Architectures of Raciality: Racial Grids and the Convergences of the Racial Nonhuman in Canada, Singapore, and Malaysia

by

Michelle Siobhan O’Brien

B.A. (Hons.) The University of Victoria, 2010
M.A. Simon Fraser University, 2011

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

October 2016

Abstract

This dissertation examines the emergence of racial grids, which define and organize categories of racial difference in relation to one another in a hierarchical manner, in Canada, Singapore, and Malaysia. It considers their varied approaches to embodied lived experiences of race and as belonging to a broader logic of raciality across the postcolonial world. This project focuses on three thematic points of comparison: the use of English as a mediator of racial distinction; the lasting influence of narratives of raciality that emerged during moments of inter-communal violence; and more recent recastings of these grids under forms of state-directed multiculturalism under conditions of globalization.

This project examines these issues through sociopolitical theory and socio-juridical documents, as well as through Asian Canadian literature and post-Independence writing in English from Malaysia and Singapore. Drawing the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, this dissertation theorizes a figuration called the racial nonhuman in order to analyze how race organizes populations based on human types and defines them against an ideal, that is white and European, human. The racial nonhuman is engendered by historical, socio-juridical, and aesthetic discourses that render particular bodies as simultaneously within these nations and their demands for different racial types, but outside their ideal body politic. I analyze works by Fred Wah, Shirley Lim, Larissa Lai, Tan Twan Eng, and Lydia Kwa to compare how these nations have instituted and maintained their racial grids, as well as to examine how the racial nonhuman is contested and reimagined across these contexts.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Michelle O’Brien.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Preface.............................................................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. iv
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... v
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1
  Modern Theorizations of Racial Epistemologies and the Non/Human: Defining the Racial Nonhuman ................................................................. 6
  Scripting Modern Racial Organization by Rescripting Indigeneity .......................... 15
  Literature’s Role, and the Structure of this Project ...................................................... 25

Chapter I: English as Racial Embodiment in Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* and Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold* .......................................................... 33
  Dominant Language and the Affectable Racial Body .............................................. 34
  English and the Contentious Role of Race in Canada’s Multicultural Legislation .................. 45
  “Special Rights” and Language Policy in Malaysia .................................................. 50
  Mother Tongues vs. “Race Neutral” English in Singapore ...................................... 54
  Linguistic Hybridity and Racial Embodiment in Wah’s *Diamond Grill* ............. 60
  Racial Mediation, Corporeality, and the Allure of English in *Joss and Gold* .......... 78

Chapter II: Exclusionary Violence and Renarativizing the Body of the Racial Nonhuman in *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Garden of Evening Mists* .................. 98
  Biopolitics and the Exclusion of Racial Bodies ....................................................... 100
  Alternate Origin Narratives in *Salt Fish Girl* ....................................................... 111
  *The Garden of Evening Mists*: Malaysia’s Perpetual Emergency Conditions .... 128
  Memory, Forgetting, and Cross-Racial Encounters in the Garden ...................... 138
  Resignifying the Flesh: Aesthetics and the Body’s Cross-Racial Connections ...... 152

Chapter III: “Productive Asianism(s) and Transmigrant Affiliations: Figuring the Racial Nonhuman in Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse.* ” ........................................ 164
  “Active Citizens” and Canada’s Multicultural Global Identity .............................. 168
  Singapore’s “Asianism” and Productive Racial Identities ................................... 179
  Transmigrant Alienation and Alternative Genealogies in *This Place Called Absence* .......................................................... 188
  Productive Citizenry, Instrumentality, and the Transglobal Context of *Pulse* .......... 202
  Queer Identities and the Racial Nonhuman: Natalie’s and Selim’s Resignified Desires .... 212

Conclusion: Toward Poethical Thought Across Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada .... 226

Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 238
Acknowledgements

This research was funded in part through the Social Sciences and Humanities Council Canadian Graduate scholarship, as well as by funding from UBC and the English Department.

I gratefully acknowledge the support of my supervisory committee, who have mentored me throughout this project and helped me to keep all the moving parts of this dissertation in sync. My supervisor, Dr. Chris Lee, consistently challenged my assumptions about this project, pushed me to be a better writer, and provided indispensable guidance along the way. I thank him for his patience, his intellectual generosity, his professional advice, and his ability to ask poignant (and sometimes daunting!) questions about this project that have remained with me for half a decade. I thank Dr. Sneja Gunew for her careful reading of my project, her incisive critiques, and her willingness to direct her astounding intellect toward my work. I would also like to thank Dr. Renisa Mawani for her truly insightful comments, for her crucial feedback on literature and law, and for sharing the impressive breadth of her knowledge. I consider myself exceedingly privileged to have benefitted from my committee’s distinct perspectives and thoughtful responses to my work.

I am also indebted to Dr. Christine Kim at SFU and Dr. Philip Holden at NUS. Dr. Kim provided me with a solid foundation in Asian Canadian studies, and her mentorship and feedback very early on gave me the confidence to pursue this project. Dr. Holden’s work and his willingness to engage with my research motivated me as I engaged with Singaporean and Malaysian writing in English. I would also like to acknowledge the faculty at UBC who offered feedback on my writing early on, and the support of the staff, including Louise Soga for her tireless help. I am also thankful for conversations with other graduate students working in/with ACS for offering thought-provoking questions about the field.
I was lucky enough to have encouragement from friends and family from numerous sources. Throughout the dissertation, Ariel Nyquist provided me with the best kind of reason to step away from this project and enjoy the conversations, laughter, and comfortable silences that can only come from years of friendship. Conversations with Jennifer O’Hara always brightened my day, and left me feeling motivated. I thank you both for your understanding and encouragement. Lai-Tze Fan has become my academic WOC partner in crime, and I would not have gotten to the finish line without chats with her that moved seamlessly from the ridiculous to the critically rigorous. Lydia Kwa’s work was a turning point for me and continues to affect me in many ways, and I’m now lucky enough to call her a friend.

Thanks to my SFU cohort, and those who have now become my Cohort, for their always already appropriate commentary. I appreciate that I was able to commiserate with both Justin O’Hearn and Corey Moseley during the early stages of my time at UBC. Justin has been my consistent colleague/friend from SFU to UBC; his ability to prioritize the work that’s truly enjoyable is a skill I honestly admire. The Garcia Scotts provided stimulating chats after fine artistic features. Steve Hahn and Lauren Perchuk have become like family, and two of my very favourite travel companions; I don’t know what I would have done without our very good life choices. Along with Lauren, Mary Corbett kept me going along the home stretch by sharing in conversations that are always insightful, never boring.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Galvani’s, and to Fiona and Luigi especially for their generosity, love, and care. Luke Galvani also deserves special thanks for his encouragement along the way. There aren’t enough superlatives to describe Marco Galvani’s support, in so many forms, throughout this undertaking. I am deeply appreciative of his belief in my abilities and his
enthusiastic help, and proud of his compassion and commitment to supporting the anti-racist work at the heart of this project.

I am so grateful for the support of my family overseas, whom I saw only briefly while completing this project. My cousins, aunts, and uncles in Malaysia especially: I thank you all for your imitable kindness, and your generosity of spirit. A special thanks to Kumaran Maheswaran for making the distance seem not so far through conversations— and food, of course.

This dissertation wouldn’t have been possible without my parents. They encouraged critical thinking and creativity; they helped me understand the ways that transmigrancy shaped our lives; and they emphasized compassion at work, regardless of the job. Thank you for leaving me with the very best of you (including the questionable sleep habits) and the good sense to surround myself with the best kind of people in your absence. It’s all for you.
Introduction

On October 8th, 1971, Canada’s House of Commons’ proceedings began with the Announcement of Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework. Prior to the announcement of how Canada’s formal multicultural and bilingual identity would help “break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies,” and “assur[e] the cultural freedom of Canadians,” the Speaker called the House’s attention to the presence of Tun Abdul Razak, the Malaysian Prime Minister, who was seated in the Speaker’s gallery (“Canada” 8545). The Speaker described how “during his relatively brief tenure of office, [Razak] has achieved an enviable reputation as the enlightened leader of a progressive country and a leading nation in the Commonwealth” (8545). One of these signs of progress was Malaysia’s development of a crucial policy that, much like Canada’s multicultural framework, integrated a rhetoric of racial distinction into the nation’s development. Earlier that year, Malaysia implemented its New Economic Policy, which aspired to “create the conditions for national unity by reducing interethnic resentment due to socioeconomic disparities” and provide special privileges for the Bumiputera (Jomo iii).1

Razak’s appearance at the House of Commons on this crucial day in Canada’s history was coincidental. The focus of his visit was to meet with Canada’s Trade Minister to discuss bilateral trade agreements (“Other” 20). But this anecdote neatly draws together two defining moments in these nations’ histories. Given the changes to Malaysia’s socio-economic policies at the time, the speaker’s acknowledgement of Malaysia’s developing reputation as a “progressive” nation suggests that this progress entails both its economic and social development—including

1Bumiputera refers to the majority Malay ethnic group and certain indigenous populations, but is a term that has become associated with special rights for the dominant Malay population.
attempts to address racial inequity insofar as it interfered with economic growth. That this particular form of progress was articulated at the same time that Canada also used its multicultural policies to emphasize its social progress reflects a global turn toward managing and endorsing specific forms of diversity to further national development. This anecdote also expresses that these nations asserted relationships that were premised on the legacies of empire they both inherited— legacies that shaped their ethno-racial grids, and, subsequently, their appeals to principles of inter-racial unity as part of developing their respective national identities.²

This project proposes that, as they developed their modern social grids, these nations deployed comparable methods of racial governmentality that were shaped by legacies of empire. Singapore’s approach to these problematics is also integral to this analysis. It is a nation inextricably linked to Malaysia, and, more importantly, the development of its distinct multiracial structure is also grounded in forms of racial governmentality that align with those found in Malaysia and Canada. While there are significant differences between Singapore and Malaysia’s colonial foundations and Canada’s settler-colonial history, as well as the racial schemas these histories produced, this project focuses on the parallels between the methods these nations implemented to develop and uphold their respective racial grids. Following Denise

² Throughout this project, I refer to the way that these nations define and organize categories of racial difference in relation to one another, and in a hierarchical manner, as their racial grids or racial schemas. My use of these terms is indebted to previous analyses of the varied methods deployed to classify and manage racial bodies. In her analysis of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial contact zones in British Columbia, Renisa Mawani refers to the “taxonomic but shifting [racial] matrix,” which “divid[ed] the region’s populace into distinct racial ‘species’” (Colonial 128, 132). In his discussion of race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore, Daniel Goh discusses the “racial governmentality of the colonial state, which organized the melding, hybridizing, and multiplying ethnic landscapes,” and proposes that this “racial grid” was “cast as multiculturalism” in the postcolonial era (213). The racial grids of these nations are referential, mutable, and suppress variations within racial groups.
Ferreira da Silva’s argument that the racial is constitutive of modern global configurations, I analyze these varied approaches to race and national development as belonging to a broader logic of raciality across the postcolonial world.³

Malaysia’s and Singapore’s postcolonial identities developed throughout Malaya’s independence from Britain (1957); the finalization of Singapore’s self-governance (1959); the formation of Malaysia through a merger of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore (1963); and Singapore’s eventual secession (1965). By 1965, the colonial racial scripts that privileged certain racial majorities were rewritten through multicultural formulations: ones that managed race hierarchically in Malaysia (with emphasis on its Malay majority, followed by Chinese, Indians, and Other) and through the formal recognition of four racial categories in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other). Under its own project of nation-building, Canada formulated a multicultural identity that originated from the development of its bilingual and bicultural policies in the 1960s, and was formalized throughout the 1980s. This multicultural structure helped Canada distinguish itself from influences of European colonialism and American imperialism, and to reconcile liberal nationalism with intensified demands from diverse ethno-racial communities. It emphasizes liberal principles of equality and tolerance while ostensibly “celebrating” ethno-racial difference, but privileges a dominant and universal “core” of whiteness (Bannerji 10).

Racial differentiation as a formative feature of postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore therefore offers an especially interesting point of comparison with Canada’s contemporaneous

³ Da Silva refers to the methods used in post-Enlightenment strategies of socio-scientific power as the “analytics of raciality” that “presupposed that scientific reason accounts for the various existing modes of being human” and produced “race difference as a category connecting place (continent) of ‘origin,’ bodies, and forms of consciousness” (Toward 422). The term “raciality” evokes this “onto-epistemological toolbox that has transmuted the spatial “others of Europe into historical ‘others of whiteness’” (367).
development. But this approach is not evident or well established in other criticism. Comparative analyses of Singapore and Malaysia largely focus on the relationship between the two nations, or relate them to other (regional) postcolonial contexts, while Canada’s racial organization is most often compared to that of other Western nations. Significant critical attention has been given to Canada’s self-fashioning as a nation that embraces the cultural “mosaic” model and rejects the United State’s approach to assimilation and pluralism. Prevalent, too, are analyses that compare other settler colonial contexts with Canada’s method of addressing immigration and racial distinction through multicultural programs, including Australia, whose multicultural formulation emerged contemporaneously with Canada’s. The relatively few comparative discussions of racial organization in Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia generally engage with the distinctions between “managed” postcolonial multiracialism in the latter nations—where racial difference is organized hierarchically—and Canada’s ostensibly liberal approach that emphasizes tolerance and equity. For instance, Daniel Goh emphasizes the distinctions between the postcolonial multiculturalisms of Singapore and Malaysia, and Canada’s “postimperial” multicultural structure (245). Goh argues that postcolonial societies are characterized by a socially deterministic approach to race, where “state recognition ascribes one’s primary identity and leaves out the others as private and irrelevant” (245). He contrasts this against postimperial societies that are associated with democracy and liberal multiculturalism. Goh asserts that postimperial contexts assume that individuals possess an “independent prepublic cultural

---

4 For instance, Sneja Gunew has made this significant comparison between Canada and Australia to convey, in part, that “the war over who may claim ‘European’ values is at the heart of Australian and Canadian multiculturalism” (12).

5 Wendy Bokhorst-Heng’s evaluation of multicultural education in Singapore and Canada is notable for its assertion that a comparison analysis of these nations’ “multicultural narratives” can reveal how they both use these narratives to respond to the diversity within their borders, and to place an “instrumental value” on diversity that also has global benefits (650).
identity” that is then attached to limited “negative and positive scripts” in order to be publically recognized (245). Comparative approaches like this suggest that, even as Malaysia and Singapore have gradually been identified both in criticism and in national discourses as multicultural nations, their approaches to racial organization are markedly different from Canada’s multicultural formulation.

I take Goh’s point that there is a significant distinction between multicultural formulations where the state assigns particular nationally-recognized racial identities to individuals, and those where people are expected to engage with the identities that correspond with their ethno-racial heritages, even though only select forms are nationally recognized. But rather than reiterate the well-established divergences between racial organization in Canada, and in Singapore and Malaysia, this project questions the dichotomy between these modes of racial organization that other comparative analyses assume, as well as the implication that one form is more managed than the other. How do racial grids operate through legislation and state discourses in Canada, Singapore, and Malaysia despite their divergent colonial histories? In what ways do the structurings of these grids similarly manifest in state policies and social discourses of multiculturalism? To respond to these questions, my analysis juxtaposes these distinct racial schemas that are still identified as multicultural, and that are notable for their considerable association with these states’ national and international identities. For instance, through the managed/liberal lens—or other critiques premised on distinguishing between multicultural types—the opening anecdote simply reflects a moment where Canada and Malaysia began to formally define their distinct multiracial forms. Through this project’s framework, however, this anecdote suggests an intersection in these emerging forms of social organization. The speaker’s acknowledgement of Malaysia’s status as a “leading” Commonwealth nation at a forum focused
on Canada’s progress marks a period where, emerging from the influences of European dominance, the respective methods used to manage their racial fields were entwined with their national identities, which helped make them distinctive and competitive across a local-global nexus.

Following this, the goal of this project is to investigate how these approaches to racial management underpin these nations’ modern social structures, and to trace some of the other significant comparative junctures in the development of these racial grids. It homes in on how raciality defines these nations by organizing populations and human “types” that justify the distinction of certain bodies from a particular ideal human form. Unlike the more established comparative axes I briefly mentioned, the comparative dimensions of this analysis are not grounded in substantive historical relationships between Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia. The connection this project assumes is that the racial schemas of these nations are based on racial epistemologies that circulated through colonial and settler colonial projects to define these different human types, and that they persist in ostensibly new forms today. This project also draws from literary interventions to consider these intersecting approaches to raciality, as well as instances that put pressure on the terms that define the ideal racial form across these contexts.

**Modern Theorizations of Racial Epistemologies and the Non/Human: Defining the Racial Nonhuman**

As this thesis is invested in the role that raciality plays in defining the human across diverse contexts, I first want to establish the critical genealogy of this approach. Anti-colonial writings have been crucial in charting the discursive forms of dehumanization used by colonial regimes to develop classificatory systems that justify the subjection of the colonized by distancing them
from ideal forms of subjectivity. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon provides a foundational analysis of this process. He discusses how colonized subjects are “reduced to the state” of animals as they are described through “zoological terms” that equate them with nonhuman animal life (7-8). These terms reinforced European superiority by merging the zoological with the racial: “Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the ‘native’ quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations. In his endeavors at description and finding the right word, the colonist refers constantly to the bestiary” (7). Yet—diverging from his tremendous investment elsewhere in detailing the effects of these utterances on the colonized subject’s sense of self—Fanon does not extend these “descriptions” to critique their more pernicious effects. Instead, he proposes that the colonized “roar with laughter every time they hear themselves called an animal by the other. For they know they are not animals. And at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory” (8). While Fanon identifies that the status of the human is at stake through these dehumanizing gestures, this analysis assumes that the colonized can be recuperated into this ideal human form through awareness of these dehumanizing tactics. It asserts a humanistic solution to dehumanization: one that suggests a concept of humanity that precedes these methods of scripting race.

More recent postcolonial theories have expanded analyses like Fanon’s to examine how race-based dehumanization is embedded in colonial biopolitics. These interventions extend biopolitical frameworks like Michel Foucault’s, which trace how biopolitical control demands the socio-scientific production of knowledge about the human. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault proposes that “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or
silently invested in a practice” (168). Foucault identifies that, across different epistemes, classificatory schemas underwrite human organization and how humans know the world around them. In the modern episteme, the conditions of humanity/the human become the object of the human sciences and the focus of this production of knowledge (340). While, prior to this, the “living being was a locality of natural classification,” under the modern episteme, “the fact of being classifiable is a property of the living being” (292). Robyn Wiegman suggests that in Foucault’s analysis of the natural sciences that predated and shaped the modern episteme’s study of man, the “permanency of racial characteristics” were already connected to the “coherence” of the subject (31). In other words, though Foucault does not expand on how race difference fits in the emergence of this new calculus of life, the modern mechanisms of the human sciences that he discusses—and its classificatory systems—always already included the racial.7

Achille Mbembe’s critique of colonial dehumanization is especially valuable here, as it brings Fanon’s discussion into conversation with Foucault’s. Citing Hannah Arendt, Mbembe suggests that “savages” are not distinguished from other humans due to racial difference alone (24). Rather, their race is entwined with their figuration as bodies that “behave like a part of nature…[the] savages are, as it were, ‘natural’ human being who lack the specifically human character, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware they had committed murder” (24). While this analysis is particularly reminiscent of Fanon’s, Mbembe departs from Fanon’s framework; he is clear that he is not focused solely on discursive forms of dehumanization that can be remediated as the colonized realize their humanity. Rather, he

---

6 Foucault articulates that the prevailing episteme may be “suspected as something of a world-view” which “postulates a general state of reason, a structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape” (191).

7 Foucault’s later works take up the question of race directly, including History of Sexuality and Society Must Be Defended. The latter in particular identifies the shifting epistemologies that resulted the “splitting of a single race into a superrace and subrace” within a society (61).
suggests that these forms of dehumanization are epistemological and that they underlie the racial subject’s exclusion from the socio-political category of the human. In Mbembe’s analysis, there is no modern concept of humanity that is anterior to raciality.

Mbembe then describes how the “racial denial” of any connection between the colonizer and colonized grounds sovereign power, and “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (27). This framework invokes a Foucauldian critique of race as the biopolitical subdivision and classification of people to “regulate the distribution of death” and make possible the “murderous function of the state” (17).8 Crucially, the elimination of inferior bodies that both Mbembe and Foucault describe is not necessarily the literal act of murder. Political power might depend on the ability to kill, but Foucault includes “Every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (Society 256). Mbembe similarly proposes that socio-political death also manifests as expulsion from humanity; he describes slavery, for instance, as both as the literal and symbolic ejection of individuals from the body politic through the “triple loss” of “a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and a loss of political status” (21). Taken together, these forms of loss lead to “absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)” (21).

My analysis extends and reframes critical transitions like Mbembe’s—ones that draw from classic readings of the colonial production of raciality, yet move toward an evaluation of the social, physical, and material effects that result from the production of knowledge about raciality and the human. Denise Ferreira da Silva’s intervention is crucial to this project. Da Silva’s work not only elaborates on the intersections of these other problematics used to exclude

8 For Foucault, state racisms—which refers to social divisions generally—manifest in hierarchies that determine which bodies should live and which are expendable (Society 254).
the racial body from the domain of the human, but also establishes that these methods of
delimiting race are co-constituted with the production of the modern human. Da Silva describes
the racial body as the origin of modern consciousness, as it is “inscribed...by the social signifiers
of...difference” and therefore becomes the “bearer of unresolvable exterior/racial difference that
signifies distinct kinds of human consciousness” (Toward 423). This “unresolvable” racial body
stands in contrast with the “proper” advanced human mind, transcendental consciousness, which
is associated with universality, self-determination, and whiteness.

In this critique, social hierarchies of human types, from the most ideal to the most
expendable, are thus predicated on raciosity. Da Silva traces how—following from eighteenth-
century naturalist and philosophical writings on the human mind and body—a classificatory
schema developed in nineteenth-century Western thought that delimited “a whole
power/knowledge apparatus, scientia racialis, the analytics of raciosity” (113). ⁹ By analyzing
racial “types,” modern “scientists of man” would attempt to establish that the ability to
apprehend man’s “social and body configurations” was part of the work of universal reason, and
would affirm human difference as irreducible, since it was rooted in reason and the laws of
nature (120). These scientific writings on classificatory systems explain, through observations on
their exteriority (roughly, the body’s relationship with the outside world, its outer determination),
the quality of their interiority (the mind). The human body became the scientific signifier of the
rational mind. However, it is not any human body that is exemplary of this ideal consciousness,
but “the body of post-Enlightenment (Caucasian, white) Europeans, the body of man, the homo
historicus, the one whose (‘highly developed’) ‘mental functions’ are inscribed in its social

---

⁹ Da Silva specifically draws together writings on Cartesian mind-body dualism, Foucault’s analysis on
how eighteenth-century thought rendered the body of a man against the measure against which everything
else in nature was contrasted against, and Hegel’s notion of “Spirit” and the ideal rational might (post-
Enlightenment European consciousness) as the sole entity able to fully comprehend the world around it.
configurations, that is, ‘civilization’” (106). In other words, the white European body signifies a consciousness associated with civilization, modernity, rationality, and the ideal form of being-human. Da Silva emphasizes that this writing of raciality took place in “globality,” that is, the colonial remapping of global space that inscribed regions of the world with different qualities (for instance, associating regions outside Western space with violence and unhabitability), and which helped institute the ontoepistemological mapping of raciality.10

Raciality and racial typing therefore define knowledge about man, and continue to “guide the terms of the grid of specification of human beings that identified each particular bodily form and the corresponding type of mind (mental functions) as coming from a particular global region or continent” (126). The exteriority of non-white racial bodies signifies that they lack the reason and self-determination inherent to the European mind and also figured them as “other” against which the ideal human form was contrasted. Da Silva’s work also suggests that even with the passage of time and socio-cultural developments hastened by European colonialism, racial others would never fully signify the “human.” Their exterior difference would continue to mark their consciousness as not simply inferior, but as contrary to human civilization. That is, humanity’s self-perfecting abilities and self-determination were produced as definitive aspects of the ideal human and as traits that were absent in these racial others. This process ultimately produces what da Silva describes as “No-Bodies”: those humans who “signify something that…escapes all that should be comprehended by Enlightenment notions of humanity” (219). These “no-bodies” are continually defined through “bodily and geographical traits,” and while they can “deman[d]…

---

10 This process is furthered by the mapping of the racial onto the modern nation, and the association of certain territories with the quality of its inhabitants; Western nations were characterized as self-determined, while other regions—particularly those most subject to Western power—were associated with outer-determination (174, 195).
human and civil rights,” their rights “so immediately disappear in the state’s decision to deploy its self-preserving forces” that evince its power (218, 220).

Da Silva’s framework is crucial to my theorization of a figuration I refer to as the racial nonhuman. In my analysis, the nonhuman describes the distinction of certain bodies from the ideal human, not only through the previously-discussed methods of discursive dehumanization, or more evident instances when these bodies are excluded from human rights and recognition through violence. More broadly, I identify the nonhuman as the exclusion of certain bodies from the domain of the human through diverse forms of (social, political, physical) violence. Following this, the figuration of the racial nonhuman assumes that the terms of raciosity across different national contexts provides the basis for the writing of the human. The racial nonhuman provides this project with a critical pathway through which to track the racial epistemologies that defined the ideal human form against particular racial bodies and how they lead to the development of the national racial grids that issued from this racial knowledge, as well as modern social apparatuses that reassert and reinforce their logic. Drawing from discussions of how the human is delimited through raciosity, I analyze its figuration as one that operates across these different levels, and that, most crucial to this project, cathects the everyday socio-political conditions that affirm this writing of raciosity.

Here, I want to briefly note the similar—but not interchangeable—formulations that motivated my use of the term racial nonhuman to identify this particular figuration. The nonhuman is distinct from the subhuman, which suggests a lesser order of humanity—one that could, through the remediation of social and legal conditions, potentially be recuperated into the domain of the normative human. By describing a debased human type, “subhuman” still refers to a particular condition of humanity. It does not go far enough, for my purposes, in invoking the
impossibility of certain racial bodies to ever signify “human” in the same way as the ideal human, when prevailing knowledge of the human always already figures them as irreconcilable with this form. I also differentiate between the nonhuman and the inhuman—specifically, Pheng Cheah’s analysis of the inhuman in *Inhuman Conditions*. I do not have space to do justice to the nuances of Cheah’s theorization of the inhuman here, but note that it provides an exemplary framework that traces how the commodification and dehumanization of particular bodies is inextricably linked to the prevailing definition of the human. Cheah argues that globalization’s unevenness has led to “inhuman” regulatory processes, in which the instrumentalization of bodies has redefined the terms of the human (486). In this reading, the inhuman is not an “attribute, effect, or consequence of the global capitalist system *qua* product of alienation from our humanity” or “secondary to or derived from the human”; the human itself is the biopolitical “product-effect” and represents the “terminal form” of the “microphysical and biopolitical technologies, tactics, and strategies that stretch across labor exporting and receiving nations” (231). Cheah also draws out the contradictions within attempts to remediate this instrumentalization, as these attempts depend on appeals to the “global machine” that relies on this commodification of certain populations. In this sense, the use of the term “inhuman” strategically invokes the history of human rights that attempt to improve the conditions of those rendered as inhuman, as well as the failings of these attempts that merely reiterate inhuman conditions.

My use of the nonhuman takes a different trajectory from Cheah’s discussion of the inhuman since following da Silva, I also analyze the human as constituted by methods that

---

11 Cheah specifically describes the inhuman in relation to how ideals of the human—including “common human decency” and “universal goodwill”—are obliterated under the needs of global capitalism, as human labor is commodified and human productivity is defined through its economic value.
exclude certain bodies from its terms. Cheah’s theorization of the modern production of the inhuman is not immediately at odds with da Silva’s examination of instances where bodies associated with particular territories and regions are produced as inferior under the demands of global capital. But, though the “inhuman force field of global capitalism” originates from historical relationships of power, Cheah’s point of departure emerges from a later critical period than da Silva’s (177). Central to da Silva’s analysis in particular is the role that post-Enlightenment writings of raciality continue to play signifying the quality of particular bodies and populations, which in turn racializes geographical regions, and produces regions outside of Western (white) spaces as underdeveloped and inferior. Cheah, however, focuses on the “repeated generation of humanity by inhuman technologies of governmentality” under contemporary transformations of global capitalism, at a time where the “postcolonial South” is well associated with “global exploitation” through the logic of raciality and its mapping of global space that da Silva analyses in detail (239, 12). Da Silva’s analysis of human types in particular thus provides this project—and its attempt to chart the construction of racial grids—with an extensive mapping of the ways in which the epistemologies that work through the racial define modern hierarchies of being both within and between nations.

I thus conceive of the figuration racial nonhuman as a comparative problematic to put into conversation these similar circulating terms that remain embedded in the modern social structuring of Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia. The terms that figure the racial nonhuman originate from the production of colonial knowledge about racial bodies, which was then used to structure nations by delineating particular human types, and figuring certain populations as valuable or extraneous to the nation. It embodies the ways in which historical, modern socio-juridical, and aesthetic discourses place certain racialized figures at the threshold of these
nations’ social schemas. In other words, the intersections in tactics and modalities that these states use to mediate their racial schemas inhere in this figuration. While the racial nonhuman evokes the diverse forms of violence that particular racial bodies are subject to in order to define ideal bodies across these locales, this project specifically examines its figuration through the less overt methods used to uphold their distinct racial grids in daily life.

**Scripting Modern Racial Organization by Rescripting Indigeneity**

In order to undertake this analysis of the less apparent methods used to uphold these racial grids in everyday life, I first consider an originary production of this figuration. The structuring of racial grids in Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia—and a primary site of the racial nonhuman’s production—is evident in their approaches to indigeneity. Under postcolonial nation-building projects, racial governmentality mapped the modern social structuring of these nations in the form of rights and restrictions, as well as the forced displacement of particular communities and the juridical rewriting of originary claims to the nation/land. I focus here not on the significant acts of physical violence that were an inevitable part of these processes, but on the accompanying policies and state discourses used to figure these populations as inferior and to undermine the significance of their histories. The methods that scripted indigeneity were comparative. They defined the terms of the ideal and dominant subject who possessed the ability to govern the nation against those originary populations whose presence might undermine these claims. I briefly trace these formulations to convey a fundamental intersection in racial organization across these nations that delineated different human types through the terms of raciality.
Previous critiques of Canada’s racial matrix have traced the crucial role that dehumanization of Indigenous peoples played in establishing the white European population’s originary claim to the land. The dehumanization of Indigenous peoples through discursive, legislative, and social processes reinforced their ostensible distance from the self-determined ideal human. As Emma Laroque notes, in legal discussions of the removal of Indigenous land rights, references were made to the uncivility and degradation of Indigenous populations to justify these processes (44). The effects of these discourses persist in the state’s continued refusal to relinquish its hold over Indigenous lands and resources in the name of “progress” (73). Concurrent to these dehumanizing tactics was the ongoing production of whiteness as the idealized human form through its association with intellect, codified law, Judeo-Christian morality, technology, and settlement; these discourses—some of which developed under the specific conditions of Canada’s settler colony, while others were transposed from European centers—contrasted the white population against Indigenous peoples to justify white settler claims to the nation. Renisa Mawani argues that “civilization and exclusion were twin strategies in the politics of elimination but ones that translated into a spectrum of deaths that could be biological, political, and/or cultural” (20).

This scripting of indigeneity rendered certain bodies as racial nonhumans and helped define a discourse of raciality that also attended to the presence of new bodies that entered the racial grid. Mawani notes that, as new racial populations arrived in Canada (particularly from the 1850s onward due to the need for additional labour), state racisms “fragmented the biological field by demarcating racial order” and determined the distribution of appropriate and inappropriate affects, traits, and behaviours [and] restricted and circumscribed the longevity of these populations. The constitution of
people (and nonpeople) in the colonial contact zone enabled violence against some, the improvement of others, and the expulsion of individuals and entire populations from local geographies—including urban setting and indigenous reserves—and from imperial and national spaces (28).

While Indigenous groups were figured as uncivilized populations that could be civilized through the work of Western values, mixed-race and Asian populations were produced as unassimilable others that were too distinct from the values of European modernity, which justified their exclusion from Canada’s developing national narrative. This racial matrix was again produced through comparisons against whiteness, as well as through a range of cross-racial contrasts and metrics rooted in circulating “knowledge” about particular racial groups. These metrics defined which bodies were ideally positioned to shape the nation, which could be reformed, and which were always exterior to its goals. But the crux of this emerging comparative grid remained the originary scripting of white settler claims through this question of indigeneity, and through the processes that devalued Indigenous populations and rendered them as inferior human types. This scripting provided the foundation for the ideological, cultural, and juridical framework that attended to the rapid expansion of Canada’s racial field.

This comparative schema gradually moved away from the terms of biological racism as Canada adopted the liberal rhetoric that characterizes the nation’s racial grid today. James Walker notes how emerging post-war human rights discourses influenced Canada’s national

---

12 The legislation used to mediate the presence of non-white racial bodies from the 1900s onward exemplify some of the other methods used to uphold this racial grid, including the Chinese Head Tax on Chinese Immigrants (1885-1923), the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which banned Chinese immigration altogether, the internment of Japanese populations following the attack on Pearl Harbor (1941-1949), and the Continuous Journey legislation that restricted the immigration of Indian subjects to circumvent the rights that should have been afforded to them as British citizens (1908-1947). In addition, the 1910 Immigration Act allowed for any race or immigrant group to be barred from entry into Canada.
identity, and how this shift is exemplified through new legislation, including the enfranchisement of Chinese and South Asian Canadians in 1947, Japanese Canadians in 1949, and restored federal voting rights for Inuit people in 1950, and other Indigenous populations in 1960 (31). But these developments did not subvert Canada’s foundational racial schema, which had already inscribed its two founding nations and populations—the French and the English—and established a particular idealized European consciousness as central to Canada’s national identity.

In both Malaysia and Singapore, the production of certain racial groups as especially significant to national development is similarly codified through racial grids that are premised on managing the issue of indigeneity. Indigeneity, in these contexts, refers not solely to the aboriginal populations of the region, but to the rescripted claims of an originary relationship to the region. Alice M. Nah describes how, even after the Federation of Malaya’s independence and separation into the sovereign states of Malaysia and Singapore, the figuration of the dominant European “Self” retained its position of privilege. 13 But, as Nah discusses, this era also led to the creation of a “postcolonial Self” by “the previously-colonised ‘native’ ‘Other’ [as] the latter took political supremacy, and shifted to become a ‘new-Self’ against ‘new-Others’ on the basis of indigeneity,” though majority populations, religion, and ancestry also helped determine the characteristics of this emerging (localized) dominant racial form (Negotiating 512). Nah argues that indigeneity has remained “the main basis for legitimising political power and the economic

13 While Singapore and Malaysia were part of British Malaya before 1957, the Japanese occupation of the region from 1942 to 1945 was met with increased nationalistic sentiments that were eventually channeled toward demands for an independent Federation of Malaya. The Federation of Malaya was created in 1957, while Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959, but Merdeka (independence) was not fully achieved until 1963; two years after this, Singapore would secede—or be expelled, in an especially contentious moment in this early history—from the Federation due to racial conflicts predominantly between the Chinese and Malaysian populations.
redistribution of wealth” in Malaysia particularly, yet in both Singapore and Malaysia, indigeneity remains persuasive only when it is seen as “primordial and timeless,” and locatable in certain individuals in an “unchallengeable manner” (512).

In Malaysia, the position of the Orang Asli (the aboriginal population of the peninsula) and the Orang Asal in Sabah and Sarawak presented the primary obstacle to immutable claims of Malay indigeneity, particularly as they were acknowledged as possessing a unique and significant long-standing knowledge of the land during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). I discuss the Emergency (an armed conflict between Malayan communists and Commonwealth forces) further in Chapter 2, but note here that eventual attempts by the British to gain the support of the Orang Asli in particular during this period hastened the development of the Department of Aborigines, whose role in managing the Orang Asli persists today through the work of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Jabata Ehwal Orang Asli, or JHEOA). The JHEOA was established in 1961 and has, since then, been supervised by members of the ruling Malay government (JHEOA 5). Nah notes that the JHEOA’s caretaking function—which oversees everything from Orang Asli employment and education, to their liquor purchases, to the terminology used to refer to them—reiterated the colonial discourses that contrasted the Orang Asli against the Malays to help uphold the latter’s political importance to the colonial project (“Names” 36-7, “Recognizing” 224). Orang Asli/Orang Asal identity remains a source of

---

14 The Orang Asli comprise nineteen distinct cultural and linguistic groups, but state-provided names and categories organize them into three primary categories (Negrito, Senoi, Proto-Malay) and six sub-groups that do not necessarily reflect the self-organization of Orang Asli peoples.
15 Colin Nichols notes that Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s first Prime Minister, responded to suggestions that Chinese, Indian, and Malays were immigrants to the Peninsula by referencing the backwardness of the Orang Asli; he argued that there could be no doubt that the Malays were indigenous, as the original inhabitants did not have any form of meaningful culture or civilization: “compared with the Malays… [These] inhabitants also had no direction and lived like primitives in mountains and jungles” (The Star, 6 November 1986) (qtd in Nicholas 122-123).
anxiety for the ruling Malay class. If indigeneity is defined “through continuous occupation of land from time immemorial, most Orang Asli [and Orang Asal] groups have far stronger claims to indigenous identity than many Malays,” as they have been in the Peninsula for thousands of years, and their very name continues to reflect their Indigeneity (“Re’mapping” 291). Malays, however, include people who “still trace their origins to places outside the peninsula,” which problematizes their claims to indigeneity (291). While the post-Independence state promised that the government would “adopt and not destroy [the Orang Asli/Orang Asal] traditional way of living and culture,” this trajectory of the management drew from colonial infrastructure to position the ruling Malay class as “custodians” of aboriginal communities (qtd. in Jones 302).

This figuration of the Orang Asli/Orang Asal as homogenized populations under the management of dominant Malays helped entrench Bumiputera (or “son of the soil”) policies, which in turn initiated the terms of Malaysia’s formalized postcolonial racial schema. Gaik Cheng Khoo argues that “Although [Bumiputera is] not a term found in the Constitution, it has come to represent Malay Muslim special rights in the Peninsula and is used to exclude Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent as well as the genuine indigenous peoples of the Peninsula, the Orang Asli” (Rise 16 emphasis mine). For instance, Malay special rights would ideally help counter how the “more urbanized and entrepreneurial Chinese” also threatened the position of the Malays (Leong and Noor 273).16 As with the management of the Orang Asli in the peninsula, the colonial criteria used to determine which groups were indigenous and possessed a legitimate claim of “belonging” developed into a “powerful rallying point for nationalist discourses” that helped legitimate Malay privilege in the postcolonial era (“Names”

---

16 The Indian minority population did not pose as significant of a threat, as they were forced to invoke a colonial working-class identity to retain the legitimacy of their representative political parties (Leong and Noor 273).
While the Malays, the Orang Asli, and the Orang Asli were recognized as Bumiputera, only the Malays were guaranteed special rights (such as reservation land, educational quotas, and additional equity stakes in publicly-listed companies). The “aborigines” had to “habitually follow” the languages, customs, and ways of life associated with indigeneity in order to have any special privileges as Bumiputera. Further, through this rewriting of indigeneity and Bumiputera criteria, other racial groups—namely the Chinese and Tamil Indian minorities—were figured in this schema as secondary to the Malays’ Bumiputera status.

Put simply, the very fact of having to contend with the Orang Asli/Orang Asli’s connection to indigeneity forced the state to articulate the terms that would define the new postcolonial Selves of Malaysia—the elite Malay population—and necessitated that the terms of Bumiputera status, around which other racial groups were organized, was constitutionally made official. This ideal new-Self must continually negotiate its “now-dominant positionality within the small space afforded to it as an ‘old-Other’ defined by British colonial policy,” and contend with “multiple ‘new-Others’ including the Orang Asli, whose indigeneity has never been in serious doubt” (“Negotiating” 528).

Unlike the Orang Asli/Orang Asli in Malaysia, by Independence, Singapore lacked the significant presence of aboriginal groups. Instead, given Singapore’s tremendous investment

---

17 The Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954) determined these requirements that “aborigines” must meet in order to have the special privileges associated with indigeneity (Act 6-7). If an Orang Asli converts to a different religion, the Act clarifies that they are still considered indigenous as long as they otherwise follow an indigenous way of life, but can also be reclassified as Malay if they convert to Islam, speak Malay, and adopt Malay customs, and can then receive full Bumiputera benefits (Nah 221).

18 Malay special rights and the primacy of Malay culture and religion were made indubitable even prior to Independence through amendments made to the Sedition Act (1948).

19 Nah explains that, in order to avoid being associated with colonial authorities, the state drew from discourses that associate “White Western Others” with imperialistic acts, which leaves “local leaders untouched, their domestic rule always ‘postcolonial’ and founded upon a hard-earned, well deserved Independence” (524).

20 Mariam Ali writes that Singapore’s Malay population includes some descendants of the Orang Kallang and the Orang Selat, two of the indigenous groups to be identified as Orang Laut: a group of largely
within Malaya, and conflicts between the Chinese majority and Malay population, notions of indigeneity in Singapore were defined in relation to the Malay population. Stemming from the Constitutional Talks of 1956, in 1963, a new article (currently Article 152) was added to the Singapore Constitution that stated that the government would “exercise its functions in such manner as to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore” (qtd. in Lim 118). While this statement does not necessarily guarantee special rights for the Malay population in Singapore, particularly given the nation’s emphasis on a meritocracy that privileges the Chinese majority, it signifies that the Singaporean state had to navigate the Malays’ position and their originary claims as it constructed its national identity.

Resulting from this need to address a significant Malay presence, early conceptions of multiracialism—used here to describe Singapore’s entrenched hierarchical Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other formation—in post-Independence Singapore were linked to discourses of “Malaysian Malaysia” that persisted even after Singapore’s secession.\(^{21}\) Malaysian Malaysia was used by Lee Kuan Yew and PAP to counter the rhetoric of Malay special rights, and asserted that Malaysia should belong to all Malaysians regardless of race (rather than a Malay Malaysia).\(^{22}\) In 1965, Lee argued that no racial group—particularly the Malays—should consider themselves as possessing unique claims to indigeneity since ethnic Malays from other nations were able to

\(\text{nomadic seafaring people from the small islands surrounding Singapore. Many Orang Laut converted to Islam and were then identified by the state as ethnic Malays (275). The Orang Seletar faced rapid sedentarization as they were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and move ashore, and those who continued to maintain a distinct culture were not perceived as a significant threat to Singapore’s Chinese majority.}\)

\(\text{\(^{21}\) Malaysian Malaysia proposes “that the nation and the state is not identified with the supremacy, wellbeing, and the interests of any one particular community or race...A Malaysian Malaysia means...educating and encouraging the various races in Malaysia to seek political affiliation not on the basis of race and religion but on the basis of common political ideologies” (Bellows 59).}\)

\(\text{\(^{22}\) Since 1959, Singapore’s ruling party has been the PAP, or People’s Action Party, which is roughly characterized by an ideological emphasis on “pragmatism, meritocracy, multiracialism, and, more recently...Asian values or communitarianism,” and was led by Lee Kuan Yew from 1959-1990 (Diane Mauzy and R.S. Milne 52).}\)
move to the region and claim status as Malays. These discourses produced the constitutionally-inscribed Malay privileges as economic and social, but not political, and subverted implications that the Malays had a unique right to rule the nation.

Though these strategies were used prior to Singapore’s secession, the assertion that the nation should belong equally to all populations aligns with the modern state’s emphasis on individual meritocratic advancement over special rights, which occludes the privileges afforded to the Chinese population. To support this process, the state also drew from colonial discourses that further distinguished the Chinese and Malay populations. Tania Li explains that pervasive imagery and descriptions of the Malay population (in the press and in state discourses) as backward and naturally inclined to rural and non-urban settings rendered them as barely capable of self-governance, let alone able to assert influence over national development (168, 173). In contrast to this stands the production of a Chinese Singaporean identity as hardworking and driven toward the development of the self and the nation; this figures the dominant Chinese population as the logical rulers of Singapore, not simply due to their numbers, but because these specific ethnicized values are correlated with the nation’s economic and cultural success. This privileging of ostensibly Chinese values—a form of social engineering, which, as Chapter 3

---

23 Lee argued: “According to history, Malays began to migrate to Malaysia in noticeable numbers only 700 years ago…Therefore it is wrong and illogical for a particular racial group to think that they are more justified to be called Malaysians and that the others can become Malaysian only through their favour” (qtd. in Fletcher 1969 58).

24 Organizations like MENDAKI in the 1980s—the Council on Education of Muslim Children, a government-sponsored Malay-Muslim educational group—aimed to improve Malay education, but again described the Malay problem as “firmly based on the orthodoxy of Malay cultural weakness” (Li 175).

25 Lee Kuan Yew attributed Singapore’s success to the presence of Chinese values, including “the strength of the family [and] the bringing up of children to be modest, hardworking, thrifty, filial, loyal and law abiding,” and argued that these traits had a positive influence on non-Chinese Singaporeans (qtd. In Barr, Lee Kuan Yew 161).
describes, was dissimulated as Asian Values—suggests that the disparity between the Malay and Chinese populations is not rooted in social inequity, but in racial distinctions.

This need to undermine any special originary claims associated with the Malay population therefore produced a dichotomy between the two populations that would define Singapore’s postcolonial racial schema. From this, the Indian population was inserted into this racial grid, which, as Chua Beng Huat argues, ensured that Singapore’s racial politics would not be reduced “to a simply majority-minority dynamics, with all its untoward implications of domination and marginalization” (qtd. in Vasu 60). The Indian presence may have provided the “substantive and conceptual space for a discourse of ‘racial equality’ and ‘racial harmony’,,” but as state discourses suggested that they were a more integrated and capable population than the Malays, their figuration in Singapore’s racial matrix helped confirm Malay inferiority (qtd. in Vasu 60).26 In effect, much like in Malaysia, this rewriting of indigeneity helped organize Singapore’s racial categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other) into a hierarchical grid, and helped the ruling Chinese population to construct a national identity founded on certain Chinese-associated values to suggest which racial group was the appropriate one to manage the nation’s development.27

These examples each engage with distinct forms of indigeneity and particular claims from originary populations, but they all indicate how the authority of the dominant majority populations of these nations was defined through measures designed to script the terms of indigeneity. This process marks an originary node in the construction of these nations’ racial

---

26 See Syed Hussein Alatas’s *The Myth of the Lazy Native* for an extensive analysis of the ways in which colonial capitalism organizes racial populations in Southeast Asia.
27 Chapter One further discusses that “Chinese” remains a contested category, as it encompasses Straits Chinese and Chinese-born Chinese populations, which themselves are culturally and linguistically diverse.
grids through the production of certain bodies as racial nonhumans. The very act of subverting or appropriating the terms of indigeneity required articulating a racial schema that figured certain bodies as inimical to national development. This process also shifted the terms of this figuration as needed, which helped further cultivate prevailing knowledge about both these bodies, and their idealized antipodes.

**Literature’s Role, and the Structure of this Project**

In the conclusion of this project, I discuss Denise Ferreira da Silva’s recent critique of fractal or compositional thinking in relation to this project’s goals. Compositional (or “poethical”) thinking examines, in part, the transnational and trans-temporal “symmetries” between events to locate them “in a global context” shaped by previous and future repetitions of racial violence without reading them as “developmentally separate” processes or through “linear temporality” (“Fractal” np). I signpost the importance of this framework here, as this project’s methodology itself is compositional; it attempts to attend to numerous processes across these nations that produce and reiterate the terms of their racial grids. Each section of this project focuses on a distinct form of social structuring in these nations, but does so by looking for “correspondences” between the different discourses and histories that define these contexts (np).

In each chapter, I analyze state narratives alongside legal discourses to trace how prevailing knowledge about racial types is officialized by state institutions and normalized through their authority, and eventually defines the identities of these nations. I also reference critical and philosophical writings on race and the terms of the human as I examine how prevailing epistemologies of race work alongside the state’s hierarchical management of racial populations. I draw from these different legislative writings, state speeches, and historical
documentation of particular national events because, read compositionally, they exemplify the variegated ways that the racial is invoked and narrated by these states as a fundamental part of their social structurings.

From this mapping of some of the ways that state institutions and the law similarly manage the racial grids of these nations, this project examines how these processes inhere in the lived realities of the racial body. I thus turn to literary narratives that engage with the particularities of these racial grids, but produce alternative narrations of their effects that cannot be captured solely through analyses of state-sanctioned discourses. This methodology is motivated by the conditions that helped produced the literary fields that are explored throughout this project. Asian Canadian literature emerged from histories of racial violence and legal exclusionary methods that created connections between different Asian Canadian communities that were subjected to intersecting and competing racial logics. While Asian Canadian cultural production was heavily influenced by anti-racist activism and critiques of identity politics throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, it has also been instrumental in recovering and disseminating racial histories and the details of events that have been suppressed in Canada (Goellnicht 76). As Christopher Lee proposes, Asian Canadian literature plays a “key role ... in constructing the very conditions under which consciousness of the past emerges” (39). Lee also notes that this body of writing has been subjected to commodification and homogenization under Canada’s multicultural identity (35). Asian Canadian writers have thus engaged with and resisted the legal measures and state discourses that attempt to manage these communities and their literary critiques.

Given the historical/temporal parameters of this project, I focus on post-Independence Singaporean and Malaysian writing in English in particular, which, as I discuss further in
Chapter 1, produces bodies of work influenced by the distinct position of English in each nation. Shirley Lim argues that early Singaporean writers in English viewed artistic production as operating distinctly from the work of the state, but notes that this separation does not signify the complete “absence of social themes and interests” so much as the “absence of state or government-dictation in choice of themes and interests” (108, 113). Some of the most influential examples of writing in English, including Lim’s work, have offered powerful critiques of gender, race, state discourses, and the law, and have helped inform public consciousness about how these problematics are entwined.

Writing in English in Malaysia is not nearly as prolific, but in addition to works published within the nation, recent diasporic Malaysian writing in English offers critiques of race and social structures that can potentially defamiliarize some of the assumed terms of racial categorization within the nation. While this body of diasporic literature may provide limited insight into recent socio-political issues in Malaysia, Philip Holden proposes that it also affords critics in Malaysia and those with a “strong contextual knowledge about Malaysian society” the chance to “make a critical intervention into doxological postcolonial readings that are not historically or socially informed” (“Communities” 65). As diasporic writers, or those writing from transnational perspectives, renarrate the intersecting state narratives and legal discourses that shaped the nation to provide necessary context for their global audience, they offer new vantage points from which to rethink these thematics.

The importance of these renarrated histories also applies to many writers from Singapore writing in diaspora, including Shirley Lim, who I discuss further in Chapter 1. As the authors this project focuses revisit and rewrite certain national histories and events from a transnational perspective, they offer critiques of these nations that align with Gayatri Spivak’s theorization of
transnational literacy, which proposes that reading through a transnational lens (and through diverse aesthetic forms) can illuminate the voice of the other, cultivate new transnational affiliations, and undermine how only certain forms of difference are given attention based on their competitiveness on the international market (Aesthetie 152). Spivak suggests that transnational literacy can also help resist the production of a “comfortable ‘other’”—and essentialized and idealized postcolonial subject—in transnational postmodernity (62). Neither Singaporean nor Malaysian post-Independence writing in English is as directly entwined with activist politics and legal disputes as Asian Canadian literature. But the emergence of these fields alongside rapid social changes in these postcolonial nations means that they can provide vital insight into, and encourage transnationally-literate readings of, the state discourses and policies that shaped these regions.

The literary texts from these fields that I analyze throughout thus share a fractal approach to narrating the broader national and historical conditions that come to bear on the racial body. As they each move between different events that inscribe the racial, they suggest that these bodies do not experience these processes as isolated, but instead feel the full force of their entanglement with other past and present discourses that extend beyond national lines. I also draw from these narratives to consider the similarities and intersections of their racial schemas to consider the position of the racial nonhuman as a fundamental part of these nations’ identities.

In Chapter 1, I draw from Frantz Fanon’s analysis on the effects of language on the racial body, and use this framework to explore the role of postcolonial English as a mediator of racial distinction as a point of comparison. This chapter considers how English is entwined with the influence of dominant whiteness across global contexts. It proposes that this relationship produces English as a problematic that shapes the embodiment of particular racial subjects and
renders them as “affectable” bodies, which marks a key instance in the figuration of the racial nonhuman (Da Silva *Toward* xv). This chapter first examines how English’s formal position has reframed monocultural ideals. Drawing from Asian Canadian interventions on the politics of language, I follow Roy Miki’s argument that English mediated the “language of racialization” that “contour[ed]” Canada’s “social imaginary” (*Broken* 87). Formal policies on English use have become vital determinants of Canada’s racial field, and they have reiterated the position of the dominant white body associated with its use, and the relative social inferiority of certain racial communities figured as others to its use. I examine Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill*, which engages with how English’s hegemonic work is upheld by its affective influences on the racial body, and provides a classic example of an Asian Canadian text that contests English’s limitations. I then consider how in Singapore and Malaysia, English, despite its colonial associations, was deployed in these early post-Independence contexts as a seemingly “race-neutral” medium that would stand distinct from mother tongue languages, and further relationships with global capital. I argue that English’s shifting role signifies the tensions that underpinned the racialization of mother tongue languages and their association with racial stratification in both nations. I then discuss Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, which traces how racial subjectivities were shaped through relationships to English in post-Independence Malaysia, and normalized through state discourses during the 1980s in both Malaysia and Singapore. In Lim’s writing, English use is depicted as liberating due to its associations with race neutrality, and a medium bound to dominant whiteness that continues to influence these countries’ racial modalities. These texts both explore tactics used to subtly reinforce the association between English and dominant whiteness/Westernization and undermine certain individuals’ use of this language of global capital. These methods ground the destabilization of certain racial
subjectivities as they are forced to contend with these systems. My goal here is to evaluate English as exemplary of a (post)colonial problematic that configures racial embodiment whose terms help render certain bodies as racial nonhumans.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the body of the racial nonhuman as a site where exclusionary violence—social, civil, and spacial—is deployed to uphold an ideal human form. This chapter explores crucial historical events in Canada and Malaysia where the state deployed forms of violence to manage particular racial populations. It considers how the effects of these acts persist in these modern states through prevailing narratives that define these groups. In the Canadian context, this chapter examines forms of immigration and social management that defined the position of prevalent Asian Canadian communities. This chapter also examines events that occurred during comparable moments in the nation’s development, such as the Malayan Emergency’s connection to racial conflicts that produced certain persistent narratives about the nation’s racial grid. I then turn to literary analyses that are invested in (re)writing into visibility those figured as racial nonhumans through the ongoing purchase of these narratives. I read Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* as registering the unassimilability of racialized women who are not simply marginalized through (neo)colonial projects. As narratives of raciality that were developed during exceptional moments of conflict take root and shape these nations’ epistemological fields, these women are removed from the terms of the ideal human. By re-imagining the human/nonhuman distinction that underpins social organization in these nations, these texts assert a common ground for narrative attempts to recast this configuration of the racial nonhuman.

Chapter 3 expands on Pheng Cheah’s argument that globalization’s unevenness has led to “inhuman” regulatory processes, and examines how these nations’ regulatory processes define
raciality and the racial nonhuman under globalization (486). Smaro Kamboureli and Fred Wah contend that Canada has “redesign[ed] its national imaginary by rewriting its history of racial relations” to “gain access to global bargaining positions” (2). This chapter proposes that even as Canada recasts its multicultural identity on a global stage to retain and attract certain advantageous Asian and Asian Canadian populations, the global production of this identity still renders the racial (nonhuman) body as the bearer of difference. Singapore, however, retroactively established relationships to global capital through new racial narratives; by re-racializing its national identity through limiting multicultural scripts, Singapore eased its incorporation into the ethnicized and globalized monolith “Asia.” From these diverging processes, I read Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*—transnational, trans-historical narratives set both in Singapore and Canada—as exemplary of what Spivak refers to as globalization’s potential “re-constellation” of the power relations that shape human relationality and the bounds of the human through aesthetic interventions (*Other* 241). This chapter asserts that despite their diverging relationships to globalization, as they grapple with the “two-way permeability” of their borders, these nations similarly redefine which Asian bodies are productive, and which provide necessary labour but fail to further their transnational pursuits (Holden and Patke 215). It also proposes that Kwa’s work exemplifies a “new enunciation” that can recover the possibility of cross-ethnic/national affiliations and further interrupt racial governmentality in an increasingly globalized era (Goh “Conclusion” 14).

Each of these chapters engages with the development of these particular nodes that define the construction of these racial grids. By tracing these developments, and identifying the production of the racial nonhuman as a constitutive element of each context, this project aims to
establish a comparative approach toward race, one that analyzes the ways in which raciosity
defines the fundamental social structures of disparate nations.
Chapter I: English as Racial Embodiment in Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* and Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*

This chapter analyzes the effects of English across present day Canada, Malaysia, and Singapore in relationship to race. Anti-colonial critics have thoroughly established the colonizing work that English does, including Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who focuses on “language as subjugation” (17). His discussion traces the loss of a common language (specifically, his mother tongue of Gikuyu) and the systematic suppression and reformation of native languages during colonialism, which resulted in the colonized only being able to see and understand themselves “through the language of the coloniser” (18). Ngũgĩ argues that the colonized Kenyans’ subjectivities were filtered through those of the colonizers when the colonial child was “exposed to images of his world as mirrored in written languages of his coloniser,” and was made to “see the World and where he stands in it as defined or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition” (17). At the same time, writers like Chinua Achebe have considered the utilitarian productivity of English, which can connect postcolonial subjects and writers. Achebe also argues that English can also be reworked and recoded by writers so that it can begin to address the experiences of previously-colonized peoples across different national contexts (18).

As Achebe also identifies, the ongoing significance of English and its hegemony in settler colonial and postcolonial nations is unavoidable; it is a language of Western dominance and neo-imperialism that continues to alienate individuals from mother tongue languages, and define their subjectivities. However, individuals across these diverse contexts are still able to harness English for its transnational purchase, and recode its associations with Western hegemony. Given English’s conflicted position as both a language of (neo)colonialism and a vehicle of empowerment for racialized individuals, this chapter homes in on this vexed relationship.
between race and language, and establishes how English persists as a key mediator of racial embodiment.

**Dominant language and the affectable racial body**

This chapter first revisits another foundational anti-colonial reading of the colonizing effects of language. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores how dominant languages alienate colonized subjects from their own language(s) and cultures. \(^{28}\) Focused on the colonial imposition of French, Fanon argues that language exerts “extraordinary power” (21). Thus, “to speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture…the Antillean who wants to be white will succeed…by adopt[ing] the culture tool of language” and will therefore be able to “prove to himself that he is culturally adequate” (2). This is not to say that the colonized subject cannot resist assimilation through language, but that ceaseless pressures to “appropriate” the “white world” alienates the colonized from their identity (21).

Fanon’s analysis of language’s effects on the racial body is premised on the claim of ontological resistance. Fanon constructs his argument by first discussing how the black man is always produced “in relation to the white man… The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (90). He also describes how his lack of “ontological resistance” illuminates how acutely he experiences his vulnerability to the schemas that mark him as affectable. Fanon’s affectability is representative of how he is affected by an external utterance from a dominant body, but is unable to effect power and manage his racial identity.

I read this affectability in ways that are similar to da Silva’s discussion. For da Silva, the institutions of whiteness produce racial bodies as affectable bodies, which she describes as “The

\(^{28}\) Fanon’s critique is later echoed in Ngũgĩ’s.
condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others’ power” (Toward xv). Da Silva argues that the eighteenth-century philosophical formulation of humanity’s mind-body dualism also rewrote man as “subjected to outer determination, namely, as an affectable thing” (xxxviii). From this, the “others of Europe”—non-white racial subjects—were subjected to the modern analytics of raciality through “engulfment”: the “political-symbolic strategy that apprehends the human body and global regions as signifiers of how universal reason institutes different kinds of self-consciousness” (32). Raciality produces these bodies as in possession of an affectable consciousness that is outer-determined. Their “visible physical traits” and their “actions that depar[t] from universality” signify the quality of their inferior minds, which affirms their vulnerability—and their affectability—to the “projects of knowledge” that delimit the racial (158).29 These affectable bodies are produced not only through physical violence, but also symbolically through the “productive violent act of naming” that prevents their exteriority from signifying a self-determined consciousness (29, 209). Put simply, the figuration of these racial bodies as affectable is precisely what subjects their being to the self-determined power, juridical reasoning, and the moral dictums of the Western subject, and most crucially, it inscribes them as bodies that cannot harness power for themselves.30 Yet the fact that the transparent “I,” the ideal “ontological figure” of post-Enlightenment European

29 Similar to Foucault, da Silva describes the ontoepistemological emergence of these bodies between two “moments of violence” (29). The ontological pole of violence marks how these racial bodies are disposed to a “violent act of naming” through analytics of raciality, which prevents their exteriority from signifying a self-determined consciousness. Da Silva describes the other pole of violence as “murder, total annihilation” of the “others of Europe that the scientific cataloguing of minds institutes” (29).

30 As noted in the Introduction, this affectable body stands in contrast to the ideal post-Enlightenment white/European subject whose signifies rationality, self-determination, and transparency (“No-bodies” 224).
thought is also an “effect of racality” is occluded by the fact that dominant whiteness signifies their possession of a superior, self-determined, and stable consciousness (xvi, 168-9).

This analysis of affectability and the lack of ontological resistance of the racial subject aligns with what Fanon describes as his “corporeal curse,” where the black man’s corporeality is always defined by a schema produced by the white man (91). Much like da Silva’s description of affectability, Fanon explains that the process of epidermalization—the inscription of race on the skin—subjects his body to a particular external schema, a “definitive structuring of the self and of the world… [that] creates a real dialectic between my body and the world” (91). While da Silva’s analysis primarily traces the historical and critical grounding for affectability across colonial contexts, Fanon’s work draws out the experiences and perspectives of those racial bodies that are subjected to these schemas. He describes how his “historico-racial schema” is not based on his lived experience, or his “remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic or visual nature” (91). Rather, it is dictated by “the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91). Crucially, this schema characterizes how the “white world” defines his corporeality as a “solely negating” experience, since his racial affectability means that he is always defined by his inferiority, and by all that he is not.31 This schema is in conflict with his “corporeal schema,” which represents his personal (internal) understanding of his embodiment; in other words, this schema is suggestive of his interpretation—one that has shaped his identity—of how his body relates to the world. In effect, Fanon locates a dialectic between his internal corporeal schema, and the external historico-racial schema that defines the subjectivity of the colonized individual, and plays a crucial role in alienating the colonized from their sense of self.

31 Rey Chow notes that “The black man is not named as nothing. Rather, he is given a place in the community of relations as performed by the name; he is hailed as some thing—dirt, negro, nigger” (6).
As Fanon pushes this analysis further by providing examples of how these effects are reinscribed through everyday interactions, he begins to draw out the role of language in reiterating these racial schemas. One of the most oft-cited and significant examples of these effects is a moment when Fanon describes the experience of hearing individuals call out “’Dirty nigger!’ or simply ’Look! A Negro!’” (89). Fanon describes a particular moment of interpellation when a young white boy on a train sees Fanon and exclaims “Look, a Negro!” (91). Fanon describes how as soon as he is defined as “a Negro,” his “corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (91). This incident marks a moment where his corporeal schema, and his perception of his embodiment, is transfigured through his affective response to the boy’s utterance, and is supplanted by the dominance of this racial epidermal schema—one that is highly impersonal, and bound to a legacy of colonial violence and racial otherness. In other words, this racial epidermal schema appears to be a particular formulation of the historico-racial schema that draws together these dominant racial histories with the experience of being visibly marked as an inferior racial other.32 Fanon’s experience does not suggest that he was not already aware that he was figured in a racial schema, or that his phenotype did not always already signify his racial otherness.33 Rather, the moment of interpellation disrupts any balance—however tenuous—between Fanon’s understanding of his embodiment as a racial subject, and how he experiences his embodiment as he engages with others. This scene therefore

---

32 Fanon also details some of the terms of this schema, as he describes how the boy’s utterance forces him to experience “my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y a bon Banania” (26).

33 As Arun Saldanha proposes, the boy’s exclamation “brings out…a latency Fanon knew was there,” but that after this exclamation, Fanon’s racial distinction “demands active management. Now his phenotype is alive, chaining him to the histories and geographies of race and colonialism” (12).
exemplifies a shift from the racial subject’s self-perceived ability to manage their sense of self as the body is replanted firmly within the prevailing hierarchy of race difference.

Importantly, the boy’s exclamation is only able to profoundly affect Fanon’s corporeality because the latter’s body is already figured through the analytics of race that produce him as vulnerable to dominant inscriptions of race—and as an affectable racial body. These instances of a racial subject’s affectability—and the destabilization of their embodiment by a dominant body’s comments—are crucial to this chapter’s theorization of how the racial nonhuman is figured through a dominant colonial language. These instances mark how certain individuals are forced to actively experience and acutely feel the power of the racial schemas that produce them as opposed to the ideal human form and consciousness. To be rendered a racial nonhuman in this sense is to be at risk of having one’s schema rewritten, of signifying a body that can be made subject to these forms of ontological and corporeal violence with impunity. In her reading of Fanon’s scene, Sylvia Wynter argues that both individuals—Fanon and the white boy—are governed by a certain knowledge of what it means to be a human in the world—in the basic biological sense but also as a social being. But Fanon’s knowledge of his self and his ability to “realize himself as human” is always undermined by these moments where he is forced to know his body through the “historico-racial schema” that binds him to a history of racial inferiority (40).

The fact that this utterance is spoken in the colonizer’s language is vital to this process. Fanon specifically considers how the colonizing language—in this case, French—is used to

---

34 Rey Chow similarly identifies how the terms of Fanon’s hailing have been already articulated and embedded in prevailing racial schemas, and that this scene is therefore one of “compulsory ‘self’-recognition [that] operates at a level that goes considerably beyond logical questions about subjective consistency” (6). The use of “Negro” in this moment, as well as the gesturing at Fanon as if he were an object to be named, is already imbued with meaning.
dehumanize racial others and to circumscribe the position of the colonized. Rey Chow explains that in Fanon's work “racialization demands to be grasped first and foremost as an experience of language, not least because lingual relations are themselves caught up in the aggressive procedures of setting apart that racialized naming and interpellation ineluctably intensify” (7).

Whether they speak fluently in order to alienate the colonized, or in “pidgin” to dehumanize them, the colonizers’ use of dominant languages is critical to their ability to disrupt the self-determination of the colonized individuals by affirming that only the colonizers are in full possession of the language that allows them to “assum[e] a culture and bea[r] the weight of a civilization” (Fanon 14). In Fanon’s analysis, as in Ngũgĩ’s discussion, dominant languages provide a constant point of reference that shapes the colonized subject’s understanding of themselves. Assimilating dominant language(s) not only allows the colonized access to certain socio-cultural facilities that are available to white subjects; use of these languages also opens up the possibility of the colonized being recognized as a “human being” in the eyes of the colonizer (18). However, the colonized can never fully possess the full “power” of dominant colonial languages: if they speak too well in the dominant tongue they are viewed with suspicion, but if they speak improperly, their inferiority is again affirmed (21, 2).

The moment where Fanon is interpellated by the boy’s exclamation harkens back to these descriptions of linguistic power. It is not simply the term “Negro” that troubles Fanon’s ability to “elaborate[e] his body schema” and figures his body in “uncertainty” (90). Fanon—a black man from Martinique writing in France (and in French)—foregrounds how French in particular functions a tool of raciality under colonialism. The scene between the boy and Fanon coalesces in the racializing work of language: it is an instance where French is wielded by a dominant
white body—even though it is a child’s—and produces Fanon as an inferior black subject, while reproducing himself as white.

While Fanon discusses the influences of French in the Antilles in particular, in his discussion of the “universal situation” of the black man, he extends his reading to consider the experience of black bodies across locales like French, Britain, and the United States (150-151). Later criticism has expanded on this brief turn toward the comparative in Fanon’s work that provides a broader framework for reading the relationship between a dominant language and the racial subject’s sense of self. For instance, Wynter notes that Fanon’s analysis is productive when examining the mastery of English forms in the United States or the Anglophone Caribbean, and Chow directs Fanon’s critique toward a transnational and comparative reading of postcolonial languages, including English. In other words, despite the particularities of Fanon’s analysis, his work has had tremendous influence on analyses of the corporeal effects of dominant languages across numerous contexts. His reading suggests that the conditions that uphold the hierarchies of language and race persist in postcolonial contexts and are similarly found in English’s modern work on raciality.35 This critical transition motivates this chapter’s exploration of language and racial embodiment, as I redirect Fanon’s focus on the colonizing effects of French toward an analysis of postcolonial English in Singapore and Malaysia, and English’s hegemonic work in Canada.

Writing about the globalization of English, Sneja Gunew elaborates on some of the consequences of its influence. In her reading of corporeality and English acquisition, Gunew notes that “the body is far from being a blank slate comprising neutral or inert matter on which

35 In the Foreword to the 2008 English edition of Black Skin, White Masks, Ziauddin Sardar notes that Fanon’s reading of language mastery today aligns with the effects of “any western language, nowadays most particularly English” (xv).
events and habits are inscribed”; learning to speak English “structure[s], or at least choreograph[s], bodies in certain ways,” such as by encouraging subjects to tone down or otherwise discipline their corporeality in order to conform to the ostensible “civility” and the restrictions of “proper” English (Haunted 731, 736). English’s signification as the language of global dominance means that it does not merely determine access to social institutions: it constitutes identity, in part by allowing those who have access to the dominant language to identify with the position of the unmarked universal body, even if they cannot fully inhabit this position.

Although English functions differently across global locations, my analysis considers how English’s work as a mediator of racial embodiment remains linked to the specter of dominant whiteness that has configured raciality in a global context. In her comparative critique of the United States and Brazil, da Silva proposes that, despite their distinct configurations, whiteness defines the racial grids of both these locales and in similar ways. Da Silva argues that in the modern production of raciality in the United States, prevailing racial discourses often articulate non-white racial others (the "others of Europe"), as “always already affectable thing[s]” to instantiate their absence from the nation’s development (Toward 234). This production of raciality helps sustain the racial individual’s exclusion from the place of the liberal “juridical-moral” subject in contrast to the ideal white subject (218). In Brazil, however, despite the

36 Gunew then draws from Foucault to analyze how English “writes on the body as a technology of the self, which…”permit[s] individuals to effect their own means or with the help of their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves …”’ (731,734).
37 Joan Scott, though focused on a feminist theoretical frame, similarly describes that individual subjectivities come into being only as they are narrated as experiences through language. Through these narrations, individuals can be said to become through language (773).
38 Da Silva does not explore the effects of English in particular, but notes that Fanon’s reading of race and language suggests the modern effects of the “analytics of raciality” that produce the racial as irreducibly different from whiteness (19).
presence of Indian and African racial others, the ideological whitening of Brazilians through the influences of colonial miscegenation results in a type of onto-epistemological obliteration of these groups from Brazilian embodiment and consciousness (238). In other words, while the presence of the “others of Europe” was acknowledged in Brazil, this acknowledgement occurred alongside discourses of miscegenation, which indicated that (European) contact with these others would “lead to their disappearance” through the production of the mestiço population that was “suited to the task of building a ‘tropical (modern) civilization’” (225, 229, 233). Both of these methods of ideological and social whitening helped signify a “consciousness endowed with the productivity that resulted in the building of modern social spaces in Europe and in the United States” and enabled the view that the Brazilian subject would eventually “fulfill a European desire” (234, 238). Despite these distinct social configurations, then, both contexts produce racial subjects whose “spirits” are European, even though Brazil in particular lacks the same significant population of dominant white bodies that signify European hegemony elsewhere (23).

I think da Silva identifies here a circulating ideal of the post-Enlightenment (white, European) human subject, whose “spirit” and self-determined superior consciousness has left an indelible mark on how dominant subjects are figured across postcolonial locales. English is one of the problematics that mediates individuals’ relationship to this ideal form; it bears these signifiers of hegemonic whiteness certainly in contexts like Canada with its dominant white population, but also in nations like Malaysia and Singapore that deploy their own sets of racialized values as they use English strategically to emphasize certain characteristics associated with the prevailing universal (white) subject to help them remain competitive across global contexts. However, the need to use English also carries with it issues of English mastery and “proper” English, which reiterates the position of English under colonial hierarchies. As a result,
while English provides a linguistic alternative to, for instance, prescribed mother tongue languages in Singapore or national language forms in Malaysia, its use still brings with it the spirit of whiteness, even though these nations do not contain a substantive white population. As a result, I propose that across these different contexts, English’s signification similarly plays a crucial role in the psychic colonization of those outside the rubric of the ideal (white) human, as does its ability to write and disrupt the racial body through everyday acts.

My goal in the remainder of this chapter is draw from legislation and literature to consider how they navigate the contentious relationship between racialization and English. I specifically argue that in Canada, and Malaysia and Singapore, multiculturalism depends on certain mediators of difference to demarcate the place of distinct racial groups, and English’s mandated use is one such method of reinforcing racial schemas. I first consider how key forms of language legislation exemplify attempts by these states to belie English’s role in mediating raciosity and associating its authority with particular racial groups. An examination of these judicial and political approaches to language policy reveal, alongside the tensions in English’s formalized position, attempts to reconcile conflicting ideologies surrounding language and national culture. Their authority is inevitably invoked in state discourses as evidence that as conflicts of language and race have been solved, which also reasserts their logic. I evaluate these legal and state narratives as crucial sites where knowledge about English and its relationship to bolstering the position of certain racial groups is formed. As these legal and state-sanctioned processes reinforce the ideological significance of certain language forms, they play a significant role in the alienation and affectability of those racial bodies othered by their work.

I then turn to literature that examines this fusing of ideological and juridical discourses that cohere English’s role in scripting raciosity in these nations. These literary works grapple
with these inconsistencies and ruptures within these discourses that help justify or normalize the productivity of English. In the Canadian context, I examine Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill*, which illuminates how racial subjectivities were defined through English even prior to formal multiculturalism, and how English’s limitations reveal the signifiers of distinction that persistently trouble multiculturalism. I then read Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, which traces how racial subjectivities were shaped through relationships to English in post-independence Malaysia, and normalized through state discourses during the 1980s. Wah’s and Lim’s works foreground how multiculturalism as a nation-building tool inscribed raciality through English, and rendered certain affectable bodies as unrecognizable due to English’s limitations.

These texts expose how racial subjects struggle with how the mandated role of English affirms their affectability and relative inferiority. Although they only touch on the legal discourses and policies that help legitimize the dominance of English, they engage with the authority of these state-sanctioned processes. Both narratives convey English’s unique positioning as both the language of dominance that helped delimit the terms of the racial nonhuman, and as a problematic whose use by non-dominant bodies can destabilize English’s hegemonic work. Wah and Lim are especially productive here, as they not only write in English about English’s dominance, but also self-reflexively critique English *in* English. They thus help write the racial nonhuman’s figuration into visibility, a necessary task because engaging with this position—one most readily subject to violence or erasure—reveals the limits of racial discourses that fail to account for these figures.
English and the contentious role of race in Canada’s multicultural legislation

Critics have argued that multiculturalism in Canada is underwritten by its bilingual/bicultural identity, which ensures that whiteness/Europeanness remains the unmarked universal at the core of Canadian identity. In *The Dark Side of the Nation*, Himani Bannerji describes that whiteness constitutes the core of Canada’s identity, and serves as the “point of departure” for its multicultural identity that helps “stabiliz[e]” its violent settler colonial history (110, 105).

Hegemonic whiteness is encoded in Canada’s social schema through a national narrative premised on “European/English” settler colonialism, which functions as a “the ideology of a nation-state” (108). “Whiteness/Europeanness” also serves as a “key bonding element,” and so other European bodies, despite their distance from idealized Anglo-Englishness, can “still form a part of their community of ‘whiteness’ as distinct from nonwhite ‘others’” (108).

This European (white) core is further encoded through language—specifically, the linguistic terms of Anglophone and Francophone, and of English and French—though, as Bannerji crucially details, “Englishness” and “English Canada” have a far greater territorial and ideological reach (108). But Bannerji also argues that the identity of prevailing whiteness “does not reside in language” alone, since English is shared by the non-whites of these same language groups; rather, English is only one signifier of Canada’s core identity, and functions alongside the scripting and coding of whiteness through the nation’s English/European heritage (42). Yet

---

39 For instance, Bannerji notes that unlike their historical position as bodies that signified other than ideal whiteness, today, Italians might signify non-Englishness, but “‘Italian’ can still form a part of the community of ‘whiteness’ as distinct from non-white ‘others’” (113). Bannerji also proposes that in modern Canada “the ethnicities of the English, the Scottish, the Irish, etc. are not visible or highlighted, but rather displaced by a general Englishness, which means less a particular culture than…a standardized official language signifying the right to rule” (113).
English still serves as one of the significant “hegemonic front[s]” of this core identity that is entwined with everyday life (108).

English’s legislated position through Canada’s bicultural/bilingual policies helps to reinforce this connection to Canada’s foundational (white) culture. Documents like the Multiculturalism Act, the 1971 White Paper on multiculturalism, and The Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism all play a role in discursively constituting and regulating the dominant epistemological field on language’s regulation of Canada’s ethno-racial grid. They expose how tensions that circulate in state discourses are not confined to either the abstract or juridical, but to efforts aimed at managing the ideological effects of language. Put differently, the act of having to articulate and justify the significance of English and French through legislation conveys attempts to both deracinate language and, contradictorily, reaffirm the relationship between English (and French) to Canada’s “founding” (white) cultures.

Smaro Kamboureli argues that while the Multiculturalism Act/Loi sur le multiculturalisme canadien differentiates between French and English Canada, it also establishes a mutually-defined relationship between the two so that neither one takes linguistic or cultural priority over the other. It thus “seeks to enshrine national stability by legislating on ethnicity” as well as its crucial counterpart, language. Most crucial to my analysis is Kamboureli’s proposal that the Act, printed as two “parallel” texts in both French and English, also points toward a “third original” text: Canadian society, and that “As a hermeneutic act…the Act/Loi is itself a translation of what it interprets, that is ‘the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society’” (96 emphasis mine). Through its emphasis on Canada’s bicultural/bilingual national identity, the Act foregrounds the cultural primacy of English and French Canada as it also interprets and inscribes all other communities as Other to these two founding cultures. The Act therefore
functions as more than an idealized ideological touchstone that describes Canada’s commitment to diversity; it is an interpretive piece of legislation that uses language to reiterate the distinction between Canada’s universal, unmarked (white) cultural core and its racialized others.

One of the significant effects of this assertion of Canada’s bilingual/bicultural identity through the authority of the law is that it also reinforces why only French and English deserve the status of founding languages, while explaining the inadequacies of potential competitors. One of the most significant omissions is the diversity of Indigenous languages. During the Royal Commission of Enquiry into Bilingualism, the diversity of Indigenous languages was cited as one reason why people of Indigenous ancestry could not be considered as equivalent to those of French or English descent (or even Ukrainian-Canadians), since “no one language” served as a “symbol of [their] distinctive identity at the national level” (Vallee 1966, 68). But, as Eve Haque notes, since The Act suggested that Indigenous claims to founding group status were “undercut through the problematic strategy of conflating ethnic group with language groups,” the tactic of “representing ‘Indians and Eskimos’” as being too “fragmented” as language groups to legitimately stake claims to founding race status was “reprised from the preliminary report” (103). 40 Haque also describes how this reading of language policy “allows us to understand how the federal government understood the problem of national unity at a specific moment in Canadian history and, subsequently… sought to restrict the policy solution to the official recognition of only two “founding races” and hence only two official languages,” which

---

40 Instead, the final report omits any legitimate evaluation of the claims that Indigenous groups might have as founding cultures, and, subsequently, any possibility of reframing Canada’s emphasis on bilingualism. Haque notes that the refusal to acknowledge Indigenous language(s) resulted in “consequences for the allocation of resources—both symbolic and material—and ultimately language maintenance, shift and loss for [I]ndigenous communities” (105).
exemplifies how language policies may be “formulated to pursue nonlanguage related goals/effects.” (106).

The Act is further affirmed by a complementary document: the 1971 White Paper on multiculturalism. This document followed from increased Québécois nationalism after the Quiet Revolution, as well as pressures for change from Indigenous groups over state mistreatment and treaty rights, and the increasing dissatisfaction from racial minorities due to widespread racism. The White Paper states that while there are “two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other” (House of Commons, 1971, 9545). By disavowing language’s substantial role in coding ethno-cultural difference, the White Paper suggests that Canada’s bilingual mandate is somehow racially neutral, as it does not have any bearing on the position of different groups outside the dominant two (98). In doing so, the White Paper, which helps structure the nation’s multicultural identity, obscures the formal role that language plays in mediating raciosity. It ignores the fact that those ethnic groups whose cultural backgrounds include the two official languages naturally have a distinct socio-cultural advantage over the others. By articulating language and ethnicity as distinct, and declaring the equality of all ethnic groups, the White Paper therefore precludes the possibility that ethno-racial dominance may follow from linguistic dominance. At the same time, it overlooks how the ideal of multicultural equality emphasized by the White Paper requires that all individuals rely on Canada’s two official languages, even as racialized communities are not recognized as having mastery over these languages in the same way as their white counterparts.

The Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1969) provides the most direct example of how Canadian legislation strives to articulate language and culture as ideologically discrete units, but cannot escape how language contours the inscription
of race difference in the social imaginary. Written after the Quiet Revolution and amidst intensified Quebec nationalism, the Report aimed to “inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada” (174). Much like the White Paper, the Report takes a convoluted and often contradictory approach to the relationship between race and language. As it attempts to address issues of linguistic (in)equality for Francophones, it again disavows the possibility that English and French are racialized languages and associated with hegemonic whiteness. It asserts that nations with bilingual cultural identities are not created to “preserve” ethnic groups, since “People of all sorts of ethnic origins speak English and French as mother tongues; there is no such thing as an English or a French ‘race’” (9). The Report suggests that “proof” of this lack of an English or French race is that while these two groups have different cultures, they come from similar “racial stocks” (9) The Report therefore strategically acknowledges racial difference and “stocks” in order to deny the association of race and language and how language affirms whiteness as dominant. It only mentions race to “prove” that since two groups can be from the same race, but have a different culture and language, race does not play a significant role in determining who has claims or access to English and French in particular.

Crucially, the other sections of The Report also complicate this apparent attempt to resolve language’s role in scripting visible registers of ethno-racial difference. For instance, the Report’s Introduction acknowledges that “any community which is governed through the medium of a language other than its own has usually felt itself to some extent disenfranchised;” the Introduction also states that “like skin colour, language is an easily identifiable badge” that
can become a “rallying cry” for “contests which are basically not those of language or race” (italics mine xxix).41 The acknowledgement that language might also signify other conflicts between groups (and that it is akin to race difference) is also an acknowledgement of its symbolic work: though language distinction is often not as charged or apparent as visible racial difference, language—and language policy—remains a vital determinant of Canada’s racial field.

By essentially refusing to admit the relationship between race and Canada’s bilingual field, documents like the Report also overlook the substantive difference between European migrants who speak one of Canada’s dominant languages—particularly English—and those non-white immigrants who also speak these languages, but will never signify linguistic dominance in the same way. To return to Bannerji’s points, the denial of race in documents like The Report does not preclude the incorporation of certain forms of whiteness/white bodies under its Canada’s bilingual/bicultural rubric. Rather, the role that The Report—and related policies—play in securing and providing the juridical justification for English’s primacy also provides a formalized method of discussing Canada’s core culture without directly invoking its associations with dominant whiteness.

“Special Rights” and Language Policy in Malaysia
In postcolonial Malaysia, the legal scripting of English reiterated its associations with colonial whiteness, but simultaneously provided a formal “race-neutral” method of managing the nation’s political and educational fields. After Independence, English retained significance as the medium of instruction. However, its position was eventually de-emphasized in favour of Malay to help

41 The report fails to specify what these conflicts are; rather than deal directly with the issue of race, the report broadly describes these conflicts as “anything that counters the community of interests among a group of people” (xxix)
assert Malay dominance. Unlike English’s purported racial-neutrality in post-Independence Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu was more evidently marked as a key component of Malay raciality.

Article 160 of the Constitution, which affirms the Malays’ special rights and Indigenous Bumiputera status defines a Malay as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom” and is domiciled in Malaysia (Art. 160 Sec. 2). While Malay was politically and constitutionally inscribed as the national language, English was made compulsory in all primary and secondary schools leading up to Independence, and was used alongside Malay for a ten-year transition period after 1965. Given English’s significance as the language of colonial administration, after Independence, it was emphasized as a language of instruction in order to train those who would oversee the new postcolonial nation.

As such, it was not the Malay majority in general that benefited from English’s persisting position as a favoured language, but “non-Malays—largely the Chinese and the Indians who had professional mobility in the urban areas as well as a lesser number of elite Malays, who also attended English-medium schools” (Language 46). As a result, while English may have been viewed as less significant compared to the mother tongues of Malaysia’s main racial groups, this language of foreign hegemony retained social significance in postcolonial Malaysia as a language of domestic administration.

---

42 Though I lack the space here to discuss the numerous forms of ethno-linguistic management faced by indigenous populations/non-Malay Bumiputera, I note that Malaysia has effectively foreclosed the potential that Orang Asli languages will be considered founding languages alongside Malay. Maya Khemlani David and James McLellan discuss the ways in which many indigenous languages are homogenized and contained as they are classified as Malay dialects “for constitutional and census purposes” (np). Yet for many Orang Asli communities considered “second-class” Bumiputera, their lack of a mastery of standard Malay and Malay education certainly compounds their distinction from the majority (np).

43 Saran Kaur Gill elaborates that since English had “already become the language of economic opportunity and social mobility,” English speakers were well-positioned to adopt roles in economic sectors or as directors of national policy. English schools were located in urban areas and were mainly attended by non-Malays, while rural Malays largely studied in Malay (246).
Malay nationalists argued that the institutionalization of Bahasa Melayu as the national language would provide them with the “educational and administrative capital that would lead to its development as a language of higher status” (81). By officializing a language closely linked to Malay racial identity, Malays would ideally gain linguistic capital over the other racial groups of Malaysia, and would reap the same social mobility enjoyed by fluent English speakers from other racial groups. The National Education Policy—as outlined in the Education Act in 1961—reiterated that Bahasa Melayu would replace English as the medium of instruction. But this gradual rescripting of the linguistic field did not result in the anticipated social stability. Instead, it underscored pre-existing racial conflicts between the Malay elite class—who acutely felt excluded in the nation’s economic and political spheres—and the Chinese opposition, whose access to English education played a factor in their economic and political influence.

The shift in language policy had tangible effects on inter-racial relationships and played a crucial role in the May 13th riots of 1969—a key moment of sectarian violence between the Chinese and Malays. The main opposition parties, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a party with a large Chinese base, and the Parti Gerakan both proposed a multilingual national identity that would elevate English, Mandarin, and Tamil to official language status. The United Malays National Organization (UNMO) however, felt that the National Language Act (1967) had not adequately ensured Malay’s primacy as the national language (Hwang 77). After the DAP and Parti Gerakan successfully managed to eradicate the Alliance’s majority in Parliament during the election of 1969, victory parades devolved into violence, in part due to the Alliance’s belief that
the other parties had “betraye[d] the Alliance formula by voting for an opposition that had
revived fundamental questions of language and Malay special rights” (77-78).44

Following the riots of 1969, Malay was rapidly implemented as the medium of instruction
and policy, and the government aimed to phase out English as the medium of instruction. But by
the mid 1970s, English’s usefulness as the language of international commerce and education
again incited a shift in the linguistic field.45 This recognition of English as the language of global
economic development may not have erased its association with racial conflicts over language
use, but did solidify its position as a necessary part of the modern nation, and enable more
widespread English education. In recent years, Malay elites have made use of English’s
institutionalization to take advantage of its relationship to capital. As Kachru and Nelson
describe, not only is English still the “principal code for communication among Malaysia’s
multi-ethnic elites,” but Malay elites are able to stake claims to the language in “covert” ways by
“utilizing the linguistic device of replacing ‘English words with denotatively equivalent terms
from Malay” (190). In doing so, they further the “natural cross-fertilization between Bahasa
Malaysia, English and various other ethnic languages” which also altered English’s development
since it could “not help but be influenced by the various other languages and sociolinguistically
develop into a number of different varieties” (“Standards” 217).46 But despite these

44 Parties like the DAP desired a multilingual nation, and understood that the Malays’ majority position
would be further bolstered by the recognition of their cultural dominance that would follow from the
national language provision.
45 The Third Malaysian Plan (1976-1980) recognized English’s significant role as a language of global
capital, and emphasized the need for Malaysians to be fluent in this international language if the nation
was going to develop economically (233). English’s pre-existing significance was again underscored by
these new discourses, and English was again formally entrenched as the language of business and
industry.

46 Further, English’s ability to provide a method for those outside the dominant Malay community to
make use of a language of global power that potentially subverts Malay’s legislative significance, as well
as its association with Malay authority is evinced by the popularity of “Manglish,” which, despite its
developments, English still retains its tenuous relationship with Malay. For instance, graduates from private universities in Malaysia have become more sought after by private-sector companies due to their English competency, which has resulted in those from public universities—particularly Malays—being less employable. Though English may not “belong” to any of the three predominant racial groups, or carry the same associations with sectarian violence as Malay, its position as a necessary language of (post)colonial administration, alongside its associations with global capital, means that its persistent hegemonic significance as a symptom of postcolonial power relations continues to influence Malaysia’s racial grid.

Mother tongues vs. “race neutral” English in Singapore

In Singapore, English is also coded as a language of global capital, and also stands distinct from official mother-tongue languages of Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil as an ostensibly race-neutral language. But in addition to this, it is the nation’s lingua franca. Chua Beng Huat argues that “Within Singapore’s multiracialism/multiculturalism, English language has become an important element in supporting the relative autonomy of the state vis-à-vis the three major racial groups of Singaporeans” and that “as an Asian-race-neutral language [English] provides the government associations with Malay vocabulary, has been influenced by the terms and structures of Malaysia’s other ethnic languages.

47 During the colonial era, Malay was an “inter-ethnic lingua franca” until English replaced its role (Leimgruber 234). Due to its historical significance, and its association with indigenous Malay populations, Malay was entrenched in The Republic of Singapore Independence Act (1965) as Singapore’s national language (distinct from the four official languages), and is still the national language today. However, this is largely a ceremonial designation; the National Anthem is sung and military commands are issued in Malay, but Malay does not have any special status beyond these instances (Kuo 1068). Much like the Malay’s “special position” as the indigenous population of Singapore, the Malay language is deemphasized in favour of English and, to an extent, the prescribed mother tongue of Singapore’s majority.
with an ideological assistance to institute ‘meritocracy’, and to continue to insist in spite of increasing evidence of hardening of economic and social class divisions, as the basis of the educational and economic competition” (15). Lisa Lim, Anne Pakir, and Lionel Wee have shown how Singapore, like Malaysia, inherited a system of government that relied on English, as well as “a population already given to viewing the language as an important resource for socio-economic mobility” (3). In a move characteristic of Singapore’s emphasis on pragmatism, English was retained as the national language, with the hope that it would help “keep Singaporean society open to global and regional forces, whilst retaining a sense of stability and connection to a historic past, however imagined” (3). In this sense, English is inscribed as a language that “that essentially marks a non-Asian ‘other’, and therefore cannot be bestowed the status of official mother tongue”; but since it is also the language that “must serve the entire country,” it is ideologically detached from its charged history as a colonial language by the state so that it can function as Singapore’s lingua franca and help negotiate global communication (6).

In 1966, Lee Kuan Yew decried the “sterilising effects of a completely English-type education [that] deprive[d] the child of that spiritual line of his past” (Chinese Chamber of Commerce 29). The mandatory bilingual policy—originally introduced in 1960, and later revised to include both primary and secondary instructional levels—was refined with the hopes that learning mother tongue languages would help ground individual racial identity and provide a cultural ballast against English’s “sterilising” effects (29). As Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng et al. 48

48 English in early post-Independence Singapore was initially viewed by the ruling elite as a threat to their dominance and Singapore’s developing national identity as a sovereign nation. Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP subsequently proposed a bilingual English and Mandarin policy that would help limit linguistic hybridization and would still allow English to be made available as the non-sectarian language of socio-economic mobility (Bokhorst-Heng et al. 135). According to the PAP, this form of linguistic discipline would provide the “common ground” that would allow everyone to compete in a “neutral medium,” which also reflects the desire to limit a proliferation of racial categories.
describe, comments like Lee’s distil dominant state sentiments on language use, and “captur[e] the essence of language constructedness in Singapore” (135). Given that Singapore’s mother tongue languages are, as expected, dictated by the state on the basis of the racial identity and the corresponding ethnocultural heritage, the state’s emphasis on their use helped reify the three main racial groups. These comments comprise a synopsis of how the state deliberately positioned seemingly race-neutral and “sterile” English against mother tongue languages as a “convenient common ground” that allowed everyone to compete in a “neutral medium,” which obscures how Singapore’s racial hierarchy figures into individual success (135).

But these sentiments also obscure how the mother tongues were equally prescriptive. In 1965, virtually no ethnic Chinese in Singapore primarily spoke Mandarin at home, and only 60% of Indians used Tamil as their home language. But as Quentin Dixon describes, by 1996, under the bilingual education policy, “All students stud[ied] their subject matter curriculum through the medium of English,” but were—and still are—also required to “reach a ‘second language’ level of proficiency in their official mother tongue – Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays and Tamil for Dravidian-speaking Indians” (Dixon 120).49 Chua Beng Huat elaborates that since the implementation of the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other) scheme, where every citizen in Singapore is categorized as belonging to one of the four races (along with the “race-language” and “race-religion” associated with each category, unless individuals stipulate otherwise) in the case of the Chinese community, language was used to “reassemble” its members—those Chinese groups “hewed from different provinces” like the Hokkiens, Cantonese, Teochews, and

49 “Second language” level of proficiency is defined as the ability to perform at a level “one year less” than the individual’s first language by the time they are taking “pre-University” courses (Purushottam 175).
Hakkas—by adopting Mandarin as the only official language associated with Chineseness (5, 3).  

Further, Mandarin was taught as the mother-tongue language in school for the Chinese population, which also helped homogenize the population by suppressing dialect groups, despite the use of dialects as the primary “home language” for many Chinese. In 1975, Lee Kuan Yew commented on the significance of Mandarin to Chinese identity in a speech on the bilingual policy: “We understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from…With the language goes the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact, in spite of exposure to all the current madnesses around the world” (qtd. in Bokhorst-Heng 135).  

In effect, Mandarin use is, in many ways, equally prescriptive and culturally “sterilizing” as English, as its mandated use functions to cohere Singapore’s dominant racial group, but at the cost of denuding the complex ethno-racial backgrounds of its members. Ideally, the two languages would work together to make the state economically competitive on a global scale, but would also help organize the racial groups at home, since Mandarin would unite the Chinese population, while English would unite “Singaporeans” more generally, without threatening the four inscribed racial groups.  

By 1984, the state’s emphasis on Mandarin not only reflected the desire to suppress dialects and unify the Chinese population through language, but also attempts to counter the fact that the

---

50 Dixon also describes that in the early years after the bilingualism policy, the majority of Chinese and many Indians were not educated in their home language, but their official mother tongue (627). Chinese “dialects” spoken at home were not considered helpful for “gaining proficiency in either English or Mandarin Chinese,” and were instead “targeted for elimination” (627-8).

51 This emphasis on Mandarin also coincided with the turn toward Asian Values discourses: the belief that Asian societies are “attach greater value to authority, family, economic growth and social harmony rather than to individual rights or abstract notions of democracy (Holden et al. 93, Wee 9). I discuss these values further in Chapter 3.
push for English as the common tongue had been almost too effective, to the point that it was
frequently surpassing the use of the prescribed mother tongues at home. Lionel Wee describes
the state-supported belief in Singapore that “mother tongues are needed to counter the
(undesirable) Western values that supposedly come along with learning English” (30). Lee Kuan
Yew stated that “One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will
not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue…Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our
mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect groups. It reminds us that we are part of an
ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5000 years” (Lee qtd. in Bokhorst-Heng
176).

Given this tension between mother tongue languages, and English’s position as the
legislated lingua franca and the language of cross-ethnic communication, English, as in the
Malaysian context, is subject to revisions, ruptures, and alterations. A particularly key instance
of this revision is Singlish (also called Colloquial Singapore English). Singlish, like “Manglish,”
is an English-based creole that incorporates English vocabulary with Chinese dialects, Malay,
and Tamil; unlike Manglish, however, its use has been vigorously contested by the state, and it
position therefore underscores anxieties surrounding language management in Singapore, as well
as sites where this management is contested. At its most basic, Singlish is another linguistic code
that those fluent in English can slip in and out of. Despite the state’s attempts to limit alternative
English forms under the guise of simply propagating “proper” English use, these instances of
opposition to Singlish reflect the general desire to contain and manage all of the official
languages. But much like hybridized English forms in Malaysia, Singlish is exemplary of a
linguistic field that undermines the state’s attempts to carefully inscribe language use along the
lines of raciosity. As such, it provides a potential site for troubling Singapore’s racial
categorizations through language use, and through a form that has demanded recognition as an indispensable socio-cultural attribute.

To summarize, as Singapore’s lingua franca and language of cross-racial affiliation, personal identification with English use is inevitable as its use is encouraged through its status as the nation’s primary language, but this identification is complicated as it reiterates English’s ties to Western neocolonialism. This personal identification with English is therefore discouraged by the state so as not to undermine how racial categories are upheld through individuals’ relationships with their mother tongue language. Further, as in Malaysia, English is also a language of (neo)colonization, its mandated use also reiterates Western hegemony, and it remains a signifier of dominant whiteness. As a result, while English’s legislative figuration as Singapore’s lingua franca was more straightforward than its shifting role as a language of instruction in Malaysia, its position in Singapore was hardly static. As Lim et al. describe:

    Singapore cannot do without English; attempting this would mean disengaging itself from the global economy, with predictably disastrous consequences. At the same time, it cannot do with only English; attempting this would mean compromising Singapore’s ‘Asianness’ by allowing a Western language to play a constitutive role in local identity politics, a role that is reserved for the mother tongues (6)

English is therefore positioned as a language Singaporeans must be fluent in, but cannot identify with. The issues surrounding this identification—or lack thereof—become especially complex since, for some individuals, English is more than simply the nation’s lingua franca when it is used habitually at home, and learned alongside mother tongues (Bokhorst-Heng et al 134).
Linguistic hybridity and racial embodiment in Wah’s *Diamond Grill*

Asian Canadian literature in English that engages with the formalized relationship between English and Canada’s “core” identity helps map how this language’s ideological significance marks bodies in certain ways, and shapes the embodiment of racial individuals. In order to be recognized as part of Canada’s larger literary field, writers often code their works linguistically so as to not alienate dominant audiences, but must then rely upon languages that, in Canada, are deeply associated with settler colonialism. Asian Canadian writers thus face the limits of the nation’s bicultural/bilingual identity; they are compelled to write in English or French, though English is the primary language of Asian North American writing and a shared medium for writers across diverse ethno-racial backgrounds.\(^52\) But writers are able to play with the limits of both French and English and contest their influence. I focus on self-critical writing in English that directly engages with English’s legislated and ideological hegemony. Asian Canadian writers like Wah who engage with the issues surrounding English use—and their own writing in English—illuminate the binds that writers face as they use English to critique its socio-cultural significance.\(^53\)

Wah’s works express a preoccupation with language’s interrelation with subject formation. In an interview with bp Nichol (1977), Wah expressed a desire to locate a “middle voice” that would help him deflect the “coherent or autonomous self” since Wah felt that language both

---

\(^52\) Despite the relative dearth of Asian North American Francophone writing (which includes the works of Ying Chen and Kim Thiây), Christine Lorre notes that writers like Chen in particular draws from French, Anglophone, and Chinese conceits to contest expectations that their writing speaks to or for any one group (267). In other words, even as the larger field of Asian Canadian literature has primarily centered Anglophone writing, its Francophone counterparts address language’s limits in similar ways, while also addressing the influences of Canada’s bilingual identity.

\(^53\) Roy Miki argues that Asian Canadian writers “encounter[r] a min[e]d field…fraught with linguistic duplicities,” but that as they “make visible the race codes that bind”—including linguistic codes—writers can “open up the possibility of cultural texts moving ‘beyond’ the reproduction of dominant expectations of aesthetic correctness toward a proprioceptive reflectiveness for racialization” (208-9, 212).
“embodies and is embodied,” and “produces language as much as it produces him” (qtd. in Day 48). Wah’s writing thus locates how language defines his embodiment as it thinks through the possibility of reconfiguring its hegemonic work. In describing this process, Wah invokes Miki’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s deterritorialization, the movement by which something leaves a (ideological, cultural, linguistic) territory, which can also refer to the disembedding or decontextualization of social relations and epistemologies. Wah uses the concept of deterritorialization to foreground the “disturbed use of language that foregrounds its surface as a conflicted space” where discursive categories of race are also disrupted (Miki 145).

Wah also proposes that racialized writers make use of the available “public aesthetics” in order to investigate their daily experiences, which means they must either draw from normative writing strategies, or use “tactics of refusal and reterritorialization” (Faking It 51). This reterritorialization through language can “imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity” and “construct a common language of the other” (66). In his essay "A Poetics of Ethnicity," Wah addresses how his engagement with an “alienethnic poetics” enacts this deterritorialized writing and contests multicultural commodification:

The culturally marginalized writer will engineer approaches to language and form that enable a particular residue (genetic, cultural, biographical) to become kinetic and valorized. For writers in Canada like Joy Kogawa and Rohinton Mistry the stance is to

---

54 Wah’s preoccupation with language’s significant role in constituting subjectivity and embodiment aligns with how critics have related Derrida’s theorizing of the linguistic supplement to embodiment. Derrida views language as a “prosthetic” that marks the constructiveness of our subjectivities as it “precedes” us (Cavalieri 92, 89). Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien similarly considers Derrida’s emphasis on the “prosthesis of origin,” where “native language is always ‘other’ because language is always ‘other’” (34). In Derrida’s reading of language, writers who attempt to grapple with this constitution through language must, as Arthur Bradley describes, “participate within a language whose rules, systems and logic they did not invent and cannot wholly control,” and that consistently “exceeds [their] grasp” (110).
operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness while investigating their individual enactments of internment and migration. But others, such as Roy Kiyooka and Marlene Nourbese Philip…have chosen to utilize more formal innovative possibilities. This second group of writers seems to me to embody an approach that might properly be called something like ‘alienethnic’ poetics (*Faking It* 51-2)

Wah’s use of English is crucial to this subversive process of deterritorialized writing. Born in Canada, Wah is not part of a tradition of immigrant writing, and English is his first language. But his engagement with English is suggestive of colonial dispossession through language, and the experience of being interpellated through English. Evelyn Ch’ien's discussion of immigrant writers who “experience a linguistic exile from their original language,” touches on this connection (28). Ch’ien explains that by “appropriating English,” writers can “engage in a reconstitution of identity that absorbs the mainstream conceptions of their marginalized culture. For a writer to resist succumbing to this pathology of self-hatred, the appropriation of English must be a very self-conscious activity; learning English is not simply learning words but conceptualizing the political force of the words in relation to one’s own culture” (28).

*Diamond Grill*—a foundational text in Asian Canadian writing— is exemplary of a self-conscious use of English to help rewrite how the racial subject is positioned through language. *Diamond Grill* comprises 144 short vignettes that largely explore the lives of Wah’s family members and Wah’s own experiences growing up in the 1950s in the small town of Nelson, BC, with a particular focus on events that take place at the titular cafe that is run by Wah’s father. Wah spends much of the text piecing together his family’s history—particularly his Chinese and

---

55 Ch’ien also considers how this experience is similar to that of postcolonial writers, who must self-consciously engage with English in order to resist “an appropriation of certain psychic material” that can get “transferred” through the learning—and use—of English (28).
Swedish heritage—and the narrative therefore provides a blueprint of sorts to his ethno-racial background. As Wah explains, one of the text’s primary concerns is to perform a “kind of heterocellular recovery” of the intergenerational narratives that have defined Wah’s identity (182). Most of the vignettes within Diamond Grill detail his grandparents’ and parents’ experiences after immigrating to Canada, which shape Wah’s racial embodiment, but belong to histories that are largely silenced by dominant Canadian discourses.

Wah—as a semi-fictionalized protagonist of Diamond Grill—struggles with the linguistic variations that have influenced his subjectivity, and this struggle is exemplified in moments when he, not unlike Fanon on the train, is also externally interpellated by dominant language forms. A key scene of this interpellation is Wah’s description of how: “UNTIL MARY MCNUTTER CALLS ME A CHINK I’m not one. That’s in elementary school. Later, I don’t have to be because I don’t look like one. But just then, I’m stunned. I’ve never thought about it. After that I start to listen, and watch. Some people are different. You can see it. Or hear it” (95).

While each section of Diamond Grill starts with a capitalized first line, the effect is especially jarring here, as the capitalization of “CHINK” mimics the experience of being yelled at, and aligns with the experience of aural interpellation. This passage also underscores that even though Wah eventually hones his ability to remain racially unmarked in certain spaces, he also learns that he will never fully be able to embody whiteness, as sounding different or being read

---

56 Wah’s describes Diamond Grill as a “biotext” to explain how he views the biographical elements in the narrative as “something constructed, a life made palpable, comprehensible, imaginable” (181). Biotexts do not aim to tell the entire truth of a particular personal narrative or historical moment, but narrate these histories through a strategic use of language that conveys the constructedness of these attempts. A biotext like Diamond Grill attempts to prevent Wah’s writing from being “hijacked by ready-made generic expectations” (181).

57 Later, once Wah has become more successful at camouflaging his racial identity, he realizes that he'd "never be an American We" after someone expresses to him that "We should nuke those Chinks!" (165).
as phenotypically non-white immediately marks bodies like his as corporally Other. In a similar sense, Wah discusses how, when filling out a form in school that asked what his racial origin was, "[he] thought well this is Canada, I'll put down Canadian"; however, Wah’s white teacher tells him “no Freddy you're Chinese, your racial origin is Chinese...” and Wah feels obligated to amend and reframe how he conceives of his raciality (53).

Wah also observes that other members of his family were externally figured as racially inferior through dominant linguistic naming:

Racialized spaces in my family seem to have occurred similarly. That is, my grandfather likely didn’t have to be a “chink” until he was called one. My father, being of mixed race, was undoubtedly more familiar with the instability, the shifting, of racial identity as he was racially slurred in China and in Canada. I’m sure he desired a more stable racial space (don’t we all) but had witnessed the destabilization of sure identities throughout his life, particularly in the descriptive containment of the Chinese in Canada (183-4)

“[D]escriptive containment” draws attention to the work of language in subjects’ embodiment. Wah does not focus on the policies or institution that circumscribe his father’s sense of self, but the material effects of these racial descriptions that “destabilize” the identities of Chinese in Canada. The naming of Wah as a “chink” is therefore a key moment in his subject formation,

---

58 This scene also illuminates a distinction between Fanon’s experience of interpellation, and Wah’s, not only because the latter experiences moments of racial passing. Unlike Fanon, Wah is situated in a settler colonial nation that professes to celebrate certain forms of racial distinction, but still opposes forms of otherness—linguistic or otherwise—that diverge from hegemonic whiteness. Wah assumes that in Canada’s multicultural environment, he can just be “Canadian,” but his perception of his corporeality is constantly reproved in these moments where his otherness is foregrounded, and he is reminded of his particular place in Canada’s racial hierarchy.
where, despite his racial passing and his ability to use language forms that contest English’s dominance, he remains subject to language’s ability to mark him as an inferior racial body.\(^{59}\)

It is through language’s profound work within the process of embodiment that the instability of the affectable racial body’s racial identity becomes particularly apparent. I identify this vulnerability to language as a significant site of the racial nonhuman’s production in the Canadian context. While Wah attempts to either conceal his racial signification or passively allows himself to be read as white, these passages foreground that such attempts are always subject to revisions and ruptures.\(^{60}\) The exclusionary work of marking Wah, his grandfather, and his father as “chinks” is exemplary of the effect that English in particular has on delimiting raciality in Canada, and how their embodiments are constituted through it destabilizing effects. English carries with it the legacy of the colonial experience that is then inscribed on his body, and his identity is always at a risk of being rewritten through English's role in delineating which bodies belong within the nation. Its hegemonic work is reiterated through its use by those white bodies whose racial signification sanctions their ability to dictate who is not fully Canadian, or part of the nation’s “core” body politic. When used by a dominant white body, even a child, the effects of English verify the dominance of these ideal bodies, and upholds their ability to profoundly mark the racial identities of non-white individuals. Wah’s affectability thus stands in stark distinction against the (white) bodies that signify the stability and self-determination associated with the ideal human form.

---

\(^{59}\) These scenes of Wah’s interpellation are thus evocative of Chow’s use of the word “tones” which, conflates the “visual and audial significations of the word” to convey the relationship between “shade and sound,” and language’s work as a “phenomenological actor” on the racial body (Native 8). “Tone” aptly describes these moments where English complicates Wah’s attempts to make his his skin “speak” whiteness.

\(^{60}\) Wah notes that apart from his ability to be read as white in certain spaces, class difference also helps mitigate his racial distinction somewhat.
While Wah’s site of interpellation is similar to Fanon’s, one of the crucial ways that Wah’s experience differs is through his hybrid racial position. Wah explores how the different histories that define his background are both mediated by and coalesce at the site of the hyphen: the position where mainstream and margin intersect, and may stand as discrete problematics, or co-exist in a dialectic. As Wah describes, “the hyphen’s dynamics, its conceptual profile, its literalness, is provocative of the large question of ‘inbetweenness.’ Everything that surrounds our thinking about the hyphen seems suited to my interest in composing language. Its marginalized position (and I don’t mean only racially), its noisy—sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque—space feels nurturing” (175-6).61

In *Diamond Grill*, the contentious position of the hyphen is visually symbolized by the “two large swinging wooden doors” in the Diamond Grill café that lead from the main body of the restaurant to the kitchen (1). The doors are an apt signifier for the hyphen; Wah associates the space of the kitchen with Chineseness, and the space outside of the kitchen with (English) Canada. The metaphorical hyphen is often discussed as being both defined by English and in its relationship to deviations from Standard English. When Wah discusses the “mixee grill,” or mixed grill, that is served as an *entée* at the café, his description just as readily refers to the cacophony of voices inside the kitchen: the swinging doors separate these varied ethno-linguistic voices from the predominantly white bodies in the rest of the restaurant, where “typical improvised imitation of Empire cuisine” is served for customers “as in most Chinese-Canadian restaurants in western Canada” (2). The space of the kitchen is often distinguished from the dining area through the use of these hybrid English forms: “On the other side of the doors, hardly

61 Exemplary of this reading of the hyphen is the theoretical space of “Asian Canadian,” where the former signifies the position of marginality, and the latter the place of dominance; the implicit hyphen in “Asian Canadian” also reflects Wah’s hybrid racial identification as Chinese Canadian.
audible to the customers, echoes a jargon of curses, jokes, and cryptic orders. Stack a hots! Half a dozen fry! Hot beef san! Fingers and tongues all over the place jibe and swear You mucka high!—Thloong you!” (1).

In these scenes, the metaphorical hyphen is not a static mediator of Wah’s Chineseness and Canadianness. Through the image of the swinging doors, the hyphen becomes a shifting site of Wah’s own negotiation with different racial histories. Wah’s description of going through the swinging doors illuminate how he associates this act with his attempts to narrativize his complex familial history: “I pick up an order and turn, back through the doors, whap! My foot registers more than its own imprint, starts to read the stain of memory” (1). The hyphen is not only a metaphor or an abstract signifier of the conflict Wah associates with the different aspects of his racial identity, but also a site where “Chinese” and “Canadian” can intersect. Wah attaches the hyphen to a physical space where he acutely feels the difference between these identities, and where they also overlap as he attempts to transition from the “Canadian” space of the dining area to the “Chinese” space of the kitchen. By associating the hyphen with a particular physical space in the restaurant, Wah is prompted to tease out the narratives and histories that it mediates—the “stain of memory”—as he encounters this site (1). The doors that lead out of the cafe function in much the same way; they “clan[g] and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside” (176). These doors therefore mark the distinction between the space of the kitchen where Wah can engage with the variegated aspects of his ethno-racial history, and the Canadian landscape that “muffles” his identity. Wah’s association of the hyphen with this physical barrier suggests that he feels as though the two competing areas of his background must be kept discrete, particularly as the “outside” is the homogenizing space of Canada where his racial distinction is contested whereas the kitchen is a
type of refuge for Wah, Wah’s father, and the Chinese/Chinese Canadian workers. But as he passes through the doors, there is also a moment where Wah experiences both “sides” simultaneously, as the door is not only a barrier, but also a material marker of Wah’s inbetweenness in a nation that does not make space for his complex racial identity. Wah therefore does not limit the hyphen’s signification to its marginalizing effects alone; the doors as hyphenated objects allow Wah to create a site that makes room for hybridity and uncertainty, and, at times, allows him freely move back and forth between the two spaces.

These sites that Wah associates with the hyphen also produce an affective response—one that connects his racialization to the scene of the restaurant and the food around him, to his memory, and to the work of language on his body. The descriptions of Wah “hearing” the hyphen as it “whap[s]!” and “clangs and rattles,” and his body “register[ing]” the sensation of the door as it hits him is a moment where the hyphen compels him to experience the slippage between the racial schema and the corporeal schema. As the doors hit him, he “feels” the reminder of how his corporeality is never stable, and is always at risk of being muffled by the racial schema outside of the “warm and waiting” kitchen. The effects of the hyphen on Wah’s body also recalls the sensory details of Fanon’s interpellation, as he experiences his raciality aurally and physically as he is made acutely aware of his racial embodiment. As Wah describes, this moment of heterocellular recovery “reverberates” from his foot “against the kitchen door on up the leg into the torso and hands, eyes thinkin straight ahead, looking through doors and languages, skin recalling its own reconnaissance, cooked into the steamy food, replayed in the folds of elsewhere...” (1). The act of physically interacting with an object that Wah imbues with the terms of the hyphen incites this complex response, where Wah moves from the immediate physical sensation to his skin’s “reconnaissance,” which evokes the experience of an individual
acquiring information about how their body—specifically, Wah’s racialized skin—is received by others. Language is again crucial to this entire process, as in these passages where Wah attempts to work through the effects of the hyphen on physical space and on his body, the English spoken in the dining area is distinct from the Cantonese and hybrid language forms spoken within the kitchen. By linking language to the recurring image of the swinging door—the mediating hyphen between English Canada which racializes his body and the space of the kitchen that is largely characterized by Chineseness—Wah therefore inscribes language as fundamental to the ways in which he negotiates the terms of racial embodiment in terms of narrative.

Wah expands on the vexed relationship between the hyphen and language’s work on racial embodiment as he considers how his father might similarly negotiate the space of the restaurant through language. Wah’s father was born in Saskatchewan, but lived in China for eighteen years, and Wah wonders what effect this migratory experience had on his father’s everyday life. Wah describes his father “on the other side of the world (through that tunnel all the way to China)” talking to himself, in English, about recognizably normative Canadian objects like Old Spice cologne, his pack of Players, and his shoes from Health Spot. But as he unlocks the “swinging doors” to the kitchen, Wah speculates that his father might mentally switch to Cantonese, or use both languages (3). This struggle with language use in different spaces returns to how the hyphen mediates “inbetweenness” through English. While Wah Sr. can slip into Cantonese within the hybrid space of the kitchen—and can draw from that aspect of his ethno-racial heritage—Wah assumes that outside that space, his father must rely on English, particularly when he engages with markers of the “Canadian” aspects of his transnational identity. This scene thus reveals the limits of Wah’s ability to imagine alternative configurations of his father’s bilingual/bicultural identity due to his own struggle with the hyphen. The stereotypical signifiers that Wah links to
English stand in marked contrast to the description of his father’s Chineseness and use of Cantonese as distant and foreign, and suggests that Wah cannot imagine that his father might think of “Canadian” objects in Cantonese, or that he might still use English in hybrid-Chinese spaces. This assumption is also suggestive of English’s hegemony over racial bodies. Wah Sr.’s own hyphenated figuration means that he likely experiences the totalizing effects of English when he is preparing to service the restaurant’s primarily white clientele.

Wah also discusses his attempts to rethink the hyphen’s mediating work on racial embodiment and its relationship to his father’s sense of in-betweenness. He considers the generative potential of the hyphen through hybrid language forms, including code-switching, which makes space for cross-racial affiliations that are limited by Standard English. In *Diamond Grill*, Wah provides an academic gloss for code-switching, and cites Mary Louise Pratt’s definition:

> Code-switching [occurs when] speakers switch spontaneously and fluidly between two languages.... In the context of fiercely monolingual dominant cultures like that of the United States, code-switching lays claim to a form of cultural power: the power to own but not be owned by the dominant language. (Pratt qtd. in Wah 6-7).

In *Faking It*, Wah more closely links code-switching to the hyphen, which signifies Wah’s alienation from both normative whiteness and his Chineseness, but also allows him to deploy aesthetic tactics to trouble the imposed boundaries between these identity positions. As Wah describes it, code-switching can intervene at the site of the hyphen to “buttress the materialization of the hyphen, and insistence of its presence in foreignicity and

---

62 While Wah’s explanation of code-switching provides a useful interpretive reading of the wordplay used by him and his family, it also enacts a similar process as he switches from the ungrammatical “long compounding sentences” and linguistic fluidity that characterizes the narrative to an academic register, which suggests that code-switching should be read as more than “wordplay” alone (182).
between/alongside claims of source, origin, and containment” (83). In *Diamond Grill*, code switching not only helps Wah unmoor English from its expected conventions, but also unsettles, and makes more nuanced, the prevailing language forms that constitute the racial and contour his embodiment.

The refrain of “high muckamuck” is exemplary of Wah’s productive use of code-switching. As Wah describes, the term derives from the Chinook term *hyu muckamuck*, which was used by First Nations people to mean “plenty to eat,” but was transformed “through the contact zone” to mean “big shot, big time operator” (65). As George Lang proposes, Chinook—also referred to as “chinuk wawa” or simply “Wawa”—was the “occasional and auxiliary tool for many of the settlers who flooded into the region. Lange describes how Chinook’s genesis:

is set within the sequence of the cataclysmic transformation of indigenous societies that began with the arrival of the continental fur trade… the creolized pidgin that had been shared among a multi-ethnic and increasingly dispersed mobile population centred at Fort Vancouver was further transformed as speakers of diverse and mutually unintelligible Indian languages were confined to reservations, notably in Grand Ronde southwest of Portland, Oregon, but also on reserves around Kamloops, British Columbia (3-4).

The use of Chinook therefore engages with the complex history of Indigenous migration and zones of contact with white settlers, as well as the desire to exceed the boundaries that resulted

---

63 Wah’s broad reference to “First Nations” here suggests that this term was used across different communities, but he focuses on how this term was part of Chinook jargon in particular.

64 Lang also states that Chinook is not simply a “pidgin-creole,” but a language of diaspora; Lang describes that while Chinook “assumed its present shape during the first decades of the nineteenth century in the lower Columbia, Wawa lost its homeland as the region became radically transformed…as Wawa spread in waves across the Northwest, it became a mega-sign signifying desire for a community beyond those to which its speakers are currently bound” (140).
from the nation’s settler colonial history. Its history as a language of diaspora—albeit an intra-national diaspora—has a particular resonance with Wah’s descriptions of his family’s history, and suggests that through terms like “sitkum dollah” and “high muckamuck,” new diasporic communities in Canada are able to draw from its dynamic potential.

Wah states that he did not originally know that his grandfather was using “Chinook jargon”; he instead assumed that his grandfather was drawing from a hybrid of Chinese and English (68). Wah’s own mis/reading exemplifies the term’s dynamism as it is removed from its Chinook roots and adapted trans-racially. Wah is initially unable to fully understand his grandfather’s code-switching until he learns more about how languages were shaped by the contact zone. But he still identifies some significance in what he reads as both English and “Chinese,” which suggests that interlocutors do not need to fully understand the etymology of these new phrases to understand the productivity of code-switching. Rather, they can read this collision of languages through their own ethno-linguistic backgrounds.

It is not until Wah returns to “high muckamuck” in *Diamond Grill* and reads it as a site of code-switching that he realizes that his grandfather enjoyed “mouthing the dissonance of encounter, the resonance of clashing tongues, his own membership in the diasporic and nomadic intersections that have occurred in northwest North America over the past one hundred and fifty years” (68). Wah then attaches the use of the “high muckamuck” by his grandfather’s generation to the use of hybrid dialects to intentionally resist formal English and contest the marginalizing work of the colonial encounter, particularly as it inflects racial corporeality. Wah yokes his narration of his grandfather’s use of the term to moments where his grandfather physically embodies signifiers of empowerment that counter his racial marginality, from his enjoyment of “clashing tongues” to his use the term when the family was in their “best clothes” while “fixing
his diamond cuff-links and shaking his arms so the shirt-sleeves will fill out smooth …walking out the door with a twinkle in his eye chuckling high muckamuck” (69). Wah’s reading of his grandfather’s subversive use of the term hearkens back to classic scenes of postcolonial linguistic resistance, but is framed by the particularities of Canada’s settler colonial context. Wah’s grandfather may be “colonized” by English, but is also a racialized settler who draws from Indigenous culture—the racial group most subject to the limits of Canada’s racial grid—to resist the linguistic hegemony of dominant (white) settlers. High muckamuck thus becomes another hyphenated site, where language, race, and the colonial encounter all intersect.

Wah describes that the term was further adapted by other members of his family to create new sites of codeswitching. For Wah’s father, high muckamuck is “translated” into a term of class derision that he uses against individuals who “put on airs,” while Wah’s mother further alters the term by adding an extra syllable (muckety-muck) (69). In each of these descriptions, Wah emphasizes the term’s subversive potential. It becomes a method of resistance for his grandfather, a class equalizer for his father, and a phrase that his mother makes her own. High muckamuck continues to extend across racial and social lines as it is transfigured from its First Nations origins by Wah’s family, and eventually reconfigured by the Chinese cooks of the Grill who “trans[e]” the term into “‘You mucka high!’” (66). This trajectory of codeswitching thus foregrounds how the act of adapting and supplementing English helps Wah to cathect his racial identity through—and connect his own narrative to—other racialized individuals who reconfigure “high muckamuck.”

While codeswitching conveys one way that English’s stifling effects on racial embodiment can be complicated by alternative articulations, Diamond Grill always returns to English’s constricting work. “Imperfect” English may contest English’s prescriptive work, but can also
suggest the speaking subject’s racial marginality and distinction from normative whiteness. Wah describes a time where his father gave a speech for the Lions Club, where Wah Sr. is immediately self-conscious as the “only Chinaman at an all-white dinner meeting” and does not feel confident in his ability to speak English (62). During the speech, he accidentally thanks the all-white audience for the “wonderful sloup” (62). Whereas, in the space of the kitchen, a dialect form or mispronunciation like “sloup” might be part of everyday speech, Wah’s father immediately turns his linguistic mis-step into a joke, a “kind of self put-down that he knows these white guys like to hear” so he does not become an object of ridicule (63). He “bluffs that Chinamen call soup sloup because, as you all know, the Chinese make their cafe soup from the slop water they wash their underwear and socks in, and besides, it’s just like when you hear me eating my soup, Chinamen like to slurp and make a lot of noise” (63). In an effort to redirect his slippage from both formal English (and the limits therein) and the normative Canadian persona he attempts to effect, Fred Wah Sr. articulates and affirms a series of tropes about Asians that render them as other-than—that their food is slop akin to what animals eat, and that they are loud, dirty, and uncouth. As Wah states, Wah Sr. “fakes it,” and in doing so, teaches his son that “English can be faked” (63). Wah Sr. thus teaches his son that pressure can potentially be placed on English’s limitations as he provides a working definition for “sloup” that relies on the tropes of the bestial Asian, but allows him to mitigate somewhat his linguistic lapse.

Wah also learns from observing his father that “when you fake language you see, as well, how everything else is a fake” (63). The act of “faking it” through language not only describes English’s constructedness, but also touches on how “faking” his understanding of English for a white audience makes Wah Sr. vulnerable to racial stereotypes that upset his sense of self (63). In this moment when Wah Sr. connects his (mis)use of English to certain “truths” about the
Chinese body, his racial identity is momentarily rewritten, and he no longer signifies a body that belongs in that space. Instead, he becomes a “Chinaman” rather than a Chinese Canadian as the equalizing force of his ability to speak English is undermined. The ability to “fak[e] it,” then, is not simply a potentially productive site of hybridity that bridges the different aspects of Wah’s racial identity, and allows him to navigate through the different racial histories that have inscribed his embodiment. Faking it, as in the case of Wah’s father, also reinscribes the precarity of his racial identity. In an interview with Spivak, Gunew asks: “…if you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first?” (“Questions” 600).65 *Diamond Grill* addresses this dynamic through its depiction of Wah Sr.’s efforts to reconfigure his identity within different spaces. In the space of the kitchen Wah’s father is able to draw from the languages that “constructed” his identity, while in the space of the Lions Club, he is pressured to suppress his Chineseness and linguistic distinctiveness, and must “reconstitute” himself through racial tropes that are legible to the white audience. English’s limitations play a significant role in this moment where Wah Sr. compensates for signifying his racial difference. Wah Sr.’s renarrativization and linguistic “faking it” ultimately yield to English’s limits through his shame and the animalistic racial stereotypes he reiterates.

Although Wah focuses on the challenges of reconciling the disparate parts of his ethno-racial background, he is also acutely aware that unlike his father, in certain spaces, he is able to

---

65 Gunew responds to her own question by considering how, in the Australian context in particular, creating space for other languages in literature would be one way of addressing this issue: “a small gesture toward beginning to understand this would be to create a demand for multi-lingual anthologies within Australian. These [sic] is an incredible disproportionate resistance to presenting the general Australian public with immigrant writing in English even, but to have in conjunction with the remainder of these repressed languages seems to be another battle which still has to be fought” (66).
pass as phenotypically white. He notes that during school events he rejected the Chinese team since he was read as “white enough to be on the winning team,” which suggests the profound effects (and potential internalization) of circulating anti-Chinese sentiments (50). As Gunew observes in her reading of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the “mark of sanity and cultural assimilation is that the body of the undesirable alter ego is consumed and transmuted into speech. As part of the process, the foreign and visibly different aspects of the body of the narrator are screened or camouflaged through her ability, finally, to project the familiar language of the dominant culture” ("Melting Pot" 152). At times, Wah is similarly able to affirm his (ostensible) dominant whiteness through his linguistic mastery of English, and his ability to wield it in these instances where he is read as white.

But like his father, Wah’s relationship to English is destabilized in the moments where he experiences his racial distinction through its power to linguistically mark him as a racial other. After his father dies, Wah describes a moment where he looks at a bear eating cherries, and is not only reminded of his father, but “becomes” him momentarily: “I feel decanting through my body his ocean (I think I can even smell it), all he could ever comprehend in a single view; that this is, in me, part of some same helical sentence we both occupy...Synapse and syntax: the bear returns to eating the cherries (12). In his afterword to the text, Wah notes the issues with—and his desire to challenge and “dislodge the privilege” and “tyranny” of –the “correct grammatical sentence” (182). In this instance where Wah “becomes,” his father, the linguistic sentence is elided with the genetic code that the two share, including their racial distinction through the “ocean” that evokes his father’s migration(s). By foregrounding describing that he feels not only his father’s genes, but that they both occupy the same “sentence” and “syntax,” Wah suggests that the two are subject to—and “sentence[d]” to—similar linguistic limitations. Wah can deflect
language and reconfigure it to suppress his Chineseness in certain spaces, not unlike his father
does with “sloup” or his grandfather does with code-switching. But his need to play with
language is still rooted in how he experiences language alienation due to his racial embodiment,
and that English does not “belong” to him in the same way that it might belong to an ideal white
Canadian. In this moment Wah thus creates a vital connection between his relationship to
language and corporeality—including the dominance of English—and the way that language
shaped his father’s embodiment.

To return to my reading of Fanon, and da Silva’s articulation of the affectable racial body,
the stability of the dominant human’s subjectivity in relation to the vulnerable Other is germane
to my reading of English’s destabilizing ability in *Diamond Grill*. This structure is what allows
Wah to be produced as an affectable body in the instance where he is called a “chink,” as well as
his father’s vulnerability to language, where he must (re)produce himself through a series of
racial and bestial stereotypes. This examination of how Wah’s embodiment—along with that of
his paternal family—as vulnerable and contingent marks the racial nonhuman’s figuration
through the role that English plays in mediating Canada’s racial grid. As Wah’s theorization of
the hyphenated subject suggests, while he and his family member are constituted by language,
they also draw on their hybridity to (re)constitute language through code switching, and
undermine the prevailing epistemological matrices that are upheld by dominant language forms.
But the figuration of the “stable” and bounded dominant subject intervenes to consistently
reinscribe these racial bodies as inferior, and English in particular is crucial to this delimitation.
As these affectable bodies can be “unbounded” by these dominant discourses they must
renegotiate their embodied sense of selves, or risk feeling excluded from Canada’s body politic.
Despite the usefulness of alternate English forms, the authority of English to delimit raciosity—
particularly when wielded by dominant bodies—remains critical for writing certain bodies out of the legibility of the human.

**Racial Mediation, Corporeality, and the Allure of English in *Joss and Gold***

To draw out the comparative similarities of *Diamond Grill’s* thematics with similar issues in Malaysia and Singapore, I turn to Shirley Lim’s *Joss and Gold*, which is set in both nations. *Joss and Gold* explores the effects of postcoloniality and Western imperialism on the post-Independence generation, as depicted largely through the experiences of Li An—the protagonist who is Chinese Malaysian—and her relationship with a white American man. Li An feels pressured to embrace her nation’s new multinational, multiracial ideals, but remains uncertain about their effects on her future. Much of the narrative is directly concerned with anxieties surrounding race, including the postcolonial writing of race through state policies on language.

While the narrative includes perspectives from each of Malaysia’s primary racial groups, it also frames postcolonial raciality against dominant whiteness, and explores the significant role that English plays in mediating these cross-racial exchanges. Lim’s work reflects her investment in a burgeoning area of writing in English which involved a shift from primarily aesthetic concerns, to a focus on identity politics and social critiques that attempt to actively oppose state authority (“English” 534, 537). A significant subset of this tradition explore the lives of women who struggle to embrace their nation’s postcolonial multinational and multiracial ideals. (169). This new direction for writing in English—and women’s writing in English in particular—is well-suited to a writer like Lim, whose own background is a mix of Hokkien Chinese, on her father’s...
side, and Peranakan on her mother’s. In his analysis of Lim’s poetry, Tom Kuo states that Lim’s “Peranakan persona plunges deeply into her identity complex that is entangled with several cultural forces” and that her literary techniques often reflect a desire to remain “out of step with pure Sinicism or pure Malay customs—what she conjures up is a third discourse from the West to conflate these two incompatible cultures” (4). Gunew expands on these linguistic complexities that Lim experienced in Malaysia and explicates their historical grounding:

Embedded in the turbulent politics leading to the 1969 race riots in which her ethnic group, the Chinese Malaysians, were targeted, Lim hangs onto the aesthetic core of art as a way of transcending the continuing and brutal pressures of the political. In her account the English language provides an alternative to the problematic relations she has with the Hokkien Chinese dialect of her father’s family, a language in which she feels alienated and forever trapped in infancy, and the Malay transmitted by her mother, who eventually abandons the family and becomes erased from its collective history. Malay is thus an abjected mothertongue… (Haunted 740).

As Lim’s writing details the methods she uses to evade the primacy of her mother-tongue languages (and her conflicted relationship to Malay), she also touches on her conflicted reliance on a language that, despite its productivity, is part of a legacy of the racial body’s (neo)colonial alienation from language.

---

66 Straits Chinese Peranakan, or Baba Nyonya, refers to those communities descended from 16th century Chinese migrants who settled in the Malay Peninsula, intermarried with the locals, and adopted many local customs and languages, while also fusing the local culture with their Chinese cultural heritage.

67 It is not that Lim feels her Malaysian world through a Western lens, but that the language she has learned in the specific historical situation and the force of the language itself help her get close to the things that give texture and depth to her Malaysian experience (84).
Lim discusses this tension directly in her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996) through her writing on the study of English literature. For Lim, English provides certain amount of linguistic stability, as English literature in particular belongs to a longstanding canon that Lim finds especially useful. She considers her British-influenced early education and the development of English as her working language, along with the changes in her relationship to English writing after her immigration to the United States in 1969. Lim contrasts the “too many names, too many identities, too many languages” in Malaysia and Singapore against what she reads as canonical English literature’s relatively-univocal approach toward identity construction (20, 16).68 Aware of how the state’s racial management is entwined with language legislation, Lim approaches English as a problematic external to these nations’ racial schemas given its distance from the three predominant racial groups. But even as English use in Southeast Asia provided Lim with an option outside of her prescribed familial tongues, in the United States, her “British colonial accent,” “brown colour,” and “Asian features” marked her as “alien” to the study of English language and literature (*Among* 275).

Especially significant to my reading is Lim’s evaluation of how her affective responses to English shape her embodiment: “The physical sensation of expansion in the chest, even in the head, as I read a profoundly beautiful or mindful poem was conclusively and possessively subjective. The literature may have been of Britain, but my love of literature was outside the empire” (198). But even as Lim considers her love of literature to be somehow external to the signification of empire, she notes an emerging disillusionment with English writing during her tenure teaching “black and brown” college students in the South Bronx in the 1970s (183). She

---

68 Although Lim’s early life is spent in Malaysia, she retains ties to Singapore both because it was her mother’s place of residence, and because she worked there prior to her immigration to the United States.
describes that, in order to remain a “decolonizing intellectual,” she had to continually “critique her own ideological formation” and “jilt her first loves” as they pertained to writing, particularly after a realization that her work was reminiscent of “colonialist versions of higher education” (183). As Gunew proposes, Lim’s preoccupations with English’s effects on corporeality relate to her “rebelliousness against the ideological impulse behind the induction into English” and an “imperially derived pedagogy” even as she is “seduced by the aesthetic power of both the language and the texts it has produced”; in doing so, Lim expresses the ambivalence and the “psychic and the physical, effects/affects of exposure to a foreign body of language and writing” (Haunted 738). The productivity that Lim locates in English, then, results in her variegated affective responses to this colonial language and its psychically colonizing effects, which she in turn explores in her writing. Lim also describes: “Every cultural change is signified through and on the body. Involuntarily the body displays, like a multidimensional, multisensorial screen, the effect of complicated movements across the social keyboard…My Westernization took place in my body” (89). In other words, even prior to her move to the United States, Lim’s Westernization was shaped by her internalization of and responses to Western ideals, including how her valorization of English writing inflects her embodiment.

Lim’s preoccupation with how—even with the absence of a dominant white population—Westernization and racinality itself can be embodied through language is expressed most clearly through the cross-racial relationships and everyday conflicts that develop throughout Joss and Gold. While Lim’s early writing often returns to English’s productivity, her evaluation of its affective potential in Joss and Gold is far more ambivalent. Although the narrative at times privileges English use as a vehicle to support multiracial and transnational relationships, it also interrogates individuals’ claims to the language. Joss and Gold suggests that even as English
helps individuals assert a hybrid identity, the bearing it has on their racial figuration can still be rescripted by those dominant bodies who attempt to dictate which bodies can or cannot claim English as their own.

*Joss and Gold* takes place over a twelve-year period, spanning from Independence-era Malaysia to developing Singapore in the 1980s. The first section, “Crossing,” takes place in Malaysia both immediately preceding and during the previously-discussed 1969 “race riots,” while the last section, “Landing,” takes place in industrialized Singapore in 1981. The majority of the narrative follows Li An’s experiences as she transitions from academic life in Malaysia to Singapore’s business sector; however, the middle section, “Circling,” is set in New York in 1980, and focuses on Li An’s ex-lover, Chester, an American who had previously lived in Malaysia.

The first section of the novel explores the strident race distinctions that characterize Malaysian social dynamics immediately preceding the riots. Throughout “Crossing,” Chester, the white American Peace Corps worker, and his two Malay friends Abdullah and Samad, express their particularly essentialist views on Malaysian race relations to Li An. Abdullah and Samad’s totalizing views are particularly evident when they discuss two of Li An’s friends, Gina and Paroo, who are Chinese and Indian respectively, and who attempt to kill themselves due to the prohibitions placed on their interracial relationship. As Abdullah describes:

Very difficult this interracial affair…Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language…Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many adat, Islam also have shariat…Of course
Chinese also have their own religion. But they must become like Malay if they want to marry Malay (58).

Mohammad Quayum posits that in this moment, both Abdullah’s and Samad’s sentiments are exemplary of a “sense of cultural purity/rigidity and isolationism/monologism” that characterized a common exclusivist sentiment: that the nation should be “built with the Malay people and culture at the centre” (19). As they assert their claims to the nation, they also reiterate how the state’s rigid racial schema is upheld by each race’s foods, customs, and, linguistic distinctiveness, which occludes the presence of intermixed/intermarried communities like Lim’s Peranakan family.

While Chester claims to take a more voyeuristic approach to the nation’s sociopolitical dynamics, his characterization marks how the influence of Western whiteness in Malaysia extends from, and is deepened by, the legacy of British colonialism. Chester’s authoritative figuration is established through the parallels Li An draws between him and colonial authority, as well as instances where she closely associates his figuration with the prevailing whiteness she interacts with in her academic life. Though Chester’s country of origin aligns him with American Imperialism and hegemony rather than British colonialism, when they first meet, Li An still associates his body with “promise” and “the great Romantic poets and novelists,” as well as “governors and other colonial officials” (29). Li An also conflates him with her sense that “Every white person” on her campus “seem[s] to be superior and aloof” (29). Chester immerses himself in Malaysian culture and demands its authenticity, but refuses to take responsibility “for anything [in Malaysia],” including Western influence (37). His attempts to keep Malaysian culture “pure” also exemplify his hegemonic impulses, as well as his reiteration of the colonial elevation of

---

69 Adat refers to the unwritten and customary codes of traditional Malay communities.
Malay. He explains to Li An and her husband, Henry, that “Malay is the only real culture in this country” as racial groups like the Chinese could “as easily be in Hong Kong or even in New York’s Chinatown,” and therefore are not as “original” or as significant to the nation as the Malays and their cultural influences (33-4). Chester’s stance on the nation’s development exemplifies ongoing attempts to dictate foreign development in Malaysia, which anticipates the United States’ intensified influence in Malaysia through economic and cultural capital, and now, their expected formalized transpacific partnerships.

Li An is positioned against these reductionist views through her identification with the metaphor of “rojak,” or “mixed.” She informs Chester: “Everything in Malaysia is…mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English…Give us a few more years and we’ll be a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people” (34-5). Li An also expresses to Henry that she is Malaysian, “not Chinese,” and writes in her diary that “All this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick…Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am Malaysian, I don’t exist” (90). While Li An’s desire for racial harmony through cultural transference are idealistic, she contradicts Chester’s figuration as an agent of Western dominance whose simply reiterates colonial emphases on discrete ethno-racial communities. Her emphasis on “rojak” is crucial, here, as it marks a turn away from English alone through this critique of Chester’s reassertion of racial categories that were reified under the nation’s colonial history. Rather, she draws from a markedly localized term to envision a different trajectory for the postcolonial state’s developing racial matrix.\(^70\)

\(^{70}\) As Quayum argues, Li An’s discussion of rojak suggests a “rejection of all unilateralism and ethnocentrism, and the gradual evolution…of a unified imagined community…somewhat similar to the Chicano aesthetic of ‘rasquachismo’ that Homi Bhabha speaks of….in which all available resources are brought together ‘for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration’” (Bhabha qtd. in Quayum 42).
"Joss and Gold" further disrupts the primacy of discrete racial categories through Li An’s characterization as the matriarch of an atypical and cross-racial family unit. Li An and Chester have an affair that produces a child, Su Yin, who is read as either Eurasian or a “mixed-up devil”, and who cannot find a space within the nation’s racial grid. Though Henry and Li An eventually divorce, Henry still claims Su Yin as his daughter, even though he is aware that Chester is her biological father. Li An moves to Singapore to raise Su Yin with two other women: her best friend, and the second wife of Henry’s father. While Li An becomes decidedly less idealistic about the actuality of a harmonious hybrid national identity, given both Malaysia’s race riots and her later experiences with Singapore’s strict racial grid, her familial unit ultimately becomes a microcosm of the hybridity she valorized in her youth. The narrative thus pushes toward “developmental, cross-cultural, multinational perspectival aesthetics” while suggesting “canons that exclude on restrictive national criteria,” such as gender, should be reevaluated and contested (Quayum 193).

This narrative move risks idealizing the importance of hybridity, but offers an alternative to rigid racial configurations as Li An embraces the ideal of the “New Malaysian,” which Quayum defines as the “vision of forging a new and inclusive national identity, which accommodates all people and imagines a community on the basis of the shared values of all ethnic groups” (21). The irony for Li An’s family is that they can only become “New Malaysians” after they move to Singapore, but part of this shift is due to the nation’s relentless development and pragmatism. Although Li An moves to Singapore for "big city tolerance and anonymity," this move also elides with Lim’s description of a “third-world expatriate” who “withdraws from her native country upon recognizing the historical discontinuities and the psychological violence visited on whole groups of people through the tragic course of wars, famine, and economic dislocations”
Su Yin also describes Singapore as “money and home,” which summarizes Lim’s depiction of modernized Singapore as a space whose racial grid is equally defined through its CMIO formulation, but where capital pursuits can temporarily override the importance of ethno-racial divisions (233). But even though Li An and her family find a role within Singapore’s social order, the narrative also figures their family unit as symbolic of the state’s inability to account for more complex points of relationality, since this unexpected matriarchal unit is only legible to those in near proximity to it.\footnote{Joan Chiung-huei Chang similarly describes how, in Lim’s presentation of Singapore, the “guarantee of financial security, rather than birthplace or racial origin, determines where one’s home should be” (155)}

While these cross-racial relationships are exemplary of Li An’s creolized racial identity, her identification with English, and English literature allow her to express her composite view of the nation, particularly within the Malaysian context. At the start of the narrative, Li An is “dazzled” by her study of English literature, and feels that being a student of English is the “most enviable position in the world” (4, 5). While her love of English is again marked by her idealism, English, not unlike the case for Lim, provides Li An with an language that is seemingly distinct from those associated with Malaysia’s rigid racial categories; it also becomes the language she wishes to teach to her racially-diverse classes, as she initially finds that English literature and language provide concrete methods of contesting racial divisiveness given its position in nation’s linguistic field. In a sense, Li An’s relationship to English is the inverse of Wah’s, who uses code-switching and the ability to move between languages other than English to reconfigure English’s hegemony. In Malaysia and Singapore, however, where the ability to switch between languages—particularly mother tongues and English—is mandated, hybridized English forms take on a similar significance to code-switching. For Li An, though, the usefulness of linguistic
hybridity is not linked to the work of Manglish or Singlish. Instead, Li An uses Standard English as a tool of hybridity, as she selects the discourses and literary histories that help her envision a dynamic hybrid identity that is not bound by racial categorization. On the one hand, Li An’s idolization of the cultural capital provided by Anglophone writing in the region reflects its ongoing signification as a language of postcolonial influence. On the other, however, Li An also believes in English’s potential productivity as a language of inter-ethnic communication. Li An fails to consider English’s hegemonic work, but focuses on how English connects her to literary sentiments that align with her desire for a nation free of rigid racial lines where individuals can choose with which languages they identify.

Despite Li An’s initially-positive associations with English as the language of “rojak,” rather than how it upheld colonial dominance, the narrative also expounds on its threat to post-Independence Malaysia’s fraught racial schema. Abdullah contests Li An’s appreciation of English language and literature, identifying it as a “bastard language” whose colonial history and exteriority to Malaysia’s core racial groups and the Malay majority means that it cannot be a “national language,” since it risks upsetting national unity. For Abdullah and Samad, English signifies a “loss of [their] language” and is still tainted by its colonial history; while they agree that the “one percent”—government workers and those in similar positions of power—should speak English, they feel that Malay is “good enough” for the country (63). Li An suggests that this formulation still means that those who desire upward mobility and to become part of the one percent would still need to learn English (63). But their resistance to critiques like Li An’s are unsurprising amidst the turbulent changes in language policies that attempted to make English available for use by elite Malays, but still subordinated to Malay in order to uphold its role in asserting Malay authority. At the same time, these comments expose the stark limits of English’s
neutrality: as soon as it is placed in relation to Malay, it becomes a politically-charged language of otherness— and one that is, in Abdullah and Samad’s estimation, decidedly external to Malaysia’s developing social landscape.

These attempts to dictate for Li An what language she should use also have a profound effect on her psyche and how she perceives her embodiment. During this conversation, and after Abdullah’s comments that English is a “bastard language” while Malay provides the national language the nation needs, Li An wonders: “Could they really do it, she wondered? What would happen if the all suddenly switched to Malay right now? How would she express herself?…Her world was lit by language. The English ingested through years of reading and talking now formed the delicate web of tissues in her brain. Giving up her language would be like undergoing a crippling operation on her brain” (56). Here, Li An gestures toward the spatial and physical presence that English has in her life, and begins to acutely feel the effect of these restricting comments as her body.

Amidst the tension between the state’s attempts to instrumentalize language and harness it for its ability to mediate the racial grid, Lim figures Li An as a necessary reminder of how the body responds to these conflicts. As she contemplates if she should focus on Malay rather than English, Li An describes how “Her body felt stranger and stranger each day. Her nerve ends vibrated on a strangely immediate and vivid plane, but everything else was distant. When she talked about the poems to her students, there was no longer a singing connection between the language and her body. Instead, there was talk, slow and difficult… Then there was her new body, singing to itself, without any form or language. She could not reach it with her mind” (60). For individuals like Li An, whose self-defined racial identity as a Malaysian Chinese is configured through English’s cross-racial potential, these conversations destabilize her sense of
self. This professed dependence on English is again mired in its hegemonic work, but as she faces continual demands from those trying to shape Malaysia’s postcolonial racial field, they disrupt the connection—however problematic—that English helped her make between her sense of self and her body. These attempts to manage language and prescribe their use based on a particular national racial schema render subjects like Li An as affectable and vulnerable to these discourses, which, as I have discussed, marks a crucial site of the racial nonhuman’s figuration.

To push this further, while Li An has, in a sense, been colonized by English, it also remains a locus of her hybrid identity that allows her to navigate the shifting racial polemics of post-Independence Malaysia. As a result, Abdullah and Samad’s comments risk destabilizing Li An’s racial identity. Though they have no legitimate authority over Li An, they are nevertheless (relatively) racially-privileged bodies whose assertions are symbolic of how dominant Malays in “new Malaysia” retain the potential to reconfigure the way that her embodiment is entwined with English’s significance. This is not to deny the important work that reframing colonial languages plays in decolonizing efforts. Rather, as discussed, the use of Malay to contest English’s race-based significance—coupled with English’s position as a language of education and race “neutrality”—results in the authority of English merely being supplanted, rather than undone.

Li An later reflects on this exchange, and the practicality of what would occur if non-Malay Malaysians were actually expected to leave the country for dissenting against the nation’s racial hierarchy. She wonders if “China would want [her],” as she feels pressured to retreat into the nation and languages that are associated with her racial signification (63). This professed dependence on English is clearly mired in its hegemonic work, as Li An’s early education was rooted in the British colonial educational system, and the English she subsequently “ingested”
that has also become so fundamental to her way of life is clearly colonial English. But in spite of these issues and attempts to detach Li An from English’s significance, the crucial role English conventions and her English education play in how she conceives of the world means that she cannot “suddenly switch” to the language of racial dominance in Malaysia, or easily retreat to her mother tongue language in either nation. Instead, similar to Wah, English is fundamental to Li An’s language of expression, and how she perceives herself through “her language.” Individuals like Li An (and even Abdullah and Samad) thus remain caught between the tensions of two dominant languages that, despite these conflicts, both mediate the nation’s racial grid.

While Li An’s conversations with Abdullah and Samad complicate her relationship to English, Chester’s mediation of the connection she draws between English and her hybrid racial identity is a crucial moment where Li An is figured as an affectable racial body. In Diamond Grill, English mastery plays a significant role in the affectable racial subject’s vulnerability to those white bodies that dictate who has command of, and cultural claims to, the language. Joss and Gold only briefly touches upon mastery as it affects Malays like Abdullah and Samad, who are “not so good” at English due to their disparate educational experiences, and feel alienated and “mute” given English’s dominance over Malay (69). Rather than focusing on mastery, nationality—as articulated through Chester’s comments—becomes a crucial method of

---

72 Li An’s admiration for colonial English and English reflects Gauri Viswanathan’s classic evaluation of English studies in (post)colonial nations, and India in particular. Viswanathan proposes that the history of English studies is rooted in how the British maintained power—and attempted to inculcate their citizens with British cultural values—through education in English literature.

73 Although Abdullah and Samad’s racial dominance in Malaysia initially encourages them to help inscribe language choice, years later, Abdullah informs Chester that Li An’s view of English was correct, since “The national language is the soul of our country, but English is the language of money for Malaysia and Singapore…So English is also the destiny of our country” (292). The relationship between Abdullah and Samad’s racial identities and Malay’s dominance is therefore reframed (and even diminished) as they recognize English’s productivity in Singapore as the language of neocolonialism and capitalism (292).
determining which bodies have any legitimate claim to English, as well as to its canonical literary lineage.

His criticisms of Li An and her views on Malaysia thus deeply affect her psyche, even as she resists his critiques. When Chester learns that Li An teaches English, he remains dubious that English writing has any legitimate bearing on Malaysian interests. He asserts that “it’s no good teaching these kinds of poems any more. This is all British culture...we had a revolution and threw them out with the tea bags, so I know what I’m talking about. You’ve got your own culture. That’s what you should be teaching” (33). As Chester homogenizes Li An’s culture and negates the colonial influences of English writing in the region (including localized reconfigurations of English writing), the presumed authority of the white Western body subtends his comments. That is, he references a conflict between two forces that, through the effects of colonialism and imperialism, have both influenced Malaysia’s development, and assumes insight into each of these events that he views as lacking in Malaysian citizens.

Li An, however, contests the expectation that she should identify with a prescribed culture and its associated language, and explains that she is not teaching culture, but “language, words, images, feelings,” which reiterates English’s association with her affective experiences (41). She counters his supposed expertise and hegemonic impulses by asking: “Aren’t you speaking the English language too? Did you throw it out with your tea bags? How come you don’t have your own American language? What would it be? American Indian?” (33). But Chester remains convinced of his insight into what is proper to Malaysia’s national identity, and his belief that English subverts Malaysian cultural purity, rather than enabling the hybrid composite raciality that Li An locates through English. Chester—as a body that Lim’s writing clearly aligns with the work of neocolonial dominance—suggests English should function as a universal language of
power insofar as it does not undermine Western readings of non-Western cultures, and, following this, as long as its use is still managed by a particular ideal Western form.

Chester’s supposed authority on who should use English, which is upheld by his racial signification, profoundly shapes Li An’s embodiment throughout their relationship. His disavowal of the usefulness of English and English literature in Malaysia therefore goes beyond an issue of linguistic preference, and becomes exemplary of how his “bounded” white body is able to figure Li An as unbounded and affectable. Although she resists his comments, they play a vital role in her gradual abandonment of her love of English and the way that English writing animates her thought. Chester thus functions as a necessary reminder of the limits of the political rescripting of these nations’ linguistic fields that may strive to manage individual identification with language, but cannot erase the influence of privileged white bodies.

Although the narrative suggests that Li An eventually realizes that Chester’s authority and influence merely extends from his association with Western whiteness, this does not immediately undo the effects of his comments. Later in their relationship, Li An expresses that the body—Chester’s body—that she “revered” signifies “nothing” (179). She asks herself: “in the authority of such nothingness, how could she continue to believe in its meaning?” (179). Li An’s sense of “nothingness” is grounded in Chester’s professed desire to remain external to Malaysia’s socio-political landscape, even as his whiteness associates him with influence over Malaysia’s development and racial makeup. In this moment, Li An contends with how Chester’s supposed appreciation of Malaysian diversity relies on tropes of ethno-racial authenticity that simply reify its racial hierarchy.

This discrepancy between their approaches is symbolically underscored by the timing of their tryst, as the night they become physically intimate is also the night of the race riots. As a
result of this relationship, and her conversations with Abdullah and Samad, Li An feels that her life is “an aimless spinning sensation, passive and pushed about by all sorts of people” and that she is “caught in the current” of these authoritative statements (77, 78). She is, in effect, unable to locate and stabilize her place in the nation’s narrative, as her racial identity as Malaysian Chinese remains unrecognized, as does the role that language plays in shaping her conception of her raciality. Lim’s feminist body politics are also crucial here: unlike Wah, Li An is also subjected to the comingling of a racial schema and a gender hierarchy, where men not only intervene to interrogate the distinctiveness of her family structure, but her most basic understanding of how she, and her family, fit into these nations. 74

Despite these distinctions, this scene is precisely why I read English’s role in Joss and Gold as aligning with Wah’s concerns in Diamond Grill. Like Wah, Lim engages with discourses and policies that similarly figure the racial nonhuman through language, and fuses the racial politics and conflicts of language of the 1969 civil disturbances (referred through as “race riots” in the text) with a powerful example of how these issues come to bear on a racial body in daily life. The centrality of language politics and legislation to the riots are thus bound to attempts to dictate language use that destabilize the racial identities of individuals like Li An. Though Li An does not reflect upon her experiences during the race riots once she leaves Malaysia for Singapore, they remain a spectre that haunts her narrative; they are a reminder of a key moment of racial vulnerability for Li An, and of the extreme violence that can result from conflicts that are shaped by racioality and language.

74 Wah’s distinct racial signification compounds his distinction from the destabilization Li An experiences. While Wah is read as white in certain spaces, Li An is rendered racially dominant only within the space of Singapore.
Despite her love of English literature and being part of an academic environment, Li An moves to Singapore after the race riots, and attempts to move on from the stigma of her divorce and Suyin’s birth. Li An subsequently becomes an Editor in Chief and Communications Vice Director at “BioSyn-Sign” in Singapore’s hyper-capitalist national landscape, where everyone is trying to “make a buck. Singapore is go go go” (217). Importantly, Li An’s racial signification shifts from the Malaysian to the Singaporean context, since she is figured as a member of the dominant Chinese race; this does not mean, however, that the signifiers of dominant whiteness fail to affect her, and continue to do so as she has internalized its influence.

After this move, Li An reflects that from “Thousands of miles away, Chester unwittingly continues to school her in the lessons of growing up. She no longer read significance, merely the act…No ideas but in things” (179). One of the “ideas” she initially lets go of after she moves to Singapore is her romanticization of English’s potential. This “growing up” and focus on “things” rather than ideas is exemplified in her daily life in Singapore, where her former desire to navigate the affective psychic/embodied influence of English is refigured by its pragmatic role as the nation’s lingua franca. In other words, rather than draw from English’s significance to connect her to ideas that might help her think through Singapore’s rigid racial grid, as she did in the Malaysian context, she forecloses her former claims to—and identification with—English. Her shifting views on language are grounded in her internalization of Chester’s sentiments, but also closely parallel how the state’s attempts to refute personal identification with English might influence those bodies that have defined themselves through a relationship with English.

It is not until Chester returns to Singapore to forge a relationship with Su Yin that Li An is able to contest the authority that he has continued to hold over a significant part of her racial identity. As she confronts her past with Chester, she also revisits her disillusionment with her
prior relationship to English, which is enacted through her revived interest in her Oxford Book of Modern Verse. As she reconsiders the place that English—and English literature in particular—has in her life, she realizes that “nothing she lived through was finally over,” and experiences a “muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten” (265). Through this, she symbolically connects her past and present, her dream for Malaysia and the reality of her life in Singapore, her family’s racial complexity and her envisioning of a new future.

Rather than focus on how hybrid dialects like Manglish and Singlish rework English and its role in mediating racial difference, what Joss and Gold instead suggests is at once more obvious but easily ignored: the pervasiveness of English, while key to its neocolonial work, means that it always already circulates across imposed ethno-racial lines. It can thus be refigured as a language of hybridity for individuals like Li An, who believes it best expresses her intersectional raciality as a Chinese Malaysian in Singapore. This does not deny that English, alongside Malays and Mandarin and other mother-tongue languages in these nations, is still strategically used to concomitantly mediate their racial fields. Rather, Lim returns to the ambivalence she identifies in her own relationship to English, and suggests that Li An reclaims English’s ambivalence as a language that helps ground her identity, even as it subjects her understanding of her raciality—and her corporeality—to ruptures and revisions. In other words, at a time when the rapid shifts to language policies within both nations remain in an uneasy relationship with the social effects of language during everyday interactions, Lim returns to the usefulness of linguistic ambivalence within Singapore, as well as Malaysia. As Katrina Powell asserts, “Recognising th[e] duality (indeed, multiplicity) of language, Lim cautions against absolutism on either side. The complexity of her experience with her first language...asks readers to reconsider the forgone conclusion of English as only constraining. In this way, she troubles several
positions about the constraints of language” (23). For a body like Li An, whose relationship to language may have been primarily shaped by her academic experience, but is also perceived as an acutely affective problematic mired in her racial embodiment, ambivalence can be a productive position. Li An’s ambivalent relationship to English allows her to draw from English language and writing to define her sense of self outside of the linguistic fields associated with her racial background, but, as she discovers through her interactions with Chester, she has no choice but to remain attuned to her vulnerability to its effects, particularly when its (neo)colonial work can be deployed against her.

But if Li An—as a woman with access to class mobility through her education and migration—is marked as an affectable racial body whose embodiment can be disrupted through imperialistic claims to English, then what results when this type of racial mediation through language is levied against those more vulnerable to these processes? Lim only suggests this possibility in instance where Li An’s sense of self is subject to erasure, particularly when Abdullah and Chester use her relationship with English as a method of exerting race-based authority over her subjectivity. Through these gestures, *Joss and Gold* grapples with the same circulating ideologies and legal histories that inscribe language’s material effects on the vulnerable racial body—including the violent fragmenting, and shifting sense of embodiment that also figure the racial nonhuman—and locates these ideologies within the particular multiracial landscapes of Malaysia and Singapore.

Lim’s and Wah’s respective works self-reflexively use English to explore the relationship between race and English in their narratives. Through this, they illuminate how writing in English, as a transnational literary field that itself is mediated by English’s ideological significance, is uniquely positioned to elaborate on these tensions. In both texts, English is a
crucial method of racial exclusion, particularly in instances when affectable racial bodies are destabilized through the prescriptive work of dominant whiteness. I therefore read both writers as ones who similarly inscribe their protagonists as vulnerable to the discourses that script the racial nonhuman. If the ideal human is grounded in a body in possession of a coherent racial identity, as da Silva’s reading of the racial body suggests, the affectable racial body signifies certain truths about its ostensibly underdeveloped consciousness, which figures these bodies as inferior and subject to exclusion and even violence. Though this analysis, I propose that—despite the distinct racial matrices that underpin multiculturalism in these nations—English helps produce a figure that upholds the unmarked universal position of the ideal human subject, and whose inferiority helps reconcile the ostensible racial equality of these multicultural states with their hierarchal structures.
Chapter II: Exclusionary Violence and Renarativizing the Body of the Racial Nonhuman in *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Garden of Evening Mists*

The previous chapter focused on the ways that English use in Canada, and Malaysia and Singapore, figures the racial nonhuman across these contexts, and how this figuration also defines the hierarchical racial grids of these nations. This chapter extends this reading, and examines the racial nonhuman’s body as a site where forms of exclusionary violence—social, civil, and spatial—coalesce to shape social organization through this figuration, while producing the terms of the prevailing ideal human form. My reading focuses on certain historical “events” where the state exacted variegated forms of violence to seemingly protect itself and its citizens from racial bodies that were necessary to national development, but simultaneously perceived as potential threats. One such event in the Malaysian context involves the State of Emergency ordinances and conditions in pre-Independence Malaya; this chapter examines the Emergency’s connections to racial conflicts and the development of certain narratives about racial organization that persisted after Independence. In the Canadian context, I consider instances of the conditional legislated exclusion of Asian Canadian bodies and focus on forms of immigration and social management that occurred during comparable moments in the nation’s development. I identify these historical occurrences as events to suggest their extension beyond the legislation that defined particular social policies, as well as beyond the specific temporal timeframes often used to declare an “end” to these conflicts.

The production of these violent events as exceptional obscures how certain racial bodies bear a significant contradiction within the state’s work. As this chapter will discuss, through the ideological and material impact of these events, these bodies are rendered as exterior to the terms and traits that define the ideal human type in each nation. That is, as these moments of race-based violence mark particular racial bodies and communities are vulnerable and inferior to the
state’s power, their affectable figuration is contrasted against the self-determined and ideal human that possesses the traits necessary to direct national development. These events therefore shaped social organization in these nations as their effects defined their racial schemas. But, crucially, modern national narratives treat these events as exceptional, and emphasize the nation’s progress beyond them. Yet these states continue to draw from the forms of social management that result from these events, including their role in typifying racial bodies.

This chapter considers not only those bodies most evidently subjected to extreme forms of physical violence alone, but also those whose figurations highlight the tensions between inclusion and exclusion. To differentiate from acts of physical violence that also characterized these periods, I refer to the rendering of these racial bodies as a form of exclusionary violence. While this critique follows da Silva’s premise of how forms of racial exclusion are always already incorporated into the modern state’s social order, it homes in on the ways that forms of exclusion must be renewed to ensure that certain racial bodies never threaten the domain of the ideal and dominant subject. This chapter approaches exclusion not solely as the denial of certain civil rights or as a distancing from certain social processes. Instead, I focus on how exclusionary violence is also found in a similar production of raciality in Canada and Malaysia, as evinced through the aforementioned exclusion of Asian Canadian bodies during the nation’s early development, as well as (predominantly) Chinese bodies under the racialized terms of the Emergency in Malaysia. These instances of racial conflict have been embedded in national narratives of race as unfortunate instances where the state’s protectorate function may have been used excessively, but was justified on the basis of having to manage those racial others who threatened a burgeoning national order. The national narratives of these nations thus continue to
rely on the distinctions produced between populations that were produced during these moments of exclusionary violence.

**Biopolitics and the Exclusion of Racial Bodies**
The methods deployed by the state to keep certain bodies within its domain while subjecting them to its power have been detailed as biopolitical interventions. Vital to this chapter’s focus is how the terms of the human figure into this process, and how inclusion and exclusion are both shaped by demarcations in the population based on notions of what constitutes the human.

In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida notes that one of the fundamental roles of the state is its protection of its subjects. By ensuring their protection through legal and political apparatuses, the state forces individuals to “obey what protects them” (42). Derrida later proposes that the state also depends on its monopoly on declaring and presiding over the death of its subjects, and it must therefore reconcile its need to protect its citizens with its selective exclusion of certain bodies from its protection.75 I read this formulation alongside Derrida’s analysis of a significant figuration that is excluded from the reach of sovereign law (and, following this, outside its protection): the beast. He proposes that the beast—and the qualities that the beast lacks—are defined against what is considered “proper” to the human in order to define these (uniquely human) traits (39).76 Though not the focus of his critique, Derrida

75 Elsewhere, in his discussion of sovereign power and the death penalty, Derrida proposes that a state’s “monopoly on violence is of a piece with the motif of sovereignty. It is also what will always have grounded the death penalty, the right of the state, the right of the sovereign to punish by death” (*Without Alibi* 268).

76 In Derrida’s reading of nonhuman animals, he notes that within the Cartesian tradition, the absolute insistence of superiority through declarations and decision making—and the ultimate decision making of the sovereign in particular—“involves a risk of, or a leaning toward, bêtise” (*The Beast* 173). The claim to absolute knowledge, which includes the very act of appropriating certain properties that are “proper” and exclusive to humankind, is itself bêtise, since it requires imagining that such an attempt can even be complete or successful (Krell 18). Michael Naas also proposes that “this list of what is considered ‘proper
identifies a limit of sovereign power’s protectorate function, and considers the ways that a figure subjected to this limit is defined against a particular configuration of the human. While one of Derrida’s strategies is to complicate this distancing of the human and the beast, his analysis of the distinction between the two can be directed toward a third figuration: those humans who are figured as lacking the traits considered proper to the human. If sovereign power’s protectorate function lapses as the state evinces its monopoly over the life and death of its citizens, then the exclusion of specific bodies from this configuration of the proper human is a method of allowing the state to overlook violence perpetrated against them.

Given the focus of Derrida’s analysis, I turn elsewhere to draw out this reading of how the configuration of the proper human—and those bodies that fall outside of this configuration—defines which bodies are subjected to neglect or violence by the state. Agamben provides a classic critique of how the modern state acquires and evinces its power through its use of exclusionary violence against particular bodies while denying the legitimacy of their death. For instance, Agamben’s theorization of the state of exception examines how the protection of the law is suspended for certain subjects. Agamben refers to zoe as the biological fact of life that is shared by all creatures (including animals), and bios as the way of living proper to an individual or group, which is also associated with the political life of subjects who are fully recognized as

---

77 Agamben’s classic figuration of the homo sacer—the body that can be killed with impunity but cannot be sacrificed in a ritual—has similarly shaped readings of how the state subjects certain bodies to forms of exclusionary violence while still keeping them within the polis. Homo sacer is “human life…included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed),” and therefore stands as the counterpoint to sovereign power which is within law, but also outside of juridical rule as it can suspend the rule of law indefinitely. Agamben describes how the body of the homo sacer, though biologically alive, is simultaneously denied “all rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence,” and therefore became “situated in a zone between life and death, inside and outside” (91).
citizens, and who therefore benefit from the protection of the state. Within the state of exception, sovereign power suspends the rule of law, and is able to remove the political autonomy (bios) of particular subjects and reduce them to bare life, but keep them within the body politic and the reach of the state’s power. Agamben also describes that the ability to dictate the human qualities of particular bodies and “return [them] to life,” or conversely, separate “the human body… from its normal political status” and “abando[n] [it] to the most extreme misfortunes” is not in the hands of the sovereign alone, but is configured through various apparatuses (scientific, epistemological, cultural) that measure the biological and social figuration of the human body (151). Like Derrida, Agamben conveys that modern power is not characterized by its direct punitive potential alone; but Agamben’s reading extends this by identifying sovereign power’s capacity to create these zones where legal authority is suspended, and the neglect of certain bodies—as well as their exploitation and exposure to violence—is sanctioned and integrated with the normative power of the state.

These critiques both return to the fundamental method through which the modern state establishes its power: it evinces its ability to protect particular subjects, and excludes others from the domain of this protection, but keeps them within the nation’s juridical order. I draw on the general framework provided by both these interventions, as they articulate how this process is reconciled with the central mechanisms of sovereign power. Taken together, they also convey a preoccupation with how the figuration of bodies that are rendered as inferior human types—or altogether outside the domain of the normative human—is crucial to this process. I use these readings as a point of departure for my analysis of these processes in relation to ethno-racial distinction. Alexander Weheliye suggests that in classic biopolitical thought, ethno-racial

---

78 Bare life is not wholly conflated with zoe, since bare life is not purely zoe itself, but rather the absence of bios, or what remains when a subject is stripped of their bios.
difference does not emerge as part of the state’s “biopolitical apparatus,” since foundational interventions in this field predominately focus on how racism disrupts Europe’s social fabric at certain historical moments (61).\(^79\) Weheliye then argues for the necessity of a racial analytic that considers how the racial body becomes the locus of intersecting discourses that sanction political violence rooted in racial difference, and renders some bodies as extraneous to humanity.

In order to develop such an analytic that examines how raciality and the limits of the human work concomitantly to mediate the modern racial fields of the particular nations that are the focus of my analysis, I return to da Silva’s comparative analysis that establishes raciality as the origin of the circulating ideal white form and the social orders that allows this socio-political violence to persist. As explained in the previous chapter, da Silva contends that this circulating ideal human form—the “proper” human—has been shaped by a notion of the human whose “spirit” reflects a post-Enlightenment Western consciousness. But, crucially, even in nations that today lack the presence of dominant white bodies, such as particular postcolonial territories, the traits of the ideal, self-determined human that are associated with dominant whiteness persist, and continue to influence their racial grids; these traits are reiterated by racial subjects whose “spirits” reflect the attributes of the ideal Western (white) subject.\(^80\) To develop this analysis da Silva examines the under-theorized statements of social organization such as: “Brazil has a

\(^79\) Weheliye proposes that biopolitical analyses that ignore race risk producing an “indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization” (4). Drawing from other criticisms of exemplary biopolitical interventions, Weheliye instead argues for the productivity of eliding biopolitical theory with the concept of “racializing assemblages,” which construes race not through classificatory social and scientific systems alone, but as a “set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity” into “humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (4). Weheliye specifically considers racializing assemblages to be the “hierarchical indicators” that help “translate the lacerations left on the captive body by apparatuses of political violence” to a “domain rooted in the visual truth-value accorded to quasi-biological distinctions between different human groupings” (40).

\(^80\) Da Silva proposes that race continues to “demarcate an entire (social symbolic) region outside the terrain of the just, legal, and the good” while whiteness signifies universality and a domain where violence is foreign (Towards 447).
multiple system of racial classification, while the U.S. has a binary one,” and “Americans are obsessed with race, while Brazilians repress it” (Toward 260-1). She considers that, despite the differences in forms of racial subjection within these nations, they rely upon similar modern social configurations that “defined who among the inhabitants of a given nation-state would inhabit the territory of transparency, the one governed by universality and self-determination.” (262).

This comparative framework conveys that the violent exclusion of racial others from this circulating notion of humanity provides a similar basis for social organization across these diverse modern states with histories of colonialism. While twentieth-century notions of the nation—the “properly modern political category”—provided the “basis for capturing that which unifies and distinguishes a people’s consciousness,” race difference was established as the “ultimate source of the unbecoming ideas and practices of exclusion” (Towards 432-3). Through this process, many forms of racial violence and exclusion are already integrated within national writings of raciology so that they are not read as contrary to national ideals. Further, as race difference was resignified as a substantive sign that explained these “rational” distinctions between groups, this process erased the “conditions of production of the racial” and racial difference (423). This analysis therefore proposes that race-based injustice is not opposed to the values of the modern state; it is aligned with the state’s construction of racial bodies as inferior and affectable, against which dominant whiteness stands as a signifier of the superior human form. As a result, raciosity’s role in shaping social justice is often ignored unless racial difference is explicitly associated with exclusionary acts.81

81 This construction of racial exclusion as exceptional rather than constitutive of the modern state renders “certain claims of racial injustice…either inarticulate or unheard because they fail to meet the criterion of race invocation” (Towards 420). It also means that less apparent instances of racial inequity are read as
Da Silva focus is on how “Indian and black” bodies have been subjected to the most extreme forms of these violent processes. But, she also discusses how the necessary integration of non-white others for work and population growth required that their positions be carefully articulated by the state. Most useful to this chapter is her analysis of how the economic need for racial bodies outside of the dominant group—including Asian bodies—is supported by the state’s ability to selectively deploy forms of social management.\(^8\) This critique establishes the tension between bodies that are included within the nation, but excluded from the position held by dominant individuals:

For every time the U.S. political and economic needs has required Asian labor, the borders of Asian difference have been open to whichever favored nationality would be retained, as well as to whichever disfavored nationality would be placed outside. In both instances, the doors would never be fully closed to these particular affectable others, because the U.S. state would promptly unleash juridical acts to attend to the state’s most immediate economic needs without threatening to locate the Asian other in the place occupied by the U.S. American subject. Such a magnificent undertaking belongs in globality, for it enables the writing of the Asian subaltern subject both as a threat to and as an excessive signifier of that which only whiteness properly signifies, the subject able to actualize the economic and juridical ends of reason. (Toward 218).\(^8\)

---

\(^8\) In her discussion of the United States, da Silva proposes that “Early Asian immigrants…would always be the ‘newcomers’ whose bodies would always communicate their foreignness in a social configuration built by and for Europeans,” which broadly follows the standard evaluation of the place of Asian immigrants in racial schemas across North America (Toward 214).

\(^8\) Lisa Lowe’s watershed work *Immigrant Acts* provides one of the foundational analyses of this tension in the context of the United States. Lowe describes how Asian Americans live in “the contradictions of...
In essence, the exclusionary forms of raciality applied to the nation’s most subjected racial others works coactively with the selective incorporation of these additional racial bodies, as these nations’ fundamental organizational schemas would ideally account for their presence.

Da Silva’s analysis here accounts for how the bodies of Asian others may not be subjected to the same forms of violence and social death as black bodies, or the global figuration of Indigenous populations. This writing of the Asian subaltern subject as both a threat and an “excessive signifier” again returns to the complexities of exclusionary violence. These bodies face variegated forms socio-juridical violence that help maintain the racial line by ensuring that they remain within the nation’s social order, but are excluded from the figuration of the dominant and ideal human. Further, certain Asian racial groups produced as “favoured nationalities” through their useful contributions are contrasted with other racial groups who remain “disfavoured” due to their comparative lack of utility or their perceived threat to social order. For instance, as I have discussed, economically successful East Asians in Canada, or Indians in Singapore and Malaysia, are strategically produced by the state as exemplary non-dominant racial others who are more aligned with national values.

Da Silva also describes how narrativization becomes a crucial part of this process. The “truth” of these racial bodies must be constantly “produce[d]” in representation through “narratives of the nation” that render racial bodies as affectable others through their visible difference, their “mores” and actions that ostensibly depart from the universal subject, and the explanation that their subalternity is a result of their inferior consciousness (“Toward” 196,

Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity”(8-9). I quote da Silva here, however, because her analysis rearticulates points like Lowe’s through a comparative framework that considers how this process takes place “in globality.”
158). Da Silva’s reading of this need to “produce” these specific racial others through both racial epistemologies and national narratives dovetails with Steve Martinot’s discussion of racial subjection and how this subjection is reiterated or “renarrativized” (*Rule 59*). Elsewhere, Martinot describes renarrativization as “to be made other than one is, in terms that are not one’s own. It is to be displaced and replaced by a system of imposed narratives—narratives by which hierarchy defines, manifests, and maintains itself” (*Forms* 230). In his discussion of Albert Memmi’s writing on racism, Martinot explains that Memmi conveys the ways in which a hierarchical “system of oppression” is “concretize[d]” through a “renarrativization of both the dominant and the dominated—that is, a renarrativization of the dominant through a renarrativization of the dominated”—which works through prevailing socio-scientific discourses that demarcate race difference and help “provide a basis for prejudice” (*Rule 26*). As this chapter discusses, another method used to produce this renarrativization is through the deployment of provisional laws and regulations that work alongside these socio-scientific discourses to reiterate the place of certain racial bodies in these social schemas.

The ongoing production of how these racial others figure in the nation’s social matrix is one of the distinctions between affectable racial bodies and the dominant human form. While dominant whiteness is also (re)narrativized to ensure it consistently permeates social structures and ideologies of the ideal human, this repeated narrativization, unlike that of marginalized racial bodies, does not destabilize the position of white bodies. Instead, the hegemony of whiteness is already affirmed through national narratives and institutions that uphold its association with a superior ability to direct the course of the nation.

But just as these racial bodies can be narrativized through these institutional, social-juridical, and ideological processes, they can also be narratively reconfigured. Da Silva proposes
that the social scientific descriptors of difference that name “bodies, social configurations, and global regions” would need to be reproduced—and, I propose, narratively reframed within racial schemas—to begin to undo the politics of difference that underpin the position of these bodies (325 “Bahia”). In her analysis of the Afro-Brazilian cultural group, Bloco Olodum, da Silva describes how their “racial subaltern speech” in their music provides an “emancipatory text which does not seek to locate the emerging racial subject in transparency”; instead, their songs “deplo[y] the racial and the cultural,” but provide a narration where subaltern subjects are able to represent themselves without “resolving” the signifiers that mark the ostensible “essence” of these racial bodies (330). Further, their work also links the affectability of bodies in both Africa and Brazil through a shared political relationship toward resistance.

Drawing upon this relationship between raciality and particular forms of narrativization, this chapter examines narrativizations that define prevailing epistemes of raciality in Canada and Malaysia. This chapter focuses on narratives that are shaped by dominant social-juridical and historical descriptions of certain events, and eventually come to define social structures. They are therefore always narratives of raciality, even if they do not always explicitly reference race distinction. Similar to Martinot’s discussion, this chapter considers the reproduction of these dominant narratives of raciality through the implementation of race-based laws (and, in the case of Malaysia, Emergency measures) alongside socio-scientific and historical discourses to uphold racial matrices; it also examines how narrativization through the methods that da Silva discusses,

---

84 The group’s lyrics link the affectable material conditions of existence for bodies in both Africa and Brazil, but do not connect these figures through some notion of a shared “spirit”: instead, they express that their similarities result from a “political relationship, a contention” experienced by individuals across these locales (336). Artistic interventions like these can produce a “memory determined by raciality, one which does not rehearse the transparent subject of historicity,” but instead links these particular locales by showing how these “distant geographic places inhabit the same subaltern region” (336).
including through artistic projects that contest and gradually reconfigure the valence of these racial histories. Through this framework, I specifically examine how the body of the racial nonhuman is produced through the ongoing salience of these exclusionary narratives across these contexts, and how the figuration of these bodies can be narrativized differently in small but productive ways. For these individuals produced as racial nonhumans through these persistent forms of violence, reconciling their contradictory inclusion/exclusion is no easy task when the relationship between their figuration and the terms of raciality has been dominated by national narratives.

To draw out this reading, I turn to literary engagements that explore these intersecting forms of narrativization through their own distinct narrative forms. I chose two texts that focus on exclusionary national narratives in Canada and Malaysia, and that attempt to (re)write the figuration of racial nonhumans into visibility. In the Canadian context, I read Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*, which considers how the historical exclusion of certain Asian Canadian bodies throughout the nation’s history has helped affirm the figuration of the ideal human form in modern Canada. I then turn to Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists*, set largely in Malaya. Tan’s novel examines the racial violence of the Occupation and Emergency, as well as innocuous forms of state control as the figuration of certain racial bodies that is used to reify social organization.

As my analysis draws together these particular historical narratives of raciality within these nations’ modern social grids, I home in on how Lai and Tan approach the challenging task of putting these complex narratives into conversation through their approaches to narrative temporality. Derrida’s counter to Agamben’s distinction between zoe and bios is useful when theorizing how this approach can begin to unsettle the prevailing forms of renarrativization that
inhere in the figuration of the racial nonhuman. Derrida proposes that Agamben reads the reigning terms of sovereign life and the forms of biopower that inflect the human as originating from a singular catalyst (333, 332). To counter this reading, Derrida considers the limits of standard forms of history to argue that modern sovereign power and biopolitics do not emanate from a singular point of origin or “decisive event” (332). Instead, even as he views historical interventions as “indispensable” for understanding the “Bio-powers or zoo-powers of what we call the modernity of our time,” he suggests how to read influential political “texts” (in the broadest sense, including texts which are not “even books at all”) in relation to “our time,” and asks if we can dispense with the inquiries if these readings might compel us to reconsider ways of “Thinking history, of doing history, of articulating a logic and a rhetoric onto a thinking of history” (332). Derrida specifically critiques the belief that certain discourses are contained within foundational events in history (333). He also inquires if we can think of history not as “diachronic succession” or “synchronic simultaneity” alone, but can give up reliance on a “linear history” altogether (333). From this, he proposes that the development of sovereignty also has “More than one ground…more than one solid and single threshold” (334). Amy Swiffen argues that in Derrida’s analysis, there are
multiple forms of partition, division, and condition that broach a sovereignty that is imagined to be indivisible. If this is correct then it is not possible to oppose sovereignty

---

85 Derrida examines Agamben’s reading of Aristotle to develop this analysis. Agamben’s critique uses this classical text to evince how the “production of a biopolitical body [is] the originary activity of sovereign power,” as he argues that Aristotle engages with a similar division between zoe and bios. Derrida, however, returns to Aristotle’s description of the human being as politikon zoon (‘political animal’) to propose that Aristotle understands the human zoon as political “By nature” (qtd. in Swiffen 353). Following this, Derrida proposes that it is ‘obvious’ that Aristotle is already “Thinking of biopolitics,” but that this division in life that defines Agamben’s argument is not founded in Aristotle’s analysis (349).

86 Derrida specifically proposes that Agamben suggests that the reigning terms of sovereign life and the forms of biopower that inflect the human originate from a singular catalyst (333, 332).
because sovereignty is not one thing. For instance, to unconditionally oppose sovereignty would mean opposing classical principles of freedom and self-determination…The issue is therefore not a choice between sovereignty and non-sovereignty but among ways of sharing, transferring, translating, and dividing sovereignty; while Agamben’s formulation productively conceives of sovereignty “in terms of an essential relation to bare life,” his reading of this relationship as potentially immutable suggests that it might be possible to overcome sovereign politics, if only the relation were discarded (354-5).

Derrida thus provides an alternative to critiques that inscribe the relationship between sovereign power and the biopolitical body as fundamental to the modern state. To push this reading further, by proposing that sovereign power does not result from any one historical “ground” that is ensconced in the past, Derrida’s reading can also open up ways to reconsider a fundamental historical relation between the proper human capable of wielding sovereign power, and those figured outside this problematic. I thus consider how Derrida’s theorization of the constraints of standard forms of history is evident in both Salt Fish Girl and The Garden of Evening Mists as they contest these limits.

Alternate Origin Narratives in Salt Fish Girl
Salt Fish Girl is narratively cyclical, and its chapters move between three iterations of the Chinese creation deity, Nu Wa: Nu Wa during her early life during the pre-Shang Dynasty, her life in South China in the early 1900s, and her rebirth in futuristic Canada’s “Unregulated Zone” in 2062, where Nu Wa is reincarnated as a girl called Miranda. In her first incarnation, Nu Wa, who is part fish, creates humans before deciding to become a human herself; she eventually falls in love with a fish seller, the titular Salt Fish Girl. She later leaves the Salt Fish Girl to work in a
Westernized city, but is left at an upscale hotel without papers or money and is imprisoned for drug trafficking and being an illegal immigrant and eventually murdered. Nu Wa is then reborn as Miranda, who smells powerfully of durian. Miranda is experimented on due to her unusual odour, but also ends up working in a laboratory that creates and performs tests on cloned women/animal hybrids that form the nation’s expendable labour force. Like her ancestor, Nu Wa, Miranda begins a transgressive relationship with a woman, Evie, who is also a clone. Though Miranda is also lured away by the trappings of capital, she eventually returns to Evie to help her and the other clones to develop a community where they are able to mitigate the effects of the state’s exclusionary violence.

Lai states that she retains a “burning desire for the past; that it should have a form; that it should have a body” and believes that “our very survival in this country depends on the articulation of this form, the construction and affirmation of this body” (“Political” 150). Salt Fish Girl exemplifies the value of highly allegorical writing for Asian Canadian literature that explores these racial histories. The text’s narrative style—and its treatment of temporality—is a crucial part of this process; it refuses to treat the past and the experiences of those subjects as a series of isolated events that can be traced linearly through a national narrative. Instead, it moves between different periods in the nation’s history to connect the experiences of racial bodies across these periods, and across variegated figurations—cross-cultural, -sexual, -racial, and even -species—to expose how certain racial bodies are subjected to the exclusionary limits of the human. Salt Fish Girl draws on fantasy and science fiction conceits when exploring these events in Canada’s history and future, and reimagines how the body of the racial nonhuman is

---

87 As Pilar Cuder-Domínguez describes, Asian Canadian women writers like Lai and Hiromi Goto draw on aspects of speculative fiction and science fiction as these genres offer new epistemologies and alternative “performances of racial and sexual identities to those traditionally enforced” (116). Cuder-Dominguez also describes that “gender, race, and genre are intimately connected in these novels” (117).
produced. It also imagines new futures for these racial nonhumans, through these new forms of relationality, and in doing so, renarrates some of the social-juridical and political processes that mark certain racial bodies as easily subjected to forms of violent exclusion. According to Lily Cho, foregrounding the history of the “dispossession and dislocation” of Asian North Americans should occur “not because it is ‘history’ in the Western historiographic sense,” but because “there are pasts that constitute our present…we cannot risk losing sight of the way in which the racisms of the past continue to shape the racisms of our present,” as well as the “historical contingencies” of how race and ethnicity are constructed (“Asian” 186). Narratives like Lai’s, that help weave together intersecting, disjointed, and co-temporal histories, illuminate these complex and largely unrecognized narratives that cannot be adequately brought into discourse by standard and linear historiographic forms alone.

But even as Lai’s text gives a form to these alternate national and personal origin narratives, and imagines new racial configurations, the Asian Canadian racial histories it explores are not abstracted beyond recognition. As I will discuss, the text occasionally interrupts its allegorical reading to acknowledge the actual historical conditions of the racial bodies—largely Asian Canadian—that populate the text. Through this imbrication of the historical and the allegorical, Salt Fish Girl does not simply reframe dominant historical discourses; by weaving them together across these historical periods, it demands an engagement with the racial bodies whose personal narratives and experiences have been similarly fragmented by forms of racial violence (social, psychological, physical, cultural) in Canada.

The cyclical form of Salt Fish Girl begins with a non-Western creation story that is repeated at the narrative’s conclusion. Nu Wa initially creates humans in her likeness, yet spitefully bifurcates the humans’ tails and provides her creations with legs (3). Lai’s envisioning
of the Nu Wa myth and its image of both an impure creator and bifurcated subject challenges dominant stories of origins and progress. Unlike the Western humanistic Genesis myth, it also situates the symbolic figure of the racial nonhuman as the initial inhabitant of the earth, rather than reiterating the significance of the “pure” and ideal human subject. Nu Wa’s racialization is implied through her “birth” in China, and her “rope of smooth black hair” that connects her to her rebirth as Miranda as a “bawling black-haired baby girl,” whose racialization is made apparent as she is described as the “only Asian child in her class” (2, 48, 23).88 Half human, half nonhuman animal hybridity—like Nu Wa’s—becomes entwined with these signs of racial distinction, and places an imaginative version of the racial nonhuman as central to this origin story.

This story of creation is a metonym for those unspoken traumas that inflect the racial body, and the bifurcated tail is a site of unknown historical pain that is obscured by the image of the pure and fully formed human subject. *Salt Fish Girl* also emphasizes the recurrence of this particular production of racial bodies. The text ends with an almost identical image of new life being birthed by another human/fish hybrid, and the statement that “Everything will be all right…until next time” (268). As Lai describes, locating hybridity and mutability within these origin stories is a way of theorizing “a place of new beginnings” for those who struggle with locating their experiences within dominant historical narratives (“Corrupted” np). *Salt Fish Girl’s* opening therefore frames the story with an investment—however symbolic—in providing an origin story for those racial nonhumans who have lost their origin stories and have been historically excluded from the domain of the ideal human. This alternate origin story also engages with the often-ignored violence that is associated with their figuration.

88 Hair is also a racial signifier that defines Nu Wa’s creations, who are made with “varying nose length and eye colour, shoe size and heart size” but are connected by their “glossy black hair” (4).
Apart from the authority of theological origin stories, *Salt Fish Girl* also explores individual origin narratives, and locates Nu Wa’s early experiences within a locale that parallels the conditions of Canada’s early national development. Through this symbolic enactment of the construction of a national history, the text details the personal narratives of Asian subjects in diaspora who are subject to early forms of national organization. Once Nu Wa transforms into a human, she abandons her lover, the titular Salt Fish Girl, for the allure of the “Island of Mists and Forgetfulness” (124). The Island of Mist and Forgetfulness is, broadly, an allegory for the early development of Western nations (its relationship with Western modernity and capitalism confirmed by its associations with the twin ideals of “Progress” and “Democracy”) (125). The descriptions of the Island also include certain signifiers that emphasize its connection to post-Confederation Canada, from the use of similar place names (“Spool Island” and “Ville d’Espoir”), to references to previous colonial competition between the British and French, to broader descriptions of language loss and constrained expectations for immigrants. Through the Island’s allegorical potential, Nu Wa’s story intersects with the forms of civil violence and exclusion that many new Asian Canadian immigrants faced during Canada’s settlement and early development. Due to her race and gender, while Nu Wa is on the Island she is taken advantage of, threatened with deportation, forced to work menial labor jobs or live on the streets, and is eventually imprisoned for crimes she did not commit (124, 140). When Nu Wa leaves the Island and returns to China decades later, unaged, her human family marries her off to a family friend with ties across British Columbia and in Toronto, with the hope that she will be able to get Canadian citizenship, move to Gold Mountain, and start sending remittances to her family. However, she is eventually drowned due to her attempts to satisfy demands that she reproduce (179). Nu Wa is therefore figured as a body in diaspora that exists outside of any semblance of
social belonging or identity. She lacks any rights in either locale, which is suggestive of how the different forms of physical and exclusionary violence that she faces can occur transnationally. Further, her attempts to resist the demands placed on her body immediately amplify these forms of violence.

The narrative traces this history from social formations that pre-date Canada through Nu Wa’s early life as a human, to modern schemas that are predicated on racial hierarchies, as the story shifts to the life of Nu Wa’s next incarnation (125). Miranda is born 250 years after Nu Wa’s death from a seed-form of Nu Wa that floats from the South China Sea and is consumed by Miranda’s mother in Canada; her life often mirrors aspects of Nu Wa’s (209, 205). Miranda lives in the futuristic, dystopian land of the Unregulated Zone outside the walled city of Serendipity (identified as once part of Vancouver). Serendipity is a type of techno-Oriental biocapitalist dystopia masquerading as a utopia; the Unregulated Zone in particular echoes the forms of marginalization that Nu Wa experiences on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. As Rita Wong describes it, the Unregulated Zone is “uncomfortably similar to today’s Free Trade Zones,” and is therefore the “rational extension of policies that exploit and discard labour for the sake of momentary profit” (119). This sudden temporal shift is crucial to the text’s reframing of the historical narratives that have defined particular populations. By extending its alternate origin story of both Canada and the Asian Canadian bodies that played a role in this history, through to the present and into the future, Salt Fish Girl resists the potential erasure of these stories in the future, while anticipating how the experiences of racial nonhumans might be further occluded in the present.

While Nu Wa’s and Miranda’s narratives are similarly framed by signifiers of Canada’s history, both extend beyond this context, but not solely through Nu Wa’s experiences as a body
in diaspora. Their biological link also connects them to other instances of racial subjection and reveals certain patterns of racial violence across the nation’s history that has produced bodies as racial nonhumans. Both of their stories intersect with the lives of other diasporic Asian bodies who are “favoured” insofar as they are included in national space to benefit its development, but are still subject to forms of direct violence and exclusion. This connection expands the text’s origin narrative for racial nonhumans; it incorporates those whose lives are only acknowledged in “history” through their labour and material contributions into its alternate genealogy. This is not to say that Lai ignores the distinctions between the particular conditions that shaped national organization across these historical contexts. Rather, the narrative draws together these disparate contexts to signal the patterns of violence that connect these bodies across their sites of subjection.

For instance, *Salt Fish Girl* connects the experience of marginalized immigrant women workers across the contexts of China and futuristic Canada. Nu Wa details how the Salt Fish Girl works in a Chinese factory where myriad women—including migrant women from elsewhere in Asia—have psychological breakdowns due to their labour:

A Malaysian girl[’s]...hysteria had provoked others, until half the women in the factory were screaming and howling and throwing themselves against the wall in sheer frustration with the dreariness of their toil and the damage it was exacting from their once young bodies and bright faces (122-23).

The experiences of these factory workers in China are then reiterated in the form of the bodies of the nonhuman clones that populate *Serendipity*. Miranda discusses the Janitors—bioengineered racial bodies—through rhetoric that mirrors descriptions of racial immigrants in Canada today; the janitors are described as “illegal” and as “dark bodies” that speak a language that Miranda
does not understand (75, 76). The “othering” of the janitors takes an extreme form, as the biotechnical reproduction of the women’s bodies excludes them from the category of the human altogether. Yet as Rita Wong argues, “the thousands of genetically engineered workers trapped in the factories of the future, space is demarcated through force and passages of confinement is not so distant from the present….these women are often excluded from the protections to which all citizen-workers should be entitled [as] ‘employers are able to evade regulatory provisions’” (113, 120). In essence, the alternate origin narrative(s) produced through Nu Wa’s incarnations foreground the necessary role of racial women’s bodies to national organization, as they are vital to social and economic processes. Their exploitation also persists through a particular invocation of exclusionary violence that undermines their claims to personhood, and produces them as subjects who cannot levy claims against the state.

**Narrativizing Racial Bodies through the Clones’ “Sources”**

The characterization of Miranda’s lover, Evie, connects *Salt Fish Girl*’s examination of exclusionary violence to its concern with disrupting dominant narrativizations that erase these histories. Through Evie and the other clones’ figurations, *Salt Fish Girl* anticipates how Canada’s socio-racial grids might be reconfigured as the terms of the modern human are complicated by biotechnological advances. Evie is exemplary of those bodies whose racial figuration and exclusion help (re)define social organization in Canada. Evie in particular represents the racial subjectivity against which the ideal human figure in Serendipity is

---

89 Aihwa Ong’s analysis of foreign domestic workers is also apt here. Ong contends that these women labourers in particular are subjected to two technologies of control: labour incarceration, on the one hand, and a technology of securitization that treats them as potential political threats, on the other, since they suggest a backward slide to dependency on the bodies of slaves, which threatens national ideas of progress and the development of global “rights” (201).
contrasted and stabilized. She is one of many genetically-engineered clones of “Third World” and “Indigenous” peoples. There are several different “lines” of clones produced in Serendipity’s laboratories to work in factories—a detail that again hearkens back to the Salt Fish Girl’s factory job in China. Each of the thousands of clones from different lines contains human and animal DNA to render them as genetically nonhuman, since only animals can be ethically cloned. For instance, there is a Japanese Canadian “Miyako” line that is spliced with cat genes, while Evie is from the “Sonia” line of Chinese Canadian clones that contains 0.03% carp DNA. Evie’s particular human source is a 20th century Chinese Canadian woman who was interned alongside her Japanese husband—a significant point that I will return to later. The clones’ atypical genetics work alongside their racially-impure sources to render them as a workforce comprised of expendable racial nonhumans. Like the Janitors, they live “without a legal existence to begin with” since rights and the laws of protection only apply to those who are “defined as persons” (248, 160). Salt Fish Girl envisions a future where racial nonhumans are also read scientifically as genetic racial nonhumans, but suggests that this process relies on the recirculation of historical scientific fields like racial typology.\textsuperscript{90} Through the deliberate use of these particular racial bodies for the clones’ sources, the historical logic used to justify their social and civil exclusion is constantly renewed in order to affirm the clones’ inferiority.

By drawing together the legislated racial violence experienced by these racial groups through the clones’ sources and their social/physical containment, Salt Fish Girl again uses history and allegory to expose the logic of anti-Asian racism that has shaped Canada’s history, and that persists in new forms. The narrative predominantly engages with particular moments of

\textsuperscript{90} As Robyn Morris proposes, by situating her texts amidst these science fiction tropes, Lai is able to both “char[t] and critique[e]” a “racialized Enlightenment rhetoric that continues, in the postmodern age, to bind discussion of human variation/otherness to skin colour and race” (82).
racial exclusion that affected Chinese and Japanese Canadians. For instance, the clones’ status as legal no-bodies also reiterates instances like the disenfranchisement of Chinese Canadians to limit their access to jobs, the Chinese Head Tax, and the Chinese Exclusion Act. Each of these events involved the removal of certain juridical rights for Chinese Canadians and the restriction of their access to many economic advantages. These examples of racist legislation bolstered a narrative of exclusion that rendered Chinese bodies in Canada as unassimilable. The clones’ characterization also connects this particular history with that of Japanese Canadians both through the production of the cat-hybrid Japanese Canadian clones and the internment of Evie’s source.

As Roy Miki notes, while the government has always publicly linked the internment to the events of WWII and national security, many Japanese Canadians were detained solely on the basis of their race, even though they were not charged with any crime (37). Miki argues that the “uprooting” of Japanese Canadians was not simply an “isolated act of racism, but the culmination of discriminatory attitudes directed towards them from the early days of settlement”; the sentiments surrounding anyone of Japanese descent during the war simply provided an “opportune moment” for racist individuals and groups to “attack the social and economic base of the thriving Japanese Canadian community, under the guise of national security” (17). Both of these significant instances of legislated race-based exclusion were thus moments where pre-existing racial discourses and ideologies were renewed and further legitimized through the work of the law.

Both of these histories that define the clones’ sources are also part of a less apparent narrative of exclusionary violence— one that rendered the lives of Chinese and Japanese bodies in Canada as a contradiction, where they were figured both as a threat to white homogeneity and
as a necessary workforce. The historical figuration of both these groups during moments like the Head Tax and internment similarly produced individuals through a narrative of socio-juridical exclusion that was attached to their racial distinction. As Lily Cho explains, for Chinese Canadians, the racism associated with the Head Tax in particular has been “marked by contemporary discourse as a policy of state-sanctioned discrimination motivated by repugnance for Chinese immigrants in Canada – a logic of undesirability that creates a policy of restriction and ultimately outright exclusion” (“Rereading” 63). However, Cho notes that the Head Tax “might have been more ambivalent in its intention than one of simple and outright exclusion,” since it did little to limit the number of Chinese immigrants in Canada, and instead produced a system of indentured labour (64). Put differently, this seemingly exceptional moment of legislated racist exclusion did not simply figure Chinese immigrants as unwanted bodies, but produced them as a desired and economically strategic labour force.91 This dichotomy is more closely aligned with contemporary figurations of Chinese Canadians than lingering discourses of social undesirability.92 Similarly, while Japanese Canadians were stripped of their rights while their communities and livelihoods were systematically dismantled, the nation again needed them for their labour.93 For instance, labour shortages on farms across Alberta and Manitoba resulted

91 Cho proposes that the head tax also “rationalized racist labour exploitation on the basis of benevolent liberal inclusion. It was this cultural logic that created the Chinese immigrant as an object and enabled a policy of racism based on a rationale of inclusion, justice, and fairness” (“Rereading” 76).
92 Cho argues that “In a moment of national formation and imperial expansion, Chinese immigrants were situated within the Canadian imaginary as both purely subservient and dangerously suspect,” and that Chinese labourers were rendered through a “stereotype of Chineseness couched in a language of both disgust and desire, both hate and idealism” to allow the ongoing exploitation of Chinese bodies and reconcile them with developing liberal ideals (68).
93 In addition to detaining Japanese Canadians without cause, the government granted the Custodian of Enemy Property the power to sell, without the consent of owners, all property owned by detained Japanese Canadians. Most items “were sold or auctioned off at a mere fraction of their value,” leaving many detained Japanese Canadians completely dispossessed (Miki Justice 42). The government also justified using the funds generated from the sale of Japanese Canadians’ property to pay for their internment. Miki identifies the extent of the injustice here, noting that “[u]nlke prisoners of war or enemy
in a demand for “cheap labour,” and the government recruited interned Japanese Canadian to fill this need (Miki Redress 41).94 This uprooting and the dispossession of Japanese Canadians at the hands of the government ensured that even after their release, Japanese Canadians would lack the financial capacity or social infrastructure to fully rebuild their communities, and after this period, these ostensibly necessary Japanese Canadians were forced to disperse and relocate far from their established communities.95 Even as individuals from both these communities were gradually figured as members of a productive workforce, and as part of the nation, they were already prefigured as extraneous to the position of dominant white bodies. Exclusionary violence in this sense takes a particularly insidious form, as individuals experience the simultaneous forces of being needed but never belonging; they are permitted to contribute to the nation, but are subject to circulating ideologies that work alongside the full force of the law to highlight their ostensible (racialized) shortcomings.

*Salt Fish Girl* uses the narrative connections between these histories of inclusion and exclusion to engage with a particular figuration of the racial nonhuman that tracks throughout the text. Evie’s narration of the clones’ sources highlights how the subjection of certain racial bodies is not merely reflective of unfortunate moments in a nation’s history; it suggests that the racial narratives developed across particular historical events worked in concert to predetermine the future figuration of these bodies. Evie describes to Miranda how one of Serendipity’s large corporations, Nextcorp, “bought out the Diverse Genome Project around the same time as I was

__________________________

nationals” who had protection under the Geneva Convention, Japanese Canadian citizens were “forced to pay for their own internment” (43).

94 Despite the poor working and living conditions on these farms, the “policy of breaking up families was suspended” for those who would relocate; as a result about 4000 Japanese Canadians relocated to the prairies “to keep their families together” (41).

95 Following their release, Japanese Canadians were given the option of either dispersing East of the Rockies or repatriating to Japan. It was made clear to the Japanese Canadian community that failure to choose one of these two options would be taken as “evidence of disloyalty” and result in later deportation.
born,” which “focused on the peoples of the so-called Third World, Aboriginal peoples, and peoples in danger of extinction” (160). Evie’s comments reveal the persistent need for these racial bodies that were already produced as an exploitable workforce, to the extent that their genomes were preserved from extinction. This act of preservation again contradicts the notion that the state (and its supporting facilities) would favour the total exclusion and outright eradication of non-white racial others. Instead, the historical narratives surrounding these bodies keeps them securely ensconced within a racial grid that prevents their unique figuration from overtaking hegemonic whiteness. Evie confirms to Miranda that all the “Workers” in Serendipity have “Brown eyes and black hair, every single one”; when Miranda responds, “Stuff like that is not supposed to happen anymore,” Evie informs her that “Stuff like that never stopped” (160). Importantly, this discussion takes place immediately after Evie reveals her genetic connection to the marginality of Chinese Canadians and the internment, which again frames the figuration of her body as an extension of the historical experiences and treatment of her “source,” a woman called “Ai” (160). Evie also describes how the corporations that produce and control the clones attempt to keep their connection to this history a secret. Her observation again returns to how the modern/futuristic state may treat these events solely as part of the nation’s history, but still uses the clones’ raciality to signify the larger logic that enabled these atrocities (160). Through this, Salt Fish Girl highlights the ongoing effects on social organization that results from this legacy of keeping bodies within the nation, but external to the same history of juridical and social belonging experienced by ideal bodies.

Salt Fish Girl therefore emphasizes that, from historical, to modern, to futuristic Canada, it is always the racial difference of these bodies—and these historical socio-juridical narratives associated with them—that allows the nation’s hierarchical structures to persist, even in an era
when hierarchies based on genetic manipulation would potentially supplant old forms of racism. Indeed, that the clones all possess a racial “flaw” or mark suggests that their racial distinction is especially crucial to their ongoing subjugation, since they could easily have been produced in the image of their white creators to reinforce dominant white heterogeneity. The exclusionary violence these bodies face therefore has another significant function beyond ensuring this vital and expendable workforce never threatens the position of dominant whiteness. Their figuration as racial nonhumans also helps reframe the scientific and juridical terms that define the white universal human.96 The terms of social organization in Serendipity therefore never diverge too far from Canada’s, where, as I have discussed, racial distinction is necessarily reiterated by social configurations in order to pre-figure universal whiteness as the ideal and dominant human form.97 In this sense, even though Serendipity is a futuristic imagining of Canada where ideologies of racial organization do not have the same hold over social consciousness as they do today, the new hierarchies of human life provided through biotechnological advances do not supplant or displace the role of the racial, but instead complement this shifting, but ever-present schema.98

While the clones’ bodies function as a metonym for current figurations of the racial nonhuman and the forms of exclusionary violence these subjects face, they also evince how

96 Wong also proposes that while the clones are “physically within the borders of the nation,” they are “nonetheless framed as the ‘other’ against which norms come to be constructed” (121).
97 Morris argues that the clones’ presence allows for “Paternal creation…mediated by the luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist self-birthings” to continue unimpeded, as the dominant white bodies that enable the clones’ creation remain secure that they retain their position as unaffordable and the most “proper form of consciousness” against the “impure” racial nonhuman clones (Haraway qtd. in Morris 91).
98 Alys Weinbaum, drawing from Benjamin’s discussion of the aura, explores this tension in detail. Weinbaum describes a “racial aura” that is manifested by the simultaneous denial and reification of race through biotechnology. Weinbaum discusses how biotechnology reasserts the lack of genetic distinctions between racial groups; however, genomics also “energize[s]” the significance of race by allowing individuals to verify their racial genealogy, and commodifies race through medical interventions like IVF or race-specific prescription drugs (208).
certain bodies exceed the logic of these socio-racial grids. The clones may be constitutive of Serendipity’s social organization, yet they also threaten the seeming stability of the human since they are unassimilable to the discourses that attempt to figure them as non-persons and in opposition to the proper human (249). After Evie explains the history of her source to Miranda, she informs her that while there is a chance that one of the clones fabricated this history, it is still a “nice myth of origins after all” that would be “a perfect focus for a revolt” (160). Perhaps inspired by this myth of origins, the clones eventually rebel. They attempt to subvert the state’s dominant means of paternalistic reproduction by using genetically-modified durian seeds to asexually produce other life in their image. Through this form of (self)reproduction, they find a method of reasserting their historical/genetic connection to their racial sources so that they remain linked by these histories. Miranda speculates on the importance of this connection when she sees Evie with older Sonia clones, and wonders what it is like “to have access to oneself as an old woman... Did Sonia 14, having lived them, share Evie's foibles? Had she come to an understanding of them? Did she see Evie's life as an extension of her own, as a second shot at those things that had failed the first time?” (228). The clones’ revolt is therefore not a way to transcend the racial violence that has inhered in their bodies; it is a method of refiguring the body of the racial nonhuman as disruptive of—rather than foundational to—Serendipity’s hierarchy of life. They are able to detach reproduction from its associations with affirming the state’s racial grid and upholding its exploitable workforce. Through this, the clones imagine alternative forms of social organization—ones that also destabilize the careful management of bodies within Serendipity—as the state is unable to fully suppress their disruptive presence while also keeping them within the confines of its economic structures.
Evie eventually confronts the clones’ “maker,” Dr. Flowers, who is emblematic of the white paternal scientific creator, and who also perpetuates colonial sentiments of socio-scientific racial difference. Dr. Flowers kills off many of the Sonias, and argues that the Sonias’ self-reproduction is “neither natural nor controllable” and is “too dangerous” (256). When Evie asks “But what you did to make me, to make us, was not [too dangerous]?” (256). Flowers retorts that he is a scientist, while the Sonias are “not human,” which emphasizes his belief that the forms of social organization produced by his project should only be presided over by an ideal human (256). Further, even though these “impure” beings begin by producing new life that bears all the signifiers and the histories of racial nonhumans, the “interbreeding and mutating” of the reproductive durian seeds means they also have the power to create a proliferation of racial bodies (256). Despite Flowers’s professed dominance over human reproduction—that is, the ability to produce and discriminate between which bodies are and are not human—Salt Fish Girl suggests that the Sonias are able to deploy their nonhuman raciality to redefine which bodies have access to da Silva’s description of the “raced consciousness able to fulfill the material and moral projects of a biocapital modernity” (Toward 209).

Crucially, while Lai’s writing conveys that the clones could create a multitude of racial bodies—including those outside of the subjected working class—the text does not suggest that they would use this ability to attempt to elevate their status in Serendipity’s racial matrix or figure themselves in transparency. Put differently, the threat the Sonias pose is not that they might immediately demand to be incorporated within the domain of the normative juridical human. Rather, they disrupt how hegemonic whiteness in Serendipity (exemplified by Flowers) relies on the ability to insert all bodies into a carefully managed social order that helps uphold the terms of the “pure” and proper human form. Their reproduction therefore contests not only
how the state’s exploitable workforce is marked through the clones’ identical racial distinction; it also undermines how the terms of the ideal human (and Serendipity’s particular social order) requires the figuration of these racial nonhumans through a narrative of subjection, rather than narratives like Miranda’s and Evie’s that connect racial bodies across eras and contexts.

The clones’ figuration therefore conveys that even though their bodies signify a history of affectability and ostensible inferiority, their reproduction and the relationships they develop ensures that they are not reduced to this signification. *Salt Fish Girl* suggests that those bodies that threaten the limited terms of the human can combat the cycle of racial commodification and exclusion by claiming a space for themselves, and, in the case of the Sonias, develop sites of affiliation that allow them to leverage the productive capabilities located within the body of the racial nonhuman itself.99 Despite this, the idea of “resistance” expressed by the clones’ actions and their treatment of their racial figuration sometimes reads as ambivalent since, despite the imaginative potential of the text, the narrative is always framed by Canada’s racial schema. The narrative critiques the limits of this schema, but focuses on re-envisioning relationships and communities within this constraining structure. This narrative decision suggests that, rather than imagine ways to transcend raciality by reorganizing racial grids, Lai is instead invested in exploring ways that racial bodies might represent themselves and redefine their relationships to one another within a contingent community. Through the clones’ racial/biological distinction,

---

99 Weheliye’s analysis of racial flesh is useful for this analysis of the subversion located within the biologically fractured and racialized bodies that populate *Salt Fish Girl*. Weheliye describes the flesh as a “vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternate ways of being that do not possess the luxury of eliding phenomenology with biology” (44). In Weheliye’s reading, the flesh has been used to produce the phenomenology of Man that “anchors” raciality/racism in the body (44). But the flesh is also a “modality of relation” between different bodies, and returning to its particularities can also create “new genres of human” (44, 45).
and the histories of their sources, their bodies become sites of relationality *between* different figurations of the human that cannot be easily contained by the state’s hierarchy of life.\(^{100}\)

By way of conclusion, I want to briefly return to Derrida’s reading of the limits of standard forms of history in relation to *Salt Fish Girl*’s approach to temporality. The connections Lai’s text makes between these bodies—and across the different socio-juridical and ideological narrativizations that render them as racial nonhumans—relies on its attempt to narratively produce a non-linear reading of the events that defined sovereign power(s) and the subjection of (racial) bodies. However, *Salt Fish Girl* sometimes falls back on a linear approach through its notation of which events take place in the past, present, or future. The moments where the narrative breaks from its non-linear form to situate these racial narratives in relation to their particular historical moments is symptomatic of the text’s occasional ambivalent approach to reworking raciality; it foregrounds the challenge of making these racial narratives recognizable without limiting them to one historical moment or single event. Despite this limitation, *Salt Fish Girl*’s non-linearity allows for the production of a narrative of racial subjection that contests the limits of national histories without suggesting that it is valuable—or even possible—to recuperate racial nonhumans into these dominant narratives.

*The Garden of Evening Mists*: Malaysia’s Perpetual Emergency Conditions
Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* is similarly invested in how certain narratives are bound to the racial body. Unlike Lai’s text, which engages with these issues through its broad and imaginative approach to temporality, *The Garden of Evening Mists* deals with three specifics

---

\(^{100}\) The clones also begin embedding subversive messages in the soles of the shoes they are forced to make (including the question “What does it mean to be human?”) which again exposes humanness as an arbitrary definition loaded with gendered and racial baggage that is increasingly fraught in the setting of Serendipity (237).
moments in history. The text is largely set during the post-war Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), and thirty-six years later in modern, post-Independence Malaysia. However, the narrative is also shaped by events that occurred under Japanese Occupation (1941-1945), as the protagonist, Yun Ling Teoh, and her sister were prisoners of war who were captured to serve as *jugan ianfu*: comfort women. The Occupation also plays a historical role in the conditions that created the state of Emergency; it disrupted the Malayan economy, and led to widespread labour disputes. It therefore intensified pre-existing unrest in the region, which was furthered by the British colonizers’ attempts to re-establish their authority in the area after the Occupation through the establishment of the Malayan Union (1946-48) which yielded Malay sovereignty to Britain. These series of events culminated in conflicts between the Malayan Communist Party (and its Malayan National Liberation Army) and British forces, which incited the declaration of a state of Emergency. The narrative does not detail the events that occurred immediately before and after the Emergency, but instead foregrounds the interconnections between the conditions that characterized these moments in the nation’s development.

Although the novel is based in these historical events, it does not attempt to produce a fully coherent and fixed narration of these histories. Rather, it is equally concerned with the power in choosing to forget—or refusing to disclose—certain events, as it is with the importance of documenting alternative narratives of these historical moments. The novel’s epigraph illuminates this tension between memory and forgetting: “There is a goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne, but none of Forgetting. Yet there should be, as they are twin sisters, twin powers, and walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty over us and who we are, all the way until death” (7). The image of Memory and Forgetting “disputing for sovereignty” is explored in the
novel both through individuals’ memories, and the selective inclusion and omission of historical events in national narratives.

Like Lai’s text, *The Garden of Evening Mists* takes a distinct approach toward temporality by using memory and forgetting as methods of producing a narrativization that broaches some of the histories that have defined racial nonhumans. The text explores how the forms of acceptable exclusionary violence used against certain marginalized bodies during these historical events were gradually normalized by the state, and were incorporated into post-Independence national structures to help shape the nation’s social-racial hierarchies. Unlike the Canadian context, the forms of civil and social management used against these racial bodies to affirm their relative inferiority were not deployed to uphold the ideal and self-determined white body alone. But, as I will discuss, the “spirit” of Enlightenment ideals that haunts many postcolonial nations (and its associations with European thought and European bodies) also persists in this landscape.

My reading of how *The Garden of Evening Mists* foregrounds the endurance of certain forms of violent historical exclusion as animated by Agamben’s aforementioned discussion of the state of exception. His discussion of the camp as “nomos” of the modern as exemplary of this state of exception. Agamben proposes that the camp is produced

at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state, which was founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation), enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides to assume directly the care of the nation’s biological life as one of its proper tasks…the camp is the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order…[and] is the fourth, inseparable element that has now added
itself – and so broken – the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land (175–176).

Agamben sees the space of the camp—any insular space that produces bare life—as an area where law is suspended, alongside much that defines the civil human: its claims to rights, its direct participation in political life, its recognition under the law. The space of the camp is thus a “zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective rights and juridical protection no longer made any sense,” and is the space where the state of exception becomes the rule (110). However, while the camp's inhabitants are produced as subjects without political claims within the nation, their exclusion from the domain of juridical rights signifies that their production into bare life is not extrapolitical, as they remain fully under state control. The camp is exemplary of a kind of modern political organization. The originary nomos of the camp may be legitimized by a state of Emergency, but these forms of exclusion are eventually generalized and extend beyond the space of the camp, so that this state of exception becomes the rule, and supplants the polis (community, or city) as the modern biopolitical paradigm.

The process that Agamben outlines, whereby the “state of emergency linked to a colonial war is extended to an entire civil population” parallels some of the events that shaped Independence in Malaysia. As Mark Neocleous explains, Malaysia has been in nigh-permanent states of Emergency since Independence (166). Before turning to Tan’s work, I outline some of these conflicts here since the connection the text makes between these events assumes some familiarity with these historical contexts. The Emergency, as I have briefly explained, was largely due to conflicts between the British occupying administration and the Malayan Communist Party. The Communist guerrilla forces which had initially fought against the
Japanese directed their attention toward anti-British resistance, and targeted British commercial interests, including attacks on rubber plantations and tin mines (Siver 3). These conflicts culminated in the assassination of several prominent British landowners in northern Malaya, which immediately led to the British declaring a state of Emergency. The Emergency outlawed leftist parties, and allowed for the detention of citizens without trial for up to two years, mass deportation, collective fines, curfews, the control of printed material, and mandatory identity cards. As Christi Siver notes, these extreme but ostensibly “nonviolent” measures—in that they did not focus on direct physical violence or murder—were reflective of the general expectations of British forces following the recently-signed Geneva convention; mass civilian killings in order to control the population would also violate “other treaties and customary international law” (6).

The perpetual state of Emergency following the formal end of the Emergency in 1960 was continued by the postcolonial state, and was reinforced by the Emergency Ordinance of 1969. After the loss of the ruling party’s (UNMO) parliamentary majority on May 13th, riots erupted in Kuala Lumpur predominantly between the Chinese and Malay communities. The Ordinance was supposed to be a temporary method of restoring order by allowing the preventative detention of individuals as long as the police “suspect[ed]” that a person has “acted” or is “about to act” in a “manner prejudicial to public order” (Emergency 3.2). A pre-existing and complementary act, the Internal Security Act (1960), also allowed for detention without trial or criminal charges. The ISA was developed as a method of deterring Communist activity, but was motivated by use of preventative detention by the British during the Emergency. These laws were retained even after the threat of the Communist insurgency had subsided. They allowed for the developing nation to swiftly counter any political dissidents or threats to government operations. For instance, since those held under the ISA were subject to an initial
60-day holding period during which they were not allowed a lawyer or outside contact, the Act meant that any forms of resistance to government-sanctioned procedures or any acts broadly perceived as dissenting could be quietly disrupted simply by detaining individuals for the initial holding period. Under the auspice of addressing laws that stood contrary to Malaysia’s status as a developed nation, the ISA was repealed in 2011, while the Ordinance was repealed in 2013. However, the ISA was soon replaced in 2013 by the anti-terrorist Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, which effectively re-entrenched the original parameters of the Emergency Ordinance by allowing detention without trial. Through these legal movements, the threat of a state of Emergency and pre-emptive responses to potential insurrection have been integrated into modern state.

_The Garden of Evening Mists_ connects the persistence of these Emergency conditions to particular historical narratives that defined raciality in the region— and the relationship between the Chinese and Malay communities in particular. The intersections between the moments that produced these narratives belies how the text approaches their ongoing effects on social organization. During the Occupation, groups of ethnic Chinese in first Singapore, and then Malaya, were executed as they were deemed a threat to Japanese forces due to their economic support of the anti-Japanese Nationalist forces in China, and their role in resistance movements such as the creation of the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) (Cheah B.K. 133). The Chinese in Malaya were therefore both subject to, and associated with, a particular narrative of racial exclusion that was upheld—and renarrativized—through the force of the law, and that foregrounded their threat to social order. While these forms of violence affected individuals from other racial groups, the Japanese desired the support of the Indian community, and the Malays were initially allowed to work in administrative positions and as part of the police force, which
meant that these communities were treated significantly differently than the Chinese. The asymmetrical treatment of these racial groups therefore furthered the tensions developing between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia in particular due to early discussions about who would be in power after Independence.

These pre-existing cross-racial tensions were also influenced and renewed by the Emergency conditions, even though the British Administration’s race-based restriction were targeted at such Communist forces as the largely-rural Chinese MNLA (a reformed version of the former MPAJA) during this period. Under a British policy that had been developed under colonial conditions, the Malays were considered “fisherman and farmers,” while the Chinese “were to work for other Chinese as laborers or retail traders,” and the Indians “were to remain clerks, plantation workers, and laborers” (Baker 181). The British had initially treated the Chinese in Southeast Asia as a “transient labour force” who were largely responsible for their own education and employment, but their economic success became vital to the nation as they provided the “retail arm for the profitable functioning of British import-export businesses” and became “good customers of the British” (180). As Jim Baker describes, in contrast to the treatment of the Chinese as an economically beneficial group, the paternalistic efforts made by the British to preserve the “Malay way of life” resulted in policies that “consigned the Malays to the lowest strata of economic life,” which was also furthered by British-sanctioned immigration policies that resulted in urban Malays being “unable to stand up to the onslaught of immigrant competition” (190, 189).

The conditions of the Emergency and the desire to cut off the MNLA from the possibility of outside support meant that the British eventually needed to reconfigure their
treatment of these groups, as they could no longer leave the Chinese Malays relatively unmanaged. Helen Ting explains that the Communist insurgency obliged the British administration to establish in a definitive manner the political status of the Chinese population in order to facilitate the implementation of thorny tasks such as army conscription and deportation of so-called hardcore Communists…[their] main concern was the regulation of a population and not the granting of rights when it was due (43).

Under the Briggs Plan (1949), the British relocated and isolated a half million Chinese “squatters” into “new villages” that provided them with modern utilities and housing. However, the Chinese villagers had no other option but to be part of this relocation that forced them out of their homes, stripped them of their land rights, and thus unable to retain their ways of life. While the MRLA was predominantly Chinese and the police and army predominantly Malay—which already gave “significant racial overtones” to the conflict—many Malays began to resent the amount of money spent on the resettlement camps, especially since the conditions for most Malays remained the same and they lacked the services that had been promised to the Chinese (Baker 244). This compulsory resettlement is not simply another example of the removal of certain rights for particular groups. As Baker puts it, the resettlement also helped “heighten] racial tensions at a time when leaders were searching for a way to create a united multiracial society” (244). Furthermore, this forced resettlement of a fifth of the Chinese community into more urban areas meant that they were brought into the “mainstream of political and economic life,” which, given their economic productivity, benefitted the developing nation, even as the Malay mistrust of their objectives increased (244). This exclusion of certain bodies from national space coupled with compulsory and racially-insular conditions of living intensified these
racial tensions predicated on the disparate treatment of Malay and Chinese communities. It also reified particular homogenizing racial narratives that produced Chinese populations as dangerous to the position of Malays.

After Independence, the effects of these events continued to shape the terms of raciality in the region, and were reiterated through new conflicts and forms of exclusionary violence. The 1969 sectarian civil conflicts—often referred to as “race riots” in popular media—exemplify how the conditions of the Emergency defined the ways in which the state exerted forms of violent management under other extreme conditions. During these civil disturbances, the Malaysian government invoked the legal powers that it maintained since the Emergency in 1948. New forms of racial management were levied against Malaysian Chinese during this period, but the postcolonial state and its Malay ruling class also drew from the aforementioned (colonial) national narrative that produced the Chinese as a threat to national order. The National Operations Council (NOC)—an administrative agency assembled by the state to restore order after the riots—justified measures taken to restore order as a response to the ongoing threat of the MCP. The NOC’s report on the measures emphasized “the part played by the Malayan Communist Party… in inciting racial feelings and suspicion; and the anxious, and later desperate, mood of the Malays with a background of Sino-Malay distrust, and just after the General Elections, as a result of racial insults and threat to their future survival in their own country” (Tun ix). Kua Kia Soong argues that certain measures such as the curfew, the use of military force to subdue aggressors, and shoot-to-kill ordinances were not applied equally across all communities, and this depiction of the Chinese Malaysians supported the apparent “bias by the Malay military against the Chinese” as they “turn[ed] a blind eye to actions by Malay rioters and show[ed] partiality in arrests” (43).
The state retains the legislative capacity to deploy these extreme measures, and continues to draw strategically from this particular racial narrative that (re)circulated during these events through the discourses that defined these legal measures. Kua contends, for instance, that the state continued to invoke the spectre of racial conflict to justify “its own control and the 'special privileges' it accords to its own section of society,” and notes that it also continues to reference its past actions to help address challenges to UMNO’s control of the post-1969 political landscape (51). As the state adopted and reproduced narrative traces of the logic used by the colonial British administrative forces to benefit the new Malay administration, it did so while ensuring that it would retain the vital economic contributions of the Chinese Malaysians. Helen Ting proposes that the Malay nationalist ideology—specifically, the assertion of “Malay ownership of the Peninsula”—was a “historical legacy of British colonialism” since “British indirect rule in the name of the traditional Malay rulers required the maintenance of this political myth as a matter of political expediency” (38). Ting also explains that the “designated ‘Other’ against whom the Malay nationalist movement proliferated after these events was not the British, but the non-Malays and, in particular, the local Chinese population”; the enemy in this national narrative was not the “imperial master” but the “aggressive and dangerous ‘foreigners’ who were feared to be taking over political control of the country” (38). Ting’s analysis identifies a significant moment of the ruling-Malay class’s self-fashioning through perpetuating British ideals and institutions that, used strategically, secured their position in relation to the Chinese while still retaining the benefits of their labour. These evocations of past racial violence serve as a reminder of the power that postcolonial government inherited and was able to deploy against acts of opposition. In other words, the connections made between these socio-juridical acts provide (temporal) continuity for a national narrative that details state power. By drawing from
this particular socio-juridical narrative—one that evinces its protectorate function and dominance—as it responds to racial conflicts, the state justifies its contentious responses to those racial bodies that threaten its social order.

**Memory, Forgetting, and Cross-Racial Encounters in the Garden**

As *The Garden of Evening Mists* explores these events through Yun Ling’s narration, it produces memory and history as entwined problematics that continuously define her body. The novel starts with Yun Ling in modern Malaysia; she is a successful judge who recently retired, and desires to return to the Cameron Highlands to build a Japanese garden to memorialize her sister, Yun Hong, who died in a civilian internment camp. This decision to return to Yugiri—the garden in the highlands where Yun Ling studied Japanese gardening under the famous Japanese artist Nakamura Aritomo—is entwined with her desire to memorialize other individuals whose lives were lost during the Emergency and Occupation and whose experiences have been largely forgotten.

Yun Ling's desire to recall these promises also works alongside her struggles to find appropriate methods of recording these histories. Yun Ling suffers from aphasia and memory loss, which initiates her desire to record these memories, and results in a productive form of forgetting—one that is necessary if she is to make sense of these obscured histories without simply reinscribing them into dominant historical discourses. Her aphasia also prompts her to share the details of her time with Aritomo with a Japanese professor, Yoshikawa Tatsuji, who is interested in rumours surrounding Aritomo’s life during and after the Occupation. This act of recounting initially helps ground Yun Ling’s identity despite the gradual loss of these memories; it also disrupts her understanding of the past as she traces how the violence in her past defined the forms of violent exclusion that shaped her present.
As the narrative traces Yun Ling’s life from her imprisonment to her retirement from the judiciary, it exposes the ways that the racial hierarchies that define her experiences become especially fraught throughout these turbulent events. These moments also create complex intersections between her life and the lives of others from distinct racial backgrounds. Her narrative thus produces an alternate history that is less bound by dominant national discourses and instead characterized by these cross-racial encounters and disjunctures in time. Her process of memory and forgetting also conveys that these violent histories can gradually emerge in new forms through the body.

Spatiality—and the particular locations where racial conflicts occurred—motivates Yun Ling’s acts of memorialization, as does the reterritorialization of the landscape under these acts of racial violence. By critiquing and expanding on Agamben’s conception of bare life and the camp, Achille Mbembe contends that in colonized regions, the state rewrites new spatial relations that produce “boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves…the classification of people according to different categories…and finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries” that “give meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories for different people within the same space” (25–26).\(^{101}\) Space itself becomes the “raw material of sovereignty,” as the way that it is both physically altered and how it enters into discourse plays an integral role in defining “who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (26).\(^{102}\) Mbembe outlines some of the ways that this territorialization occurs—

\(^{101}\) Mbembe develops this connection between spatial alterations and exclusionary structures that affect the bodies of racialized individuals through his theorization of necropolitics: the "generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population" where "wounded or slain” bodies are inscribed in the order of power (19, 12, 14).
\(^{102}\) Mbembe also notes that race and racism necessarily figure “so prominently in the calculus” of this biopolitical formation since racism helps “regulate the distribution of death and…make[s] possible the murderous function of the [colonial] state” (17, 22).
both discursively and spatially; most relevant to my reading is his analysis of how the “war machine” is constructed through more innocuous events like the redirection of funds, the regulation of access to resources (both natural and man-made), and attempts to immobilize and “spatially fix” individuals (29).

The most apparent form of this reterritorialization in *The Garden of Evening Mists* is through the development of internment camps during the Occupation. But the narrative also considers other spatial reconfigurations associated with the different forms of exclusionary violence that shaped the nation’s social landscape. Aritomo and Yun Ling discuss how the security measures taken during these tumultuous periods became permanent fixtures in the region; they also describe how the barbed wire used to reterritorialize the landscape has “sprouted everywhere” and has become a “weed that is strangling the country” (127). Yun Ling also notes how Gerard Templar, the historical High Commissioner of Malaya during the Emergency, had “classified regions infested with CTs as ‘Black Areas’, tightening food rationing and imposing onerous curfews over them, intending to make life for the inhabitants so miserable they would withdraw their support for the communists” (223).

The text explores more innocuous forms of this reterritorialization through the creation of new boundaries and hierarchies. After the Occupation, the Communists immediately started “killing the Malays in their kampongs” and, subsequently, “the Malays took their revenge on the Chinese” (59). This “revenge” did not include physical violence alone as it also involved the state’s development of narratives that depicted Chinese Malaysians as a problematic and antagonistic racial group (59). These forms of reterritorialization extend beyond the relationship between colonial forces and the Communists, or the events of the Occupation, and contributed to the sequence of effects that furthered Chinese and Malay animosity.
From these broader examples of reterritorialization, the violence of these periods is catheted in the spatial signification of Yugiri— the titular garden. Aritomo’s decision to create the garden resulted from his involvement in the Occupation, and throughout that era, the land around the garden was also used to intern individuals. Yun Ling learns from Magnus Pretorius, the owner of the Majuba Tea Estate on the same property as the garden, that “The senior army officers moved into our home. We lived in a fenced-off compound on the estate…Every morning we were marched to the slopes to work alongside our coolies” (32). The garden’s development was especially shaped by the conflicts that arose through the Emergency conditions. Yugiri is located in the area that where Emergency conditions were first brought into law; spatial alterations to the area reflected the conditions of this period, since structural work on the garden was performed directly amidst the conflict between the English and the Communists. As Yun Ling’s narrative suggests, the garden’s development was marked by the murders of Orang Asli by the CTs, the violence against the Communists by the State, and the forced relocation of half a million Min Yuen—Chinese “squatters”—into the New Villages. Yun Ling also describes that “some of the people who were given a private tour of Majuba Tea Estate would also ask to see Yugiri…Most of the visitors were senior government officials taking a holiday with their wives in Cameron Highlands before going back to waging war on the communist-terrorists hiding in the jungles” (26). Even after Independence, this garden remains a popular tourist site that still bears the marks of these events, though its history is largely obscured for those whose lives were not immediately affected by these moments. Yugiri is therefore not external to the nation, but reflective of its conditions, as its own history has been shaped by these racial conflicts.

As Yun Ling recalls the garden’s construction, she parallels its development with conversations between diverse individuals whose racial histories have helped shaped the garden.
The text’s approach to describing particular racial conflicts through these conversations is, at times, contrived, with characters from each of the main racial groups directly stating their communities’ concerns. But Tan’s attempts to narratively detail the history of these racial conflicts for the uninformed are helpful as they reflect anxieties surrounding race. These anxieties come to the forefront in the section set during the Emergency, including through an extended scene when Magnus hosts an all-day party on his property adjacent to the garden. This particular party takes place the day after one of the precipitating events of the Emergency: the murder of the British High Commissioner. This scene painstakingly stages some of the racial tensions that predated the Emergency by detailing conversations between a mix of “Chinese, Malays, and Europeans” who discuss local events (56). One conversation in particular between Magnus, his wife Emily, Yun Ling, and Jaafar Hamid—a Malay who owns one of the hotels in the Highlands—foregrounds the narrative’s struggle to deal directly with racial conflicts without relying on standard tropes of race relations in the nation. The relationships between these individuals are complicated as the group discusses who actually “belongs” within the nation. Jaafar, for instance, argues that the “orang China” are simply “descendants of immigrants” whose loyalty will always remain with China; he also believes that for the Straits Chinese, “home is England” due to their English education and loyalty to England (60). His comments attempt to discount the presence of Chinese in Malaysia on two fronts. They render the Chinese Malaysian population as eternal immigrants who are only ever “Chinese,” despite their long history in the region, and also suggest that English-educated Chinese are automatically aligned with British interests, even though they were also subject to the effects of colonial control in the

---

103 During these scenes, the presence of Indian individuals is only discussed in terms of their work on the estate, and the Indigenous population is only mentioned when Yun Ling meets the Protector of the Aborigines during the party.
region. When Yun Ling proposes that “Old countries are dying…and new ones are being born. It doesn’t matter where one’s ancestors came from,” Hamid informs the group that the Malays are the “true” bumiputera, and that by their standards, the place “so carelessly named ‘Malaya’…didn’t officially exist until only recently” (60).

Hamid’s comments reflect the need for many Malays to develop a narrative that justifies why their community should rule the nation after Independence. But this narrative also ignores the positions of others within the country, including other “true” bumiputera like the Orang Asli (60). In response to Hamid’s claims, Emily exemplifies the feelings of many from the Chinese Malaysian community during the pre-Independence era as she directly opposes sentiments like Hamid’s. She describes the contradictory position of the labouring Chinese as necessary to the nation, but also unacknowledged by those Malays vying for control of the country. She informs Hamid that “we Chinese built up the tin industry, we brought in commerce. Kuala Lumpur was founded by a Chinese! Don’t pretend you didn’t know” (60). Her comments foreground the significance of Chinese contributions to the nation, and anticipate that attempts will be made to diminish their role after Independence.

The conversation at the party forces Yun Ling to contend with her own fraught position in the nation and her own anxieties surrounding her race. In light of Emily’s comments, Yun Ling similarly considers that the British ship[ped] indentured coolies from southern China to work the mines, as the Malays preferred to remain in their kampongs and till their own fields. The Chinese immigrants came with the intention of returning to their homeland after making their fortune...[but] established families and fortunes in Penang, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur, and opened the way
for more of their countrymen from the southern ports of China. These immigrants soon became part of Malaya (61).

While Yun Ling’s relative class privilege is also negated in certain spaces, she betrays her privilege during this moment, since her family’s relationship to Malaysia is uniquely shaped by their associations with British officials. She reflects that she “never wondered about [this history]” and felt “forever at home” in the nation (61). But even though she is privileged—as one of the “English-educated Straits Chinese – the King’s Chinese” who is also a member of the judiciary—and can align herself with those elite Chinese Malaysians vying for representation, her relationship to these discussions remains conflicted. The trauma of her experiences during the Occupation continues to affect her, as do acts of racism by elite Malays, including immediately prior to the party, where she is the only member in her group stopped and searched at a security checkpoint (29). Her response to Hamid’s claims—however naive—reflect this conflicted position. They suggest her belief that Malaya’s future should not be limited by racial divisiveness, as she opposes attempts to render certain subjects as not fully part of the nation (189).

Through the inclusion of these conflicted sentiments between individuals from diverse racial backgrounds, *The Garden of Evening Mists* conveys an investment in these particular historical moments characterized by these emerging interracial tensions. These discussions imagine how these conflicts may have played out in daily interactions at a time when, under Emergency conditions, bodies were selectively incorporated into or excluded from national space through new forms of social management that inflected the nation’s racial hierarchies. But throughout these scenes, racial conflicts are substrates of contests over national belonging. That is, they reduce these historical conflicts that shaped the nation’s racial grid to questions of who
arrived when and contributed what to nation-building efforts. These scenes thus reproduce a nationally-acceptable way of addressing these hierarchies without interrogating their relationship to other acts of racial violence.

Though I propose that the conversations staged within the space of the garden fall short, a reading of its aesthetics provides a far more nuanced critique of raciality. This focus on the garden’s form does not sidestep the issue of anxieties surrounding race by providing a more covert and palatable way of dealing with these charged thematics. Rather, the garden’s aesthetics merge historical events, spatiality, racial signifiers, and the fraught position of the racial body, and also envisions alternate ways of approaching these intersecting issues.

The garden’s form and questions of its ongoing importance become one method for the narrative to explore the selective form of historical amnesia that characterizes the nation. The way that individuals respond to the garden and its aesthetics intersects with the willingness of some in modern Malaysia to rely on a particular narrative of the nation marked by a limited approach to temporality: one that overlooks the effects of these historical events on particular bodies that ignores how these histories have shaped the present. After Yun Ling returns to the garden in modern Malaysia, she details how Frederik Pretorius—Magnus’s nephew—decides to continue developing his family’s land. However, Frederik desires to return the estate’s garden to a more natural state where plants are able to erode the events that have shaped the garden’s construction. Frederik idealizes a period before the land was reterritorialized, but “restoring” the garden would also erase how its construction is bound to events like the Emergency and the post-Independence conditions of the nation.

While Frederik expresses a seemingly progressive desire to restore Malaysia to a type of pure state untouched by these events, Yun Ling is aware that there is no unmediated relationship
to the land. Aware of the garden’s symbolic and spatial potential, she asks Frederik: “What is gardening but the controlling and perfecting of nature?…When you talk about ‘indigenous gardening’, or whatever it’s called, you already have man involved…It all sounds very much planned to me. Gardens like Yugiri’s are deceptive. They’re false. Everything here has been thought out and shaped and built. We’re sitting in one of the most artificial places you can find” (14-5). Yun Ling’s responses suggest that the garden’s aesthetic value is not based in its authenticity and purity; instead, its aesthetic mediation has produced a crucial space that reflects the history of the land and the diverse people and events that have contributed to this history. Her comments also indicate that Frederik has misread the process of gardening, and naively overlooked the fact that his intended renovations are just another way of mediating the land and its history through his own ideals. Yun Ling expands this commentary on the garden’s significance to the effects of historical social management more generally. She reminds Frederik that both of them are, by his logic, as “alien” to the land as the plants he desires to remove, which hearkens back to her previous conversation with Jaafar over who belongs within the nation (14). Further, she relates their disagreement to moments of turmoil in the nation: “Was it because they lived in lands so regularly rocked by earthquakes and natural calamities that they sought to control the world around them?” (15). These comments connect the garden’s history to contemporaneous forms of national management and suggest that attempts to erase these histories also affect how individuals understand the relationship between the events that have reterritorialized the nation.

---

104 Frederik’s appreciation of “Indigenous” gardening does not entail an engagement with how the Indigenous population might relate to the land, or that he will offer the land to the Orang Asli in the area; instead, it is a method of using the garden’s aesthetics to relinquish one form of control over the land by returning it to a some form of ostensibly authentic and natural state.
I read these discussions surrounding the garden’s structure and aesthetics as narrative signposts to larger issues—particularly the circulating desire to erase how these racially-charged conflicts are embedded in modern Malaysia’s social order. By connecting the garden’s potential destruction to the persistent desire to eradicate certain historical events that shape the present, the narrative flags this thematic as one that has significance outside the issue of the loss of certain spaces. The garden’s form becomes a crucial way of broaching the numerous forms that historical amnesia might take and also allows Yun Ling to speculate on this problem without focusing on one particular event. This method of using discussions of aesthetics to connect diverse lost histories also allows for a reading of the racial nonhuman’s production that does not tether this figuration to one race alone.105 As the text moves between different events and relates them to the garden’s form, it touches on the lives of individuals who are subjected to exclusionary violence, but their experiences are subsequently obscured through prevailing national narratives. This not only includes individuals forced into camps during the Occupation, but also the “Chinese peasants” Yun Ling describes, many of whom, as I have discussed, were forcibly resettled and remain marginalized today. Put differently, the tension between Yun Ling’s desire to retain vulnerable historical sites, and Frederik’s attempts to ignore certain events, marks a recurring way that the text deals with how the loss of certain violent histories that shaped modern Malaysia perpetuates the marginality of particular racial bodies.

The conditions that shape views like Frederik’s in modern Malaysia also lead to acts that align with the “spirit” of Western ideals, which produce the forms of erasure and violence that

105 The Garden of Evening Mist’s engagement with the figuration of the racial nonhuman also reflects how Tan’s text reiterates certain racial biases in modern Malaysia by ignoring particular histories. Indian Malaysians are reduced to their appearance as background characters, and the Indigenous population only appears during a short scene between Aritomo and Yun Ling, and when an unidentified Orang Asli tribe briefly looks after Yun Ling after her escape from the camp.
render individuals as racial nonhumans. Views like Frederik’s are depicted as incommensurable with attempts like Yun Ling’s to memorialize forgotten histories of marginalized peoples. By simultaneously denying his management of and control over the land while shaping it through his ideals of authenticity, Frederik is complicit in eroding spaces that bear these histories of reterritorialization and exclusionary violence. Frederik is therefore exemplary of a particular subject the narrative critiques: one who is influenced by a particular ideal of human development and extols the virtues of “progress” and growth while ignoring the past. This broad and symbolic reading of lost histories sets up the text’s eventual engagement with the role of other individuals who directly obscure these violent events. The narrative expands on these issues as it specifically considers how racial subjects are able to influence national narratives by drawing from sentiments associated with colonial authority—the traits considered proper to the ideal human. Through this, Tan’s writing connects the experiences of certain individuals who are rendered as racial nonhumans to those who draw from these values to retain influence over the nation.

The text explores how these sentiments persist in the Malay community through their aforementioned adoption of the British administrative apparatus; as well as instances where these sentiments were drawn upon by elite Chinese Malaysians in their struggle for national representation against the Malays. The narrative acknowledges the distinction between those from the ruling Malay class who aligned themselves with British leaders and drew from British infrastructure, but later resisted their association with the British colonials—or, as Jaafar pejoratively refers to them, the “Mat Salleh” (Caucasians)—and the elite Chinese who were also subject to colonial power, but affected and adopted certain Western traits and ideals.
The specific figure whose actions most clearly reflect these issues first exemplified through Frederik’s reaction to the garden is, appropriately, already associated with paternalistic power. The characterization of Teoh Boon Hau, Yun Ling’s father, evinces how these sentiments shape the nation. Boon Hau clearly counters Yun Ling’s desire to recall these racial histories and include them within national narratives, which is perhaps one reason why Yun Ling reacts so strongly to Frederik’s comments about erasure. Boon Hau is exemplary of how the “spirit” of British colonial ideals persists in Malaya (and later, post-Independence Malaysia). Boon Hau is described as an “Anglophile” and a proponent of British ideals and colonial rule (224). Yun Ling recalls how the non-English speaking Chinese in Malaysia referred to individuals like her father and the rest of her family as “Eaters of the Europeans’ shit,” as they used their English skills to “get good jobs in the civil service [and]…rise in our colonial society” (244-5).

Prior to Independence, Yun Ling’s father was a successful businessman in the rubber-plantation industry, and though he was largely content with the possibility that the English would “rule Malaya forever,” he later represents the Chinese during the Merdeka talks, and becomes an advisor to the Chinese party (245). As Yun Ling notes, during this period, the “calls for self-rule had grown more strident among the Malay nationalists,” and that in response, the “Malayan Chinese had formed their own political party to have their voice heard in the negotiations for Merdeka” (125-6). 106 But even though he begins to learn Mandarin and describes himself as “no longer a banana”— someone who is “Yellow outside, white inside”—when Independence seems inevitable, Yun Ling’s father still retains both his associations with the British High

---

106 Yun Ling also describes how during a visit with Magnus and Inspector Woo—a member of the Special Branch who visits the garden to warn Yun Ling about CTs (Communist Terrorists) in the area, the Inspector informs her that since it is “only a matter of time before the British leave Malaya,” the various Chinese groups must “stand together” if they are to have representation in the new nation (125).
Commissioner of Malaya, Gerald Templer, and his idealization of English influences (126). Similar to the previously discussed Malay self-fashioning through certain British ideals, Boon Hau’s characterization aligns with a particular version of how a similar form of self-fashioning was also adopted by elite Chinese Malaysians during the development of the independent nation. Yao Souchou notes that, during nation-building efforts, the rhetoric used by those in the Chinese Malaysian community that endeavored to construct a respectable Chinese identity invoked colonial discourses and the notion of the “loyal British Chinese, socially respectable and tradition-bound” that would could only come “into being by their silent referencing to the Other Chinese mired in the world of opium, prostitutes, and criminal violence” (117).

Importantly, Teoh Boon Hau is also aware of the failings of British rule, and the violence perpetrated by their dominance. However, this knowledge does not stop him from expressing his admiration for British culture and authority and recirculating these ideals as he is given more authority. Yun Ling describes how both during the Japanese massacre of “hundreds of thousands of Chinese in Nanking… the slaughter, the rape of old and young women, of children; the mind-numbing savagery of it all” and again during the Japanese invasion of Malaya, Boon Hau began to question his feelings toward the British, but remained “confident” that the British would intervene rather than “disappearing without a word” (246). Further, he ignores the effects of these events on individuals like his daughter, and does not want to discuss Yun Ling’s experiences in the camps; while he remains understandably enraged at the Japanese, he does not hold the British accountable for their lack of intervention (246). Through both his elite position and his paternal influence, he is also able to transmit his views to his family and immediate community. When Yun Ling and Magnus are discussing the history of Malacca, Magnus intimates that for individuals like Yun Ling, the world is “made up of only English history,” and
this sentiment is reiterated when Yun Ling realizes that she is surrounded by “volumes of Malayan history and memoirs written by Stamford Raffles, Hugh Clifford, Frank A. Swettenham”—all colonial administrators in Malaya (65, 75). Boon Hau therefore remains an individual who has not only internalized certain exemplary signifiers of white dominance in Malaya; he deploys a prevailing narrative of development that focus on Malaysian progress through a struggle for a self-determined nation, and is indifferent toward how these sentiments ignore the nation’s violent history. As he draws on these sentiments in order to improve his position within the nation, he ensures that these views continue to inflect Malaysia’s post-Independence structures.

In some ways, Yun Ling’s descriptions of her father produce Boon Hau as a caricature of the colonized subject who readily fills the void left by the absence of an immediate colonial presence within the nation. But this risks oversimplifying how actions like his have a direct effect on racial dynamics in the nation. The conversation about the garden’s aesthetics early on in the text provide a frame for reading the less apparent effects of these sentiments expressed by individuals like Boon Hau, as it emphasizes the consequences of ignoring certain histories. The willful historical amnesia of individuals like Frederik who are not as influential, but still see no issues with erasing signifiers of the nation’s history, works alongside this national narrative that obscures the state’s dependence on racial violence. Through the recirculation and dominance of sentiments like Boon Hau’s—sentiments that erase the position of racial bodies subjected to exclusionary violence—I identify an crucial example of how individuals in power help figure individuals as racial nonhumans. Boon Hau remains firm in his belief that following the colonial authority’s schema of development and the racial order they helped entrench is the best course for the nation. This national narrative that Boon Hau helps develop defines and justifies the roles
of particular racial bodies in relation to these historical moments of conflict. In doing so, this narrative produces a form of exclusionary violence that largely ignores how the nation’s racial and social hierarchies depend on the state’s ability to deny certain bodies complete personhood; it therefore enables the ongoing subjection of racial nonhumans who are figured through this form of national development. As Boon Hau’s characterization suggests, these conditions are also able to persist in modern Malaysia in part because figures of authority continue to overlook how much of the modern nation’s conflicts and its racial logic have been defined through these events that are treated as exceptional and regrettable. In this sense, rather than depicting Boon Hau solely as a lingering effect of colonialism, the narrative renders him as one of the individuals who uses his influence as an inheritor of colonial power to directly counter the desire to retrieve certain histories.

**Resignifying the Flesh: Aesthetics and the Body’s Cross-Racial Connections**

Even though Tan’s writing repeatedly emphasizes instances of forgetting and historical erasure, the figuration of the racial nonhuman under these conditions remains visible through Yun Ling’s conflicted position and its influence on her actions. That is to say, Tan characterizes Yun Ling as an individual who is subject to the exclusionary violence and forgetting that figures the racial nonhuman, as a perpetrator of forms of violence through aspects of her work, and as a body that desires to uncover these forgotten experiences. Yun Ling is not born into the dominant racial group but inherits her father’s social standing. She cannot wholly avoid the influence of views like Boon Hau’s and is aware that she benefitted from his “influence” while first working in the judicial system (192). Her eventual desire to draw out these histories in modern Malaysia is her method of countering the conditions produced by views like her father’s. The narrative consistently reiterates Yun Ling’s desire to capture her memories to help her “determine what is
real,” and she expresses that there are “fragments of my life that I do not want to lose, if only because I still have not found the knot to tie them up with” (25). As she narrates these events, however, Yun Ling does not rely on a dominant linear narrative form, or one that adheres to the temporal continuity or univocality that defines national narratives. As with Lai’s text, there is no investment in a concrete retelling of events that might be “tied up” neatly in some way, or reflect the “real”; rather, Yun Ling eventually feels a sense of release as she begins to recall and forget certain memories in equal measure. She also notes that this struggle to recollect is not a symptom of her illness alone, but a type of letting go of one method of discourse in favour of finding alternate ways of pursuing these narratives. Yun Ling therefore returns to the garden for its significance as a space where she is able to explore these historical instances of violence that produced certain racial relationships, but through its alternative aesthetic and narrative form that cannot be so easily excised from national discourses. Further, as she is prompted by the garden’s affective work, she eventually considers how an alternative historical narrative might also reside in the body of those individuals whose histories are not recognized within the nation.

While Yun Ling’s conversation with Frederik touches on the symbolic importance of the garden’s form in relation to historical erasure, Tan uses Yun Ling’s recollections of the garden’s creation to detail precisely how its aesthetics might capture the intersections between the different racial groups and events that comprise the nation. As Yun Ling notes, Aritomo once informed her that Yugiri is “composed of a variety of clocks…Some of them run faster than the others, and some of them move slower than we can ever perceive…Every single plant and tree at

---

107 Fincham proposes that the “graphic historical and social realism” of the text illustrates the “consequences of western ideologies of development,” but in the “embedded story of Japanese gardening that accompanies this narrative of colonial exploitation, Tan counters the political, social, and ecological instability of a Malaya poised on the brink of independence...Underpinning this alternative world-view is the ecocritical principle of human and non-human connection” (126).
Yugiri grew, flowered and died at its own rate” (60). Aritomo’s comments reflect how the garden is created through practice of shakkei—of borrowing from different elements from different periods and cultures—which aligns with how it has been shaped by different historical periods and racial conflicts. By drawing on the principles of shakkei, Aritomo develops Yugiri to be more than a traditional Japanese garden and a sign of Japanese hegemony during the Occupation. While Yugiri appears exemplary of a highly controlled Japanese garden, it actually features a myriad of design principles that incorporate the aesthetics of the Malaysian landscape alongside Chinese and Indian design. Its form also suggests a link between different periods of time and these ethno-racial histories; the garden is therefore a crucial site where individuals are encouraged to engage simultaneously with diverse and often occluded ethno-cultural histories.

The substantial use of Japanese gardening to produce this diverse space opposes how acts of reterritorialization perpetuated the racial conflicts and exclusionary violence that helped erode certain histories. The narrative specifically suggests that as a result of Aritomo’s decision to draw together different aesthetic principles, the garden can evoke particular affective responses that reveal the diverse elements that comprised its construction. For instance, when Vimalya Chin—who is of Chinese and Indian descent—becomes Frederik’s gardener, she comments that “I don’t see a single unifying theme here. It feels odd to me. Yet it’s somehow also familiar” (162). Vimalya, unlike individuals such as Frederik, seems attuned to how the garden “borrows” the aesthetic principles of several ethno-racial histories. This is not to say that racial hybridity gives individuals like Vimalya intuitive insight into sites of racial mixing; rather, her comments suggest that aspects of the garden evoke particular memories and this experience might be animated by her racial subjectivity. Responses like Vimalya’s are crucial moments in the text where the garden’s construction becomes a way of charting the significance of new ways
of reading—and experiencing—the nation’s history. While scenes like the garden party merely reproduce entrenched racial narratives, Tan’s focus on the garden’s aesthetics complicates this; it raises larger questions of what would happen if a search for the connections between obscured histories did not rely solely on standard documented historical forms, but on locating new sites where these events might have been captured through alternate media. This is necessary for any attempt to detail the events that figured individuals as racial nonhumans, since their personal narratives are often erased by prevailing national discourses.  

The garden is therefore the ideal location for Yun Ling’s act of memorialization. As Yun Ling’s difficulty with recounting these events intensifies, she draws on Aritomo’s descriptions of how the garden’s form can coalesce these events and histories: “I hear Aritomo’s voice again. Do everything correctly and the garden will remember it for you…After staying away from Yugiri for so long, I am now starting to understand, to truly understand, what he meant. The lessons are embedded in every tree and shrub, in every view I look at. He was right – I have committed everything he taught me to my memory” (163). Yun Ling is therefore able to use the garden to draw together the experiences of those from different racial groups who are figured as what Weheliye would identify as “full humans, not-quite-Humans and nonhumans” (40). Yun Ling initially commits to developing Yugiri into a spatial repository that memorializes the histories of racial nonhumans like her sister, Yun Hong, whose life and death were occluded by the suspension of law under the Occupation, and whose experiences were largely forgotten during (post)colonial nation-building efforts. However, the garden’s development also allows her to revisit and account for her own conflicted and problematic role in perpetuating the same forms of

108 This insight is especially significant coming from a woman who is half-Indian, since Tan’s writing, perhaps reflective of the position of many working-class Indian Malaysians, effectively erases their presence from the histories it details.
violence she decries; in doing so, she exposes other racial histories and the experiences of racial nonhumans that have also been obscured in modern Malaysia.\textsuperscript{109}

As Yun Ling recalls her experiences, it becomes apparent that while she was enraged by the violence of the British authorities, she also perpetuated aspects of this violence. She notes that she was responsible for prosecuting not only the more violent MCP guerrillas, but also those individuals who assisted the MCP guerrillas as a form of resistance against the British. After explaining some of the aspects of the Japanese internment camp to Frederik, she recalls going to one of the New Village resettlement camps as part of her prosecutorial duties. The conditions she describes, where the villages are fenced in, searched daily by armed guards, and kept from their means of making a living mirror the conditions of the camp she was in; these conditions also hearken back to Agamben’s description of zones where law is suspended and bodies are denied the rights and recognition of the normative human. As she returns to work on the garden, the process of recovering the garden’s form helps her to also expose these painful events. She recalls a young woman from one of these camps who gave supplies to the guerrillas, and was separated from her family and deported to China due to Yun Ling’s work. As she reflects upon how her actions robbed the woman’s daughter of her presence, Yun Ling briefly articulates the connection between the power of the state’s socio-juridical apparatus she helped uphold and the narratives of racinality that configured her relationships to others; she feels that she is “writing one of [her] judgements,” and later wonders if “all I had been trying to do was to assert my influence over another person, after having been powerless for so long” (104, 99). Through this association provoked by the space of the garden, Yun Ling gradually realizes that she directed

\textsuperscript{109} In an interview, Tan Twan Eng describes how he does not set out to “judge or preach morality,” but is interested in exposing “moments in time when the world is changing [that] bring out the best and worst in people,” and Yun Ling’s characterization exemplifies this particular aim (“I don’t”).
the effects of her traumatic experiences against even those in her own racial group who had also been forced into camp life—albeit under different historical circumstances; in doing so, she perpetuated a particular form of exclusionary violence. These painful recollections and emotions reaffirm her commitment to restore the garden and to create a space where others can experience the intersections of these untold histories through the atypical narratives that inhere in Yugiri’s design. This process does not undo the myriad ways these histories have been ignored; to do so would oversimplify the violence that defined these moments. However, it mirrors the significant narrative approach that the text also engages with; it conveys that exploring the connections between the exclusionary racial violence that defined these events also helps expose their reoccurrence in modern social structures.

From this narrative production of the garden as an alternate aesthetic form that helps Yun Ling to capture certain histories, the narrative merges the garden’s significance with the racial body, and the body of the racial nonhuman in particular. As I have suggested, the act of racial (re)narrativization by dominant discourses produces bodies within a “system of oppression.” Weheliye draws out this point in his description of racial flesh (and black enfleshment in particular) as “vestibular” to culture, since this flesh reflects its “own value as ontological lack and Man’s value as properly human”; in other words, like da Silva’s point, the black body reflects for dominant bodies what the human being is not and is therefore considered “deviant” even though it necessarily precedes the production of the proper human (43). But new modalities of being are also made possible by the unique position of racial enfleshment as anterior to Man in dominant epistemologies of the human. As Weheliye describes, the flesh is not an “abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death,” but an “irreducible” and “alternate instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as
such” (43). Weheliye emphasizes the possibilities created when individuals are attuned to the overlooked elements of racial enfleshment that are exterior to Man. Weheliye here diverges from analyses that enumerate the ways that the racial flesh fails to signify the proper human, and considers the myriad ways that the flesh engages with the movements, practices, affects, and narratives that are outside this ideal form.

This description of how the racial flesh engages with modalities outside the dominant human also suggests how the flesh can be read as a site that contains new narrativizations of the body’s history. Yun Ling, for instance, uses her body—and the flesh itself—to uncover her lost memories and the disparate histories of racial nonhumans that have defined her life. Tan’s turn to the body is apt both because of the body’s role in signifying race distinction, and also because so much of Yun Ling’s process of revisiting these histories within the garden is determined by her struggles with her embodiment as her memory changes. In modern Malaysia, Yun Ling reflects how, in stark contrast to the chaos and violence of events around them during the Emergency, Aritomo drew a horimono—a traditional Japanese tattoo—across Yun Ling’s entire back. Through its intersection with the garden’s history, the tattoo tethers Yun Ling’s body to the particular narratives that are reflected in Yugiri’s formation. It similarly develops into a site where distinct histories are drawn together to produce a polyvocal narrative of these violent events, and therefore disrupts dominant readings of these events as temporally discrete. The horimono is the embodied version of Yugiri; it contains the details of the garden’s construction in its designs, as well as many of its aesthetic features. Its form follows the principles of Sakuteiki, the “oldest collection of writings on Japanese gardening,” and Yun Ling describes that she and Aritomo “felt the garden” while it was being created (78).
Like the garden, the style of the horimono appears Japanese, but the designs draw from different cross-ethnic aesthetic forms, including images of Chinese folk tales, Malaysian forests, and marks and shapes that Yun Ling cannot decipher. Yun Ling’s conversations with Tatsumi, the Japanese historian, reveal that, like the garden, horimonos are also artistic texts; they are often created by woodblock artists (like Aritomo). Yun Ling also recalls visiting a museum in Tokyo that preserved and displayed different horimonos, which again suggests their merit as legitimate forms of art. Yun Ling’s discussions with Tatsumi imply that, like any artistic text, the historical context that shapes the horimono’s creation becomes embedded in the work itself.

Crucially, Yun Ling chooses to have her body inscribed with these images, and the process, while excruciatingly painful, is almost therapeutic. Yun Ling describes how the experience felt like her skin was “taken apart, line by line, stitch by stitch,” as Aritomo would “wait for the scabs to form and drop off” before proceeding with the horimono, and she would then cleanse her “raw” flesh nightly (280, 282). This event becomes almost ritualized for Yun Ling, who describes that she began to “enjoy the pain because, for those hours when his needles tracked across my skin, the clamour in my mind was deadened. I worried about what would happen once the final cut was made, when the last open pore was tamped and sealed with ink” (283). This ritual occurs nightly until the tattoo is complete and Yun Ling has, as Aritomo describes, a “new skin” (310).

The horimono forces her to revisit the different moments of violence she experienced, but also allows her to produce a distinct version of these histories through the images. The horimono is drawn over the numerous scars she acquired in the camp, and includes images of the camp where she was interned. Even though Yun Ling could hide the tattoo, the stigma associated with it prevented her from being physically close to another person; she informs Frederik that she
never showed the tattoo to anyone since horimono are not accepted by the public, and knowledge of the piece would ruin her career and the life she had built for herself. The taboo and impurity associated with the tattoo, its placement over her scars, and the inclusion of these images of the camp, work collectively to associate the horimono with the bodies of interned comfort women who were not able to return to normal life. Further, Aritomo associates the pain from the tattoo with the physical violence she previously experienced in the camp, but suggests that the horimono will be less painful. Through this process, the ink that “seals” her open pores does not keep out the memories that “clamour” in her mind but, instead, permanently affixes them to her flesh through the different designs.

The horimono is not only an embodied signifier of the more distant history of the Occupation. It remains entwined with the conditions of the Emergency, and the history of the racially charged conflict between the predominantly ethnic-Chinese “CTs” and the British forces that Yun Ling also directly contributed to—a conflict that would later be reiterated in race relations between the ruling Malay and Chinese communities. For instance, Aritomo’s comment about how the tattoo is associated with her past experiences does not refer solely to the beatings she received in the camp; its production is also directly parallel with the timeline of the Emergency. Yun Ling describes how the tattoo’s creation begins amid the peak of Templar’s counter-insurgency tactics against the Communists and it is completed as the Emergency comes to an end. More importantly, just before the horimono is tattooed on her body, Yun Ling is beaten and stabbed by a group of MCP guerrillas—including members of a MCP supporter’s family Yun Ling sentenced to deportation—as they recognize her as one of the special prosecutors of the MCP guerrillas. This event becomes entwined with the horimono’s history, as it compels her to remain in the area with Aritomo and precedes her decision to allow him to
tattoo her; it also becomes another act of physical violence that she attends to through the ritualized process of the horimono.

The horimono’s signification therefore tethers Yun Ling’s scarred flesh to a racialized conflict where individuals were marginalized, forced into camps, separated from their families, and otherwise produced through the aforementioned particular narrative of exclusionary violence that would be adopted by the post-Independence state. The reinscription of Yun Ling’s flesh through the horimono therefore binds her to others whose figurations as racial nonhumans did not abate as easily in the post-Independence era and also compels her to reflect upon these moments of exclusionary violence in modern Malaysia. Its complex creation also forces her to revisit moments when the figuration of the racial nonhuman shaped her history, from her time in the camp, to her judgements that affected less privileged Chinese, to moments where she is also read as part of this group. As she traces the horimono’s history during conversations with Tatsumi, its intersections with these particular events become apparent; Yun Ling describes this aspect of its creation as “part of what happened to me,” and it becomes a physical marker that complicates her status as a privileged Chinese Malaysian in modern Malaysia (324). Like Salt Fish Girl, the horimono therefore allows Yun Ling to engage with variegated subjected racial bodies, not through a perfectly equivalent relationship or a shared “spirit,” but through a shared figuration under the state’s racial matrices.110

The narrative also alludes to the possibility that the horimono is actually a map that uses the structure of the garden as a type of key to the Golden Lily: stores of gold and other treasure that the Imperial Army had plundered from Malaya, potentially with the help of Aritomo, and

---

110 Fincham similarly argues that the horimono reflects a “mysterious balance between the human and non-human worlds,” and also connects individuals across different eras, as its history is so indebted to the imbrication of different cultures, and its significance in the future revitalizes Yun Ling’s desire to protect the garden (135).
that had likely been left behind after the Occupation. With the help of Tatsumi, Yun Ling eventually realizes that the camp that she and her sister were kept in was likely a Golden Lily slave-camp, and that she would be able to use the designs embedded in the horimono to locate her sister’s grave. But Yun Ling also considers the issues with using the horimono as a map, and revealing this particular history to the public. She realizes that by doing so, Aritomo’s work on the garden—and the garden more generally—would be inserted into a particular historical narrative by individuals like Tatsuji, the “respected historian” whose interest in detailing the atrocities that occurred during the Occupation is redirected toward exposing Aritomo’s secretive past. Yun Ling prevents the production of a limited and incomplete aspect of the garden’s history; while she is clearly protective of Aritomo’s memory, she is equally concerned with how the garden’s enduring historical significance risks being defined by this particular limited narrative that would turn Yugiri solely into an object of curiosity. This would also directly counter Yun Ling’s work on the garden in modern Malaysia, which is focused on producing a space that retains the garden’s cross-racial aesthetics, and how it “remembers” the historical violence that shaped its earlier creation through the affective responses it evokes. As a result, she decides that either the garden or the horimono can survive, and ultimately chooses to rebuild the garden and make arrangements so that the tattoo is destroyed after her death. By doing so, Yun Ling chooses to erase the histories that her body signifies through the horimono. While, in life, Yun Ling’s flesh is subject to the terms of dominant discourses, Tan suggests the possibility for individuals like Yun Ling to again shape the narrative that defines their flesh. Yun Ling chooses to destroy the marks that would resolve some of the incidents that occurred during these national events, but that would obscure the garden’s complex signification and undo its ongoing work as a site that allows individuals to feel certain histories.
Through this comparative reading of *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Garden of Evening Mists*, I have attempted to draw out some of the similarities in the development of racial narratives across these texts and their locales. *Salt Fish Girl* weaves together different legislated moments of racial exclusion—and the narratives of raciality that defined these histories—with Canada’s modern racial grid. Tan’s text engages with historical events of racial violence and their ongoing effects through the work of memory and forgetting, and how memory—and memorialization—can also produce a significant instance of rescripting these narratives. These distinct approaches to history and temporality convey significant intersections between the subjection of different racial bodies from how they were configured prior to the formation of these modern states, through their lingering effects today. Through this, they connect some of the different nodes (or “grounds”) from which modern power originates. To return to Derrida’s question about reading for non-traditional historical texts, in these particular texts, the body of the racial nonhuman is especially crucial to how they each rethink the historically-sedimented narratives and social configurations that subject these figures to social and civil exclusion. In Lai’s and Tan’s respective works, these bodies are rendered as significant sites where historical memory inheres, often through violence, and also where these alternative narrations are made visible. Further, by addressing these obscured histories, this approach can help expose how the unacknowledged events in their respective pasts have helped affirm the circulating form of the ideal human.
Chapter III: “Productive Asianism(s) and Transmigrant Affiliations: Figuring the Racial Nonhuman in Lydia Kwa’s This Place Called Absence and Pulse.

This chapter focuses on the ways that localized multicultural/multiracial forms are reconfigured and extended to define global relationships between nations, and how this process places pressure on the racial schemas that underpin these multicultural formulations. Saskia Sassen refers to the “unbundling of national space” as new socio-legal forms are inserted into national institutions to accommodate new cross-border (economic, cultural) relationships, and as states adjust their national projects to further their global interests (219). Sassen explains that much of this unbundling centres on developing new legislated apparatuses to enable the “hypermobility” of global capital (56). Citing Arjun Appadurai, Sassen makes the observation that this unbundling parallels disjunctures in global cultural flows, where pre-existing national ideologies and cultural forms intersect and conflict with new cultural developments that bolster global pursuits (56).

This form of “unbundling” includes the use of diversity, as it is displayed in state policies, to develop national and global projects that are ostensibly just. Since the global has become the referent for current programmes designed to ameliorate issues of cultural difference, as da Silva explains, the “pair multiculturalism and diversity could so easily become the main goal of the neoliberal agenda for global justice” (“Bahia” 332). Multiculturalism and diversity, as policies and ideologies attuned to defining and managing difference, are ideally positioned to mediate new forms of distinction and the cross-racial relationships that develop under globalization. Together, they provide legislated and ideological frameworks that purport to admit difference that nations are able to draw on as they attempt to attract global talent and develop new transnational relationships. Crucially, the form of multiculturalism and diversity that da Silva references here still assumes “the irreducibility of the difference between post-
Enlightenment Europeans and their ‘others’” (324). Despite these global shifts, states have adjusted—but not eradicated—the same hierarchical racial grids that have characterized these modern nations, and that privilege particular ideal bodies.

This chapter examines these conditions in the contexts of Singapore and Canada in particular, where raciality is redefined through the increased movement of ethno-cultural forms, while many forms of racial distinction are still circumscribed or suppressed under these neoliberal global processes. These modern nations are connected through ongoing forms of economic and cultural exchange, which is supported by the colonial legacy they both inherited, including a common lingua franca that supports these exchanges. But more crucial to this analysis are the connections created as these nations redefine raciality through their multicultural forms in order to remain globally competitive. My intervention discusses how, resulting from the recasting of their multicultural frameworks, these nations emphasize certain forms of diverse citizenry, such as “ideal” immigrant populations in the Canadian context, or certain ideal cosmopolitans in Singapore. At the same time, these nations alter the discriminatory and regulatory policies previously applied to certain populations as the presence of these groups becomes more or less beneficial. An obvious example of this would be the apparent shift in the Asian bodies most favoured by the Canadian state for their economic and social capital, such as wealthy East Asians and investors who can help further transnational economic connections. This limited inclusivity fails to attend to those bodies that are needed to meet equally pressing demands for low-wage labour, including Southeast Asian migrant labourers and Foreign

111 For instance, these nations are connected through Canada’s role as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) dialogue partner. Canada discusses and “co-operates” with Singapore on issues of “security…regional integration, economic interests, interfaith dialogue, transnational crime and counterterrorism, [and] disaster risk reduction” (“Canada’s”). Singapore and Canada also have trade agreements that encompass not only economic exchanges, but also the exchange of citizens through immigration, education, and tourism.
Domestic Workers. This process conveys which bodies are necessary or extraneous to global projects, and commodifies Asian identities deemed advantageous. The narrow scope of discourses of productivity devalues the social, economic, and cultural contributions from particular ethno-racial bodies, and also overlooks the transnational trajectories of their histories that do not benefit these particular global relationships.

Granted, the racial signification of these figures may also be strategically used for their economic labour as well as help to redefine the state’s multicultural identity. For instance, less economically-successful migrant Asians in the Canadian and Singaporean contexts who do not further the state’s cosmopolitan aims, might also be acknowledged insofar as they fill certain labor needs and because their distinction contributes to these nations’ respective multicultural identities. However, as they fail to provide a cultural “bridge” to those particularly advantageous populations that assist these nations’ respective global programs, their other contributions to the nation, and their histories within Canada and Singapore, are devalued. As Raka Shome argues, the selective co-optation and value assigned to ethno-racial bodies—particularly as it affects those whose experiences are defined by immigration and migration—produces a nation-bound framing of individuals’ experiences, which “disallow[s]” the emergence of the “interruptive political possibilities” found within their intersecting transnational histories (157, 152). This limited inclusivity of particular racial bodies has pernicious effects, since those that are largely treated as though they are extraneous to the nation never fully “belong,” and are more easily subjected to the asymmetrical application of these nations’ social programs and immigration laws.

Through this process, bodies who are considered “unproductive” and in excess of the state’s demands are figured as racial nonhumans where aspects of their racial distinction that do
not benefit these new (trans)national relationships are ignored or suppressed. Previous chapters have engaged with the racial nonhuman as a figuration that both underpins—but is in excess of—these nations’ racial grids. As I have already discussed, this figure connects the experiences of vulnerable racialized individuals to the ways in which nations define their racial schemas through problematics such as language, and shore up their national identities by occluding the histories of particular bodies. While the previous chapter explored how the exclusionary violence experienced by communities of colour remains unacknowledged, this chapter considers what happens to this figuration of the racial nonhuman when states acknowledge select racial and cultural histories to harness forms of “human capital.” From multiculturalism and immigration policies, to what I refer to as the selective Asianfication of Canada’s identity and Singapore’s use of Asianism to define its cultural identity, these processes expose how certain racial figurations are instrumentalized to serve transnational pursuits. The development of the terms that mark the new ideal productive citizen—which remains bound to the self-determined human form—also produces the inverse figuration that fails to signify these qualities. The racial nonhuman exemplifies how these nations’ modern multicultural forms rely on the production of bodies that are nonhuman insofar as they are rendered purely through the utility of their raciality, and fail to signify the qualities associated with these idealized “active” and “productive” human forms.

To consider how the racial nonhuman is figured through these shifts in these nations’ global identities, I turn to literary interventions that explore the intersections of Canada’s and Singapore’s racial schemas. I read Lydia Kwa’s This Place Called Absence and Pulse—which are set in both Southeast Asia and Canada—for their exploration of the limits of “productive” raciality. Kwa’s focus on the relationships between migrant Asian bodies across diverse contexts reveals how they are subject to similar schemas of racial management that have been
disseminated through colonialism and imperialism— though some individuals experience the effects of this management more acutely than others. Critiques like Kwa’s articulate and give form to certain transnational linkages and experiences that are bracketed out by the rescripting of racial grids that figures racial subjects based on emerging terms of productivity.

“Active Citizens” and Canada’s Multicultural Global Identity
In previous chapters, I have discussed how racial modalities in Canada have continued to uphold the position of a particular ideal (white) human while figuring particular Asian Canadian bodies as distinct from this form. This chapter turns to the ways in which these modalities are redefined to meet a global demand for additional bodies. I examine some of the different methods that have been used to recast Canada’s multicultural ideologies to mediate this process. One of these methods is the production of new rhetorical strategies that suggest that Canada’s history of racism evinces its status as a globally-competitive liberal nation capable of engaging with diverse bodies. These strategies work alongside the socio-juridical production of new information about multiculturalism’s limits, which helps reiterate the distinction of additional (migrant) bodies from Canada’s unmarked Canadian core.

As Kamboureli and Wah contend, Canada’s “body politic” was historically troubled by “racial frictions,” but today, the state has “redesign[ed] its national imaginary” as it “translat[es] its own management of racialized cultural productions into its political and cultural capital both internally and internationally” (133). In this sense, diversity produces national strength and allows Canada to access new “global bargaining positions” (133). Kamboureli and Wah provide the example of how government bodies, like the Department of Canadian Heritage, fund and internationally “marke[t]” literary and other artistic publications that express “universal” themes of race and anti-racism (138). The suggestion that these themes are universal connects Canada to
other nations by articulating the “normativity of race and racialization” (138). The state’s support of cultural productions that express these themes also commodifies Canada’s diversity; both individuals’ skills and their racial difference become beneficial to forging strong transnational relationships. To extend this, multiculturalism’s association with tolerance suggests that nations that incorporate multiculturalism into their global identities are invested in diversity and equity. This process depicts Canada as a nation well-equipped to forge relationships (economic, cultural) with other countries and peoples.

As Canada recasts its multicultural identity, the historical particularities that define its current multiculturalism formation are also obscured. Kamboureli and Wah propose that Canada’s current recasting of its multicultural ideology allows the state to acknowledge the nation’s “racist legacy” precisely because it can do so “while showing a benevolent face” (134). This allows the government to admit certain historical acts of discrimination against certain immigrant communities (such as the government’s formal acknowledgement of the Chinese Head Tax or for the Komagata Maru, or particular acts of violence against Indigenous populations), while affirming the modern nation is amenable to the inclusion of diverse bodies. To that end, as Canada markets its multicultural identity as a tool of global competitiveness, and uses it to mediate the increased movement of bodies across its borders, it

112 This commodification aligns with Henry Giroux’s description of the “biopolitics of disposability,” which refers to the way that, under neoliberal systems, individual value—even for those from the same racial group—is dictated by the neoliberal global market (Giroux 599).

113 I discuss the 1914 voyage of the Komagata Maru further in the Conclusion of this project, but note here that it marks a significant moment of anti-Indian violence in Canada. 376 British subjects--Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus--attempted to journey to Canada at a time where Canada’s exclusion laws, and the 1908 Continuous Journey provision in particular, allowed immigration officer to refuse the entry of Indians who did not come straight from India to Canada on a continuous journey (Johnston 17). Once the Komagata Maru reached the Burrard Inlet off the coast of British Columbia, it was forbidden to dock, and its passengers were forcibly detained aboard the ship for two months under barely-livable conditions (Mawani 370). Crucially, as Hugh Johnston describes, the Komagata Maru’s voyage was a “direct challenge” to Canada’s racist immigration laws (9).
observes how its settler colonial history has always defined the terms of Canadian diversity. As Hijin Park proposes:

Migration and settlement are largely depoliticized rather than viewed as tied to colonial and imperial relations that produce various forms of dislocation and migration. Canadian corporate and government involvement in establishing the unequal global distribution of power and resources that produce migration are often unmentioned (16).

To push this further, this acknowledgement of Canada’s “racist legacy” does not mean that raciality is directly mentioned or that racism is necessarily admitted as systemic, as Robyn Wiegman conveys in her discussion of attempts to "particulariz[e]" whiteness in order to "transcend" its broad associations with oppression (147). Wiegman considers the state's desire to produce an antiracist national image by blaming racist actions on a select white minority (144). This formulation acknowledges certain histories of racism, but attributes them to those who simply do not know better, thereby not upsetting the liberal vision of the nation. In the context of Canada, the recognition of these past events is attached to narratives that only acknowledge specific forms of bias toward certain immigrant groups or Indigenous peoples.\(^{114}\) For instance, regardless of the state’s intense resistance to addressing Indigenous land rights, and of the

---

\(^{114}\) Though I note that both Indigenous peoples and other non-white populations are included in the state’s limited acknowledgement of past acts of racial discrimination, I do not want to suggest that these groups are affected in the same way by the continual failure of Canada’s multicultural identity to admit the ongoing impact of these acts of violence. Non-Indigenous people of colour have both played a role in, and continue to benefit from, the particular forms of violence asserted against Indigenous peoples. As Enakshi Dua and Bonita Lawrence argue, “Broad differences exist between those brought as slaves, currently work as migrant laborers, are refugees without legal documentation, or émigrés who have obtained citizenship. Yet people of color live on land that is appropriated and contested, where Aboriginal peoples are denied nationhood and access to their own lands” (134). Daniel Heath Justice similarly contends that opportunities for “non-Natives in Canada come as a consequence of the land loss, resource expropriation, social upheaval, and political repression of Aboriginal peoples” (145). I do not take up these salient points further in this chapter, but note that even as the state instrumentalized particular immigrant populations and devalues others, both participate in a national framework that extends from Canada’s settler colonial project and its ongoing exploitation of Indigenous peoples.
contentious and protracted nature of this process, Canada’s self-defined narrative of progress includes the belief that claims are, in fact, “settled.” Gabrielle Slowey proposes that following these agreements, “the government is portrayed as generous and the Aboriginal peoples as land and cash rich” in state discourses, even though the state still allows corporations to continue encroaching on Indigenous lands (275). These processes overlook how the historical racist rhetoric and legislations that supported these forms of social management are embedded in current forms of raciality and did not disappear simply because Canada declared itself to be a multicultural nation.

The state’s decision to revisit its official multicultural policies also illustrates the tension between the global economic and social cachet of multiculturalism and diversity, and the need to still define the types of individuals who are particularly useful to Canada’s aims. A significant example of this is the culmination of Canada’s review of its multicultural programs: the 1996 Brighton Report (also known as the Strategic Evaluation of Multiculturalism Programs Review). The report not only evaluated the effectiveness of Canada’s multicultural and diversity programs, but also considered how identity and civil participation affected social cohesion under multiculturalism. While the report touches on the merits of multiculturalism, it also uncritically notes the “considerable feeling across the country that present immigration levels are too high,” and that “many Canadians” would like “immigrants to assimilate better into mainstream society” (Government 45). In order to address these feelings of “many Canadians,” the report argues that funding should be directed away from “ethno-specific organizations,” and reallocated for “public agencies and organizations that shape the lives of Canadians” (76). The emphasis on reallocating funds to programs that benefit “the lives of Canadians” suggests that ethno-racial specific programs are not useful to Canadians as a whole, which reflects a history of placing certain
minority groups—including the targets of these programs—outside of the Canadian core. Further, for those “many Canadians” who are concerned about the influx of immigrants, documents like the report help confirm that, even though additional bodies are needed to bolster Canada’s development, the state will still place limits on its multicultural policies. The Brighton Report manages to accomplish this rhetorical work without ever invoking its effects on racialized bodies directly, as the problem of race is subsumed under the needs of “many Canadians.”

In short, the (global) extension of Canada’s multicultural liberal ideals is tempered within Canada’s borders through these discourses that reiterate that multiculturalism does not entail unfettered migration. These forms of racial management work concurrently with how race is encoded in Canada’s immigration policies, specifically through the methods used to emphasize particular ideal immigrants. Outside of those who successfully relocate to Canada as refugees or under the family class system, migration to Canada is mediated by the state’s emphasis on how immigrants must have labour-market skills that enhance the nation’s competitive position in a global market. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canada’s immigration policies are invested in “ensuring that Canadians honour their responsibilities toward sponsored family members; and achieving the appropriate balance between the economic and family components of immigration” (CIC xi). Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel explain the ways in which these terms foreground the economic focus of Canada’s immigration policies, as well as the ideal immigrant’s self-determination. The “‘ideal’ immigrant” in this case is a “self-sufficient one, one who will not make demands on the social programs of the welfare state. And if the ‘ideal’ immigrant has family or dependents, the ‘ideal’ immigrant will be able to support

---

115 ‘The Migration Policy Institute aptly describes this process as Canada’s ability to “convert” immigrants’ “high human capital” into socioeconomic mobility (Challinor).
them and bear the costs of their integration into Canadian society” (65). These efforts to delineate an immigrant class that reflects specific social values like economic productivity and self-determination is well-supported by immigration regulations like those placed on family-class immigrants. For instance, the language requirement for family-class immigrants restricts the number of immigrants from countries where English-language education is generally reserved for members of the elite class (72). Regardless of the professed intent behind this proposal, such as how shared language might assist with integration, the language requirement has significant racist and classist implications.

This management of raciality through Canada’s immigration system is also highly gendered. Canada’s points system—which assesses potential immigrants and allocates points based on education, work experience, age, and language—favours a skilled working class with formal education and experience in the public realm. These criteria create additional barriers for women whose access to education and occupational training is limited to the “domestic realm” (50). But one category that admits markedly more women outside of European nations than men is the Live-in Caregiver program (LCP), which primarily accepts women from the Philippines and other developing Asian nations. The demographics of the LCP exemplify how the immigration of foreign women who work in the domestic sector is shaped by racial grids. As Sedef Arat-Koç argues, “nursemaids and nannies” from Britain and elsewhere in Europe receive high points through the formal points system (217). However, points for all other categories of domestic work were lowered with the implementation of the FDWP/LCP, which discriminates

---

116 These criteria have only intensified since 2008, as Canada has focused on attracting “economic class” (including investors, self-employed workers, skilled workers, and entrepreneurs) immigrants and short-term workers (“Program”).

117 Until 1992, the LCP was the Foreign Domestic Worker class. Throughout the 1950s to the 1980s, this category was largely filled by women from the Caribbean (Bakan and Stasiulis 43).
against women in countries without certain types of formal nursemaid or nanny training, including foreign-trained nurses who receive no occupational points, and can only apply through the LCP. The creation of the LCP outside of the points system not only marks women’s work as relatively inferior, but also subjects women to precarious conditions of status and employment. They can eventually apply for citizenship or landed immigrant status, but do not arrive with landed status (Abu-Laban 54). Further, since their landing visas dictate the particular employer they must work for while in Canada, they are also extremely vulnerable to abuse and to deplorable living conditions (Lee and Pratt).

The point here is not that Canada’s current immigration systems are carefully crafted with racial exclusion in mind, or are focused exclusively on barring particular groups of “undesirable” racial others from entry into the nation, in the same way as past regulations like the Head Tax or the Continuous Journey provision.\footnote{The Continuous Journey provision was enacted in 1908 to restrict the immigration of Indian citizens who were part of the Commonwealth and could not be directly excluded on the basis of their origin. The Act prohibited immigration from individuals who did not arrive in Canada directly from their country of birth/citizenship. Since ships from India required a stopover before they reached Canada, the Act was an effective way of preventing Indian immigration without creating a law that named this group specifically (Mawani 370).} What a cursory assessment of these policies reveals is that they are highly racialized, from their use of English as a passive mediator of racial distinction, to the way that the labor of live-in caregivers (predominantly non-white women) is distinguished from “skilled” labor, to how the implied terms of the “ideal” immigrant successfully curtails the immigration of individuals from developing nations.\footnote{These restrictions include the select recognition of foreign professional licenses under Canada’s selection criteria and licensing agencies, and the “de-skilling” of foreign professional women in particular (Mojab 123).} The terms of the immigration system work alongside Canada’s internal multicultural programs to ensure that a core “Canadian” culture—one rooted in cultural values associated with dominant Anglo-
European whiteness—will not be irreparably diluted more than is absolutely necessary as Canada incorporates new cultures and ethnicities through its global projects.

The shifts in policies and accompanying discourses to fulfill Canada’s global goals have asymmetric effects on different racial groups. As this chapter focuses on the migration of specific Asian populations, I consider how the logic of inclusion and exclusion discussed in the previous chapter is also connected to these discourses of immigration that convey the demand for certain Asian bodies, but also provide ways of managing their place within the nation. Philip Kelly suggests that in recent years, “The distant objectifying gaze with which world regions such as East, South or Southeast Asia were once beheld—and through which they were held together—is now problematized by the insertion of Asia into Canada and the complicity of Canada in events in Asia” (215). I thus analyze what Park refers to as the “Asianfication” of national and international programs as Canada commodifies diversity. Park proposes that this “Asianfication” takes “advantage of ‘people to people’ exchanges or the ‘people dimension’ of globalization” including “long-term, permanent migration, and short-term migrations of students, business people, scientists, academics, professionals, and extended family” (22). The programs that support these initiatives include the creation of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (APFC) by Parliament in 1984, a federal cabinet position tied to the Asia Pacific since 1994, and a focus on developing Asia Pacific policies (Evans and Woo 10). Further, the state can draw selectively on the history of Asian Canadians’ contributions to imply a historical and mutually-beneficial connection between Canada and particular Asian nations, and use this history to further trade connections and attract the “right” types of immigrants. The way that individuals are recognized by this “Asianfication” is dictated by Canada’s participation in a global neoliberal market that demands a differentiated labor force, which means that an individual’s value remains
stratified within racial categories. For instance, Park’s discussion touches on the ways that Western “Asia rising” discourse eclipses the contributions of less-wealthy Asian workers, and those whose financial or social capital does not act as a “bridge” to the Asia Pacific (21-22). The limits on which Asian bodies are “valuable” is, again, highly gendered. The contributions from Canada’s relationship with Asia that are especially recognized and considered most beneficial are those from wealthy—often male—individuals whose economic and cultural capital bolsters Canada’s position, while the role of economically disadvantaged women from Asia (including garment workers, domestic workers, and caregivers) are treated as comparatively inconsequential (21-22).

As this “Asianfication” is integrated into Canada’s immigration concerns, it intersects with the rhetoric of “active citizens.” While this term does not solely refer to Asian Canadians, it returns to the tension between inclusion and exclusion that continues to affect many Asian communities in Canada. As Abu-Laban and Gabriel explain, Canada’s current multicultural program aims to “inculcate an attachment to Canada….and create what is referred to as active citizens. In the latter respect, the new multiculturalism program parallels recent neo-liberal discussions around immigration, which have also stressed creating active citizens” (114). The rhetoric of “active citizens” is now used by organizations like the CIC (Citizenship and Immigration Canada), but originated as part of the updated multicultural policy under a federal program spearheaded by the Department of Canadian Heritage in 1995 to keep multicultural programs cost-effective. This update emphasized, in part, the importance of “civic participation,” defined as the need to “develo[p], among Canada’s diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and the capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country” (Bullard n. pag.). This rhetoric also addresses the possibility that Canada’s emphasis on
multiculturalism and diversity will enable the immigration of individuals who either fail to
directly contribute to national development, or support a core Canadian identity.

“Active citizens” is also used in less problematic instances, such as by organizations like
The Institute for Canadian Citizenship, which uses the term in their programs that assist new
Canadians as they adapt to Canada and its political processes. For the expansive category of
Asian Canadian migration in particular, the term’s intersections with the stereotypical figurations
of model immigrants foregrounds the distinctions between the forms of diversity—and the
particular communities—that are considered advantageous to Canada’s multicultural identity.
Put differently, the rhetoric of “active citizens” is a racially-defined way of transmitting which
specific immigrant groups possess these valuable traits, which aligns with Canada’s selective
approach toward Asianfication. The term is not only coded to demand the social and cultural
participation of particular racialized immigrant communities; it also suggests that those who
cannot (or do not) contribute aspects of their heritage to shape Canada’s identity are “inactive”
citizens who are not engaged with the cultural and social structures that benefit the nation.

Importantly, despite Canada’s focus on attracting Asians and new forms of exchange, this
process is still tempered by the rendering of particular Asian bodies as always external to the
development of Canada’s core identity. For instance, Lily Cho considers the effects of reducing
Chinese Canadian identities to their relationships with Canada, overlooking their connection to
imperialism, colonialism, and other transnational relationships. Cho proposes that a narrative of
“home” (Asia) versus “arrival” (Canada) continue to underline the reception that Asian Canadian
immigrants receive. It ignores the ways in which “home” for many Asian bodies has always been
Canada, and affirms the view that “white people originate in Canada” (190). This narrative also
discounts the ways that migrant movements might be perpetual and do not end upon arrival. It
overlooks individuals’ “multigenerational detours” through other nations, which “naturalizes” the uniformity of Asian nations (190). It assumes, for instance, that all Chinese diasporic communities originate from China.\textsuperscript{120} In short, Cho’s discussion emphasizes the ways that Asian Canadians continue to figure as homogeneous outsiders in the nation’s racial matrix, which hearkens back to their historical figuration as bodies that may threaten the opportunities and lifestyles of “legitimate” members of Canada’s core community.

For those who retain their social and economic ties to their nation(s) of origins, this limited narrative of immigration undercuts the importance of transnational living and the conflicted relationships individuals might have with their ethno-racial homeland(s). Philip Kelly argues that “homeland cultural ties are now acceptable in the mainstream discourse of Canadian society, but those deriving a collective identity by retaining them are courted politically” (212). Kelly also notes that “immigrant integration” becomes necessary for most individuals who migrate from Asia to Canada, as multiple national allegiances undermine attempts to manage and circumscribe the position of Asian immigrants in Canada (212). Crucially, this lack of recognition affects how the other histories that shape individuals’ lives may provide significant alternatives to these dominant “home” and “arrival” narratives. Raka Shome discusses this process in government discourse, where the “transnational interruptions and linkages of [immigrant] lives [are] simply bracketed out in public discourse, thus disallowing their interruptive political possibilities to emerge” (156). In other words, ignoring these alternative narratives diminishes that they belie the prevailing narrative that treats Canada as an ideal point of “arrival,” but one that might still expel these foreign others if they do not become part of the “multicultural imaginary landscape” (156).

\textsuperscript{120} Raka Shome similarly describes the limits of the standard multicultural narrative, where individuals migrate to an “Anglo nation…and become part of the racialized minority landscape of the nation” (156).
Singapore’s “Asianism” and Productive Racial Identities

Globalization has helped shift Western hegemony over global financial centres. Nations like Singapore have developed into internationally-competitive economic hubs. As Singapore develops its global identity to bolster this development, it also draws upon its multiracial/multicultural makeup. According to Philip Holden, since Singapore is a migrant settler society “almost wholly constituted through migration,” there is “little possibility of an appeal to a pre-colonial past,” or a present devoid of the multiracial grid that was instituted under colonialism, and that has become a part of everyday life (278). As a result, while Singapore does not have the equivalent of Canada’s Multiculturalism Act—and a history of explicit legislation easily invoked as evidence of the nation’s multicultural identity—multiculturalism and multiracial discourses are nevertheless foundational to the nation’s identity. Singapore’s current approach to multiracialism/multiculturalism is influenced by issues of immigration, which extends from the management of the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other formulation. This section focuses on how Singapore has altered its multicultural identity by adapting its pre-existing racial makeup to define its “Asian” cultural identity.

Holden notes that a symptom of Singapore’s migrant settler structure is that Singaporean cultural identity is largely “invisible” in other countries after individuals leave Singapore; a Singaporean Chinese migrant will be read by individuals in Canada as East Asian, and a

[121] Holden’s discussion aligns with Bhabha’s reading of how “colonized societies had multiculturalism imposed upon them from above and they evolved an ethic of survival that encompassed the presence of ‘otherness’ as a practice of everyday life and language…[I]t is grounded in a very real sense of ‘coexistence’ that inhabits societies that are often too quickly described as lacking the liberal virtues of toleration and individualism” (Bhabha 23).
Singaporean Indian as South Asian (278). Along with Singapore’s position as a state-sized nation that cannot draw on a relationship to its larger body for resources or cultural influence, these factors complicate Singapore’s attempts to share its global identity through its cultural and racial distinction. But the nation’s particular multiracial makeup also allows for “Asianism” to be invoked as part of its global and regional positions. Much like C.J. Wan-ling Wee’s theorization of the “Asian modern,” Leo Ching proposes that “Asianism” today is not premised on the “unequivocal difference” between the West and Asia, but is produced through the strategic assertion and commodification of an Asian identity under neoliberal regimes (236). As Wee describes it, this identity may have been defined by the “hegemonic Euro-American West” but is “reterritorialized into a varied yet consistent vision” by Asian states as a way of developing a national identity that supports the development of international relationships and flows of global capital (30).

The development of a recognizably “Asian” cultural identity is necessary to this process. Wee proposes that capitalism is now a “cultural form” in Singapore, and that under the nation’s neoliberal regimes, culture “was (and is) conceived of as a residual category to be revamped instrumentally as part of the radical reconstruction of subjectivity itself for the economy” (9). Wee’s critique touches on how capitalism drives Singaporean culture, while culture risks being subordinated under the interests of capital; the ongoing development of Singapore’s “unique” cultural identity furthers the state’s commodification of its national identity to help develop an

---

122 The ways that Singaporeans are (mis)identified in other nations does not reflect diasporic Singaporeans’ self-identification, or how the Singaporean state might identify them (see Cheryl Naruse’s “Singapore, State Nationalism, and the Production of Diaspora” for a further analysis of this).

123 The use of Asianism here is borrowed from Leo Ching’s use of the term, amongst others, but it provides a useful distinction between Canada’s “Asianification”—the development of an association between Canada and Asian identities that remains subordinate to dominant white Canadianness—and Asianism, which is a commodification of an Asian identity within Asia.
affinity between Singapore and other regions in Asia (and elsewhere). To strengthen this cultural base, the state is able to draw on Asian Values discourse—the aforementioned appeal to “traditional” and essentialized values like communitarianism. Since the 1980s, Asian Values discourse has helped secure Singapore’s transnational trade connections, and develop its regional presence. This use of Asian Values is a significant example of how culture is managed “as an instrument to maintain economic competitiveness,” which allows Singapore to insert itself into the monolith “Asia” and engage other Asian nations (9, 10).  

This ideological shaping of Singapore’s cultural identity would be impossible without the instrumentalization of its citizens to support these efforts. Cheah explains that “The cultivation of human capital has always been crucial to Singapore’s hyper development” and the state’s desire to become the “high technology and financial center for Asia and the primary Asian hub of transnational capital investments” (196). To this end, the government has rapidly improved its citizens’ skills and professional expertise, and bolstered these “indigenous” human resources with foreign labor (197). Crucially, this focus on instrumentalizing citizens and developing “human capital” also merges the language of capital with Singapore’s cultural concerns. Recent state policies and discourses reveal this connection, including the rhetoric of material “hardware” and social “heartware” that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong first discussed in 1997, as part of the government’s focus on social development for the 21st Century (Singapore 21):

124 Wee notes that one example of this is Singapore’s development of its economic connections to China through the government’s focus on “‘Sinic’ qualities” as it forms its “capitalist identity” (10).

125 Goh and Holden suggest that Singapore’s 1991 Strategic Economic Plan helped set the groundwork for Singapore’s desire to “catch up” by the 21st Century through its focus on “national identity, quality of life” and becoming a “global city,” where citizens “fulfil[1] their individual dreams yet…[come] together to enjoy the surplus value of global capitalism” (9).
More than a house, Singapore must be a home. The Government can provide the conditions for security and economic growth. But in the end, it is people who give feeling, the human touch, the sense of pride and achievement, the warmth. So beyond developing physical infrastructure and hardware, we need to develop our social infrastructure and software. In Sony corporation, they call this ‘heartware.’ We need to go beyond economic and material needs, and reorient society to meet the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, cultural and social needs of our people. Our concept of competitiveness must therefore recognize that the robust and successful societies of the future will be those that place people at the centre. Countries and societies which can develop and mobilize their people, and serve the human needs, goals and aspirations of their citizens will have a lasting edge. Singapore must be such a society (qtd in Cheah 255).

This speech illuminates the state’s awareness that even though Singapore is defined by its particular social hierarchies, it requires a unified cultural and social identity to bind its people together and develop their cultural capital. The state may acknowledge the importance of factors outside its “economic and material needs” and “physical infrastructure and hardware”; however, the desire for “social infrastructure and software” is still an attempt to ensure Singapore’s competitiveness against other nations that were able to define their economic and cultural identities while Singapore was still coming into its own as an independent nation (emphasis mine). While the state purportedly supports its citizens’ emotional needs, even the emotive power of “heartware” is associated with its connection to industrial development though Sony, and the economic “edge” that can be acquired if certain citizens participate in this new global vision for Singapore.
Lee’s discussion of “heartware” also reveals the government’s emphasis on the instrumentalization of a particular type of Singaporean citizen—one who is willing to be “develop[ed] and mobilize[d]” for Singapore’s global development. Cheah proposes that this mobilization of Singapore’s people in service of its “hyperdevelopment” also subjects individuals to processes that not only “enhance the individual’s skills through training,” but also “induce a sense of belonging through social recognition and the emotional reward of striving toward a higher goal that transcends mere economic self-interest” (203). This focus on improving the particular skills of citizens to grow the nation’s heartware alongside its hardware produces an implicit value-based system; cultural contributions might be recognized alongside individual’s economic utility, but not all contributions are considered equally valuable. During Lee Hsien Loong’s comments in 1997, he emphasized that all Singaporeans must hone certain personal contributions to aid the state’s development:

Not everyone can perform equally well…but [e]very Singaporean has a contribution to make to his job, his company, his community and his country. But equally, he has a responsibility to keep himself employable and productive through continuous learning, and to play his part to the best of his ability (203).

This comment tacitly expresses a demand that Singaporeans aspire toward certain forms of enterprise, which perpetuates how contributions from individuals who work in sectors that do not further Singapore’s global development are rendered inferior. To that effect, sentiments like these also evade how Singapore’s racial hierarchy predetermines which individuals can keep themselves “employable and productive” in a way that is recognized by the state.

These processes that I have identified—from the state’s need to cultivate a distinct Asian identity, to the instrumentalization of “productive” citizens to grow cultural and economic
capital, to how these developments are premised on Singapore’s multiracial form—are drawn together and redeployed through the state’s emphasis on cosmopolitanism. Beginning in the late 1980s, Angelia Poon claims, the Singaporean state “grafte[d]...a particular notion of cosmopolitanism onto postcolonial multiculturalism” where multiracialism/multiculturalism was set up as the nation’s “heritage,” and continuities were drawn between a “(Chinese) immigrant past and the present arrival of ‘foreign talent’ to Singapore for work” (75, 77). Cosmopolitanism draws on Singapore’s racial grid to “advertise[s]” Singapore’s ostensible openness to cultural diversity to attract global talent, and encourage its citizens to engage with a global consumerist culture (82). But, crucially, it remains organized around the “core” of the nation’s multiracial Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other hierarchical paradigm (73). It therefore leaves many of “the more political and radical possibilities of cosmopolitanism untouched” (76, 77).126 This ideological framework of cosmopolitanism helps establish Singapore as a global city-state through its “inextricable integration with the global knowledge economy,” and works through “education and immigration policies to facilitate the movement and settlement” of certain (economically) valuable bodies (70, 74). As then-Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs (soon to be Singapore's Minister of Communication and the Arts) George Yeo proposed in 1989, Singapore “cannot be a trading nation, if we are not cosmopolitan” (qtd. in Hill 215). In order to flourish as a nation, the country increasingly relies on outside resources (from trade goods to foreign talent/foreign workers) and its relationships with other countries and multinational corporations. Those citizens able to further this goal become the active agents of Singapore’s focus on cosmopolitanism, and their contributions are therefore considered vital by the state. To this end,

126 Poon states that the cosmopolitan subject is “primarily conceived of in apolitical terms” where citizens are required to be cosmopolitan without “embracing...the state of being implicated in moral action that being a full citizen of the world would suggest” (78).
the instrumentalization of Singapore’s “productive” citizens involves directing their national engagement toward this form of cosmopolitanism that helps Singapore to remain competitive in a global marketplace.

Despite official support of the nation’s evolving cosmopolitan identity, the state attempts to ensure that this focus on cosmopolitanism does not undermine its pre-existing domestic multiracial grid. Markedly similar to the language used to differentiate between the nation’s “hardware” and “heartware,” the state has produced not only the category of the “cosmopolitans,” but also the “heartlanders” (Tan 67). These two ostensibly-opposed identities help extend Singapore’s Asianism, while mediating its global pursuits. Kenneth Paul Tan identifies heartlanders as those who are “valued as the ‘keepers’ or ‘protectors’ of national values, culture, identity, and a sense of belonging,” while cosmopolitans (generally “English-educated Chinese”) are useful because they are culturally adaptable and help “raise the country’s international profile…to drive the economy into more advanced stages” (67). Heartlanders are associated with tradition, an emphasis on the local, and are often lauded in state discourses for their “rootedness and national attachment” (Poon 77). Cosmopolitans, however, are connected to economic development, transnational mobility, adaptability, and social progress.

The government is able to draw strategically on these two categories to maintain Singapore’s particular national form as its citizens are asked to help strengthen economic relationships with other nations, and are increasingly exposed to other ideologies. For instance, Tan describes the ways in which government often “justifies the limits it places on openness and liberalization—as demanded by the more cosmopolitan Singaporeans—by reference to a conservative majority [the heartlander] that will not tolerate such changes” (68). The ability to invoke these two identities allows Singapore’s dominant group—the English-educated
“cosmopolitan” Chinese—to pursue their particular economic goals through their global engagements, while the heartlanders (often less-privileged individuals) will presumably uphold Singapore’s “core” values. This process also means that the privileged Chinese are able to shore up their dominant position in the nation’s social hierarchy, while, ironically, the less-privileged heartlanders are expected to defend the national structures that define their relatively subordinate position.

Even with the appeal to “heartware” and “heartlanders,” Singapore’s “core” identity and defined racial categories remain in an unsteady relationship with its global endeavors and strategic use of cosmopolitan values. For instance, a significant consequence of Singapore’s emphasis on cosmopolitanism is its relationship to the influences of postcolonial whiteness. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang explain that cosmopolitanism’s relationship to whiteness is a “slippery concept that ‘oscillates’ uneasily between a post-colonial hang-up of ‘white’ or ‘Western’” …and a sense of ambivalence towards whiteness and a celebration of Singapore’s progressive multicultural stance” (5). Whiteness is associated with foreign “talent” rather than foreign “workers” in Singapore who provide a low-cost workforce, have limited work opportunities, and lack global influence. Meier argues that whiteness in Singapore signifies the “traveller, the businessman, and the colonizer,” and that white bodies are desired and required by Singaporean society” for their associations with creativity and experience (127, 128, 134). Whiteness and white mobility is therefore produced as necessary for Singapore’s global competitiveness, but its connection to Western culture and ideals also risks upsetting the balance maintained between Singaporean cosmopolitans and heartlanders. As Yeoh and Huang suggest, it thus conflicts with the state’s management of its cosmopolitan ideals and the emphasis placed on Chinese cosmopolitans in particular.
While cosmopolitanism might have been “grafted” onto the nation’s multiracial form, the success of Singapore’s cosmopolitan pursuits (and the presence of over a million non-resident “others”) continues to clash with its essentialist structure (Yeoh 49). By rapidly introducing individuals to a proliferation of ethno-racial and cultural identities, and by stressing cultural and geographical mobility, cosmopolitanism threatens to fracture the proportional representation assured by the CMIO formulation (Chua 20, Poon 72). Singapore’s multiracial/multicultural structure must therefore contend with this shift, including through a reassertion of Singapore’s racial grid. As Brenda Yeoh proposes, the rise of state discourses that bracket off foreign workers and foreign talent from Singapore’s CMIO population is suggestive of the state’s revitalization of its multiracial identity (49). Exemplary of this reassertion of the CMIO narrative in statal discourses is Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s 2000 speech on Singaporean multiculturalism, which declared that multiculturalism is not comprised of “mosaic pieces, but four overlapping circles. Each circle represents one community. The area where the circles overlap is the common area where we live, play and work together and where we feel truly Singaporean with minimal consciousness of our ethnicity” (qtd. in Yeoh 49). This new approach to multiculturalism purports to reconcile the influx of new bodies—who can participate in this “common area,” but never become part of the four circles—with the pre-existing CMIO population.

Though this need to reaffirm the nation’s foundational essentialist structure on a national level, the CMIO formulation is, as Goh and Holden describe, still “activated to meet the challenges of globalization” (214). Race is still instrumentalized, as it remains the “symbolic vehicle for embodying the specific cultural skills that are deemed as crucial to the seizing of capitalist opportunities in East Asia (Chinese high culture) and for representing the price and
quality of immigrant labour needs (light-skinned foreign talent versus dark-skinned ‘foreign workers’)” (214). Singapore can therefore use its well-developed multiracial rubric to naturalize explanations for why elite Chinese Singaporeans and their association with cosmopolitan potential are more likely to achieve transnational economic success, and continue to further its need for cultural capital. I return to this point further in my analysis of Kwa’s writing, but note here that though Singaporean cosmopolitan extends from its multiracial form, there are marked limits on which individuals and which transnational connections are acknowledged as part of the nation’s cosmopolitan pursuits. That is, even within the dominant Chinese population, individuals who fall outside particular national values are not included within the cosmopolitan ideal.

Transmigrant Alienation and Alternative Genealogies in *This Place Called Absence*

Lydia Kwa’s work explores the emotional and material effects of individuals who are never fully at home within either Canada or Singapore, as they are caught between these forms of racial instrumentalization and national demands for certain forms of ideal citizenry. Kwa was born in Singapore and moved to Canada in 1980 at the age of 20. Her novels *This Place Called Absence* (2000) and *Pulse* (2010) are set in both locales. The protagonists of these texts are queer Chinese Singaporean women who settled in Canada. Though both women are part of Singapore’s dominant racial group, they leave largely due to homophobia and the marginalization of queer subjects in the nation. In Canada, they become relatively successful professionals and are more easily able to express their sexual identities, but are divorced from their Singaporean roots through migration, and also because they are read as Chinese rather than Chinese Singaporean. Further, in Canada, they are still figured as queer, racialized, migrant women in a nation that places primacy on the white heterosexual male body. In other words, they essentially exchange
their relative racial privilege in Singapore for the ability to be openly gay in Canada, though they are then subordinated to Canada’s white majority. Though Singapore lacks a significant white population, non-white groups are still subjected to the ongoing hegemony of whiteness that has penetrated the racial grids of postcolonial nations. This section will consider, in part, how these effects only intensify under globalization.

The complex racial figuration of these women—and the shifts in their ethno-racial identities as they migrate to Canada and return to Singapore—produce important affiliations between them and other individuals who are similarly subjected to these racial matrices. By bridging the social/racial schemas of these nations through the characterization of these women, *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse* engage with the shared intergenerational “conditions of dislocation and racialization” that Lily Cho describes, though Kwa also remains attentive to the distinctions of these locales (186).

*This Place Call Absence* focuses on the experiences of Wu Lan, a psychologist who returns to Canada after her father’s funeral in Singapore. The narrative begins on Remembrance Day in Canada, which is apt since much of Wu Lan’s story is a reflection upon both her life and the history of other immigrant women whose experiences are lost to the process of migration and militarism. The narrative operates through two connected timelines that shift between the contemporary—Wu Lan in Vancouver in 1999, and her mother, Mahmee, in Singapore—and early twentieth-century Singapore. The narrative arc set in twentieth-century Singapore is connected to Wu Lan’s story through her research into, and narration of, the lives of two ah kus (prostitutes): Lee Ah Choi, whose parents sell her into prostitution, and Ah Choi’s lover, Chow Chat Mui, who flees her father's sexual abuse and is forced into sex work. The experiences of the socially-illegitimate ah kus are parallel to—but not fully equated with—the problematics that
mark Wu Lan as Other within Canada’s nationspace: they are all queer, diasporic, racially-marked bodies. Wu Lan’s research makes visible these identities that Singapore has attempted to occlude from national narratives, and helps her assert her own obscured history within the Canadian context as a Chinese-Singaporean Canadian. Wu Lan’s narrative is therefore facilitated by globalization; her transnational and trans-temporal connections to others could only exist through the type of rapid communication and resources available through global institutions.127

Wu Lan’s desire to create a connection with these women’s histories is precipitated by the dual alienation she experiences as a migrant subject. Wu Lan thinks of both Canada as home, and Singapore as “back home,” but has an uneasy relationship to both (20). Canada offers opportunities that Wu Lan would not be able to access as easily in Singapore, from the ability to form her own psychology practice, to the freedom to watch movies that were banned in Singapore when they came out, to the chance to come out to her family after she is in an open and “stable relationship”— though one that has ended by the start of the narrative (20).

However, Wu Lan also feels adrift in Canada’s modernized and globalized landscape. She describes how she was “proud of her escape from Singapore” after she “convinced [her]self that leaving the country was the solution, but that this “flight into exile...resulted in internal fissures in the psyche, the cleaving of memory from memory” as she attempts to bridge her life between these two nations (123). She seems to struggle with forming lasting bonds and friendships; she rarely talks to her family in Singapore, does not mention any friends in either

127 Eleanor Ty notes that “Wu Lan makes and receives long distance calls from her mother and brother, jet travel enables her to attend her father’s funeral in Singapore, and she is able to do research on nineteenth-century prostitutes in Malaysia in the state-of-the art Vancouver Public Library. In her mind, she constantly flits back and forth between her memories of her father and mother in Singapore and her present state of loneliness in Canada” (25).
locale, and though she has a brief relationship in Canada with a woman who is indifferent to her racial distinction, she does not pursue a long-term connection with anyone.

Wu Lan also notes that while she has been in the country for two decades, the “unsaid and unsayable” is still “swirling inside” of her as she figures out “who is Wu Lan?” (123). Part of this struggle with the “unsaid” involves how Wu Lan must defend her identity and her history to those in Canada who incorrectly assume that she must be part of the influx of immigrants from Hong Kong. For instance, when talking with a young woman in the library about the book on the ah kus, the woman asks if Wu Lan is from Hong Kong due to her appearance and accent; Wu Lan responds that she is “from here” and that she “left Singapore twenty years ago. I’m Canadian now” (32). It is unclear if the young woman believes Wu Lan, and interactions like these foreground how the inability of others to read her ethno-racial background complicates her ability to form connections with others.

Wu Lan’s alienation is also contrasted against other non-white bodies around her. In a scene that seems designed to blatantly foreground this distinction, Wu Lan compares herself to two young men on a bus. She observes an “Extreme faux macho…Asian guy” talking to his white friend about a recent demolition of an apartment on Alberni Street (29-30). She regards them with “a touch of curiosity and envy, especially the Asian guy,” who is able to confidently discuss local matters with his friend (30). This scene elides a moment of global progress in Vancouver’s history—as Alberni has been steadily developed into a high-end retail area that targets wealthy Asian immigrants—with the ideal faces of modern multicultural Canada. The two men are middle class, interracial friends at ease in their environment; they stand in contrast to Wu Lan’s experiences and the misrecognition of her identity within Canada.
I identify Wu Lan’s alienation as one of the markers of the racial nonhuman’s figuration in the Canadian context. Moments like the woman’s comments alone do not render Wu Lan as a racial nonhuman but they exemplify how her sense of self is constantly undermined. While Wu Lan self-identifies as a Canadian with global connections, even when she asserts this relationship, the complexities of her background as a Singaporean Chinese in Canada are not acknowledged by others. She faces the state’s failure to develop frameworks or vocabularies that would make “unproductive” transnational histories and experiences like hers legible to others, and that would help establish that complex trajectories of individual migration do not contradict a sense of being “from here.” In her analysis of the failure of multiculturalism and diversity to account for complex transnational trajectories, Shome proposes that the “transnational limits of current frameworks of cultural inclusion” must be reconfigured” to allow individuals to “connect to the existence, as well as imagination” of others (152). Wu Lan experiences these limitations as she consistently struggles to represent herself to others, which prevent her from ever fully feeling that she knows who she is. Kwa’s characterization of Wu Lan therefore homes in on the day-to-day experiences of a body that must constantly renegotiate its racial identity and contest the effects of Canada’s commodification and homogenization of certain forms of racial difference. Through these experiences, she reflects the racial nonhuman’s figuration as a body that, as it lacks the qualities associated with an emerging ideal global human subject, is figured at the limits of the nation’s structuring of its global identity. Her self-reflexive question about who she is, is not just symptomatic of an existential crisis, but reflects how her dislocation and the lack of belonging renders her as a body that does not initially know where it belongs.

*This Place Called Absence* suggests that the ways in which individuals like Wu Lan are figured in globality is an intensification of the historical treatment of migrant women. Wu Lan’s
desire to give a voice to the experiences of the ah kus is prompted by her discovery of an old journal in the Vancouver Public Library that briefly mentions the women. The article discusses women who had left Mainland China and Japan from the late 1800s to the mid-twentieth century, women who landed in Singapore and were indentured to the sex trade to pay off debts. Some had been sold by their families, while others willingly sold their bodies. Many of the women had committed suicide in response to the utter misery of their livelihood and the suffering they experienced from diseases like gonorrhea and syphilis (31).

Wu Lan eventually locates a manuscript by the same author, James Francis Warren, and finds the names of the two women in a ledger in the book. From this, Wu Lan begins to narrate the ah kus’s experiences, and in doing so, engages with a history of other migrant women’s identities and trajectories that were shaped by globalization. As Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu describes (citing Kwa’s historical source material), the presence of ah kus in turn-of-the-century Singapore was part of the “important history of colonial prostitution in Britain’s Straits Settlements, the capital of which was Singapore” (Warren cited in Fu 96). The ah kus were largely from impoverished families, and were forced to leave their homes, settle in Southeast Asia, and work as prostitutes (Warren 10). Their presence was indispensable to retaining the intensified migration of Chinese labourers who were primary bachelors in a society with a dearth of marriageable women. The ah kus were therefore viewed by the colonial government as a “necessary evil” whose presence aided Singapore’s expansion and its need for new sources of labour (34).

In her reading of Kwa’s novel, Eleanor Ty discusses the connection between these historical moments that produced new affiliations between nations and peoples, and globalization as a recent phenomenon. Ty cites Wimmer and Glick Schiller’s description of how the
widespread labour migration that, in the last century and a half, “spanned the globe with little or no restriction in most states” and produced the intersections of nation building, immigration, and global trade systems that laid the groundwork for modern globalization (25). The argument that modern forms of globalization result from the historical development of international trade routes—as well as the effects of colonialism and imperialism—is not a novel claim. What is especially useful about this reading is that it connects the transmigrancy of marginalized women across modern and early 20th-century contexts. Transmigrants in this context refers to “immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organization, religious, and political—that spans borders” (Blanc qtd. in Ty 26). Ty proposes that like Wu Lan, “the two ah ku women can be called transmigrants. They have vivid memories of their childhoods [in China] and maintain strong ties to their families” (Ty 26). Further, like Wu Lan, the ah kus are exemplary of those female migrants who never fully “arrive” in their new locale; they retain significant bonds with their nation of origin, even though these bonds are not historically recognized. However, even as they use these economic opportunities to retain relationships with their families, Ah Choi and Chat Mui are subject to an especially precarious form of global capital. As young transmigrants who find themselves in a nation that does not accept their particular subjectivities, they are also subjected to the commodification of their bodies as they are essentially forced into sex work.

In effect, this focus on transmigrancy not only highlights how the ah kus’s presence was vital to Singapore’s development, and its relationship to China; it also produces their experiences as part of a history of transnationalism and the migrations of Asian women that predates nation-

128 Ty suggests that there are also significant material signs of the women’s transmigrancy, including the remittances they send back to China to ensure the survival of their families. Ty notes that these remittances are an important part of these economic relationships in the regions (57).
Based narratives of immigration. This reading crucially foregrounds their commonalities with other individuals—like Wu Lan—who are also vulnerable to these processes. Wu Lan realizes that their experiences will remain untold in Singapore—a nation that does not admit their histories—but still wishes that she “could be under their skins, to know what it was like” (43). When asked by her lover why she has invested time in researching and imagining the lives of these women, she responds: “I don’t pretend to know. It’s more that I’ve needed to imagine them so that I won’t…can’t be…defeated by their anonymity” (43, 163). But even as Wu Lan draws on her own experiences when constructing the ah kus’s story, she does not fetishize their subalternity or try to write them a purely positive narrative. Rather, she tries to “wait for inspiration,” as she creates a story for them that is developed and nuanced (48). She traces their vulnerability to disease and violence, their secret love, Ah Choi’s suicide, and Chat Mui’s eventual freedom from prostitution through her marriage to a queer Peranakan scholar.

While Wu Lan explains that she has imagined the two women “together,” she also acknowledges that she does not “know for sure if lesbianism existed among the ah kus of that time,” but feels “compelled” to create a history that would not be “celebrated” by history (163). In effect, Wu Lan attempts to use her imagination to explore the potential connections between her life and the lives of these subversive transmigrant women, and tries to consider the particularities of their experiences that have been omitted from historical records. Through this,

---

129 Holden states that “Kwa is careful not to simply plot equivalences—the existential loneliness of a professional migrant in late twentieth-century Vancouver is clearly not the same as the struggle for everyday survival faced by sex workers in early twentieth-century Singapore—but her narrative does encourage the drawing of parallels.” (“Interrogating” 287)

130 Chat Mui’s descriptions of her relationship with Ah Choi reflect the context of the period she lives in, where homosexuality was neither named as such—nor outlawed—by the government, but individuals were aware that their relationships were still taboo: “Careful, they’ll name our desire sick and despicable, crush it under the hateful weight of their gossip. Or maybe they’ll think nothing of this love, and only laugh secretly to themselves. Make it as trivial as a passing cloud” (102).
Wu Lan creates what Gui refers to as an “alternate, queer genealogy,” which not only challenges a history of nation building, and allows her to consider a “non-instrumentalized intimacy” with another person as she narrates the ah kus’s relationship (308). Gui also proposes that Wu Lan’s distinct “objectification” of the ah kus’s—that is, how she draws from their role in history to produce this particular narrative—is contrary to the “Singaporean state’s resonant directive of harnessing queer subjectivity as a neoliberal technology for the creative industries” (309). Gui’s point aligns with work like Audrey Yue’s, which homes in on the “illiberal pragmatism” that characterizes Singapore’s treatment of queer communities. Yue explores how the state must appeal to its social conservative base that predominantly rejects these individuals and emphasizes heterosexual reproduction, but also relies upon gay Singaporeans to convey that the nation is open-minded and able to attract global talent (“We’re” 199, 200). Wu Lan’s genealogy helps to address this approach by countering the state’s suppression of queer identities by foregrounding their experiences, but does so without reiterating the way the state homogenizes queerness through its selective commodification of Singapore’s queer culture.

Gui focuses on the Singaporean context, but this alternate genealogy also has a bearing on Canada’s history. Wu Lan may be a transmigrant, but she still identifies as Canadian. The exclusion of these historical transmigrants from modern Singapore’s national narrative and their figuration as racial nonhumans traverses Wu Lan’s life in Canada, and inflects her own already-tenuous position. Wu Lan undoubtedly leads a more privileged, less perilous life in Canada and

---

131 Yue describes how, following the 1997 financial crisis, Asian nations like Singapore sought to transition from a focus on traditional manufacturing practices and economies to “technologically-enhanced knowledge-based creative economies” (“Creative” 153). Though this shift resulted in some degree of “cultural liberalisation and queer inclusion” in Singapore, this liberalization coexists with Singapore’s “anachronistic British Penal Code” that allows for the prosecution of homosexuality (153, 149). This tension between inclusion and exclusion foregrounds the ambivalence at the heart of the illiberal pragmatism that characterizes Singapore’s treatment of queer culture.
the way her racial signification shapes her migration to Canada is markedly distinct to how the ah kus are read in Singapore. However, her narration of their stories still help her to envision a genealogical connection with individuals who faced issues that parallel her experiences throughout her arrival and settlement in Canada. Put differently, her relationship to ah kus contests the limits of Canada’s globalized multicultural identity, whose commodification of difference and “Asianification” acknowledge only certain identities, and deny the “multigenerational detours” that have shaped her transmigrancy. Through this framework, Wu Lan’s intersection with the figuration of the racial nonhuman is not solely based on state discourses that refuse to admit her sexual identity in Singapore and essentialize her racial background in both locales. She is also aligned with the racial nonhuman though her imbrication with this legacy of transmigrant erasure— one that interrupts vital transmigrant affiliations and the potential of the queer genealogies that individuals like Wu Lan struggle to uncover, and that may also help her define her identity in Canada. She is subjected to the limits of the nation’s “multicultural imaginary landscape” that only courts certain form of transnational living (Shome 156). Her narrative highlights that the selective admittance of certain racial identities in both nations is part of a history of erasure that narrowly circumscribes the lives of certain undesirable racial histories.

Wu Lan’s engagement with the ah kus’s narrative depicts what transnational literacy might look like when both the passage of time and gaps in historical records complicate this type of literacy. However, she pairs the imaginative with her attentiveness to the particularities of the ah kus’s experiences as she connects their narratives to her own, and also refuses to be stymied by the silencing that complicates this process— including how her own feeling of alienation results in her constant struggle to make sense of her life and her role in the nation, let alone
representing the lives of two women who lived a century before. The genealogical narrative she eventually constructs therefore aligns with Appadurai’s discussion of how, under globalization, imagination develops new significance in social life as individuals are able to engage with myriad public and global spheres (6). Appadurai proposes that imagination becomes a way for individuals to “consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries… [imagination is] the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge” (6). By exploring the stories of these women, Wu Lan not only feels that she gains a better understanding of the “effects of mass migration, cheap labour, colonial expansion”; she also feels like she is “going back” to a history that resonates with her attempts to determine who she is, which is complicated by her transmigrant experiences that are all-too-frequently misrecognized or ignored by a nation that only admits certain “active” bodies, and only recognizes the productive aspects of transmigrant identities (This Place 141).

Importantly, This Place Called Absence also suggests the possibility of a more material connection between Wu Lan and Chat Mui in particular. Chat Mui has her name removed from the list of ah kus with the help of Koh Tian Chin, the gay scholar who marries her and sends her to his family in Java to protect them both. In return, she promises that she will work for his mother and look after his cousin’s daughter (204). Before she leaves for Java, Tian Chin gives her a pair of traditional Peranakan kasut manik—brocade slippers—that he sewed with his mother’s help. Wu Lan’s mother later sends her a pair of slippers that are identical to the ones that Tian Chin gave to Chat Mui, which have a distinct pattern embroidered on them. Wu Lan assumes the slippers belonged to her maternal grandmother, who was also Peranakan, which suggests the woman whom Chat Mui worked for was also one of Wu Lan’s ancestors. In other
words, Kwa subtly incorporates the possibility that the slippers that Chat Mui received in her time of need are appropriately returned to the descendent of the woman who made them, when she is also attempting to make sense of her life.

Much like relationship between the two women that develops through Wu Lan’s research, the connection that Kwa implies through the history of the slippers helps Wu Lan to ground her transmigrant narrative. Through this, the historical significance of the slippers helps reconfigure prevailing state narratives that restrict particular racial identities, including, for example, Wu Lan’s Peranakan heritage. Wu Lan’s mother denies their Peranakan background, which is not unsurprising given the ambivalent position of this identity. Daniel Goh proposes that many individuals of Peranakan lineage are unwillingly subjected to the multicultural state’s essentialization of Peranakan culture and, like Wu Lan’s mother, feel that they are not Chinese enough (53). As Gui notes, her mother’s insistence that “we are pure, we belong here, come from China” is also “in line with the Singapore state’s vested interest in keeping its population predominantly Chinese” (305). Gui also proposes that Wu Lan’s family and their denunciation of this aspect of their ethnic background expresses “the values of the ‘heartlander’ moral majority in whose name the Singaporean state promotes heteronormative sexuality, biological reproduction, and economic entrepreneurship and efficiency” (305). Even without the implied connection to Chat Mui, the slippers are a reminder of certain repressed racial histories and undervalued cultural heritages. Wu Lan’s mother’s decision to send the slippers to her daughter therefore marks the first step toward acknowledging their Peranakan background, but this potential genealogical connection also emphasizes how this heritage upsets Wu Lan’s family’s

---

132 Goh also describes how certain Straits Chinese identify with an “exclusive blend of Englishness and Peranakan Chineseness” and an “imagined Peranakan heritage”—imagined in the sense that it reflects a strategic and selective engagement with Peranakan culture—in order to “distinguish themselves from the more recently arrived Chinese masses” (53)
ostensible Chinese “purity” and heartlander values in particular. Their reappearance in modern Singapore defines a historical connection between Wu Lan’s “heartlander” family and the non-heterosexual, non-reproductive pairing of Koh Tian Chin and Chat Mui.

Chat Mui is therefore a type of early foremother of modern Chinese Singaporeans, and her narrative is therefore a part of their history. However, she fails to uphold the particular “Chinese” values that modern heartlanders draw upon— including the fact that she leaves Singapore due to the gendered oppression she faces (and which persist in new forms in the modern nation). Further, as Wu Lan’s narrativization produces Chat Mui’s story of transgressive love and freedom as part of Singapore’s national history, Chat Mui’s legacy also throws into relief the limits of a cosmopolitan identity. Chat Mui ostensibly expresses the cosmopolitan values of adaptability, social progress, and mobility, and should represent a historical grounding for this figuration. However, her experiences as an ah ku, her sexuality, and the atypical genealogy she forms through her paper marriage to a queer Peranakan scholar all preclude her from being the ideal historical antecedent to Singapore’s cosmopolitan community, particularly since she does not reflect the productivity associated with this identity. The brocade slippers therefore mark a significant inheritance for Wu Lan; through them, she gains an ancestral connection to individuals who more closely reflect her subjectivity, and who complicate the limits of both her family’s “heartlander” values, and the particular terms of the modern Singaporean cosmopolitan that excludes her subjectivity.

Critics like Ty and Holden have similarly considered how the brocade slippers connect Wu Lan to Chat Mui and subsequently help (re)define her relationship to Singapore; I consider how, like the queer genealogy she produces, they also help reconfigure her role in Canada. After she receives the slippers, Wu Lan considers that the experience of being an unassimilable and
transgressive body might not be confined to either Chat Mui’s era or her own, which confounds the exceptionality of the past and the ostensible progressiveness of the present. Wu Lan reflects:

One hundred years ago, the light was dimmer, and could only illuminate a small space.

True enough, but it was a light that was not taken for granted. It was a light that became more precious by its contrast to the surrounding dark. One hundred years ago, the choices were different, yet still the same—whether one wants to live, and how. I wish they hadn't died in such despair, in their cubicles, taking their own lives…what does a body know when it has been taken too far for escape to still be a conscious choice? (202).

Wu Lan’s question of what a body “know[s]” when it has “been taken too far for escape to be a conscious choice” appears to reference Ah Choi’s suicide, but is also a crucial reflection of Wu Lan’s malaise in Canada. However, to extend Wu Lan’s description of the metaphorical darkness, the narrative she produces that links her life to that of the ah kus is what ultimately illuminates all of their experiences. Their connection therefore becomes part of the larger history of both queer transmigrants and Chinese Singaporean women in Canada. As she discovers “who is Wu Lan?” through Chat Mui’s story, Wu Lan gradually (re)identifies with her relationship to Singapore—as well as China and Indonesia through their shared Peranakan connection—and also accepts that Canada is not her finite point of arrival. Her mother’s choice to send the slippers provides a vital material symbol of this development, as it broadens the scope of her transmigrant identity in Canada to include her Peranakan heritage. The slippers’ arrival therefore also marks the arrival of another part of her history that is suppressed in Singapore and then further obscured by Canada’s misrecognition and essentialization of migrant raciality to help develop its cultural capital, as well as its hierarchy of valued cultural contributions.
This Place Called Absence never directly reveals whether sections in the ah kus’s “voices” are wholly fabricated by Wu Lan, or if she somehow accurately taps into the particularities of their histories. However, the inclusion of the brocade slippers confounds the likelihood that the entirety of Chat Mui’s story is just part of Wu Lan’s imagination. Wu Lan eventually finds solace in her role as someone who is able to uncover these narratives; she declares that she is “Wu Lan, an exorcist of hidden demons. I am the discoverer of secrets...I prepare the dead for release” (208). It is only through her ability to imagine what Appadurai refers to as “new designs for collective life” that she is able to develop meaningful relationships in Canada and eventually renews transnational relationships with individuals in modern Singapore (6). After forging this connection between her life and the life of this otherwise-forgotten woman who lived “one hundred years ago,” Wu Lan feels like she can regularly return to Singapore to see her family. She realizes that she does not want to remain cut off from the world, or in the “abyss” she has fallen into, and also wants to draw on her renewed ability to hear “suffering that’s invisible and wordless” in her psychology practice in Canada (206). She harnesses her link to Chat Mui through the complex queer, transmigrant, non-instrumentalized genealogy she constructs, and uses this bond to bridge her life in Canada with her former life in Singapore. This genealogy is also a signifier of what risks being lost under globalization, when the histories of transmigrant women—ones who are, as I have identified, rendered as racial nonhumans—are not acknowledged in the national narratives of either nation, even as their narratives reveal crucial transnational connections that influence modern multicultural grids.

Productive Citizenry, Instrumentality, and the Transglobal Context of Pulse
While This Place Called Absence explores the constraints experienced by particular Asian transmigrants in contemporary Canada and Singapore, Pulse takes this project a step further, and
engages with the bodies of those figured as racial nonhumans as they are subjected to these processes. *Pulse* focuses on Natalie Chia, an acupuncturist living in Toronto. Her former lover, Faridah, calls her from Singapore to inform Natalie that Faridah’s son, Selim, has killed himself. The narrative shifts between Natalie’s return to Singapore to try and uncover the motivation behind Selim’s suicide, and Natalie’s childhood in Singapore during the tumultuous period of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite their age difference, Natalie and Selim are connected through Faridah, as well as through their explorations of what it means to be queer in the repressive space of Singapore—though Selim is able to subvert some of these limitations through the virtual communities that did not exist during Natalie’s youth. Further, they both share the use of *Kinbaku* (Japanese erotic rope bondage) as a means of expressing their sexual identities and exploring unspoken elements of their pasts.

Two critiques in particular inform my reading of how *Pulse* engages with the limits of modern raciality in both Canada and Singapore. The first is Gui’s examination of how literature considers “alternative modes of social relations and self-fashioning that might be foreclosed by neoliberal rationality” where selfhood appears to be shaped by “objective relations rather than subjective interpellation” (292). The question that motivates Gui’s reading is especially relevant to my own intervention; he asks how novels might “engage with neoliberalism as a dominant mode of governmentality, one that is invested in the refashioning of societies as collective and individual subjects for productive efficiency and market optimization” (291). Gui directs this question toward Kwa’s work and the context of Singapore in particular, but I also consider how this question relates to the aforementioned Asianfication of Canada’s Asian population as a way to strategically emphasize those ethno-racial groups that best support Canada’s attempts to form global relationships.
The second analysis that animates my reading is da Silva’s consideration of the “unrepresentable sexual female body” as both “a figuring of excess, which in national and global moments exposes, without resolution or apologies, the violence of racial/colonial subjugation” and as a “radical critique of the global present…as the unresolvable trace of an Other desire [that] unsettles easy appropriations of the figure of the Woman” (“To Be” 49, 56). Da Silva’s reading raises the question of how women’s sexuality might remain a problematic that, even in a globalized era, has not been captured by global circuits of white masculine hegemony. She proposes that exploring this form of sexuality potentially provides a nuanced and subversive engagement with the subjected figuration of racialized women. At the same time, it remains an important signifier of an historic subjection, which connects women globally through the similar violent appropriation and rendering of their sexuality under colonial processes.

Given the need for productive workers in both contexts, and the occlusion of certain forms of immigrant women’s labour, I also consider how *Pulse* explores the rhetoric used to instrumentalize racial women’s bodies. Granted, *Pulse* does not deal directly with those who are most subjected to the perils of instrumentalization, or who are often produced as minoritized citizens whose identities do not contribute to the globalized multicultural identity of either locale. But even as it explores the life of an individual who appears to be, at first glance, an ideal and “productive” racialized woman, *Pulse* considers the violence this body faces as it resists demands for its productivity and contests diverse forms of instrumentalization through the sexual autonomy of the racial body. Through this approach, *Pulse* critiques the logic that allows particular “nonproductive” racialized bodies to be evacuated from a nation’s global identity and (re)figured as racial nonhumans.
The narrative present of *Pulse* takes place in 2007, almost a decade later than Kwa’s first novel, and the text conveys globalization’s intensification in the intervening years, as it is positioned as the defining element of both locales. To a greater degree than Kwa’s first novel, *Pulse* begins by considering how multi-racial communities in Canada have rapidly expanded in recent years. *This Place Called Absence*’s focus on remembering those whose histories are lost through migration and globalization is signaled through the novel’s opening on Remembrance Day, while *Pulse*’s concern with national identity and racial distinction is signified through its opening soon after Canada Day. Natalie describes a daily scene of her life in Canada as she looks out her window:

I watch a group of children playing outside: the two Vietnamese sisters with Hello Kitty barrettes in their hair, the lanky son of Iranian parents and the cute, wide-eyed Korean boy with the mini mohawk haircut, dressed in oversized jeans, a hand-me-down from his brother. Afternoon heat, shimmering along the edges, enters the pores of the children and suffuses them with glee. Sunlight animates the trio of plastic Canada Day flags, nested among the cascades of blue lobelia in the planter box across the street (11).

The scene evokes a type of modern urban pastoral, where the intersection of cultures enabled by Canada’s need for multicultural bodies also intersects with other signifiers of globalization, including the ubiquity of Hello Kitty and the trendy mohawk haircut that suffuses cultural lines, as well as Natalie’s description of the constant sounds of “Toishan, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog… [and] Cantopop spill[ing] from the store selling pirated DVDs” (17). Natalie describes that she likes life in this multicultural neighbourhood filled with multi-generational immigrants; many of these families are deep-seated in the area and have been there for “more
than thirty years,” including Natalie’s family, who have lived there since their immigration from Singapore, as well as Natalie and her partner, Michelle (11).

Natalie lacks a strong connection to her Singaporean roots and, like Wu Lan, her particular racial identity as Singaporean Chinese is also obscured in Canada. However, Natalie’s ability to pass as Chinese and speak Standard English provides her with the chance to create new relationships with the communities around her—particularly immigrant ones—which shapes her life in Canada. She describes going to church with her family despite her diverging beliefs, and the congregants “chatting in Cantonese. Many of them left Hong Kong in the late ‘80s or ‘90s, long before the handover of Hong Kong to the mainland in July 1997. Thanks to coming to this church, I’ve improved my Cantonese. I might even pass as a Hong Konger” (88-9). Her family’s seemingly-successful integration into a Chinese Canadian community also helps her to feel more easily part of the dominant Chinese majority when she eventually returns to Singapore. But Natalie also loses something of her background through this effort to integrate. Her family also has Nonya (half Malay, half Chinese) heritage, and this association with one particular community helps them to ignore the “uncomfortable reality” of their Nonya background (64).

To frame this differently, Natalie and her family must rely on an essentialized version of their ethno-racial distinction in order to find social recognition in Canada, which means that their background is subsumed under this recognized immigrant community that facilitates their integration. Their necessary and strategic alliance is symptomatic of how the nation’s Asianification—and its acceptance and recognition of only certain advantageous Asian Canadian identities—means that individuals may oversimplify the nuances of their backgrounds as they try to find a place for themselves in Canada. Similar to Wu Lan in This Place Called Absence, Natalie’s figuration therefore dovetails with that of other individuals who do not “bridge”
Canada’s relationship with its Asian partner nations; since their integration is less crucial to the state’s global goals, they must find alternate ways of making Canada “home.” Migrant women like Natalie are also subject to the fact that this recognition of only certain and “active” Asian Canadian bodies has, traditionally, been highly masculinized, which makes Natalie’s relationship with the Chinese Canadian community all the more necessary.

The narrative does not draw a potential connection between the two locales’ contemporary structures, in part because Natalie’s knowledge of Singapore lapses in the intervening years. Instead, it contrasts Natalie’s past experiences in Singapore with the restrictions she faces in Canada. Natalie still feels some type of affinity with Singapore, but clearly prefers life in Canada as opposed to living under Singapore’s policies. However, her views of both nations appear to be influenced by the particular period of change during which she left Singapore and arrived in Canada. Natalie’s family immigrated to Canada in 1979, after Canada declared its multiculturalism policy, but before multiculturalism would be formally entrenched in The Multiculturalism Act. They also immigrated after Canada’s Immigration Act (1976) was implemented; following the adoption of Canada’s points system in 1967, the Act further shifted the terms of Canada’s immigration law away from a focus on prohibited groups, who should be kept out of the country, to who should be allowed in, which was still largely based on individual’s social and economic contributions (16). This also means that Natalie’s family left Singapore before the nation’s intensified industrialization and its shift toward multiculturalism and a CMIO cultural identity. This distinction offers one reason why Natalie critiques Singapore’s restrictiveness, but extols Canada’s diversity and seeming acceptance of

---

133 The Act also established Canada’s points requirements and four classes of immigrants (family, independent, assisted relatives, and humanitarian).
myriad identities, even though its multicultural imaginary fails to acknowledge her Singaporean heritage.

Natalie’s narrative also gestures toward some of the ideological and social changes in Singapore since she immigrated. For instance, her departure after Selim’s death conveniently occurs on National Day—the commemoration of Singaporean Independence that includes a speech from the Prime Minister on Singapore’s future. Natalie overhears the Prime Minister’s address to the nation and his summary of the modern state’s goals; her description of his speech pinpoints what she perceives as a significant distinction between old and modern Singapore:

The prime minister's speech starts out with a list of all the excellent achievements Singapore and its citizens have accomplished. He reports on the economic growth and Productivity of the country. How different his style is from his father's. In the early days, our first prime minister emphasized Singapore's vulnerability at the hands of Communists. How brilliant Lee Kuan Yew was, to portray Communist presence as compromising the economic welfare of the citizenry. He made the Communist threat sound ominous enough that people willingly trusted his charismatic leadership to save them (249-250)

Natalie’s recollection of the speeches foregrounds the state’s economic pursuits in both eras, but also touches on some significant distinctions. During earlier speeches, Lee Kuan Yew used the threat of an internal enemy—the Communists—who threatened not only Singapore’s population, but also its developing economic aims. In modern Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong invokes certain signifiers that align with the nation’s focus on Asian Values discourse. For instance, Natalie notes that the current prime minister’s choice to deliver his speech from the top floor of the National Library is “Confucian” (249). Further, rather than focus on an internal threat, Lee Hsien
Loong uses the ostensibly “positive” rhetoric of growth and productivity to highlight Singapore’s external pursuits, and the direction the nation must continue in if it is to remain competitive. Through this rhetorical strategy, the state emphasizes its demand for productive citizens who contribute to its economic growth. While Natalie does not expound on the significance of this speech, it conveys how her diasporic remembrance of Singapore diverges from the nationalist rhetoric of the modern state. It also develops a narrative connection between the Singapore she remembers and remains critical of, and the modern demand for productive citizens that appears across both locales.

Natalie’s narration of and chance encounter with this event that summarizes some of the state’s demands of its citizens is not coincidental. Her limited perspective on Singapore is shaped by her feeling that she is still tethered to the nation, which results in her envisioning connections between the timing of significant moments in her life and crucial moments in the nation’s development. She notes that she is “as old as modern Singapore,” and also intimates that she grew up alongside the independent nation:

on that momentous day in 1959 when the People’s Action Party government, under Lee Kuan Yew, began to run the country, independent of British rule…I appeared out of my mother’s womb, two hours ahead of the government. To have one’s existential debut coincide with the emergence of the country’s self-government— I couldn’t help but grow up believing that my fate would never be severed completely from Singapore’s (15-16).

Even after Natalie immigrates to Canada, she continues to produce her own narrative in relation to contentious events in Singapore, both because it creates a tenuous connection between her life

---

134 This approach follows in a tradition of postcolonial writing—beginning with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*—where events in an individual’s life parallel significant moments in a nation’s history.
and part of her background that is ignored in Canada, and because of the gaps in her understanding of Singapore. Natalie’s feelings toward Singapore’s development and her belief that she’s tied to its “fate” are further defined by racial tensions throughout the 1960s and 70s, as well as her experiences during the “race riots” of 1964.\(^{135}\) During the riots, Natalie was out with her father and, though she does not seem to understand the significance of this event until she is older, she notes her father’s concern when they saw “a gang of Malay men with parangs approaching” (37). Natalie also describes that after that period, the Chinese were “nervous” around the Malays for a “long time,” and that she “was not supposed to get too close” (154).\(^{136}\)

Events like these not only shape Natalie’s understanding of the nation’s race relations, but also further her belief that Singapore is less accepting of racial distinction than Canada, a nation that she does not associate with the same recent history of violent racial conflict as it ostensibly accepts numerous racial identities. In another flashback, Natalie recalls describing the riots to Selim: “your mom and I grew up during a time when Singapore was going through a lot of political change. There was all that tension between the Chinese and Malays. And the race riots…” (37). This conversation is framed by Selim’s desire to help “catch up” with Natalie, but also fill in the “lost years” during her time in Canada (35). Throughout, Selim plays the part of the insider who views Natalie as part of the past that he desires to make sense of, and tries to unsettle Natalie by putting on an excessive Singlish accent, while she is treated as the diasporic

---

\(^{135}\) The 1964 riots were actually two separate riots, one which was a riot on the twenty-first of July during a celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday between Malay participants and Chinese bystanders. The other was on the second of September after the death of a Malay trishaw rider as Malays retaliated against the Chinese population. The riots were framed both by Konfrontasi—a Malaysian-Indonesian conflict over, in part, Malaysian expansion—and rising tensions between the PAP and UMNO. The riot that Natalie refers to is the one that occurred in July.

\(^{136}\) Natalie’s family expresses racist sentiments against the Malays after these events, even though her grandmother is Nonya. She recalls her grandfather telling her “Only Chinese people enough smart do business. Make money, everything proper place. You see Malays, only know how to fish and sit around kampong” (63).
outsider whose home and ideals are rooted in Canada. Selim responds to Natalie’s story by quoting from Singapore’s National Pledge, and connecting it to an event that changed race relations across the globe, including in Singapore: “One united people, regardless of race, language or religion… Sounds wonderful, but the reality is that people have become quite unsettled since 9/11… There’s an underlying tension that wasn’t there before 9/11, with the exception of those race riots in ‘64, of course… That’s why the government has been encouraging Muslims to devote themselves to what is positive and non-violent in their religion” (37). Selim’s comments foreground religion’s development into a proxy for race distinction in Singapore. Further, by using 9/11 to bridge his understanding of modern Singapore, and Natalie’s understanding as someone who identifies as Singaporean and Canadian, his comments also recall how certain discourses of raciality continue to have global influence and that other nations’ racial grids—including Canada’s—were equally affected by these conflicts. In effect, the text suggests that Natalie’s relationship to the two nations is conditioned by both the effectiveness of Canada’s multicultural identity and by the comparative absence of such a policy in Singapore during her early life there. As a result, she only engages with the racially-charged issues that influenced Singapore’s modern identity, but not the comparable conflicts that shaped Canada’s, which occludes how her racial subjectivity is subsumed under the state’s goals in both

---

137 Selim also tells Natalie “Unlike your generation, it’s not simply a question of race anymore. Especially when there’s more and more of us in Singapore who are racially mixed. It’s all about religion. Christianity against Islam.” (38). Selim’s comments ignore the presence of other religions and raciality’s ongoing importance, but suggest that religion is a significant supplement of race.

138 Selim also makes a comment that, curiously, seems to refer to Singapore’s pragmatism and demand for productivity, but ultimately becomes a way of expressing a desire for more transparency about these racial conflicts. He states that he wants to “face things. Become a responsible, honest citizen who contributes positively to society” and to become a “peacemaking” individual, but emphasizes that this can only occur alongside “fa[ing] things” rather than denying the “truth” of Singapore’s conflicts (38). Selim here briefly imagines an alternative to the type of productivity that stifles identities like Natalie’s, as well as his mixed-race queerness.
locales. Her relationship with Selim, however, helps to contextualize these issues in relation to modern Singapore and also exposes her to some of the pervasive sentiments that transect both nations.

**Queer Identities and the Racial Nonhuman: Natalie’s and Selim’s Resignified Desires**

These scenes that detail some of the social policies and events that define Natalie’s subjectivity also illuminate her connection to Selim and convey some of the terms that define ideal citizens in each locale. However, these policies alone do not render Natalie and Selim as racial nonhumans. Rather, their respective sexual identities alongside their raciality mark the limits of their productivity and value, and, subsequently their social acceptance.

I consider this emphasis on Natalie’s marginality in particular in relation to da Silva’s analysis of the sexual female body as in excess of the prevailing terms of the productive female body in globality. Da Silva argues that the “body in modern Western thought” is “Tamed, apprehended as a signifier of exteriority, the body… has consistently referred to other ways of existing as human beings, of that which exceeds and hence threatens the accounts of law and morality authorized by sovereign reason” (“To Be” 55). Women’s bodies are constrained within the “patriarchal bounds of motherhood” or through the terms of their economic labor (50). But the sexual female body of the woman “unsettles easy appropriations of the figure of the Woman” since it “threatens the accomplishment of colonial and national juridicoeconomic goals and has no place in the ontoepistemological grammar that governs post-Enlightenment accounts of existence” (56 emphasis mine). It is also in excess of the patriarchal “legalmoral” and economic order. Put differently, while the female body is always already defined in an “economic and symbolic…productive regime: as object, other, or commodity,” the sexual desire of this body presents an alternate figuration that is not integrated in economic orders and the state’s
commodification of bodies (56). As a result, the unrepresentable and unmanaged desires of this body can “never fuel the machineries of global capitalism and the existing critiques of it because the political text both draw from does not contemplate her” (56).

Da Silva’s analysis deals explicitly with the subjection of the sexual black female body, since she identifies this body to be the “center” of the modern global matrix (49). However, she also considers how we might read the female body in general as more than an object of desire or a subject of violence across postcolonial contexts (56). As I have discussed, certain forms of racial and sexual distinction are strategically instrumentalized by the state, while other forms that do not further the state’s economic goals are excluded from the terms of the “active” citizenry and often marginalized. But da Silva’s analysis helpfully directs attention towards a third figuration, where particular forms of sexual desire provide an “untraced guide for radical praxis” as they exceed the state’s signification of racial bodies, which complicates readings of these bodies purely in relation to their value or subjection (56). Da Silva intentionally does not elaborate on what new lines of knowledge may be opened up by this examination of the body and desire. I draw from this reading to examine how Natalie’s and Selim’s sexual bodies are bound together through their excess, which countermands both Singapore’s and Canada’s particular “national juridicoeconomic goals.”

Natalie’s aforementioned critical view of Singapore is also shaped by how racial conflicts in the nation intersected with her struggles with her sexual identity during her youth. Her family’s prejudice against the Malays, and her experiences during the race riots, are complicated

---

139 Da Silva acknowledges that what she is arguing “is not new because it has already been signaled in Sylvia Wynter’s reading of the modern episteme, in Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of modern representation, and in [Luce] Irigaray’s writings of the woman: that is, the possibility that the other-wise is something more than that which can be signified by a mode of being human, which has been written as other in the Kantian or Hegelian framing of productive reason—as form or life” (56-7).
when, at age thirteen, Natalie meets Faridah at school. Faridah is Malay, and her family appears to be as proud of their racial heritage as Natalie’s is of their Chineseness; Faridah tells Natalie that her father was part of the *Utusan Melayu*—an important Malay-language publication—and even at thirteen Faridah admonishes Natalie for not knowing “Malay history” (163). Despite their racial and cultural distinctions, Natalie and Faridah soon start a relationship, which lasts for four years. Their relationship counters the state’s eventual emphasis on cultural management that produces a core Chinese base and discrete peripheral cultural groups. Exemplary of this is how their developing bond is associated with the progressive thematics of the prose poem “Desiderata,” which connects the two girls to other cultures and ideologies, and crosses the social lines imposed by the state. Faridah asks their teacher why they “use something foreign” when they could study something local, and Natalie draws on her privileged Chinese background to suggest that they should read something by Confucius. Their teacher emphasizes the poem’s countercultural message, and states that it “would be nice to have something that crossed the cultural divide, something not limited to one culture or historical context (102-3).” Natalie eventually enjoys the experience of reading the poem aloud with her classmates; even though their “recital was discordant and out of sync,” she feels “serene” due to this unification of different voices and experiences (102). Her memory of Desiderata therefore becomes a node in her narrative that entwines the potential of the girls’ cross-racial, queer relationship with other struggles to forge relationships that might not fall under the state’s notion of pragmatism and productivity.

However, their relationship is ended by an extreme act of violence. From the time that Natalie is old enough to attend school, her father sexually abuses her. Her bond with Faridah

---

140 She also describes that it was used by individuals resisting other forms of state suppression, including the contemporaneous Vietnam War (102).
appears to help her resist his appalling acts, but he eventually becomes suspicious of their relationship. When the girls are roughly sixteen, Natalie’s father arrives home early from work after a particularly stressful day and walks in on the girls in Natalie’s room. He violently attacks Natalie, strips her naked, binds her with rope, and nearly drowns her in front of her mother and Faridah while her grandparents are in the other room. Her father is not only infuriated that Natalie and Faridah’s queer relationship has disrupted his sexual and patriarchal dominance over her; he also tells Natalie that God “saved” her life in 1964 during the riots, and then blames Faridah for “corrupt[ing]” Natalie (226).

Natalie’s relationship with Faridah therefore becomes the focus of numerous anxieties, including the family’s concerns about the Malays, her father’s entrenched homophobia, his frustration over the family’s economic struggles, and, most importantly, his perceived loss of control over a young woman’s body. Natalie’s assault should not be construed as solely symbolic of her father’s inability to adapt to shifting social mores, nor should it suggest that her father’s behaviour actually results from the issues he cites, including Faridah’s “corruption” of Natalie’s life. Rather, the narrative entwines Natalie’s recollection of these painful memories with national issues that deepen her family’s instability, including racial discrimination, patriarchal dominance, and the suppression of queer identities— all of which coalesce to shape her relationship to Singapore. The public act of violence seems to have prompted the family’s move to Canada, which is also associated with the end of her father’s sexual abuse (157). Her father’s appeal to these restrictive state discourses, and their association with his abusive acts, lapses in the Canadian context. This association therefore suggests one reason why Natalie is so amenable to ignoring how these issues are also present within Canada; she initially believes that she is able to start over, somewhat, in their new home.
This imbrication of sexuality and raciality that shapes Natalie’s experiences—and that figure her as a racial nonhuman—are mirrored in modern Singapore through Selim. Though Selim’s narrative also reflects the significant changes to Singapore in the interceding period.

Gabriel Tat Meng Selim Khoo is half Malay, and half Chinese on his father’s side. Natalie notes that even though he is listed as Chinese on his identity card in accordance with his father’s identity, this reveals an “inconsistency,” as his father is “really a Baba, a male of mixed Malay and Chinese heritage. But neither Babas nor Nonyas would be acknowledged on their identity cards” (30). Though the historical contexts for these nations’ inability to accept certain minoritized racial configurations, Selim’s identity is not fully acknowledged in Singapore, in ways similar to how Canada’s “Asianfication” does not encompass the complexity of Natalie’s Chinese Singaporean background. Selim is aware of these limitations, and uses his Malay name as an attempt to resist not only the state’s desire to dictate his racial identity and mark him as Chinese, but also the implications of his Christian English name.

Like Natalie, Selim’s relationship is also a form of implicit resistance that traverses racial lines, as his partner, Philip, is Indian. But while Selim is able to have a somewhat more open relationship with Philip, he has to contend with the fact that his father, Adam is extremely homophobic. When Natalie returns to Singapore, Adam asks her what it is like living in Canada; he focuses on how the nation is “liberal” and allows “marriage for homosexuals,” which he feels exceeds the need to be “tolerant” (202-3). Adam’s comments are reflective of Singapore’s homophobic climate, but also draw on Canada’s rhetoric of liberal tolerance to create a contrast between the two nations that mirrors Natalie’s feelings, where Singapore is associated with the management of sexual and racial distinction, while Canada tolerates difference. Adam’s comments again exemplify how Canada has successfully globalized this aspect of its national
identity, even though this edict of liberal tolerance, is, as I have discussed, not one that acknowledges all bodies equally. Further, his homophobic sentiments also become entwined with conservative heartlander ideals. As Cheryl Naruse notes, while Adam “does not refer directly to Asian Values, he does rely on the binary logics of east versus west, which are endemic to Asian Values discourse” (224).

But to return to Selim’s figuration, like Natalie, his father’s dissatisfaction with modern Singapore—including the nation’s gradual acceptance of some queer identities and hybrid racial forms—is also associated with the sexual abuse that he inflicts on his son. Philip gives Natalie a note that Selim left before he killed himself, which reveals that Adam sexually assaulted Selim from age nine to sixteen. Selim asks Philip to share the note with Natalie in particular because she is also familiar with “That father from whom we can never receive unconditional love. Impossible to ask for something that won’t be given freely” (244-5 emphasis mine). These comments bind Natalie’s and Selim’s home lives together through the oppression and violence they experienced and through their fathers who express the extremes of Singapore’s conservative heartlander base that refuses certain identities.

This generalized description of a patriarchal entity that refuses to acknowledge its children, and subjects them to unthinkable acts of violence, also invokes the state rhetoric that marginalizes both Natalie and Selim. Natalie and Selim are, ostensibly, well positioned to draw on their cosmopolitan potential, not simply because of their dominant Chinese patrilineage. More crucially, their identities transect ethno-racial and transnational lines through Natalie’s migration and Selim’s deep connection to Natalie’s history. To return to Yue’s point about the state’s illiberal pragmatism, their respective sexualities, while still “deviant” within Singapore’s borders, could help expand the terms of Singapore’s cosmopolitanism; while this suggests a form
of instrumentalization, it also opens up the possibility of engaging with, as Poon describes, the currently “untouched” “political and radical possibilities” of cosmopolitanism (76). This is not to suggest that harnessing their backgrounds for cultural capital is preferable, but that expanding the bounds of cosmopolitanism to include figurations like theirs would begin to reframe the current erasure of these complex backgrounds. A form of cosmopolitanism that acknowledges their intersecting experiences would also help individuals like Selim and Natalie to further develop the transnational lines of affiliation that are already part of their identities. However, under the state’s restrictive cosmopolitan forms, their interracial queer bodies defy the terms of productive citizenry; their cosmopolitan potential is both unreadable, and actively contested under the state’s management of its conservative local base. Their complex distinctiveness is always already delimited by the state’s racial matrices and there is no need to make room for their figurations when they are extraneous to these states’ interests. Both Selim and Natalie therefore reflect a tension between the desire to be accepted on the one hand, and, on the other, the limits of that acceptance when it is premised on the usefulness of certain figurations.

This reading draws out how Selim’s message to Natalie is a stark reminder of, beyond their shared familial alienation, the fact that there is no retreat for them outside of their homes when they face rejection from their nation. Through the unrepresentability of their racial identities, and their alienation at home and under the state’s terms of global productivity, their respective figurations align with the excess that defines the racial nonhuman. This approach does not deny the significant differences between Selim’s and Natalie’s sexual desire; Selim’s queer male body is not part of the same history of subjection and the postcolonial economy of desire as Natalie’s female body, which is doubly marginalized when she must redefine her identity in both locales. Despite these apparent differences, the narrative continues to connect them through their
racial-sexual figurations and how their sexuality is also subject to the label of unproductivity of their racial distinction. In effect, both Selim’s and Natalie’s familial histories, their complex racial identities, and the reception of their sexuality figures them through the unrepresentability of their desires. However, this also means that the nuances of their particular desires remain unmanaged, as they are not vital to the “machineries of global capitalism” that da Silva identifies.

Importantly, given this relationship between their sexual identities and their racial signification, the narrative is careful not to suggest that their sexual desires are simply reactive and incited by the restrictions placed on their racialized queer bodies. The two are undeniably aware of the discrimination they face due to their respective sexual orientations, since Natalie does not come out to her family until she moves to Canada and Selim still lives in an openly homophobic nation and with a homophobic father. Further, they are both aware that their sexual relationships are defined by their partnerships with individuals outside their respective racial groups. However, they also eventually live openly with their partners, and even Selim is accepted amongst his colleagues who are aware that he is gay. The suggestion that they are able to keep their everyday relationships separate from their understanding of how their sexual desires amplify their racial marginality might be idealistic. But it also opens up room to read their sexual desire as a site of affiliation rather than just a response to their racial signification. It foregrounds how these individuals from different generations, races, nations, and gender identities forge a significant connection that goes beyond how their bodies are defined by their ostensible non-productivity.

Beyond textual descriptions of their raciality and sexuality, and what I identify as their figuration as racial nonhumans, the connection between Natalie’s and Selim’s inadmissible
bodies and their desires, cohere in their use of Kinbaku. Natalie begins to practice Kinbaku after her arrival in Canada. During a brief trip to Singapore, Selim identifies Natalie as a fellow Kinbaku practitioner through her online anonym “Cosmic Pulse”—the same name as her grandparents’ Chinese medicine shop in Singapore. Natalie describes how Selim is the “most adamant among the online participants that pain was essential to Kinbaku…It was clear that he was a gay man who used Kinbaku rope techniques within Western BDSM practices. He identified himself as a slave or bottom, and he definitely liked to play it risky” (40). While Natalie is dominant—a top—in her Kinbaku practices with Michelle, and uses Kinbaku to “transform…fear and develop trust,” Selim uses it to “experience surrender. Relinquish control”; Selim proposes to Natalie that in that sense, they are both drawn to Kinbaku as it allows them to express their sexual desires and develop trust with another individual (40-1, 44).

Like Natalie, Selim connects his Kinbaku practices to his “ancestral heritage” through his nickname, Benkulen Bound (59). Benkulen refers to a port in Sumatra that was under the control of the British, until Stamford Raffles—credited as the man who founded modern Singapore—suggested that the East India Company cede power of Benkulen to the Dutch in exchange for Malacca (59). Natalie is adamant that Raffles’ views and actions “were instrumental in developing the myth of Malay backwardness, so much so that for most of the nineteenth century, his arguments about the so-called delay of Malay society were implicitly accepted by Europeans” (41-42). Selim informs Natalie that the name is especially poignant

141 Natalie also considers how Raffles’s actions shaped later racial conflicts in the area: “if Benkulen had not lost its status as a major trading port, then power would not have shifted to Malacca and Singapore. And if that had not happened, perhaps the fall of Malaya and Singapore to the Japanese during the Second World War would not have occurred. After all, if the Malays hadn’t had suffered under the racial prejudice of their colonizers, would the Malayan Communist Party have been so willing to believe the Japanese when they said they were in the region to liberate the population from the oppression of the British?” (60).
for him, since his mother’s side is distantly related to Munshi Abdullah, who was Raffles’ tutor and interpreter, though, importantly, Abdullah disagreed with Raffles’ treatment of the Malays and his choice to hand over Malay settlements to the Chinese (40, 230). Natalie eventually realizes that Selim’s choice to bring together this aspect of his history with a practice that was significant to him was his way of “liv[ing] true to the complex, hybrid self that he was” (60). However, it is also a way for him to contest these historical events by “binding” his transgressive acts—as well as the power he associates with Kinbaku—to his Malay heritage that is both denied and devalued in modern Singapore.

While, for Selim, Kinbaku is clearly attached to his desire to subvert the confines of his racial identity, for Natalie, it is associated with resistance and power; it becomes one of the “truths” she will never tell her parents as part of her “ultimate rebellion” against them (131). Given the abuse she faced in her youth, Natalie refuses to be possessed by anyone, to the extent that she will not make herself vulnerable to the “incalculable” risk of being bound by Michelle (131). Instead, the practice of binding another person fulfils Natalie’s need to perform what she views as an act of “servic[e]” for her partner, and to be bound to another while retaining control (41). She takes pleasure in the extension of this relationship beyond the immediate moment of the binding, as she and her partner can touch and view the “temporary markings” left behind on the body (40). Her desire to leave marks on another seems, initially, as though it could possibly reflect how her initial experiences of sexual power were shaped by the psychological marks her father left on her. But Natalie’s engagement with Kinbaku, and the enjoyment of these marks, is instead firmly rooted in her desire and in the desire to use pleasure as a way of release. It also allows her to experience a connection reminiscent of the one she shared with Faridah, which unified the two women across social and racial lines. In this sense, Kinbaku is the ideal vessel for
her to undo her father’s grotesque acts, including his binding of her body in front of Faridah and her mother. Even as Natalie and Selim take “two different approaches to the rope,” through Kinbaku, they both reclaim a form of authority over what it means to be bound by another, and transfigure their fathers’ actions into a relationship of trust and consent (40).

Selim’s suicide is, in some ways, a radical extension of this desire. In his final letter to his partner, he writes that his father’s refusal to accept him is part of his desire to end his life; he then states that it is also provoked by how he feels that “Every time I managed to escape, to survive, I felt a growing restlessness after the initial high...my feelings fascinate me. Why are human beings never satiated?” (243). His comments are not reflective of a lack of fulfilment in his work or social life; he is an accomplished police officer, and Philip also informs Natalie that Selim’s colleagues knew about his proclivities and willingly overlooked them. Rather, Selim’s comments are directly associated with the pleasure and release afforded by his use of Kinbaku. The transgressive potential of Kinbaku, and its association with its practitioners’ particular desires, also foregrounds how the queer desire of racial bodies like Selim’s becomes part of the aforementioned excess that cannot be captured by the nation’s productive regime. Selim pushes his desire to its ultimate conclusion, and his death ends the tension between his momentary “survival” through Kinbaku, and the consistent rejection of his body by patriarchal authorities.

Kinbaku does not just turn Natalie and Selim from objects of patriarchal sexual desire into subjects of their own sexual desire, as it also foregrounds the ineffability of their own desires. For Natalie, the transgression at the core of Kinbaku primarily helps her counter her misrecognition in both locales. As she masters this practice, she is able to reshape her identity and harness her ability to define her relationships to others through this intimate form. But Kinbaku is not only a form of inadvertent resistance. Its physical significance also becomes a
way of claiming the body of these racial nonhumans through a form of desire that cannot be captured by the state’s appropriation and delimitation of Asian bodies. The practice is methodological and historical, but also deeply personal. It does not deny the complex relationships of power between bodies, but quite literally reconfigures them through the act of binding another and being bound to another. Further, each shape of Kinbaku that is woven across the body is distinct and its significance is defined by its practitioners as they work together to form the designs. The lasting psychological and physical marks help Natalie and Selim to counter the restrictions they feel are defined by other areas of their lives. In this sense, it is a variable form that defies the patriarchal authority of Natalie’s and Selim’s fathers; it also provides a medium that lets them use their desires to counter the state’s patriarchal values—and its “patriarchal legalmoral” apparatus—that define their racial body.

Kinbaku’s significance to Natalie’s and Selim’s figuration is also reminiscent of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s description of the “bad subject” that opposes the model minority stereotype and the “problem of commodification” by resisting “dominant society’s interpellation into a race- and class- stratified society” (24, 150). In his reading of Kwa’s This Place Called Absence, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu invokes the problematic of the bad subject to suggest that Kwa produces subjects whose bodies are re-signified and become a “site of transformative cultural practice,” as their transgressions take place “within the hegemonic system” that defines their bodies (4, 102). Natalie and Selim are not inherently “bad subjects”: they both lead stable and comfortable middle-class lives, and have long-term relationships and occupations that they both excel at and enjoy. The complexity of their racial identities remain overlooked by the state (plural states in Natalie’s case); but to most individuals they are still easily classifiable as Chinese and Malay, respectively, which provides them with the option to “pass” as one of these racial groups as
needed. As a result, while I have identified them both as racial nonhumans, this figuration is not always evident in their everyday lives—though Selim is clearly more aware of the specific restrictions they both face, Natalie predominantly feels their effects. Natalie in particular is figured as a body that is both out of place and time, since her understanding of modern Singapore is both outdated and limited by her understanding of emotionally-charged events, and her views on Canada are overly idealistic. Kinbaku is not a curative for her alienation, but is emblematic of how unbounded desire can contest the commodification of racial bodies under these nations’ global multicultural identities. Through Kinbaku, they can figure themselves as bodies that defy simplistic stereotypical representations, and create a connection between themselves and a community—albeit largely an online one—of other “bad subjects” who produce new relationships of power through their unsignifiable desires.

To conclude, I want to briefly return to the connections that both This Place Called Absence and Pulse develop as they narratively weave together some of the different methods that devalue these bodies, and expose what I identify as emerging node in the structuring of these racial grids that defines the terms of the racial nonhuman. Both texts explore the everyday experiences of the particular figurations that are bracketed out through the rhetoric of productive raciality in these nations—including the Asianfication of Canada’s identity and Singapore’s use of “Asianism” as part of their global multicultural identities. I have noted that, apart from the historical experiences of the ah kus, Kwa’s work does not focus on those bodies that are most vulnerable to new methods of social structuring. But both novels crucially suggest that, even as racial bodies are rendered as unproductive for distinct reasons, and through distinct (social, economic, ideological) measures that restructure these nations’ racial grids, significant affinities arise across their figurations. The failure of these states to make room for their complex histories,
and the devaluation of their transnational connections as part of their global identities, diffuses throughout their daily lives, as it renders their histories illegible to other individuals they attempt to connect with. However, as both *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse* engage with some of the processes that obstruct these possibilities, they also draw out some of the trans-national, -racial, and -historical connections that connect these bodies across migration and dislocation. Through this focus on relationality between these racial bodies across the contexts of Canada and Singapore, Kwa’s writing develops a transnational connection between particular bodies that, under these nations’ global pursuits, fail to signify the qualities associated with the productive human subject.
Conclusion: Toward Poethical Thought Across Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada

“You comply with every demand and order meted out by the British, even here...In front of you is the ship’s charterer who convinced you in Singapore that life in Canada will be one of good living...Trying to land in Canada, you have been denied your humanity. Stories are written about you that never reach your eyes or ears, yet they provide the rising cries and anger that drift from the wharf, slip into the water to surround and crawl up against the ship and ricochet off the ship…” (Phinder Dulai, “soul-journ to the end of the pacific” 4-5)

“When you are looking at archival materials you are trying to take as much as possible to be able to give it meaning. From Canadian sources it was a very limited. It was Mackenzie King’s report, and in newspaper articles that were specific about what the riot meant. When we went to look at Chinese language reports and what they reported in Japan and in Singapore, we were given different accounts of what had happened. It became a fuller truth for what happened at that time” (Karin Lee, “Conversation with the Filmmakers” 39)

In this dissertation, I have identified three points of comparison that bridge the social structuring of Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia: the use of English to mediate racial embodiment, the way that exceptional events that defined raciality persist in new narratives that inhere in the racial body, and the global export of multicultural forms. As I noted in the Introduction, this comparative approach is unexpected. It is not grounded in a close modern relationship between Canada and these two deeply-connected Southeast Asian nations, or in apparent convergences between the historical conditions of settler-colonial Canada, and (post)colonial Singapore and Malaysia. Put simply, this thesis does not suggest this comparison is necessary because of one particular point of connection—past or present—between these locales. Rather, it attempts to establish a framework for reading less evident intersections
between these nations’ racial grids, and considers how their respective approaches to racial
governmentality belong to a larger logic of raciosity that circulates throughout the postcolonial
world. The racial nonhuman figuration provides this project with a method of tracing the
different instances of racial violence inherent in the formation of the ideal human across these
contexts, including the reassertion of historical approaches to raciosity that shape these nations’
modern racial schemas. Each chapter has therefore returned to this figuration in order to examine
the methods deployed by these nations as they define human types through discourses of
raciosity, and establish their modern social structures in relation to particular ideal human forms.

The three previous chapters have drawn on state discourses and legal narratives that helped
institute these forms of racial governmentality. They comprise what Wendy Bokhorst-Heng
refers to as “statal narratives,” which refers to the state’s role as a “critical actor in creating,
reproducing, and disseminating” ideological narratives in official capacities and in “institutional
contexts” (633, 632). Bokhorst-Heng applies this critique to her comparative analysis of
educational policy and multiculturalism in Singapore and Canada; she proposes that an
examination of multicultural statal narratives exposes how these narratives conflict with one
another, how they shape “the relationship between ideology and practice,” how they operate
within a “dynamic global/transnational-local/national nexus,” and how they “induct new
citizens” into the state’s ideal conceptualization of the nation (633-4). The concept of “statal
narratives” is useful when reflecting on the narratives circulated by these states as they reify their
racial grids, from language policy and state-sanctioned speeches on the importance of English
discussed in Chapter 1, to the narratives of raciosity deployed during seemingly exceptional acts
of racial violence that animate Chapter 2, to the state discourses analyzed in Chapter 3 that
emphasize or foreclose particular racial figurations. These narratives exemplify the connection
between the policies and legislation used to manage racial bodies, and the state-sanctioned discourses that reinforce their logic and transmit it (trans)nationally.

Alongside these statal narratives, literary narratives have provided my analysis with crucial insight into the effects these forms of racial governmentality have had on racial subjects and on those rendered racial nonhumans. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Fred Wah and Shirley Lim engage with English’s postcolonial work on the affectable racial body. This chapter also explored productive ways in which English’s ability to destabilize racial corporeality can be reworked: for Wah, through the use of code-switching, and in Lim’s writing, by harnessing English’s ambivalent position in Malaysia and Singapore to resist state attempts to manage its use. Chapter 2 considered how the distinct approach to temporality in Larissa Lai’s and Tan Twan Eng’s texts exposes the lingering effects of key moments of exclusionary violence in Canada’s and Malaysia’s histories. These works also suggest that for those figured as racial nonhumans through narratives of raciality produced during these events, the racial body is a site where these narratives both inhere and can be contested. In Chapter 3, I examined how Lydia Kwa’s novels explore the lives of women rendered racial nonhumans as Singapore and Canada privilege certain productive Asian bodies to bolster their global identities. Kwa’s work touches on how unexpected affiliations between racial bodies can also counter the way that certain histories are rendered illegible under these processes.

By way of conclusion, and of also envisioning future trajectories for comparative project, I turn to a recent intervention by Denise Ferreira da Silva that helps draw out the significance of the unexpected connections between these nations that underpins this work. In “Fractal Thinking,” da Silva again marks the racial as the “single most important ethico-juridical concept in the global present” before proposing that fractal or “compositional” or “poethical” thinking
might help to reread the racial—and racial violence—as a reassembled composition of the past, present, and future (np). In a critique of the current refugee crisis in Europe, da Silva suggests that poethical thinking can help think beyond critiques that produce this event as an “unprecedented crisis” (np). Rather, a poethical mapping of this present moment:

reveals the language of assimilation and the impulse to protect the White/European ‘way of life’ to be a repetition of the terms and logic deployed a century ago, when Anglo-American workers in the East and the Midwest of the US protested against the influx of Southern, Eastern European, and Asian immigrants, as well as black migrants fleeing the total violence of Jim Crow, on the basis that they would not assimilate and that they would lower the existing standard of living (np).

This type of thinking, and of making connections between different forms of racial violence, is necessary in order to understand these particular events as part of past and future iterations of the same logic that extends across different global contexts. Through her focus on the relationship between global capital and racial violence, da Silva suggests that this mapping of global capital among “so many repetitive instants and instances of the deployment of colonial-racial machinery” produces a mode of thought that “cannot be indifferent to racial violence in all of its iterations and expressions” (np). To draw this out further, the methodology provided by compositional thinking demands an engagement with raciality and racial subjugation that spans across currently undertheorized (national, temporal, epistemological) lines.

Poethical/compositional thinking is not bound by an analytical framework that only considers different deployments of racial governmentality within specific and circumscribed historical periods or geographic spaces; it attends to the particularities of moments where racial logic is
(re)assembled and redeployed, while also considering the manifold “correspondences” between different contexts.

Da Silva’s theorization of poethical thinking is reminiscent of other arguments that underscore the need to analyze particular events as always already connected through complex trans-temporal onto-epistemological networks. It evokes, for example, aspects of Derrida’s aforementioned imperative to think of a different way of “doing history,” as well as Wallerstein’s analysis of “world-systems” as a “spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units,” and Wai Chee Dimock’s critique of “deep time” that examines literature through non-standard time comprised of “alternate measures—African, Asian, and European... [of] an irregular duration and extension, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation” (Wallerstein 17, Dimock 4). But da Silva’s discussion of poethical thought is distinct given that the different correspondences/compositions made possible by this framework emanate from and return to the racial.

Da Silva explains that what “has yet to happen” is as vital as comprehending different intersecting pasts and presents, which makes space for the anticipatory and imaginative work of the literary narratives that shaped this project (np). But what is especially pertinent to my project’s focus is that poethical thought encourages an expansion of each of the nodes this project has touched upon, by envisaging how the processes that figure the racial nonhuman might be “reassembled” in the future, and the new transnational connections that might arise as a result of this (re)assemblage. Broadly, each chapter in this project extends from the last, from English as a fundamental problematic that mediates the stratified racial schemas of these nations,
to a more expansive critique of how these schemas are then upheld as moments of racial violence are embedded in national narratives, to an analysis of how these racial narratives are then recast as these nations develop new transnational connections and export their global identities. But a poethical/compositional reading of each of these critical points suggests the importance of returning to each, and to consider their concomitant and ongoing role in structuring these racial grids.

Poethical thinking thus provides a productive critical framework when reconsidering the connections this project has attempted to draw between these nations and their writings of racziality, as well as when looking ahead to other possible intersections between the way that Canada, and Singapore and Malaysia, figure certain bodies as racial nonhumans. A compositional comparative methodology engages with the historical and social conditions that give rise to these particular forms of social structuring, but encourages a more expansive look at what parallels might arise between racial bodies that are similarly subjected to these conditions—including the circulating terms of human types—across these distinct contexts. It also does not demand a terminus for this type of comparative work; by underscoring the repetition of these forms of racziality, it proposes that a broader form of critical thought is necessary in order to “interrupt the repetition characteristic of fractal patterns” created by the global work of “colonial and racial subjugation” (np).

In the final pages of this dissertation, I want to briefly consider the two excerpts above that draw together racial organization across Canada and Southeast Asia as they engage with particular historical events. This juxtaposition motivates a form of compositional thought. The first is from Phinder Dulai’s poetry collection dreams/arteries, which connects the 1914 journey of the Komagata Maru to other contemporaneous histories of migration and modern forms of
racial violence. This section of the collection’s opening prose poem examines the dehumanizing effects of colonial power which mediated the experiences of the British Indian passengers aboard the Komagata Maru as they travelled from Hong Kong, to Shanghai, to Moji, to Yokohama, to Vancouver, where they were denied entry into Canada and were forced to return to Calcutta two months later (Johnston 62, Mawani “Sovereignties” 107).

This passage makes brief reference to the role that colonial Singapore played in the Komagata Maru’s journey. The “ship’s charterer” in Singapore refers to Gurdit Singh, who chartered the Komagata Maru in Hong Kong, but who had previously made inquiries about other ships in Singapore (Johnston 26). Gurdit Singh had been living and working as a contractor in Malaya and Singapore before his decision to challenge the aforementioned Continuous Journey provision, and as Mawani argues, to “defy the racial inclusions and exclusions through which British subjecthood and mobility was determined” (108, 109).

In a historical mapping of the Komagata Maru’s journey and its relationship to broader issues of colonial migration, Singapore and Malaysia therefore only appear in relation to Gurdit Singh, and because during its return voyage, the ship was turned away yet again by British officials in Singapore (Johnston 148). But Dulai’s decision to locate Singapore as the point where the poem’s subject was encouraged to migrate to Canada momentarily refocuses the Komagata Maru’s history, and positions colonial Singapore and Malaya as central parts of its narrative. The majority of the Komagata Maru’s passengers boarded in Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Moji; but in Dulai’s poem, the presence of the interlocutor in Singapore envisions a prior conversation not captured by the historical archive (62). It thus motivates further consideration of
the contemporaneous forms of racial violence and resistance present in the Straits Settlements
and elsewhere throughout the peninsula.\textsuperscript{142}

While I do not have the space here to analyze this particular historical intersection
further, I note the productivity of expanding the comparative potential found within Dulai’s
inclusion of Singapore in this narrativization of a significant moment of racial exclusion in
Canada’s history, particularly given its bearing on the present. Dulai’s \textit{dreams/arteries} also
parallels the \textit{Komagata Maru}’s voyage with more recent instances of racial violence. For
instance, “from sea to sun” explores the arrest and interrogation of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees
aboard the \textit{MV Ocean Lady}, which arrived in Canada in 2009, and “investigative erasure”
incorporates the context of the United States through its examination of the 2012 fatal shootings
in a Wisconsin gurdwara by a white supremacist (29, 45). By connecting Singapore and
Malaysia—even briefly—to prior events that shape these current acts, Dulai’s writing raises the
question of how these nations might reiterate these forms of racial violence that continue to
figure racial bodies as inferior human types. This connection might, for instance, help trace how
the logic deployed against refugees in Canada almost 100 years after the \textit{Komagata Maru}’s
voyage is closely bound to the same discourses of raciality produced by modern Singapore and
Malaysia as they turn away migrant ships from their ports.\textsuperscript{143} As da Silva argues, “when
approaching \textit{what happens} as a composition, it is possible to attend to its constitutive elements,
which may also be part of other compositions (\textit{what has happened} and \textit{has yet to happen})

\textsuperscript{142} These contemporaneous forms of racial control and resistance include the expansion of British power
as colonial forces took control of Johor, the last area in Malaya to remain independent of colonial control,
in 1914, as well as the 1915 Singapore mutiny, where Indian troops in Singapore— influenced by
demands for Indian independence from British rule— violently rebelled against colonial forces (Nadarajah
179, Turnbull 148).

\textsuperscript{143} In 2015, Malaysia turned away a boat carrying over 500 Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis, while
Singapore refused entry to 40 passengers from Myanmar after their vessel sank (Fuller and Cochrane np).
comprising similar elements” (np). Applying this form of compositional thinking across these nations and to the question of the violence faced by particular migrant communities helps draw out some of the intersections in their “constitutive elements,” including their colonial histories of violence that similarly define their modern approaches to racial exclusion.

The second epigraph is from the “Disfiguring Identity: Art, Migration, and Exile” symposium which took place in Surrey in 2014 alongside the “Ruptures in Arrival: Art in the Wake of the Komagata Maru” exhibition. The exhibition “profiled contemporary visual art related to the history of the Komagata Maru incident, together with works that address more recent histories of mass migration from Asia to Canada’s West Coast,” while the symposium included artist panels and screenings of films dealing with race and racial violence in Canada (Davison 7). One of the installations included media artist Karin Lee’s 2007 short film “Shattered: The Anti-Asian Riots of 1907,” which juxtaposes Vancouver’s 1907 Anti-Asian riots against modern settings.145

Here, I will not offer a discussion of “Shattered” itself, but will turn instead to Lee’s discussion of how particular historical archives shaped her artistic intervention. Lee indicates that Canadian sources alone lacked the nuanced engagement with the riots that a project like “Shattered” demanded. She instead searched elsewhere, including in Singaporean archives and newspapers, in order to develop a “fuller truth” of the riots that considers how different historical

---

144 Da Silva describes that this move “draws upon Joan Retallack’s take on complexity as symmetry” in *The Poethical Wager* (np). In “Accident...Aeroplane...Artichoke,” Retallack describes the poethical art form as “a form of life in which we would, in our most enlightened moments, want to live — which makes the intricate complexity of the intersecting intentional and accidental that is our world known to us though the sensory and imaginative enactment of complex forms” (122).

145 Initiated by the Asiatic Exclusion League, the 1907 riots involved the destruction and looting of Chinese and Japanese-owned buildings by a mob of over 8000 white Canadians (Ward 73). See also Mawani’s “Racial Violence and the Cosmopolitan City,” which helpfully locates the riots amidst the entwined forces of colonial and capitalism and their shaping of Vancouver’s rapid expansion.
accounts might influence modern engagements with the riot’s “meaning.” Lee’s turn to the Singaporean context evokes the broader contemporaneous migration of Asian populations that shaped both nations. On the one hand, the distinctions between the records of these events convey that they were understood differently across these contexts, which contributes to the fuller truth that Lee describes. But Singapore’s documentation of and engagements with these events in Canada also gestures toward their mutual concern with managing and producing knowledge about some of the same migrant populations, as well as new migratory movements that threatened the colonial privileging of ideal whiteness. Returning to this intersection serves as a reminder that some of the significant events that defined these distinct racial grids occurred simultaneously, and provided these locales with similar—but not identical—understandings of racial types that are reiterated in new forms today.

Taken together, these excerpts provide a different way of understanding the importance of reading these events comparatively, but of also thinking beyond standard comparative frameworks. Read through a compositional approach, Dulai’s intervention, and his return to Singapore’s involvement in the Komagata Maru’s voyage, suggests the productivity of implicating these nations in one another’s history. What would a compositional critique of the Komagata Maru’s bearing on Canada’s modern racial grid look like when analyzed alongside the colonial discourses in Singapore and Malaysia that shaped this ship’s return, including the rhetoric they developed to describe the ostensible dangers posed by its passengers? How did the methods Canada deployed to render these Indian bodies as inferior affect their figurations in Singapore and Malaysia? How might Singapore and Malaysia’s current anxieties about migrant bodies from Asian nations within close proximity also influence Canada’s rendering of them as undesirable or unassimilable?
I cannot take up these questions further here, but wonder if, when read in light of shared implication that Dulai’s intervention provokes, Lee’s point about looking across multiple transnational archives might suggest a future direction for this line of inquiry. By naming the particular archives in question, Lee’s comments are a reminder that, as they engaged with these events, these nations simultaneously developed and documented knowledge about one another, and about their respective forms of racial management that included some of the same racial populations, and that were influenced by the same expansive colonial project.\textsuperscript{146} Transposed to the present (and, following da Silva’s theorization of compositional thinking, looking ahead to the future), their modern discussions of each other’s forms of racial governmentality may uncover new insights into their particular concerns, while also providing further knowledge about the different “meanings” of certain events.

Through both artistic reimaginings and a reevaluation of the history that shaped the colonial archive’s documentation of particular events, these excerpts help position approaches to raciality in these Southeast Asian nations and within Canada’s racial narrative. In doing so, they direct attention toward an undertheorized space in many analyses of past and present forms of racial violence across these contexts. This comparative reading therefore aligns with one of the aims of this project, as well as its methodology; it conveys the need to examine the many possible and unlikely intersections of these nations’ racial matrices, and to continue the task of thinking beyond critiques premised on their similarities and divergences alone. In terms of this

\textsuperscript{146} Mawani analyzes a crucial example of this knowledge production in relation to the Komagata Maru’s journey, as she notes that “English-language newspapers published in Amritsar, Allahbad, Calcutta, Lahore, and elsewhere provided detailed information to their readership regarding the ship’s status and the legal and political reactions incited by its arrival” (“Law” 262). Mawani describes that these reports viewed the ship’s journey “as part of a much broader and longer global process of colonial violence,” and that the “ship’s supporters drew important connections between Canadian exclusion as it was materializing in Vancouver and legal developments unfolding in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa” (262).
project’s particular focus, it also suggests that the production of the racial nonhuman across these contexts can only be addressed and interrupted within a transnational framework, as (re)iterations of the racial knowledge that define this figuration within the border of these nations continue to occur elsewhere and circulate globally. Expanding the scope of the logic used to map these “repetitive instants and instances of the deployment of colonial-racial machinery” might produce a mode of thought that is always already transnational, and that cannot be “indifferent to racial violence in all of its iterations and expressions” if it implicates each of these national contexts within their respective writings of raciality (“Fractal” np).
Works Cited


Challinor, A.E. "Canada's Immigration Policy: A Focus on Human Capital."


Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. "'Bahia Pêlo Negro': Can the Subaltern (subject of Raciality) Speak?" *Ethnicities* 5.3 (2005): 321-42.


---. "To Be Announced: Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice." *Social Text* 31.1 (2013): 43-62.


Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things, (An Archaeology of the Human Sciences)* translation


Kamboureli, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Oxford


---. “(Re)Mapping Indigenous 'Race'/Place in Postcolonial Peninsular Malaysia.”


Noor, Noraini M., and Chan-Hoong Leong. "Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore:


Web. 1 Apr. 2016.


Shome, Raka. "Mapping the Limits of Multiculturalism in the Context of Globalization."


Tan, Twan Eng. "I Don't Set out to Judge." Interview by Shalini Mukerji. The Hindu. N.p., 20


Ward, Peter. *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals*


