

Essentialism And The Diasporic Native Informant: Malaysia In Hsu Ming Teo's *Love And Vertigo*

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Abstract

Hsu Ming Teo's (2000) novel *Love and Vertigo* oscillates between three countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. Though Teo is seen to be affiliated with Malaysia, and certainly appraised as articulating her ethnic history with clarity of creative and artistic skill, the image of Malaysia that she shapes come to the fore as a remembered reality, through the glimpses caught from the morsels of both memory and filial visits to this estranged home/ancestral land. The most significant issue that resides at the heart of such writings is the repudiation of the Chinese community by the Malays in Malaysia. The images of Malaysia in the novel are fleeting, yet when they do appear they seem to be the most macabre amongst the spectres of the past that haunt the main protagonist, Grace. This article discusses the almost ghostly role that Malaysia plays in the novel and argues that the cultural memory of the older country lies entombed with the ghost of the 1969 racial riots. It concludes that when writings by diasporic native informants such as Teo and others around the globe are taken to be authentic renditions of ethnic heritage as part of multicultural politics in the cosmopolitan, the implications of these are highly serious as they are largely constructions of decidedly essentialist discourses of the older country.

Keywords: diaspora, multiculturalism, native informant, Malaysian Chinese, ethnicity.

Essentialism and the Diasporic Native Informant

This article aims to shed light primarily on the discourse of Malaysia as expressed in the novel *Love and Vertigo* by Hsu Ming Teo (2000), a writer with some connection with the culture and history of Malaysia, having been born in Malaysia and now living in Australia as part of the Malaysian diaspora overseas. It aims to find out whether the representations of the various subject positions that is perceived in the country that was once home hinge upon the dialectics of migration, nationhood, gender and ethnicity that is tied more closely to Australian ideals than they are to Malaysia. If this is found to be at the heart of the novel, would they then stand as indications of some form of affiliation with that which they now call home? If this is the case, then how would this figure in their status as chroniclers of the older country?

I argue that the space that writers such as Hsu Ming Teo and others like her occupy when they write is one that would ultimately overlap between being Australian and having been

part of Malaysia in the distant (or not that distant) past. This space is also primarily one that is characterised by the so called “First-World” status that Australia possesses. Would we categorise them as part of the group that is alluded to in Chow’s (1993, p.93) argument below on the dialectics and dialogics of the writings of “third-world” intellectuals living in the first world? Would they be seen within the context of

the problematic of the post-colonial discursive space in which many “third-world” intellectuals who choose to live in the “first world” function. Within that space, these intellectuals are not only “natives” but spokespersons for “natives” in the third world [...] serving as providers of knowledge about their nations and cultures. The way these intellectuals function is therefore inseparable from their status as cultural workers/brokers in diaspora [...].

Do the writers of diasporic descent become, however inadvertent it may seem, spokespersons for the countries they write of by virtue of their link to it by birth? Do they function as native informants within postcolonial discursive spaces of their texts? Does this result in a form of romanticising of the various subjectivities of the communities of the older country, of, to cite Chow (1993, p.117) once again, the tendency “to sentimentalise ... those day to day realities from which they are distanced”? Are these perceived realities formed within a notably Australian ideological backdrop, whether vivid or muted? Another contributory factor to such acts of essentialising might very well lie in the influence of what I have elsewhere theorised as ‘Western or Occidental Hailings of Diaspora’ (Shanthini Pillai, 2007), where I argue that the specific ideological premises that bracket Western conceptions of diaspora and the experiences on which it is often hinged on which invariably centre on the issue of angst and exile contextualized within the biblical association of diaspora converging on the Jewish Exodus and its evocations of persecution, exile and alienation.

My point is that when most Western scholars approach the condition of diasporic existence, they frequently use an ideological formation that is often deeply intertwined with the Jewish connotations and its various codifications, in the similar vein of the hailing mechanisms of ideology that Althusser (1984, p.48) speaks of, where “ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it recruits subjects ... by that very precise operation ... called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the line of the most commonplace every police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”. Encased within this concept is the idea of recognition and familiarity, of accessing familiar myths and metaphors to make sense of the experience of diaspora.

Take for instance Cohen’s (1999) discussion of the etymology of diaspora. He hails the Book of Deuteronomy as the site for the denominator of diaspora most referred to, with its implication of forcible dispersion as a result of divine retribution to the Jews for having abandoned the ways of the Lord : “Among these nations you will find no peace, no rest for the sole of your foot [...] Your life will hang continually in suspense, fear will beset you night and day, and you will find no security all your life long” (Deuteronomy cited in Cohen 1999, p.266). He goes on to assert that this association largely

overshadows the original denominator that stems from the Greek translation of the Bible where diaspora “originally meant to ‘sow widely’”. Yet his stand remains rather clear when he states that it would be “impossible to understand notions of diaspora without first coming to grips with some central aspects of the Jewish experience” (p.267). The Jewish experience is notably grounded at the centre of Cohen’s discussion of the etymology of diaspora and he proceeds to contextualize the razing of the temple of Jerusalem in 586 BC and its creation of “the central folk memory of the negative, victim diaspora tradition (p.267), where “ ‘Babylon’ subsequently became a code-word among Jews (and later Africans) for the afflictions, isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place, set adrift, cut off from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class” (p.267). This hailer of diaspora, caught up within the Babylonian evocations of captivity, alienation and isolation is echoed in many other Western scholarly excursions into the experience of diaspora.

In an article on Diasporas and the Jewish experience, Cheyette (2003, p.46) has this to say:

The experience of diaspora can be a blessing or a curse, or, more commonly, an uneasy amalgam of the two states. It is not a coincidence that the Hebrew root for exile or diaspora has two distinct connotations. *Golah* implies residence in a foreign country (where the migrant is in charge of his or her destiny), whereas *Galut* denotes a tragic sense of displacement (where the migrant is essentially the passive object of an impersonal history”.

In the similar vein as Cohen (1999), he does not fail to point out that the etymology of ‘diaspora’ “originally stems from the Greek *dia-sperien* meaning ‘to scatter’ or ‘to sow’” [...] first used in the New Testament to indicate the dispersal of the disciples and the spreading of the gospel”. He continues thus:

In the medieval period, it mainly referred to the resettlement of Jews outside of Israel and more recently, has been applied to large-scale migrations of populations such as the African diaspora or the diaspora of the Irish or Palestinian peoples. Today however, the term ‘diaspora’ has effectively reverted to its original etymology indicating a universalized state of homelessness that is at the heart of the new gospel of postmodern and postcolonial theory (p.46).

Note the strong biblical association and the codification in the employment of the term ‘gospel’ as well as the reference to homelessness, all key indicators or hailers of the experience of diaspora. Even James Clifford while cautioning against making the Jewish experience the central focus of diaspora, still accedes to the fact that the language of it remains inescapably tied to the Jewish experience: “We should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model” (Clifford cited in Cohen 1997, p.2). The language that he

speaks of is one coloured with the evocations of exile, loss and persecution and these are the hailing mechanisms of Western responses to diaspora which has become the definitive model for the majority of scholarly investigations of diasporic experience by both the West and the non-West.

Closer to the South East Asian region are two Western scholars, Bishop and Phillips (2004), currently residing in the island state of Singapore and their articulation of the identity politics of diasporic experience. In their discussion, they too make reference to the Judaic and biblical roots of the term diaspora and in no uncertain terms state, "Diaspora? This would always have been a curse" (p.166). The authors are of the firm belief that the curse of diaspora is inextricably intertwined with the blessings that hail from it and they see the echo of the pattern of disobedience and divine retribution in the politics of Asian diasporic identity formation and that "for each blessing there corresponds a curse" (p.169). Their contention is with the tendency of contemporary (Asian) inquiries into diasporic experience to privilege the celebration of individual identity and thus eliding the violence of its original conception.

On the issue of the problematics of ethnicity and diaspora in the United States of America, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (1996, p.211) pertinently asks: 'When someone speaks as an Asian-American, who exactly is speaking? If we dwell in the hyphen, who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the Asian and the American components? What is the appropriate narrative to represent relationality? Replace 'America' with 'Australia' and the questions Radhakrishnan asks become deeply relevant to the subject of writing as diasporic and Australian. When a diasporic writer in Australia writes, who does she write as? Perceptions are bound to differ in the reading public from one side of the hyphen as opposed to the other, i.e. when she is read as Malaysian or as Australian. Do we look at the space that is occupied by the hyphen as a multi-entry visa to the world of what precedes it and what follows? Or does the writer hint at a form of allegiance to the nation that she calls home now through the ideological underpinnings that shape her responses to the land that was once home (either to her or to her family)? In other words, are the perceived realities of Teo's (inherited) memories of Malaya formed within a notably Australian ideological backdrop? What precisely is the space that Teo inhabits as a creative writer when she writes about Malaysia? How much of it is sentimentalised or even exoticised? The following discussion will attempt to engage with the problematic outlined above.

Malaysia in Hsu Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo*

The narrative discourse of *Love and Vertigo* oscillates between three countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. The images of Malaysia in the novel are fleeting, yet when they do appear they seem to be the most macabre amongst the spectres of the past that haunt the main protagonist, Grace. The novel begins on this note: "These are the myths I tell about my family and, like all myths, they are both truths and lies, simultaneous buffers of love and betrayals of trust" (p.1). In the narrative that unfolds, it

appears that Grace's responses to Malaysia and Singapore are caught up in the dialectics of the relationship she has with her parents. Grace's mother is Singaporean while her father is Malaysian. Grace herself is Malaysian born but having migrated with the family to Australia at the tender age of seven, is Australian in all but birth. In many ways, Australia becomes the buffer against the memories of the past. Yet because the migration is induced by trauma of the Malaysian 1969 race riots on the psyche of Grace's mother, its legacy in the mind of her daughter appears with the stain of distrust and censure, with a touch of the mythical.

The following is how the racial riots of 1969 are described in the novel:

Malay Muslims, incited by the youth of the United Malay National Organisation, went on a jihad against Malaysian Chinese and Indians, murdering some, maiming others. The killing spree had been organised according to a precise café colour scheme: after *susu* (the milky white Chinese) then *kopi* (the coffee-coloured Indians) (p.11).

These lines are also the first glimpse of Malaysia in the novel. The terms of representation in the passage reveal a conflictual time-frame. The metaphors of jihad appear to be more contemporary notions of the Malay community that seem to be influenced by occidental discourse on the Muslim world in general. The images of the Chinese and the Indians in the passage too are somewhat estranged from the historical context of the scene set and reflect in its stead an affiliation with the myths and metaphors that are more engaged with Sydney's café culture (or any other contemporary cosmopolitan city).

Conflicting time-frames are also evident in the following passage:

The patriarch and his wife were living in the one state in Malaysia where the Sultan forbade violence against any ethnic group. This may have been because his dentist and tennis partner – the Patriarch—was Chinese, while his physician and golf partner was Indian. The Patriarch was especially favoured because he was in possession of a rusty tub of a boat in which he would chug upstream to the various *kampong* villages along the river, tending to tooth-aches, enduring halitosis, extracting teeth and plopping them into a small Kraft peanut butter jar he kept for that purpose (p.12).

The first half of the depiction is conveyed in terms of representations of a post independent Malaysia (especially in the image of the physician and his golf partner). However the second half presents a view of pre-independence Malaya, of the boat chugging upstream, deeply reminiscent of scenes from Conrad's (1921) colonial narratives, especially *The Lagoon*. The same can be said of the depiction of the figure of the venerated sultan. While the use of such local expressions demonstrates her attempt to engage with the various scenes and tones of local Malaysian life the overall effect emerges disengaged from the local world that Teo articulates in the novel.

Such terms of estrangement can be linked to the physical estrangement from the country as Malaysia is seen to be a site of perennial violence and anxiety that induces migration in two generations. Jonah's mother (Grace's paternal grandmother) decides to move to Singapore with her son in the aftermath of a violent communist insurgence, insisting that "he would have a better chance of gaining a place at university if he didn't come from an obscure village in Malaya" (p.90). Jonah meets and marries Pandora, Grace's mother in Singapore and she induces her husband to move twice, once from Singapore to Malaysia as she wanted to move "far away" from his domineering mother and again in the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, this time to Australia.

These migrations seem to be foregrounded by a strong rhetoric of blame. Grace remembers that her father "would never quell his resentment" against his wife for making him "choose between his mother and herself" and in the second instance, blames her for forcing him to leave a successful dental practise in Malaysia and to struggle to nurture a fledgling one in Sydney. This rhetoric of blame permeates the consciousness of their daughter as it spills over into her memories of Malaysia, and rests rather heavily on the shoulders of Malaysia and the Malay community in particular:

While Chinese and Indians were being sliced with sharp-bladed *parangs* in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, my mother was screaming from the pain of childbirth, safe under the Sultan's protection, while my father hunted durians (p.12).

The image of the *parang* becomes an almost permanent fixture to the figure of the Malay in Grace's mind, intimations of an almost malevolent shadow of Malaysia lurking in her subconscious.

In her reading of the Chinese Australian experience as depicted in three novels, amongst which Teo's *Love and Vertigo* is featured, Jacobs (2002, p.2) writes that "identity, sexual and familial love, and cross-cultural encounters are interrogated and complicated [in these novels] by an inability to forget the past which over-shadows the business of survival". This appears to be at the core of the representation of the Malaysian past, as the memories, are "no longer reality but history" (p.2), they stem from a legacy of memories that are inherited but never lived. Her parents' inability to forget the past informs Grace's present and overshadows her survival of it in the present. These troubled sensitivities are threaded finely and firmly into the fabric of the Tay family. Every time Grace relates the birth of her family members, there is an attendant image of larger social tensions that fracture families, communities and nations at large. The first birth that is spoken of in the novel is that of her brother, as described above, having taken place at the very moment Malaya is ripped apart by ethnic clashes. The birth of her mother Pandora Lim is described in similar terms, as it is seen as one that led to dissolution:

... that day, disaster struck that tiny terrace household in Singapore..... All the women gathered there in the courtyard—sisters, second cousins neighbours and friends—would never congregate in that same group again.
... Mei Ling's childbirthing screams had attracted the attention of Japanese

soldiers looking for *kuniangs* : ‘comfort women’ ... Even after the war some of those women never returned to their families or friends, so ashamed were they of what they had been forced to do during the war (p.28).

Her father was born on the very day of the outbreak of the Second World War, swathed with the attendant image of Polish “sabres waving uselessly against the crushing tanks” of Hitler’s army “far away in Europe” (p.84). However, Grace’s own birth is described almost as an afterthought, for when she is born, her mother is preoccupied with thoughts of leaving Malaysia as a result of the racial riots of 1969: “For six years Pandora watched and waited, waited and watched. She gave birth to me during her time of waiting, when she reminded and nagged and felt her desperation grow.” (p.139). Such anxieties inevitably seep into Grace and colours her perception of the country.

It is however interesting to note that the memory of the country for Grace’s father is strikingly different. Grace remembers Jonah Tay constantly comparing the state of affairs in Australia with Malaysia and perennially insisting that he would have been better off had he not migrated:

To have crossed the boundary of the familiar had been no easy feat for this reluctant Chinese Odysseus. He took a deep breath and did it—then he never stopped complaining about it for the rest of his life, reminding his family of the sacrifices made and the opportunities lost (p.10).

Intergenerational conflicts commonly associated with diasporic families are more often than not expressed by Jonah rather than Pandora, as evident in the following heated exchange with his son:

“Don’t walk away while I’m talking to you,’ he said, his voice trembling from outrage laced with hurt. ‘That’s the rudest thing you could ever do to a Chinese father. If I had known you all would turn out like this I would never have given up my practice in Malaysia and immigrated to Australia. My old partner is now a millionaire’ (p.234).

The same sentiment resurfaces when he learns of Grace’s decision to become a cleaner rather than continue her studies in university:” After everything I gave up in Malaysia, all the sacrifices I made, this is how you and Sonny repay me” (p.265).

Jonah Tay’s vision of Malaysia is one of prosperity, both culturally and financially. For Pandora, it is a place of aggression and ethnic Othering. Faced with conflicting memories of Malaysia, Grace’s vision of it consequently oscillates between a sense of aloofness and inherited betrayal. Malaysia notably played no real part in her life and the stories of the racial riots come to the fore with only one side of the story, that of a victimised and largely guilt-free Chinese community facing the violence of a *parang* wielding Malay community. This is magnified by the strong overtones of Chinese heroism encapsulated in the dragon slaying mythical hero. When she relates Jonah’s experience of being caught

in the middle of the racial riots, he and the friend he is with are described as “two Chinese knights... ardent in their self-imposed quest for the holy grail of durian” (p.128). He is also referred to as a “Chinese Odysseus” as seen earlier. Greek mythical nomenclature heavily informs the narration of Grace’s family history. Her mother and all her siblings are renamed after mythical characters that their mother “had picked from a Reader’s Digest condensed book of Greek and Roman myths” (p.34). Interestingly enough the names of the girls are based on female mythical characters that endure some form of tragedy, often at the hand of the male Greek heroes: Pandora, Lida, Daphne and Persephone. These seem to be narrative techniques employed to reinforce the subject matter of aggression and oppression, patriarchal subjugation in the case of the women in the Lim family and ethnic victimisation in the case of the Tay family in relation to Malaysia. However, while Grace gradually progresses towards some form of reconciliation with the memory of Singapore and its legacy of patriarchal suppression, the image of Malaysia remains fossilised on the shores of the memories of the 1969 racial riots. This is perhaps largely due to the fact that it is this incident that is used as a leverage to garner gratitude from the children for the act of migration:

‘Just remember May 13, 1969,’ he told us, ‘and be thankful that you’re here instead of Kuala Lumpur. We could all have been killed. And if I hadn’t sacrificed my career and all the money I could make there in order to bring you kids here for a good education, like all the other Chinese, you’d be suffering discrimination by the Malays in the schools and universities. So just be grateful you’re Australian” (p.182).

Yet at the point in which the Tays migrate to Australia, the country has only just begun to emerge from the prejudicial “White Australia Policy” and its shadow looms heavily on the lives of the younger Tays:

‘We grew to hate the sound of our voices, and those of our parents. They loved all things British, but they could not speak English. Their accents, their syntax and their vocabulary mirrored in language our cultural difference and our social leprosy before the age of multiculturalism” (p.178).

Grace is taunted verbally but Sonny becomes the victim of actual physical abuse and would come home “sporting ugly bruises everyday” (p.177). This hated voice that she alludes to however is the Singaporean variation of English. It becomes apparent that Grace is more susceptible to her Singaporean Chinese roots and distances herself from her Malaysian links. Her ethnic identity is more closely grounded in the island state, which appears to fare much better than her birthplace. This is in spite of the fact it is in Singapore that her mother commits suicide. The incidents of ethnic othering that Grace and Sonny experience in Australia seem to fade into the creases in the pages of the story she tells. They are not related in accusatory tones emphasising mostly the linguistic barriers that stand in the way of cultural encounters. The overall impression of this is the identification as Australian, which does not come across as too problematic. In fact Australia signifies freedom for Grace, in terms of her gendered identity as opposed to her

mother's subjugation as a Chinese female in Singapore and her being othered as a Chinese in Malaysia, much the same way her mother achieves the same kind of liberation. A strong subtext to Grace's story is her sexual liberation. In many ways, the narrative space becomes a portal for her articulation of her sexual empowerment.

Ultimately it becomes apparent that the narrative space becomes a portal for the negotiating of the repressed history of Grace's mother and thus by association her mother's motherland, the 'womb of space' that is Singapore: 'I can begin to accept that part of me which is embedded here and refuses to wither away no matter how many times I chop and sear those roots' (p.271), thoughts that cross her mind towards the close of her narrative. In this way, though Teo is often linked to her Malaysian roots (she was born in Malaysia in 1970 and arrived to be a resident in Australia in 1977), it becomes obvious that it is Singapore that is at the heart of this novel. This sentiment is similarly echoed by Ismail Talib (2006, p.125).

Teo is one writer who is difficult to classify as Malaysian or Singaporean. Although it might just be easier to classify her as an Australian author, her fictional exploration of the Australian identity is with recent immigrants and not with the more settled communities. Although I classify her as Malaysian, partly due to the passport that she and her parents held before they became Australian, the Singaporean presence is still significantly more palpable than the Malaysian.

This raises the issue of the problematics of identification and categorization that is inevitably caught up in the world of reading, nominating as well as the teaching of literary texts of the diaspora. The following, being a response to *Love and Vertigo*, is a crucial example:

The prestigious Vogel award for young writers was in 2000 given to a novel that moves between Australia, Singapore and Malaysia. Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo* touches upon what it is to live in Australia with a family that bridges two cultures. Grace flies to Singapore for her mother's funeral, and spends time with her Chinese family. The history of Singapore is a backdrop for the rich lives of these strong people who, in one memorable moment of the novel, stop to buy sweets while being pursued by anti-Chinese rioters." (Ikin and Jorgensen, 2001, p.8)

There are a number of issues reflected above. First and most significant, is the inaccuracy of the perceived setting, for the scene that is referred to in the passage actually takes place in Malaysia. There appears to be a blurring of the boundaries between Malaysia and Singapore in the eyes of the Australian reader, while for the Malaysian reader and for the narrator of the novel, Singapore rests in a space that is more reconciliatory than it is for Malaysia. Note the pervasive influence of the picture of the Malays as "anti-Chinese rioters" upon the reviewers. This highlights the problematic of diasporic writings, and especially writings that are taken to be representative chronicles of the estranged

‘homelands’ or ancestral lands. Appended to this is also what can be noted as the politics of recognition and misrecognition that often dog the heels of diasporic fiction.

Though Teo is seen to be affiliated with Malaysia, and certainly appraised as articulating her ethnic history with clarity of creative and artistic skill, the image of Malaysia that she shapes come to the fore as a remembered reality, through the glimpses caught from the morsels of both memory and filial visits to this estranged home/ancestral land. The most significant issue that resides at the heart of such writings is the repudiation of the Chinese community by the Malays in Malaysia. The *parang* wielding Malay who streaks across the pages of the novel is indicative thus of the unconscious in the imagination of the novelist herself. It can be surmised that Malaysia plays a ghostly role in the imagination of the writer, and that this seems to be a common trait especially amongst writers of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, whose cultural memory of the older country lies entombed with the ghost of the 1969 racial riots. When these writings are taken to be authentic renditions of ethnic heritage as part of multicultural politics, the implications are rather serious as they present a version of Malaysia that is far removed from her reality. As Graham Huggan (2001, p.138) puts it

Such writings may be considered on the one hand as capitalising—mendaciously in some cases—from the portrayal of a cultural otherness set in apparent opposition to the Anglo-Celtic mainstream but, on the other, as falling victim to the self-serving establishment desire to assign and manipulate categories of cultural difference by attributing value to literary works primarily rewarded for representing a fetishised ‘ethnic voice’ ... What is at stake here in other words, is not just the cultural authenticity—or lack of it—supposedly embodied in these writers and their writings, but the degree of agency they are able to exercise over the production and, no less important, the subsequent reception of their book.

Teo has been rewarded for her representation of a segment of Australia’s multicultural community. She, like many other diasporic Malaysians who choose to write of their estranged homeland, is in many senses a native informant and she possesses the agency to shape international views of Malaysia’s past.

Yet, while Teo’s novel serves up the unpalatable ‘ethnic affirmative action’ policy of Malaysia, it holds in reserve another national anxiety, that of the host land’s ‘white Australia’ policy. It becomes rather apparent that the enmity towards the Malaysian racial riots of 1969 eclipses the spectre of prejudicial ‘white. If these anxieties continue to haunt the memory of Malaysia, they consequently stand in the way of a reconciliation with the nation that could have been home.

Conclusion

In many senses, the anxieties of the racial riots, like that of the white Australia policy, are ghostly spectres of the past. However, it appears that while many diasporic Malaysians have laid the ghost of the latter to rest, the same does not seem to apply to the former.

Perhaps this is due to what Ien Ang (1996, p.37) calls the “influential narrative of progressive transformation” where though “the nation is claimed to be on the road from a racist, exclusionary past to a multicultural, inclusionary present [yet] the truth value accorded to this narrative has the unfortunate effect of suppressing a plain dealing and unsentimental consideration of the continuing constitutive role of processes of racialized and ethnicized othering in contemporary Australia.” The narratives of White racism that appear in the text are far overshadowed by accounts of Malay racism encountered in Malaysia.

We have the presence of the victim diaspora tradition in the evocations of exile and loss portrayed in much of the discourse of Jonah, Grace’s father and even more so in Pandora, Grace’s mother. The memories of Malaya are continually tinged with images of persecution, violence and affliction. These expressions inevitably create a ricochet of the common hailers that the Western world uses to engage with the experience of diaspora. Perhaps this is largely due to the fact that for writers like Teo, the representations of the various subject positions that they perceive in the country that was once home hinges upon the dialectics of migration, nationhood, gender and ethnicity that is tied more closely to Australian ideals than they are to Malaysia. For them, diasporic memory is no longer reality but history and history is inextricably intertwined with elements of the fictive, or as in the words of Hayden White (1985, p.121), history is “the literature of fact” or “fictions of factual representation”.

The question that must be asked is thus should Malaysia be perennially enshrouded by the spectre of the ghastly episode of the 1969 race riots that ultimately sits at the heart of most diasporic articulations of her past or, can a reconciliation be initiated with these estranged and embittered kinfolk? There is a need for a sustained effort to initiate a reconciliation with the memory of Malaysia amongst the Malaysian diaspora in Australia through examining the perceptions that Malaysian Australians have of Malaysia and to exorcise the ghosts of the past. Perhaps this can be done by re-examining the role that Malaysia has symbolically in the lives of its diaspora in Australia and to note the points in which it intersects with the reality of contemporary Malaysia as opposed to the imagined Malaysia of the historical past and thus work towards altering essentialist perceptions of the ‘older’ country.

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