

The Breaking of a Dream: May 13th, Malaysia

Shirley Geok-lin LIM

University of California, Santa Barbara

I was twenty-four years old on May 13th 1969, when racial riots broke out in Selangor, chiefly in the Malaysian capital city, Kuala Lumpur, and its suburbs. Although Wikipedia terms the violence “Sino-Malay sectarian,” every historical source notes that most of the massacred and injured were Malaysian Chinese.¹ I was then living in such a suburb, near the University of Malaya campus, and a postgraduate student working on a Masters degree in the Department of English, in the only university then in Malaysia. Prior to May 13th 1969, Malaysia had been newly pieced together as a political state, composed of the Federation of Malaysia that had achieved independence in 1957, united with North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore. However, the perceived threat of voting outcomes in upcoming elections, that Singapore’s majority ethnic Chinese urban dwellers would undermine Malay numerical superiority particularly

* My thanks to Tee Kim Tong and Yucheng Lee for the invitation to participate in the May 13 conference held at National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung, to memorialize the 50th anniversary of the May 13 racial massacre in 1969.

1. See “13 May Incident” in *Wikipedia*. Kua Kia Soong presents an empirically drawn history in his book, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Kuala Lumpur: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007). While Kua’s publication of just then declassified British and other foreign records of the May 13th events has been criticized by some as partial, it is the only extant historical recounting of the violence, as Malaysian records have never been shared and are said to have been destroyed. See also Baradan Kuppusamy (2007): Dr. Kua “blamed then-deputy prime minister Abdul Razak and others for engineering the May 13 violence and subsequent coup which brought down Malaysia’s old order. ‘The riot was just a backdrop to seize power,’ he said. [...] [D]ispatches, between the [British] mission in Kuala Lumpur and London [...] showed that [...] the all-Malay army units stood by and let the mayhem happen. [...] One British Foreign Office document dated May 15, 1969, succinctly concludes that the riots were organised to “formalise Malay dominance, sideline the Chinese and shelve the Tunku’s government.”

Received: October 28, 2019 / Accepted: December 03, 2019
Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities, no.48 (Jan. 2020): 39-52

marked in the rural hinterland, lead to fears of Chinese ascendancy and resulted in Singapore being unceremoniously kicked out of Malaysia in 1965. The ejection of Singapore from Malaysia post-dated the establishment of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1962, when a tolerant multi-cultural and multilingual educational policy governed. These historical contexts alone may explain why I, like so many of my friends, thought everyone in our elite university were Anglophiles. With no postcolonial self-reflexivity, English teaching assistants taught tutorials on British poetry, from Shakespeare's "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" to William Butler Yeats' "Easter 1914." The twelve years after Merdeka appears now like an interregnum in a Twilight Zone, we young colonized English-language-loving zombies sucking the blood still from a separated fantastical dead motherland called England.

My poem "Monsoon History," composed sometime in the 1970's while I was negotiating a *fugit tempus* diaspora in the United States of America, figures a child raptly reading Lord Alfred Tennyson's poems. This British colonial education shaped for me an imaginary that is both a specific historical moment in my Malaysian sensibility and simultaneously an alienation from that particular geospatial locale. Because "Monsoon History" was taught over many years as part of the Malaysian Fifth Form English Literature curriculum, it has been interpreted as iconic of my growth as a Malaysian Anglophone poet. My present poetics, however, perhaps would have owed as much to *Peranakan* [native-born] verse had May 13th 1969 never happened. It was never "Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee" that amused this *anak* [child] in my mother's house, for my *Emak* [mother] recited no Mother Goose verse, no "Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man," no "Mary, Mary, quite contrary" to her children. In fact, *Emak*'s English was quite weak. Unlike my Hokkien-speaking father who had studied in British-run schools till he was seventeen and who enjoyed reading English-language newspapers and magazines like *Time* and *National Geographic*, *EMak*, who had stopped schooling at twelve, hardly read, and instead loved a good gossip and laugh, both shared in Malay, her mother tongue.²

Some anthropologists speculate that *Nyonyas*, Malay-speaking *Peranakans*, are descendants of the Batak tribal women who married the *Singkeh* immigrants from Fujian. *Batak* women undertook the ancestral worship rituals their foreign husbands demanded. Not Muslims, rather like the Hindu Balinese, they ate pork. Skilled in the fiery curries and *lemak* coconut dishes based on the freshest of local herbaceous ingredients, costumed in elaborately filigreed figure-hugging *kebaya* sarongs handed down by their foremothers, their descendants devolved to Chineseness without losing their original indigenous language and socio-cultural practices. These social acts included, on auspicious occasions, chewing *sirih*—a quid concocted of betel leaves, areca nut, lime, gambier and cloves—and strict observations of female modesty, coupled with a dominant matriarchal family structure. In my mother's household, till I was eight, I was raised a *Peranakan* female. When my mother gave up her children, she was admitting the failure of her interracial marriage, between a patriarchal Chinese

2. *Hokkien* is an oral dialect of Chinese that has shared roots with the dialect from Fujian that has many similarities with Taiwanese Chinese.

and a *Peranakan* matriarch, a family unit weakened, then wrecked by material desires and economic booms and busts coming out of subordination to colonial forces apprehended only as a distant West.³

Like my parents' marriage, my childhood oral poems, in contrast to those I read in books imported from Britain, were a mix of English and Malay with some *Hokkien*, this linguistic mix being in actuality our home language. Our mother tongue was not bilingual; rather, it may in hindsight be taken as fully a Manglish orality. Here is a poem we chanted-sang in the same way that British children might have chanted-sang "Mary had a little lamb."

Sitting under the *pokok kelapa* (coconut tree)
I will sing for you.
Oh Mina, kiss me *lah*,
Don't *tutup pintu*. (close the door)
Your face is like a *pinyapu*, (broom)
Your curly hair is full of *kutu*. (lice)
Oh Mina, my own, own sweetheart,
I love you, *selalu, sanghat*. (always, very much)

Occasionally, we sang folks songs that were completely in Malay, as with "*Chan Mali Chan*":

*Di mana dia anak kambing saya?
Anak kambing saya yang makan daun talas.
Di mana dia buah hati saya?
Buah hati saya bagai telur dikupas.
Chan mali chan, chan mali chan
Chan mali chan, ketipung payung.*

*Di mana dia, anak kambing saya?
Anak kambing saya main di tepi sawah.
Di mana dia, cinta hati saya?
Cinta hati saya yang pakai baju merah.*

*Chan mali chan, chan mali chan
Chan mali chan, ketipung payong.**

*Where is he, my little goat?
My little goat is eating taro leaves.
Where is he, my loved one?
My loved one is like a shelled egg.
Where is he, my little goat?
My little goat is playing by the paddy fields.

3. I have written at much greater length of my fraught childhood and my parents' marital troubles in my 1995 memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*.

Where is he, my loved one?
My loved one who is wearing red.

Where is your little goat, sir?
Sir, your goat is on top of the bridge.
Which one of those is your favourite flower, sir?
It is the Tanjong flower at the end of the branch.

If you want to know where my goat is,
It is in my room.
If you want to know which is my umbrella,
It is the tiniest one.
Where is your goat, sir?
Your goat that has yellow fur.
Which one is your loved one, sir?
My loved one is the one who's in white and yellow.

When I heard this folk melody played over the Air Asia plane on my flight from Kuala Lumpur to Penang in November 2018, a rush of homesickness stunned me like a wave knocking me off my feet that I had not expected rushing from a horizon I had forgotten to check for safety. Today, in the 21st century, Air Asia publicity office has shrewdly played on Malaysians' identity sentiments that are Malay-lingual-rooted, easily roused, easy on the ear, and communal in the extreme, shared by almost every Malaysian national flying on Air Asia, whatever his or her ethnicity.

Some other song lyrics, claimed also by Indonesia and Singapore, are "*Burong Kaka Tua*" (Old Tutok Bird) and "*Rasa Sayang Hey!*" The last in my childhood memory serves as a kind of anthem for my mother's people, harmonizing on "the taste" or feeling of love:

*Rasa sayang, hey! Rasa sayang sayang hey,
Hey lihat nona jauh, rasa sayang sayang hey.
Rasa sayang, hey! Rasa sayang sayang hey,
Hey lihat nona jauh, rasa sayang sayang hey.
Buah cempedak di luar pagar,
Ambil galah tolong jolokkan,
Saya budak baru belajar,
Kalau salah tolong tunjukkan.**

*I feel love, hey! I feel love, love, hey,
Hey, when I look at that girl, I feel love, love, hey.
I feel love, hey! I feel love, love, hey,
Hey, when I look at that girl, I feel love, love, hey.
The jackfruit is outside the fence,
Please take a stick and poke it down,
I'm just a new guy trying to learn,
So if I'm wrong then please show me the way.

Despite the gendered lyrics, this folk song was sung lustily by both boys and girls, men and women, absent the melancholic, sexual yearning, romantic address to a loved one that dominated Western Tin Pan Alley records that played on our radios, as in “Red Sails in the Sunset” or Nat King Cole’s “The Falling Leaves.” In my Malacca childhood, “Rasa Sayang Hey!” was an unself-conscious campfire song for Boy Scouts and for multiple-generation church picnics.

Like the insertion of different DNA segments to form new recombinant chromosomes, *Peranakan* language plays, as seen in these examples, arguably modeled a multicultural nation-identity evolution not drawn from a single-race-origin but complexly combinational. The May 13th 1969 racial violence, arson, and killings of hundreds or even thousands of innocent citizens, leading to the yet-to-be repaired rupture of national communal relations, achieved a traumatic wounding of a generation of unique Malaysians who learned and sang Malay and English language songs with equal fervor and *sang-froid*. May 13th marked the extreme shift from probable recombinant nation-evolution, as instantiated in these linguistic examples, to reified, or even apartheid, raced identities. After May 13th, after the blunt imposition of Bahasa Melayu as the national language and the marginalization of the then medium of instruction, English, as well as of Tamil, Chinese, and other ethnic languages, to sectional, that is, subordinate status, the kind of playful orality that characterized *Peranakan* speech became politically fraught.

Stigmatized as bazaar Malay or pidgin English, serving neither as a marker of Chinese ethnicity or of educated professionals working in *Bahasa* or English-language offices, the fusing of Malay and English registers termed Manglish is sometimes viewed as parallel to Singlish which many Singaporeans delight in claiming as a major feature of their national identity. However, Singapore and Malaysian Englishes are distinctively differentiated, the way that non-identical twins possess differentiated features. Singlish, albeit with some official resistance, is now widely accepted as the home language of Singaporeans, the comfort tongue of the nation. However, in Manglish’s recombinant DNA, Bahasa is the foundational corpus; in Singlish, it is arguably Hokkien. Also, despite what has been noted about features shared between Manglish and Singlish, Manglish does not possess the socio-cultural, even state-recognized, legitimacy of a home-language that Singlish enjoys.

Beginning with my generation, the split between Malay and English language writing in Malaysia is overt, evident, chronic, and seems no longer redeemable. Muhammad Haji Salleh, despite his 1970’s outspoken and celebrated rejection of English language writing to commit to what he argued was an authentic national Malay language literature, now quibbles and obviates between composing in Malay but also almost simultaneously translating into English. He explains his present shifting positionality in his 2000 essay “Rowing Down Two Rivers,”⁴ in which he juggles

4. Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia); also in “Decolonizing: A Personal Journey,” he argues that writing only in English is a “sin” (2000a: 60). He continues to equate Malaysian national identity with the Malay language. As critics have noted, “Muhammad is a strong advocate of this policy of nation

seemingly incommensurate goals, between Malay prideful ascendancy and individual authorial ambition for a global readership, abjectly accessible only through the once-abused “bastard” English language.⁵ Today, Chinese-language Malaysian writing is read only by Chinese-educated Malaysians, and its translation whether into Malay or English appears incapable of crossing over to other Malaysian language communities.

A social analyst might study the historical and current tensions and debates in Malaysian literary production as on-going symptoms of a post-traumatic-stress-disorder on the body of the nation. Before May 13th, communal relations and political discourse assumed a merit-based, non-raced ethos; after May 13th (and the passing of the New Economic Plan—NEP—, emphatic sedition laws and new Constitutional amendments), non-merit, race-based-hierarchical, Malay-supremacist social and governmental structures were enforced as the new normal. This new normal, in place for half a century, is all a couple of generations of Malaysians have experienced; but PTSD symptoms have recurred through these years after the race riots and massacres, to remind many Malaysians that there once was a different national identity-ideal that the new normal denies.

PTSD is widely diagnosed as “an anxiety disorder that some people get after seeing or living through a dangerous event. When in danger, it’s natural to feel afraid. This fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to prepare to defend against the danger or to avoid it” (“Posttraumatic stress disorder”). May 13th 1969 initiated a mass exodus of Malaysian citizens to Singapore and territories more distant. Currently, there is some public discussion on the relation between the unrecorded loss of lives on May 13th and the on-going loss of many more thousands of citizens since May 13th 1969, under the euphemism of “brain drain.” Lim Teck Ghee asked, “Was May 69 the

formation, in which all the Malaysian races are expected to embrace and rally around the Malay language”: “I gave up the colonial language to write in the national language. For the time being I would like to see writers contribute their talents to a literature in this [Malay] language [...]. That will solve the problem. Writers should have a sense of roots, national identity and pride in their language” (Mohammad A. Quayum 2006). In the 2019 interview, he repeats: “Malaysian literature, by definition, would be the literature written in the national language. It is a literature in progress, now being written by not only the majority Malays but also by the Chinese, Indians, Kadazandusuns, Ibans, Bidayuhs, Bajaus and the Aslan (first) peoples. We have many interesting works from East Malaysia, with unique cultural backgrounds and use of language. This is a richness that is also being discovered. Together, all these writings will be the Malaysian literature” (Nursafiri Ahmad Safian & Mohammad A. Quayum 127).

5. I have critiqued M.H. Salleh’s “ambivalence,” shuttling between an overt insistence on the evils of a multilingual literature (which he argues subverts “Malaysian” national identity) — grounded on his unswerving equation of “Malaysian” literature as ONLY literature written in Malay—, and his rationale that translating his poems into English and writing his critical essays in English in no way contradicts his position that English is a colonial and thus “bastard” language. See my “English in Malaysia: Identity and the Market Place” in *Asiatic* (Lim 2015); and also his recent interview with Nursafira Ahmad Safin and Mohammad A. Quayum in *Asiatic* (2019), which repeats these contradictions.

watershed or is it simply one of several past tipping points [...]?”, and answered “[T]he roots go back to not only 1969 but also to the change in educational policy in 1970 requiring students sitting for the MCE to pass Bahasa Malaysia or they would not be able to get entry into local universities. The period after this educational policy change saw the out-migration of non-Malays and their children pursuing their studies abroad begin in earnest.” In short, he notes the almost covert perception that Malay supremacy evidenced in “institutional racial and religious discrimination and individualised experiences as push factors for those who have left the country or are seeking to leave” (Lim 2019).

Whatever the reasons, records coincide to support that with each fresh flashback rousing anxiety and fear, a fresh flood of Malaysians exit the body politic, either physically in a global diaspora or psychically, withdrawing from political and civic engagement to supposedly safer narrow communal concerns. That is, many Malaysians exhibit avoidance symptoms, “staying away from events that are reminders of the experience,” hence the continued historical erasure of that date and its aftermath, with no annual notice of the event, the perpetrators, victims, memorials or site markers of physical violence and damage, no estimates of fiscal costs to national wealth, losses to individuals, families and businesses, no Commission established to arrive at answers to any of these issues. If one were to raise May 13th to even intimate friends, the first reaction often is to deny its significance to contemporary Malaysian society; that is, Malaysians express emotional numbness in response to this historical event, another symptom of PTSD.

As to how different ethnic communities feel about the trauma, because there is no public sharing, one cannot conclude if any Malaysian may have felt strong guilt or depression after May 13th. But fears this trauma may recur are ever-present in the sedition laws and the absence of social discourse on the event. The nation has moved on, one may infer, except that erasure and silence that rule any May 13th discussions are symptoms not of recovery and healing as of repression and denial. In the place of memory and healing, the nation is continuously displaying hyper-arousal symptoms of PTSD. Public discourse, whether political or academic, has been clearly tense or “on edge” whenever race and its unspoken companion, violence, are referenced.

Re-experiencing symptoms of the May 13th trauma, I argue, include flashbacks. Medically, flashbacks occur when the trauma is “relived over and over and includes physical symptoms such as elevated heart rate and perspiration.” In similar manner, whenever threats are raised by some ethnic groups of race violence in the event of unacceptable actions by other groups, the May 13th trauma is relived even without recourse to overt references to the historical event. See, for example, the recent incident reported at the *South China Morning Post* of 20th March 2019, of a “Malay power’ neo-Nazi band festival that was cancelled in Malaysia’s Ipoh city. The article notes that many of the Malay heavy metal bands preach a “‘Malay power’ movement, that Malaysia should be an exclusively Malay nation, immigration should end and non-Malays should be expelled” (Wright 2019). The photograph of a crowd at a Boot Ax performance shows young Malay men in Western tees doing the Nazi salute. These Malay power bands have names such as Xenophobia, Spiderwar and Total Distrust,

English words that denote explicitly extreme Malay supremacist positions. The article quotes an interview with the pop culture website *Vice*, in which Slay, a band member of Boot Ax, explained the Malay power movement as “concerned about keeping a pure Malay community all over the Malay Archipelago.” “Malaysia is home to people from China, India, and foreign immigrants from Bangladesh, Africa, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Burma [Myanmar],” Slay told *Vice*. “The government can’t control the entry of immigrants, and we get so many of them.” Valorizing Nazi ideology, Slay adds, “The lesson that we can learn from Nazism is that we can take extreme racist action if the position of the Malays is affected by these factors.” These Malay supremacy groups of educated youths openly articulate anti-immigrant sentiments, collapsing anti-Malaysian-Chinese and other ethnic-Malaysian-citizens communities under this umbrella immigrant rubric, to threaten violence and even killings (as suggested in the naming of the band’s spokesman, Slay). Any anti-Malay statement would rightfully result in immediate arrest of the speaker under the strict sedition laws, yet these Malay Power bands have free access to multimedia platforms and have not been arrested for inciting racial hostility.

The appeal of Nazi ideology to these Malay Power bands may be explained by the analysis of the motive for the recent massacre of over 50 Muslim immigrants in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15th, 2019, by an Australian right-wing white supremacist. As Slay notes, the sentiments of members of his band, Boot Ax, are similar to “blue-eyed” Nazis a century ago. Pete W. Singer observes, “Another tactic they [white nationalists and Islamic terrorists] use is offering a sense of fellowship. It’s a strange but very real combination of finding a community and finally feeling understood and appreciated, but they’re finding it through the expression of hate” (Campbell 2019).⁶

The public response to flashbacks raised by covert allusions to the May 13th trauma is fear, resulting in “re-experiencing symptoms” that “may cause problems in a person’s everyday routine.” Malaysian citizens are easily startled and made anxious by any news related to race tensions and conflicts; at the same time, Malaysians in advantaged race positions are prone to “angry outbursts” if they believe the lessons learned through this historical trauma are being forgotten. That is, even as the May 13th massacres cannot be openly accessed or studied, it must also never be forgotten. Repression is an on-going effort at memory control, both for ensuring civic peace by surface forgetting and oppressing likely oppositional elements by hyper-arousal of covert or barely disguised anger and fears. According to medical observations, “hyper-arousal symptoms are usually constant, instead of being triggered by things that remind one of the traumatic event. They can make the person feel continually stressed and angry.” The overwhelmed Malaysians turn to modifying their behavior, to subdued quiescence, changing the subject, even to thoughts of leaving the country or sending their loved ones away, a form of self-destruction of Malaysian identity.

PTSD symptoms displayed in the national body can occur in weird moments of

6. See Charlie Campbell’s extended essay in *Time*, on a white supremacist’s massacre of Muslims in Christchurch (2019).

flashbacks, hyper-vigilance, and on-going wounding. Malaysian society appears “normal,” but what now is considered normal is what has been normalized. The Constitution, post-May 13th, has normalized—that is, legitimated—a half century of ethnic or race preference, officially tagged as “Bumiputraisim” and often boasted of as Malay supremacy, aka, *Melaya Ketuanan*. According to Wikipedia: “*Ketuanan Melayu* (Jawi script: *کتوانن ملايو*; literally “Malay dominance”) is a political concept emphasizing Malay preeminence in present-day Malaysia.” Hence, for me, returning “home” usually once a year has been increasingly challenging, for I see what Malaysian citizens have become inured to. To be “at home” is challenging, for I have to turn a blind eye to race-preferences instated through state apparatuses such as public education and universities, government agencies, banks, religious sites and buildings and governments-linked corporations, even so-called private entrepreneurial enterprises, where administrators, staff, faculty, personnel and students are one race majority over-represented. One must squint to not see the on-going deprivations on civil service and socio-economic equality brought on by the processes of NEP in the aftermath of May 13th.

But while these explicit repercussions are seldom critiqued and despite on-going episodes of racial hostility, under the scabs may be discerned some healing. This healing remains discreet, an open secret not to be addressed else it invites violence to maintain fear and enforce humiliating displays of submission. Take, for example, the figure of Malaysia’s foremost elder literary figure, a poet who began publishing in the 1950s, who has written plays, reviews and essays, and whose many books, all written in English, include his translations of Classical Chinese poetry and rich allusions to Western classical literature like *Antigone* and canonical British poets such as T.S. Eliot. Wong Phui Nam’s reputation is established as a major author in Malaysia and with Singapore poets, and critical chapters on his works proliferate.⁷ Yet critics do not address the aporia in his texts, that Wong converted to Islam decades ago in marrying a Malay woman, and this long happy marriage has produced Muslim children who are taken as fully Bumiputra. Neil Khor in his 2008 article, “Malacca’s Straits Chinese Anglophone Poets and their Experience of Malaysian Nationalism,” makes the case for Wong’s liminality as neither a Chinese nor an at-home Malaysian, but Khor’s brief biographical note on Wong’s marriage to a Malay serves no analytical factor in his psychological reading of Wong’s poems (Khor 127-149). Wong’s poems and essays, after all, make no reference to this autobiographical matter. Wong’s texts do not inscribe or even covertly suggest Chinese-Malay tensions, themes that the seven-generation Malacca *Peranakan Baba* poet, Ee Tiang Hong, directly foregrounds in his pre- and post-May 13th poetry.⁸ Is Wong’s erasure of autobiographical Chinese-Malay intimate

7. Wong Phui Nam’s six publications, all in English, span over 40 years and include *Anike* (2006), *An Acre of Day’s Glass: Collected Poems* (2006), *Against the Wilderness* (2000), *Ways of Exile* (1993), *Remembering Grandma and Other Poems* (1989) and *How the Hills are Distant* (1968).

8. As I noted in 2015 *Asiatic*, of Ee Tiang Hong’s oeuvre, “despite his immigration to Perth, Australia, in 1972, [Ee] remains a noted diasporic Malaysian poet, perhaps because he continued writing out of his quarrels with Malaysian identity politics even in his later books,

relations a deliberate masking of what is too sensitive for his words to approach? Or does what Wong avoid in his writing represent a void, a “lack” in which such tensions and contradictions—e.g. his limning a nostalgia for Chinese-language Tang lyrical sentiments while in the position of a Muslim paterfamilias in a wholly Bumiputra family—are “disappeared,” rendered mute and invisible because so restrictively contained? And should we take Wong’s figure as the foremost living Chinese Malaysian Anglophone poet as an instance of racial passing (passing as Malaysian Chinese or not passing as Bumiputra?) or of racial healing that is not yet ready to be acknowledged?

I give you a second more personal instance. On September 23rd, 1996, I was invited to give a lecture, “Writing a Malaysian/American Memoir,” at the International Islamic University in Petaling Jaya by the Head of the English Department, a white American woman who had converted to Islam when she married a Malay poet, who had published an article on my memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, and who was teaching the memoir to her undergraduate classes. A question and answer session followed my talk. As is customary in Malaysian universities, only faculty asked the questions. One was raised by a middle-aged man sitting toward the front of the long seminar table while the students were ranked in rows toward the back of the room. I repeat his words almost verbatim: “Lady Professor,” he began, “I am from Syria. I have just come to this country and I don’t know much about Malaysia, but this is what I see. The Chinese here are very money-minded.” He continued in this vein, his words seeming to invite my response to his anti-Chinese statements. I was so taken aback that I did not observe how the other teachers responded to his racist stereotyping. Making an effort to be polite, I thanked him for his question and added, “But your comment is an insult to Malays as it assumes that Malays are not money-minded. There are many Malays who are very successful businessmen, who are CEOs of large corporations. Many Malays wish to succeed in making money; they work very hard to compete and many are doing very well and have become rich. You seem to say they have failed in business because only the Chinese are money-minded.” He was silent after my rejoinder, and the faculty moved on to other issues. At the end of the Q & A, a line formed chiefly of students to have me autograph their memoir copies. As I signed and chatted with each, several of them whispered, “My mother/grandmother is Chinese.” They did not elaborate what such information suggests of their identities or of their unspoken response to the anti-Chinese stereotype the Syrian professor had confidently thrown out. However, I understood their communication of shared Chinese descent as a silent rebuttal to the Syrian’s racism that no faculty beside myself had openly resisted that morning.

It may be argued that a very different narrative may be told of Malaysia, that fifty years of peace, of no repetition of the killings, arson and violence after the May 13th trauma, are themselves proof of healing; that the prosperity that has lifted the boats of every ethnic community (albeit unequally) in this half century is evidence of the success of NEP policies; that democratic ideals of free speech, equality and meritocratic justice

which includes *I of the Many Faces* (1960), *Myths for a wilderness* (1976), *Tranquerah* (1986) and *Nearing a Horizon* (1986).”

are culturally specific Western concepts not suited to particular non-Western societies. Quiescence and prosperity may thus be taken as national goals that unite Malaysian citizens; and thus, the open corruption that ruled in the decades of Najib's Barisan government which threatened Malaysian prosperity and which disturbed the quiescence of submission to Barisan politicians finally brought Najib and his cronies down.

The stunning victory of the opposition party, Pakatan Harapan, on May 10th 2018, however, does not signify a transformation to a different normal, for free speech, equality and meritocratic justice are still absent in the new ruling discourse. After the Christchurch massacre of Muslims, a sweeping generalization about what unifies New Zealanders as citizens is that although "The indigenous Maori people make up more than a sixth of the population, but they are joined by the descendents of British colonialists and more recent arrivals from the South Pacific, Europe, Asia and Africa. The diverse population is united by shared values of affability, self-deprecating humor and sports"(Campbell 2019). As a visiting diasporic Malaysian, I do not live in the everyday interactions of ordinary Malaysians, whose coexistence appears to be rather like those claimed for New Zealanders: affable, tolerant, and respectful. Besides, my perspective is skewed by distance of time and space. But the politics of quotas heavily favoring one ethnic community over all the others remain the foundation of post-May 13th Malaysia, and so long as this *Melayu Ketuanan* continues, Malaysia remains to me yet a traumatized nation, split between an overt ruling body part and other parts bound in unspeaking fear.

The multiculturalism that *Peranakan* Malaysians displayed pre-May 13th is lost forever. Instead a Malay-dominant recombinant culturalism dominates in the 21st century Malaysian nation, one not grounded on genetic purity or even on social practices—see, for example, the "Westernization" of Malaysia in the popularity of heavy Metal music, the increasing numbers of women in the professions, the tastes for Western cuisine, the dependence on Western technology and use of social media, etc; even a more relaxed acceptance of the importance of English for instruction, international business, and communication across ethnic groups—but on religious identity as Muslim.

The voluntary intimate sharing from at least five International Islamic University undergraduates that long ago September has remained fresh with me through the years. I wonder where these students are now; what professions they have gone into, and how they negotiate the racism that simmer daily in Malaysian lives. For me, their whispers of inter-ethnic marriages offer a vision of healing under the scab of May 13th ethnic separatism, a generation of offspring with Bumiputra recorded identities yet also of Sino- or Tamil- or Caucasian-descent, a recombinant DNA authentically Malaysian. These children now grown and perhaps with children of their own are 21st century *Peranakans*, possessing both Southeast Asian indigenous AND Sino or Caucasian or Indo descent lines: the way that some of Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir's forebears had come from South Asia, the way that certain Sultanates have British parentage, the way that Mrs. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, married to Anwar Ismail, and the current Deputy Prime Minister, "has a *Peranakan* Chinese grandfather" "but was raised Malay Muslim" (according to reports).

Neil Khor's analysis of three Malaysian Anglophone poets, of whom only Wong Phui Nam chose to remain in the country, views Ee Tiang Hong and myself, both Malacca *Peranakans*, as avowing a multiracial Malaysian identity that was aborted after May 13th. It seems to me rather that while it is a political fact that *Peranakans*—native-born Sino-descent citizens—have been refused recognition as Bumipuras, a status offered to Eurasians—mixed-race citizens who trace descent from Portuguese/Dutch/European colonialists—a new “Malaysian” identity has evolved in which Malay now forms the national foundation ethno-identity (unlike *Peranakans* like myself where Sino is the founding ethno identity), together with Indian, Caucasian and Chinese strands in the recombinant DNA of many contemporary and even more future Malaysians.

A survivor of the New Zealand massacre, Ahmed, notes that “More terrifying [than the killings] was the flurry of cheers and gleeful comments online racists attached to the murderous scenes. ‘We underestimate the power of hatred,’ Ahmed says” (Campbell 2019). The unarguable lesson taken away from May 13th 1969 is the same lesson Ahmed teaches us after the massacre of his compatriots while they were at prayer in their mosques in Christchurch, that we take away from the massacres of Sri Lankan Christians on Easter Sunday this year, from the massacre of black Americans in their historic Charleston church by a U.S. white nationalist in 2015, from the concentration camps and gas ovens that were set up all over Europe in World War 2, that for good or for ill, we humans must never underestimate the power of hatred.

WORKS CITED

- Campbell, Charlie (2019). “The New Zealand Attacks Show How White Supremacy Went From a Homegrown Issue to a Global Threat.” *Time*, 21 March (time.com/magazine/south-pacific/5555848).
- “Ketuanan Melayu” (2019). *Wikipedia* (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ketuanan_Melayu).
- Khor, Neil (2008). “Malacca’s Straits Chinese Anglophone Poets and their Experience of Malaysian Nationalism.” *Archipel*, no.76: 127-149.
- Kua Kia Soong (2007). *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Kuala Lumpur: Suaram Komunikasi).
- Kuppusamy, Baradan (2007). “Politicians linked to Malaysia’s May 13th riots,” *South China Morning Post*, 14 May (www.scmp.com/article/592766/politicians-linked-malaysias-may-13-riots).
- Lim Teck Ghee (2019). “Brain Drain and the Role of the State.” *The Sun Daily*, 5 May (www.thesundaily.my/opinion/brain-drain-and-the-role-of-the-state-KI846963).
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin (1995). *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: Feminist Press).
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin (2015). “English in Malaysia: Identity and the Market Place.” *Asiatic* 9.3: 1-25.

- Mohammad A. Quayum (2006). "On a Journey Homeward: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh." *Postcolonial Text* 2.4 (www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/458/456).
- Mohammed Haji Salleh (2000). *Rowing Down Two Rivers* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia).
- Mohammed Haji Salleh (2000a). "Decolonization: A Personal Journey." *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 7.2: 51-67.
- Nursafiri Ahmad Safian & Mohammad A. Quayum (2019). "Malaysian Literature and Its Future: An Interview with Muhammad Haji Salleh." *Asiatic* 13.1: 119-141.
- "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" (2019). *Wikipedia* (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posttraumatic_stress_disorder).
- "Wan Azizah Wan Ismail" (2019). *Wikipedia* (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wan_Azizah_Wan_Ismail).
- Wright, Adam (2019). "'Malay power' neo-Nazi band festival cancelled in Malaysia's Ipoh City." *South China Morning Post*, 20 March (www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3002515/malaysian-neo-nazi-bands-lined-kuala-lumpur-concert-similar).

ABSTRACT

The May 13th 1969 racial violence, arson, and deaths of innocent citizens achieved a traumatic wounding of a generation of unique Malaysians who learned and sang Malay and English language songs with equal fervor and sang-froid. This trauma marked the shift from probable recombinant nation-evolution to reified, or even apartheid, raced identities. Beginning with my generation, the split between Malay and English language writing in Malaysia is overt, evident, chronic, and seems no longer redeemable. After May 13th, non-merit, race-preferred governmental structures were enforced as the new normal, which is all a couple of generations of Malaysians have experienced. But PTSD symptoms have recurred through the past half-century to remind there once was a different national identity-ideal. Even as May 13th cannot be openly accessed or expressed, it must also never be forgotten. Memory control acts as a means to ensure civic peace and to obviate oppositional elements by hyper-arousal of covert or barely disguised anger and fears. "Returning 'home'" for diasporic Malaysians may be increasingly challenging, for they are less inured to the on-going consequences on civil service and socio-economic equality brought on by the processes of NEP in the aftermath of May 13th. However, despite on-going episodes of racial hostility, under the scabs may be discerned some healing. Instead of the multiculturalism that Peranakan Malaysians displayed pre-May 13th, a Malay-dominant recombinant culturalism dominates in the 21st century nation, not grounded on genetic purity or on social practices but on religious identity as Muslim. On the one hand, the Constitution has normalized a half century of ethnic or race preference, officially tagged as "Bumiputeraism" and often boasted of as Malay supremacy. On the other hand, while it is a fact that Peranakans have been rejected as Bumis, new identities

have evolved in which Malay forms the foundation ethno-identity, together with Indian, Caucasian, Chinese and other ethnic strands in the recombinant national DNA of many contemporary and even more future Malaysians.

Keywords: May 13th Incident, trauma, PTSD symptoms, memory

五月十三日，馬來西亞夢碎

林玉玲

聖塔芭芭拉加州大學

摘 要

一九六九年五月十三日，許多無辜馬來西亞公民死於種族暴動，一個世代遭受創傷，他們曾以同樣的熱情和冷靜學唱馬來歌曲和英文歌曲。這個創傷顯示透過各族融合成為國族的展望落空，形成壁壘分明甚至種族隔離。從我這一代開始，馬來語和英語書寫顯然分道揚鑣，再也無可挽回。「五一三事件」之後，種族優先政策成為新常態，那已是幾代人的共同經驗。但是，就算五一三事件無法公開討論，我們絕對不能遺忘；五十年來，創傷後壓力症候群不斷提醒我們另一種國族認同理想的存在。

記憶控制是一種維穩手段，透過激烈方式壓抑憤怒和恐懼，以消除反對的聲音。對離散馬來西亞人來說，「回家」充滿挑戰；他們未受惠於新經濟政策。土著文化主義取代了五一三以前土生華人所表述的多元文化主義。這並非根據純正血統或社會傳統，而是基於穆斯林的身份政治。然而，儘管種族敵對情緒持續高漲，馬來西亞人仍心存希望。在這個世紀，一方面，半個世紀以來憲法將種族優先論的「卜米主義」合法化，視之為馬來人特權。另一方面，儘管土生華人不受承認為土著，新的認同論述已漸冒現：在重組當代的、未來的馬來西亞國族基因時，固然以馬來人為基石，但印度裔、歐裔、華裔等族裔也交織其中。

關鍵詞：五一三事件、創傷後壓力症候群(PTSD)、記憶

* **Shirley Geok-lin LIM** is Professor Emerita at University of California, Santa Barbara. Her recent poetry collections include *Ars Poetica for the Day* (2015), *The Irreversible Sun* (2015), *Do You Live In?* (2015), and *Embracing the Angel: Hong Kong Poems* (2014).