person’s salvation lay in the exercise of his own free will, and not through the grace of God” (246), thus implying that a person can be redeemed by his own volition, and not by destiny. Power is in the hands of the individual: “We always have a choice. Nothing is fixed or permanent” (247). So while Philip’s middle name denotes a road, it also connotes the idea of freedom. The author Tan seems to suggest that agency is located in the in-between space, where true transformation and healing can take place. Although it is the fate of the colonised subject to suffer the trauma of loss and fragmentation, they are free to break away from the impositions of colonial history to shape their own future identities.

After the war, I had frequently found myself driving past houses abandoned by their owners, many of whom had died in the war, either in the camps or at sea.... A sense of loss overflowed within me each time another house, surely the only one of its kind in the world, was destroyed and turned into unwanted rubble. (181)

As the amnesia of war slowly trickles down to the populace of Malaya, it threatens to erase traces of the personal narrative and replace it with impersonal historical narratives. Philip’s struggle against forgetting is the struggle to conserve sites of memory such as old houses and monuments. The fight to preserve the colonial heritage of Penang is synonymous with his battle to cling to his identity as a Penangite. So he establishes the Hutton Heritage Trust, which is an institution dedicated to reclaiming and restoring sites of memory: “over the years I saved countless buildings from disappearing” (181). The changing landscape of the city disrupts the continuity of his personal narrative as his sense of identity is tied up to Penang itself. Hence any change to the city is a threat to his selfhood. On one level, by refusing to accept changes to his beloved town, Philip is refusing to let go and forget the ghosts of his past. He still holds on to colonial houses and landmarks in an effort to relive the memories of his past, as painful and unresolved as they are. Only by reminding himself of the trauma can he not lose sight of who he is and where he is from.

Place has an immense psychological impact on an individual. It is a relationship that is complex, at once binding and fragile.... When the place is threatened, the individual feels alarmed and equally threatened. (Leon 3)

Monuments are always constructed with the aim of nurturing collective remembering or collective forgetting. Symbols of cultural power, they are material representations of ideologies or discourses that serve to unite members of an imagined community by a common thread of narration. Monuments shape identities of social groups, because they make tangible a specific geographical site where space and time coalesce. French historian Pierre Nora

calls these sites of memory “*lieux de memoire*,” “the places in which... collective memory was rooted” (*Realms of Memory* xv). He believes the existence of such places is evidence of the inextricable link between history and memory: “if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de memoire*” (“Between Memory and History” 12), adding that it is exactly this “push and pull” that produces the *lieux*. Commemorative sites are the product of memory sliding into history into memory and history again. The result is the birth of a fluid space open to interpretations of selfhood and statehood. Neither memory nor history will be able to exert its power without the congealing influence of the *lieux*.

In the case of Philip, his passion for old colonial buildings serves to reinforce his identity as a son of Penang. In his mind’s eye, those memorial sites map out his past and remain eternal structures: “Many had been demolished, but in the geography of my mind, I saw them every day, entire, complete, standing proudly in a row” (369). He adds, “I’ve been blessed with the gift of memory” (369). It is this ability to remember that is the key to his survival and self-preservation. He identifies so much with the buildings that he himself has been transformed into a monument:

I have become a fixture. I’m surprised the guide books don’t list me down as one of those features of those streets and alleys – an old man, hair all white, walking up and down these aged and ageless streets, searching, searching, looking for something that can never be found again. (369-70)

Conclusion

Personal stories and creative fiction are generally occluded from the master narrative of history. Using the mediums of historical fiction, fictional autobiography and survivor testimonials in *The Gift of Rain*, the author creates spaces of ambivalence within which his protagonist “releases into this discourse [of nation]... forms of historical contingency, small events, *petit recits*, a number of what [could be called] enunciatory sites” (Attwell 106). These petite voices have the potential to undermine the narrative power of history by offering new perspectives. Philip’s personal account of the war is not only a rewriting of the history of Penang and Malaya under colonisation, but also the depiction of a “transformative, anti-colonial moment” (Attwell 106) which shaped the future identity of the nation. His compelling story of a resistance campaign against the Japanese not only takes into account the experience of unlikely heroes and minority groups which enriches the reading of national history but also gives a layered perception of the Japanese Occupation.

Sandwiched between the personal and public narratives is a healing space which unites the fragments of his identity. Philip’s voice, speaking from the space between history and memory, allows him to re-construct his past in a way

that is self-determined and self-directed. The exhumation of his past liberates him from the paralysis that had initially gripped him. Since the past can only be told from the present, this retrospective look from an older, more mature self actively shapes the events told in tandem with a deeper, more textured understanding of self. In other words, instead of permitting the past to define his present identity, Philip enables his present self to define the past.

After coming to terms with his own identity, Philip returns to the community: "I accepted the Penang Historical Society's invitation to attend the party for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Japanese Occupation" (441). The healing and transformation of the self also leads to a reconciliation with community. Philip has learned to forgive his enemies and accept himself wholeheartedly. Thanks to the gift of memory, he is able to remember and not lose sight of who he truly is.

We are beings mainly capable of love and memory. These capabilities are the greatest gifts given to us, and we can do nothing else but live out the remembered desires and memories of our hearts. (444)

Works Cited

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: California UP, 2004.
- Askew, David. "The Nanjing Incident: Recent Research and Trends." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (2002). 18 April 2013. <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/Askew.html>. 25 August 2014.
- Attwell, David. "Interview with Homi K. Bhabha." *Current Writing* 5.2 (1993): 100-13.
- Baker, Kelly. "Identity, Memory and Place." *The Word Hoard* 1.1 (2012): 23-33.
- Bhabha, H.K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (1984): 125-33.
- . *The Location of Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.
- Bond, Sarah E. "Erasing the Face of History." *The New York Times* 18 April 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/html?_r=0. 1 September 2014.
- Burrows, Victoria. "The Heterotopic Spaces of Postcolonial Trauma in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Studies in the Novel* 40.1 (2008): 161-77.
- Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Cheah, Boon Kheng. *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012.

- Dutton, Donald G., Ehor O. Boyanowsky and Michael Harris Bond. "Extreme Mass Homicide: From Military Massacre to Genocide." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 10.4 (2005): 437-73.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester, 1980.
- Gillis, John R. "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship." *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Ed. John R. Gillis. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1994. 3-24.
- Haaken, J. "Traumatic Revisions: Remembering Abuse and the Politics of Forgiveness." *New Feminist Stories of Child Sexual Abuse: Sexual Scripts and Dangerous Dialogues*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jordan, Jennifer A. "Landscapes of European Memory: Biodiversity and Collective Remembrance." *History & Memory* 22. 2 (2010): 6-23.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Leon, Carol. *Movement and Belonging: Lines, Places and Spaces of Travel*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-25.
- . *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past. Vol. I: Conflicts and Divisions*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Reavey, P. and Steven D. Brown. "Rethinking Agency in Memory: Space and Embodiment in Child Sexual Abuse." *Journal of Social Work Practice* 21.1 (2007): 5-21.
- Sack, Robert D. *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Tan Twan Eng. *The Gift of Rain*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Myrmidon, 2007.
- Zheng, Wang. "Old Wounds, New Narratives." *History & Memory* 21.1 (2009): 101-26.
- Varner, Eric R. "Portraits, Plots and Politics: Damnatio memoriae and the Images of Imperial Women." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001): 41-93.