

Punks, Monks and Politics

**Authenticity in Thailand,
Indonesia and Malaysia**

Edited by
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Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction <i>Julian CH Lee and Marco Ferrarese</i>	ix
SECTION 1: MALAYSIA	1
1 Heavy Metal Nothingness: Alluring Foreignness and Authenticity Construction in Early 2010s Malaysian Metal <i>Marco Ferrarese</i>	3
2 Religiosity as a 'Currency' of Authenticity: Islam and Group Identity Formation in Malaysia <i>Frederik Holst</i>	25
3 Close Encounters of the Authentic Kind: Exploring the Meaning-Making of Love, Sex and Intimacy among Gay-Identifying Malaysian Men <i>Joseph N. Goh</i>	47
4 Ini Bukan Budaya Kita: This Is Not Our Culture <i>Julian CH Lee</i>	65
5 A Postscript—Ini Budaya Kita: This Is Our Culture <i>Nikkola Mikocki-Bleeker, Julian CH Lee and Ceridwen Spark</i>	79
SECTION 2: INDONESIA	89
6 Emplacing Punk: Subcultural Boundary Work and Space in Indonesia <i>Erik Hannerz</i>	91

7	<i>Punk Sejati: The Production of 'Do-It-Yourself' Authenticity in the Indonesian Hardcore Punk Scene</i> <i>Sean Martin-Iverson</i>	105
8	Authenticity and the Textiles of Sikka: An Essay on the Apposition of Values <i>E. Douglas Lewis</i>	125
9	Culture as Art: From Practice to Spectacle in Indonesia <i>Greg Acciaioli</i>	145
SECTION 3: THAILAND		165
10	If You Don't Do It Who Fucking Will? Authenticity and Do-It-Yourself Practices in Bangkok's Underground Rock Subculture <i>Pablo Henri Ramirez Didou</i>	167
11	Questioning Thainess: Pleng Lukthung in the Twenty-First Century <i>Viriya Sawangchot</i>	183
12	Thailand after the 2014 Coup: Restoring 'Thai-Style Democracy' <i>Alessio Fratticcioli</i>	191
13	Buddhism and Authentic Practice in the Mountains of Southeast Asia <i>Sean Matthew Ashley</i>	211
14	Reshaping the Quest for 'Authenticity' in Home-Stay Tourism in Northeast Thailand <i>Rebekah Farrell</i>	227
	References	237
	Index	267
	About the Contributors	283

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Chapter 3

Close Encounters of the Authentic Kind

Exploring the Meaning-Making of Love, Sex and Intimacy among Gay-Identifying Malaysian Men

Joseph N. Goh

This chapter focuses on the doings of love, sex and intimacy that give rise to the meaning-makings of authenticity for gay-identifying Malaysian men. These personal meaning-making processes are concomitantly dialogical engagements with the religio-political, sociocultural and legal logic in Malaysia that vehemently repudiates such subjectivities as inauthentic reproductions of 'Western' invention in contradistinction with 'real Asian values'. In this chapter, I challenge the notion of authenticity as a personal ontological trait, and focus on how an ensemble of particular attitudes and deeds of gay-identifying men within their religio-political, sociocultural and legal contexts in Malaysia constructs the notion of 'authenticity'.

As I focus on the dynamics of abjection and inner strife that besiege gay-identifying men by virtue of their sexual proclivities, I also investigate processes of agency and empowerment that resist accusations of ersatz sexual subjectivity. My understanding of authenticity in this chapter focuses primarily on the notions of 'being true to one's self' (Vannini and Franzese 2008) and 'the pursuit of inner comprehension, self-acceptance, and a method of self-articulation' (Goh 2014: 133). Yet, I am cognizant that the exercise of agentic authenticity is as much beleaguered by religio-political, sociocultural and legal constraints as it is by evolving and contingent performances of sexual subjectivity. Just as I concede that personal discursive constructions of sexual authenticity constantly negotiate with the nationalistic rhetoric that governs political and sexual notions of authenticity, such constructions are themselves unstable and shifting in the quotidian realities of sexual subjects.

Hence, my chapter is not a simplistic endeavour that gratuitously stamps a mark of reified authenticity on gay-identifying men who act on sexual impulses. Instead, I offer *situated vignettes*—snapshots of these men and their lives as at the time of my interviews with them—of the complexities surrounding their lived experiences and circumstances. My reference to ‘love’ in this chapter alludes to feeling of attraction, longing and attachment that are popularly referred to as ‘falling in love’. My use of the term ‘sex’ refers to ‘a collection of behaviors related directly or indirectly to stimulation of the genitals [in which] bodies then respond . . . with a reflex that is pleasurable and tension-releasing’ (Rye and Meaney 2007: 28–29). My understanding of ‘intimacy’ alludes to ‘a personal “knowing” [of sexual partners] in a way that is not available publicly’ (Worth, Reid, and McMillan 2002: 243).

This chapter is based on a larger qualitative research project in which I conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews with thirty non-heteronormative men on their sexual identifications, sexual practices and faith negotiations. In this chapter, I deploy a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology (Bryant and Charmaz 2010: 1–28; Charmaz 2000: 509–535) to analyse and interpret selected narratives of six gay-identifying men—Aadesh, Alex, Shanghai Fun, Raw, Plato and Buck¹—on issues of negotiating *sexual authenticity*, or authenticity as sexual subjects, with religio-political, sociocultural and legal complexities. A Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology understands that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and research participants, and favours a ‘middle ground’ approach of openness to what is learned from research participants while remaining familiar with relevant scholarship and research issues. I am assisted by diverse scholarship on authenticity, sexuality and other related studies in investigating, articulating and theorizing the conceptualizations of sex as close encounters between these men.

In what follows, I first investigate multidisciplinary studies on authenticity. Then I allow these studies to segue into discussion with selected studies of ‘Asian values’, and some religio-political and sociocultural discourses on ‘Malaysian culture’ by the country’s political actors as reported in the news media, including issues of non-heteronormative sexualities. I utilize this discussion as a backdrop in my interpretation of and theorization on the narratives of these men.

AUTHENTICITY, ‘ASIAN VALUES’ AND NON-HETERONORMATIVE SUBJECTIVITIES IN MALAYSIA

To speak of authenticity is to speak of a myriad of human realities in which issues of what are (un)real, (un>true, (in)valid and (un)original are often fiercely debated. On a sociological level, the materiality of authenticity is

validated when something ‘is “genuine”, because its origin or authorship are not in question, and it is not an imitation or a copy’, or when it is pronounced as a ‘faithful reconstruction or representation’ (Leeuwen 2001: 392–393), irrespective of scientific or historical evaluation. These arguments feature most prominently in debates on ‘cultural authenticity’, or arguments for and against particular cultural expressions as genuine or fake.

Marshall Sahlins points out that post-structural, postmodern and postcolonial studies have exposed the construction of culture as ‘an ideological smokescreen of more fundamental interests, principally power and greed’ (1999: 403). This perspective shatters the ‘pure’, nativistic image of culture as a rigidly monolithic entity which, as Dimitrios Theodossopoulos asserts, ‘lies at an inaccessible level below the surface of social life, deep within oneself or among societies “uncontaminated” by modernity’ (2013: 338). At the same time, Sahlins canvasses for an ‘inventiveness of tradition’ (1999: 408), rather than ‘invented traditions’ (1999: 402). This inventiveness conceptualizes a kind of innate ‘cultural structure’ which is subjected to interminable processes of change in serving the self-representation of particular societies. Theodossopoulos understands Sahlins’ perspective as an effort to overcome an ‘implicit reductionism’ (2013: 350) in the notion of invented traditions which perceives culture as merely politically perfunctory. At the same time, Theodossopoulos recognizes ‘authenticity’s conceptual imprecision—its blurred, context-specific, often undefined (or indefinable) semantic boundaries—[as] indicative of its dynamic and flexible nature’ (2013: 355) in cultural expressions. Ann Swidler adopts the use of ‘culture as repertoire [in which] cultural symbols, rulers or rituals only sometimes “work” for people’ (2001: 25). Adrian Holliday insists that ‘it is at the level of discourse that individuals are able to negotiate, make sense of and practise culture; and it is within this process that imaginations about culture are generated and ideology is both experienced and manufactured’ (2011: 1).

While appreciating these scholars’ acknowledgement of the evolutionary and mutable qualities of culture, I find myself leaning towards Fred Dervin’s ‘liquid approach to interculturality’ (2011: 38) that not only opposes a ‘reified vision of culture’ and “a solid approach” to intercultural discourses’ (2011: 39), but interrogates and deconstructs the conceptualization of ‘culture’ itself. Dervin’s formulation of liquid interculturality highlights the fact that discourses are ‘always a subject’s representation or perspective that s/he (co-) constructs, negotiates, contests while interacting’ in order for ‘speakers to construct “reality” and their perception of phenomena but also to (re-)position themselves’ (Dervin 2011: 40–41). Hence, what is termed as ‘culture’ is in fact a series of strategic discourses on self-representation that are contingent on specific intents and goals within a society. There is no structure with an ‘authentic core’ that evolves and progresses yet remains impermeable and

solid, as 'culture' is a series of intersecting and recursive discourses that gives rise to an illusion of ontological substance. Notions of 'culture' and the 'inventiveness of tradition' (Sahlins 1999: 408) are devoid of an intrinsic element. They are haphazard and rhizomatic processes that are constantly reinvented and recast according to particular needs, and performed by embodied persons with varying degrees of acceptance and awareness within societies. Moreover, 'culture' is an implement of self-representation that often serves the specific purposes of dominant voices in society, whereby 'ideological imaginations of culture very often lead to the demonization of a particular foreign Other' (Holliday 2011: 1).

In stating that 'culture' is a convenient analogy for ideological discourses, rather than the existence of an authentic essence, I am further suggesting that discourse plays a pivotal role in authenticity. Discourses on (in)authenticity cannot appropriate absolute and static positions—they are fluid and situated according to contextual realities. Such discourses have been particularly operative in the construction of 'Asian values' or 'the Asian way', marked by the rhetoric of political leaders in East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. The sociopolitical logic that governs the notion of authenticity in 'Asian values' is thus a call 'for a return to traditional core values deemed to be common to all Asian societies, and which differentiated "Asia" from other regions or civilizations, particularly the "West"' (Dupont 1996: 14). The 'Asian values' rhetoric has been used to pursue political interests, as '[political elites] have deliberately tried to equate the defence of Asian values (questions of cultural preservation and national or group identity) with the defence of existing political structures' (Ingleton 1998: 229). The drive for political superiority through the promotion of 'authentically Asian' discourses is so overpowering that even though the 1997 regional economic crisis unseated the idea of 'Asian values' as *the* deciding factor for economic ascendancies in East and Southeast Asia (Thompson 2004), this strategy of 'regime legitimization' (Dupont 1996: 25) continues to persist in many countries, including Malaysia.

The former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, is arguably one of the strongest proponents of 'Asian values' in Southeast Asia. In *The Voice of Asia* (1995) which he co-authored with Japanese politician Shintarō Ishihara, Mahathir deplored how 'Western societies have witnessed an almost complete separation of religion from secular life and the gradual replacement of religious with hedonistic values' (1995: 80). For Mahathir, the bulwark against the encroachment of 'Western decadence' is what political scientist Alan Dupont terms as Mahathir's "'Asia-as-civilisation" thesis' (1996: 14) or the perception of an 'Asian superiority' within a Malaysian-Islamic framework. Mark Thompson observes how 'Asian values' is a method 'to justify authoritarianism after economic development' (2004: 1085). The political

agenda behind the Malaysian-style 'Asian values' is evident, as Mahathir avoided it altogether during the regional economic crisis, and concentrated instead on 'thinly veiled anti-Semitism and crude xenophobia' (2004: 1086).

Mahathir and other Malaysian politicians continue to uphold 'authentic Asian values'. I am particularly interested in how such ideals are morphed into discursive condemnations of non-heteronormative sexualities. Heteronormativity upholds certain expressions, behaviours and appearances of gender and sexuality as natural and normal, and thus are often accepted and prioritized in mainstream politics, society, culture and religion. Non-heteronormative subjectivities and expressions destabilize these expectations. Malaysian legalities such as the Penal Code and the Syariah (Islamic) laws continue to criminalize sexual activities that include oral and anal penetrative sex, which in turn are frequently annexed to non-heteronormative men (Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 1997: sec. 377 A–C; 2006: sec. 2). Mahathir has pronounced homosexuality as unnatural and contributory to human extinction (reported in Sukumaran 2012). In June 2012, current Malaysian premier Najib Razak categorically declared the country's opposition towards 'any deviant culture, such as the behaviour of the LGBTs and deviant thoughts such as liberalism and pluralism' (quoted in *MalaysiaKini* 2012). I suggest that Najib's perception of a 'deviant LGBT culture' is set in polarity with an imagined 'normal-thus-authentic Malaysian culture', particularly as his refusal to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in November 2012 was justified by his claim that 'it depends on your values and norms and we reject LGBT' (quoted in Mergawati 2012). For Najib 'authentic Malaysian values and norms' are unequivocally heteronormative.

Najib's denouncement of non-heteronormative subjectivities came soon after Malaysia's Foreign Ministry revealed Najib's disappointment with the United States President Barack Obama's statement of support in May 2012 for same-sex marriages, accompanied by a firm insistence that 'it is a personal opinion and only applies to the US' (Teoh 2012; Gast 2012). Najib's further condemnation of 'LGBTs, pluralism [and] liberalism [which] are against Islam and [which he deems] compulsory . . . to fight' (quoted in Hafidz 2012) in June 2012 lies in utter contradiction to his earlier statement in April 2012 that 'the function of government is no longer seen as limiting [the] freedom of the individual, but . . . ensuring that basic rights protected by the Constitution for each individual is assured' (quoted in Chooi 2012). Mahathir's and Najib's statements belie a deep-seated suspicion and fear of unfamiliar, progressive and evolving realities in the country. I argue that Najib's ferocity against non-heteronormative sexualities also reveals the struggle of the Najib-led ruling coalition for political preservation through manipulatory concepts of an 'authentic Malaysian culture' that rejects both 'Western

values' and 'non-Malaysian Asian values' in matters of gender and sexuality. Najib's claim that Malaysia does 'support human rights, but . . . within the boundaries set by Islam' (quoted in Hafidz 2012) suggests that the attainment of an 'authentic Malaysian culture' which can presumably stem the tide of moral turpitude rests on a strictly orchestrated performance of 'authentic cultural values' that are 'Malaysian', 'Islamic', and which reject both 'Western' and non-Malaysian 'Asian' values. Antagonism towards non-heteronormative sexualities in the name of 'authentic' Malaysian Islam serves as 'regime legitimation' (Dupont 1996: 25) and an implement of morality that secures political superiority, as to colonize the moral sphere is to colonize the political sphere (Goh 2015). There is thus a distinct implication that 'open dissent from the views of those who hold political power is somehow contrary to Asian values' (Ingleson 1998: 230).

These political, nationalistic, religious, sociocultural and legal aspects of authenticity intersect with the negotiations of personal lives. Phillip Vannini and Alexis Franzese offer a perspective on authenticity as self-truthfulness, in which 'one [who] is true to one's self . . . experiences authenticity [yet] when one is untrue to one's self, the experience of inauthenticity is likely to occur' (2008: 1633). Charles Guignon does not understand personal authenticity as 'the static self-sameness of a pre-given thing through time, but the continuous, ongoing, open-ended activity of living out a story over a course of time' (2004: 127). As such, the claim of authenticity as 'being true to one's self' must not be seen as a fixed and simplistic dynamic of unearthing the 'true self'. Guignon further posits 'there is no substantial self beneath the ensemble of socially conditioned roles and activities that make up a life, and so there can be no such thing as getting in touch with a "real self" in order to be true to it' (2004: 130). Building on Guignon—and hearkening to my previous argument that there is no cultural core—I argue that the pursuit of what constitutes 'real authenticity' must not translate into a quest for 'a set of core civilizational values' (Dupont 1996: 16). Instead, this pursuit must examine religio-politically, socioculturally and legally inflected discursive constructions that commingle with the meaning-makings of authenticity. In the following section, I analyse how my research participants explore, construct and reconstitute their own discourses of sexual authenticity in Malaysia.

ANALYSING THE DOINGS OF AUTHENTICITY

Aadesh is a forty-one-year-old, gay-identifying, Malayalee-Indian-Malaysian in the entertainment industry who identifies as a non-practising Roman Catholic. He speaks of sexual engagements as moments of greater vulnerability and 'being in the present':

When I finally came out as a gay man, it was an intellectual journey more than a physical journey . . . honestly, I've probably engaged [in sex] with people I've cared about twice . . . I think there's more feeling of being in the present, and there's also a more feeling of, vulnerability. I think when I am not, when I'm just engaging in sex it's just, I don't have to care. I can create that distance. And that once I care, then there is a deeper sense that somebody is coming into my life. And that vulnerability is, often very frightening for me, so, yeah (sighs) . . . I'm actually always surprised that I enjoy sex . . . once I get passed all the head conversations I have, that when I'm in the moment . . . in retrospect after sex I'm like wow. That I have far more inhibitions about sex when I'm engaging in sex than before sex, if that makes any sense . . . I have engaged in sex with men [and] would . . . be persecuted under the . . . law (half-laugh). Em, but I don't think about it, at all. I also have [permanent residence in a country outside Malaysia], so there's an out (chuckles).

Aadesh's admission of 'finally [coming] out as a gay man' can be primarily understood as a process of disclosure, acknowledgement and meaning-making of desire to himself. That it was initially 'an intellectual journey' which took precedence over 'a physical journey' alludes to two salient points. First, self-acknowledgement of oneself 'as a gay man' is constitutive of evolutionary and processual dynamics in which one has not *arrived* at an 'authentic, true self', but a *becoming* in which one continuously but interminably strives to make sense of who one 'is'. In this sense, 'identity persists because of a will to meaning' (Giffney 2009: 6), a struggle to know oneself by understanding the meaning of one's life. Second, there is no automated linkage between an intellectual exercise and a corporeal manifestation of that exercise. '[Coming] out' is a deeply personal *exercise of intimate cognisance* 'as a gay man' in mind *and* body. In other words, it is a process of 'knowing' and 'doing' gay which manifests that 'the body . . . becomes a visible carrier of self-identity and is increasingly integrated into life-style decisions which an individual makes' (Giddens 1992: 31).

By drawing a distinction between the 'intellectual' and 'physical' dimensions of his coming out, and weighing in more heavily on the former, Aadesh reveals his strivings towards a cognisance of his sexuality before actively embodying this cognisance through sexual expression. For this reason, the process of sexual self-disclosure is not without some measure of hesitance as Aadesh is 'always surprised that [he enjoys] sex . . . once [he gets] passed all [his] head conversations'. Hence, 'in retrospect after sex', Aadesh recognizes that actual, bodily sexual experiences command a certain 'body-rooted authority' (Starhawk 2010: 21) that serves to bridge the chasm between 'inhibitions about sex . . . before sex' and 'engaging in sex' itself. '[Coming] out' is thus a journey in which cognisance paves the way for self-realization and self-representation, and which in turn fosters self-validation.

Aadesh provides a contrast between '[engaging in sex] with people [he's] cared about' and more casual sexual encounters. Sexual involvements with people he '[cares] about' induces a 'feeling of being in the present, and . . . of . . . vulnerability', which suggests that sexual activities which enlist some form of love or affection are somehow more 'real' or 'authentic' in that they deliver a greater sense of investment and 'soul baring' during sexual connection. To allow a sense of 'care' and 'vulnerability' is to submit to 'a deeper sense that somebody is coming into [his] life'. Aadesh expresses an ambivalence and tentativeness towards love and intimacy which he describes as 'very frightening'. Conversely, 'just engaging in sex' means that '[he doesn't] have to care [and he] can create that distance'. I suggest that Aadesh's deployment of the word 'care' in this narrative harbours a sort of double entendre as he uses it in terms of affection with men with whom he has had sexual encounters, and as a notion of nonchalance. I further suggest that the malleable usage of this word bespeaks the complex dynamics of *de/attachment* and *dis/association* in physical acts that are ultimately dependent on the quality of connection between Aadesh and his sexual partners. As such, sexual self-disclosure acts as a catalyst that generates body epistemologies which inform Aadesh on how to 'know' and 'do' authenticity as a gay-identifying man.

The religio-political, sociocultural and legal realities continue to hold a grip on his interior dynamics. Aadesh is aware that to 'have engaged in sex with men' beckons the possibility of being 'persecuted under the . . . law'. Yet he is able to not 'think about it, at all' as he has 'an out' in the form of relocating to another country. Aadesh understands that he is able to further engage in his personal, growing discourses of self-realization by relinquishing residence in a country that seeks to impose a specific brand-of 'heteronormative authenticity' on him. In so doing, he subverts the essentializing, homonegative rhetoric in his country by providing himself with the possibility of another space to construct alternative and meaningful life stories. For Aadesh, the pursuit of sexual authenticity requires mental and physical distancing from constraints that threaten to occlude that pursuit. The quest to '[be] true to one's self' (Vannini and Franzese 2008: 1633) is something that Aadesh needs to 'do, not . . . find [as a] self-making or self-fashioning [being]' (Guignon 2004: 127. *Emphasis in the original*).

Authenticity is also performed when one honestly confronts intimate truths about oneself during sexual activity. As Alex says:

I meet up with guys who want to hook up with me, but it always feels like it's a miracle that they're attracted to me, so I feel like every fuck is a mercy fuck . . . When you go into a hook up with this type of mind set, you lose your sense of self-worth and empowerment, you are willing to do many things to please them, even if it means drugs or barebacking, because you come from

this place where you think that they're doing you a huge favour by having sex with you. Most of the time, the guys I meet are at least fifty percent attractive to me. This is of course an arbitrary scale. If they are more than seventy percent attractive to me, they have more power over me, I'd let them bareback me because I want them to like me, for example. The cycle continues because after the man has ejaculated, usually I do not orgasm or ejaculate at all, there's this sense of yes, I've pleased someone, they liked me, therefore I am likeable, that I get. Then I just leave. Almost all the times this happens, they are glad, one guy said I was a professional because I knew exactly how to go about leaving the scene after sex . . . I've come to a point where I'm apathetic about [laws against sexual activities between men:] it's not really an issue for me. I know that as long as I try not to get caught, then I should be fine.

Alex is a twenty-nine-year-old, gay-identifying, Malaysian who works in the arts, calls himself 'mixed' by way of ethnicity, and identifies concomitantly as Muslim, agnostic, spiritual and a theist. Through a highly reflexive intimation of his sexual pursuits, Alex engages in an honest appraisal of his self-image in 'hook[ing] up', understood as 'a sexual encounter, usually lasting only one night, between two people who are strangers or brief acquaintances' (Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000: 76). His '[meeting] up with guys who want to hook up' with him are fraught with struggles of low self-worth. For him, a successful casual liaison demonstrates 'a miracle that [his sexual partners] are attracted to him'. In expressing that 'every fuck is a mercy fuck', Alex articulates a disbelief that he is perceived as attractive by other men, and that sexual encounters with him occur purely due to condescension on the part of these men. 'This type of mindset' is not only potentially detrimental to his 'sense of self-worth and empowerment', but also to his health, as '[he is] willing to do many things to please them, even if it means drugs or barebacking'. Alex is prepared to engage in potentially risky sexual behaviour through 'drugs', or a recreational use of chemical substances to enhance sexual pleasure, and 'barebacking', or a 'deliberate abandonment of prophylaxis during sex' (Dean 2009: 1) by foregoing the use of condoms and other disease prevention measures during anal penetrative sex. This compromise which stems from a perception of his '[sexual partners as] doing [him] a huge favour by having sex with [him]' reveals the extent of his low self-esteem and his need to be validated through sexual activity.

Alex confesses that those who 'are more than seventy percent attractive [to him] . . . have more power' and are even entitled to 'bareback [him] because [he wants] them to like [him]'. Casual sexual meetings—and notably anal penetrative sex—are thus no longer predicated on the principle of mutual pleasuring and intimacy building, but are deployed as frantic strategies to accrue endorsement for himself as a sexual subject. Alex demonstrates how 'the distinctive value of intimacy lies in the fact that it is a field of tensions'

(Johnson 2009: 8), meaning that the striving towards intimacy is inescapably riddled with complexity. There are two points that I find particularly noteworthy in Alex's narrative. First, the attainment of a sexual connection is simultaneously its relinquishment. Although Alex has 'pleased someone, they liked [him], therefore [he is] likeable', he frequently does not achieve an 'orgasm or [ejaculation]' and is instead labelled 'a professional because [he knows] exactly how to go about leaving the scene after sex'. In pleasuring and satisfying others, he is left disengaged, unpleasured and discontented. At this juncture, it is helpful to note that 'the body does not simply perform sex . . . it is irreducibly constitutive in the making of sexual experience and the development of oneself as a sexual subject' (Bryant and Schofield 2007: 334).

Second, Alex is cognizant that recursive sexual activities reify a negative image of his sexual body. Hence, in choosing not to gloss over his sexual realities and portraying their more painful dimensions, I suggest that Alex performs authentic self-appraisal as a gay-identifying man. He reflexively faces the reality that his quest for acknowledgement, validation and reciprocity through sexual encounters is interrupted by a 'mercy fuck' mentality, and invariably meets with dismissal, disavowal and non-reciprocity. There is as such no resolution in this conflict. This acute sense of self-truthfulness is rendered even more vulnerable by Alex's being 'apathetic about [laws against sexual activities between men]', yet 'try[ing] not to get caught'. There is a considerable measure of irony in Alex's comment that he 'should be fine', as his sense of apathy is always haunted by the possibility of legal prosecution. The process of 'doing authenticity' is embroiled in a melange of courage, nonchalance, fear and actual legal repercussions. Thus, the *disorderliness and contingencies of personal lived realities* within religio-political, sociocultural and legal realities also contribute a significant portion to his doing of authenticity.

Authenticity also emerges from making specific decisions on the exchange of vulnerabilities during sexual activities. Shanghai Fun, a gay-identifying, thirty-four-year-old, Malay-Muslim Malaysian government official, intimates his preference for establishing trust in the sexual Other before engaging in sexual activity:

Interviewer: [The] sexual practices that you engage in, what do they mean for you?

Shanghai Fun: It means, I don't think it's fun, if I could decide a word, because for me, like I told you before, I don't just have meaningless sex. When I have sex with a person, em, it means love, which is why I'm still single (laughs) . . . First of all I think it's trust. I mean it's the fact that you trust that person, that you trust to be in the room with that person, so that's a one major trust for me there . . . Second, it's . . . long to be with someone so you

do that sort of thing . . . Apparently the way people perceive here in Malaysia . . . to get someone, you have to sleep with them first, and then the relationship bloom . . . What happened to all those going on a date . . . a couple of weeks . . . get to know each other, and then sleep.

Shanghai Fun explains the meaning of 'sexual practices that [he engages] in' by asserting that '[he doesn't] think it's fun . . . because [he doesn't] just have meaningless sex'. In fact he deplors what he considers as a popular perception 'in Malaysia [whereby] to get someone' and before a 'relationship bloom[s]', one has to 'sleep with them first'. In contrast, 'when [he has] sex with a person . . . it means love'. Shanghai Fun's insight reveals how 'love cannot be dismissed as being a transient, uncontrollable feeling, since it expresses our most profound attitudes' (Ben-Ze'ev 2001: 411). In conflating sexual 'fun' with 'meaningless sex', Shanghai Fun articulates an aversion and reluctance towards sexual activities that are bereft of 'love' as 'a more profound attitude' (Ben-Ze'ev 2001: 434). For him, sexual activity cannot be relegated to mere physiological gratification. Instead, Shanghai Fun chooses the vision of sexual activity as exclusively annexed to love, thus conceptualizing sexual activity as an act of intimacy.

The annexation of sexual engagement to love is not one that is simplistically forged. Shanghai Fun develops this notion further by sketching three prerequisites. First, I draw attention to his assertion that a '[longing] to be with someone' must be present in order for one to 'do that sort of thing'. I see this as an inference to an attraction and a desire for acquaintanceship and companionship with someone with whom Shanghai Fun feels comfortable. This 'longing' supersedes a connection that is solely concentrated on the need for physiological release. Second, I highlight his overarching idea of transitional deference in sexual activity, in which sexual subjects '[go] on a date' and 'get to know each other' for 'a couple of weeks . . . and then sleep [together]'. Shanghai Fun presents a pattern in which non-sexual personal exchanges serve to evaluate possibilities of corporeal connections. Finally, I underscore his insistence that 'trust' must be present whether it 'be in the room with [a] person' with those whom one desires to have sex either by '[going to] their place, or they come to [one's] place'. A 'trust issue' suggests an initial risk-taking and vulnerability before gaining confidence and security in the presence of another, particularly in intimate bodily contact. Hence, the performativity of an authentic sexual subjectivity is 'an evaluative concept' (Leeuwen 2001: 392) that constitutes a *triple imbrication of longing, deference and trust* for Shanghai Fun. This performativity avoids casual sexual encounters and enlists love as a non-negotiable feature of sexual connection. Seen in this light, a strategic planning of sexual processes provides possibilities for the becoming of love.

While Shanghai Fun may possess a heteronormative perception of the connection between sexual activity and love, it is nonetheless *his* personalized mode of doing authenticity as a sexual subject as he strives 'to take a whole-hearted stand on what is of crucial importance for [himself]' (Guignon 2004: 139). Yet this vision harbours a challenge in Shanghai Fun's relationships with men, as its abidance has led to him being 'still single'. It is important to note that religio-political, sociocultural and legal factors play a significant role in his personal striving towards authenticity. As he quips:

I don't put myself out there so that I could be related to [laws against sex between men] . . . that they would hunt me down . . . it's just . . . stupid [law] . . . it doesn't have any effect on you because you don't comply to that.

Thus, although sexual authenticity is an agentic negotiation that is drawn on lines that are parallel with sexual choice and vision, it also extends to a decision for him not to 'put [him]self out there so that [he can] be . . . hunt[ed] . . . down'. By deploying a *strategy of unobtrusiveness* in which he '[doesn't] comply to that'—meaning that he eschews situations in which he becomes susceptible to the law—Shanghai Fun is able to construct a buffer between himself and the risks of penalty. Furthermore, by naming such Malaysian legalities as 'stupid', he forges a *strategy of trivialization* by imputing such laws as insidious heteronormative agendas under the guise of 'authenticity' which he is able to evade simply through practical strategies.

For some research participants, sexual activities become pivotal moments and opportunities to perform 'the authentic self' through soul barings. For Raw, the pursuit of intimacy is crowned in the act of kissing, as it is during such moments that he is able to ascertain the quality of a man-to-man connection:

I think when a guy knows how to kiss and kiss well, you know . . . to be very blunt, you can fake a hard on. You cannot fake a kiss, because em, I think gay men have er taken for granted their bodies so much that any boy can come along and suck them off, right. You could meet somebody in . . . a sauna, and . . . if the guy is hot, you may say OK fuck me now, right. And when my friends tell me stories like that I'm like, did you actually even know, er you know, did you even find out his name, you know like, I don't need names, I just needed a fuck, I need a hard cock in my ass. And for me kissing is a very intimate expression . . . of . . . sexually what's going on between two men.

Raw is a forty-something, gay-identifying, Malaysian educator of mixed ancestry who is exploring Tibetan Buddhism. In his narrative, he mentions how one can 'fake a hard on' but one 'cannot fake a kiss'. The notion that one can successfully but disingenuously portray a turgid penis is a curious

proposition. Raw may be alluding to the use of pharmaceutical drugs for cases of erectile dysfunction that have also been procured by many men for sexually recreational purposes (Pfizer Inc. 2014; Crosby and DiClemente 2004; Mansergh et al. 2006). Nonetheless, the matter remains complicated as such drugs do not *cause* instantaneous erections but rather *enhance and sustain* them after some initial sexual arousal. I believe a different issue is at hand, seeing as Raw states that 'gay men have . . . taken for granted their bodies so much that any boy can come along and suck them off'. These words suggest the possibility of 'producing' an erection on the basis of a sexual arousal that focuses purely on genital attraction and physiological release, thus achieving a physiological feat that is totally disconnected from any intimate exchange or personal connection. Raw demonstrates that 'while some part of sex is biological, this does not make it simply instinctual or pre-cultural' (Slavin 2009: 93). Seen from this perspective, Raw positions 'fake' as the antonym of doing of authenticity when bodies sexually converge.

At this juncture, Raw speaks of *sexploits*—a portmanteau that signals the proactiveness of sexual exploitations—that are very possibly derived from '[his] friends [who] tell [him] stories' of meeting men in saunas, which are 'indoor sex-on-premises venues' (Richters 2007: 276) and surrendering themselves for anal penetrative sex. His bewilderment over whether his friends 'actually . . . even [found] out [the] name' of their sexual partners is contrasted with their blasé response, 'I don't need names, I just needed a fuck, I need a hard cock in my ass', meaning the pursuit of casual anal penetrative sex. Such a response informs Raw's perception of wilful nonchalance and anonymity in casual encounters. This scenario is set in contradistinction with more purposeful connection and intimacy for which he now yearns. It also prioritizes purely biological impulses that reside in deliberately disinterested and disconnected sexual activities. Kissing is the antonym of this sexual disjuncture. For Raw, one 'cannot fake a kiss', because it is an 'intimate expression . . . of . . . sexually what's going on between two men'. In other words, kissing establishes and protracts a sense of genuine connection and reciprocal intimacy between two persons beyond the 'fakeness' of casual sexual gratification. Kissing ignites within Raw, as it were, the 'production' of an 'authentic personhood' in sexual engagements. Yet his pursuit of authenticity is gripped by the religio-political, sociocultural and legal contexts in which he is located. Raw muses on the reality that

The only legal sex, according to section 377, is between a husband and wife, where it is vaginal sex, where the husband is on top of the wife. Any variation . . . is considered illegal. In this country, it is being interpreted right now, to suit the needs of an elite few. To actually shame a particular political leader, so that people would not accept.

In commenting on the heteronormative ideals of sexual engagements which are codified in Malaysian legalities as 'the husband . . . on top of the wife', and where 'any variation . . . is considered illegal', Raw is alluding to the Penal Code that criminalizes oral and anal penetrative sex. His claim that these ideals have been politicized 'to suit the needs of an elite few [and] shame a particular political leader' is a reference to former Malaysian deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whose repeated indictments based on charges of homosexual acts have been touted by Malaysian scholars as instrumental in securing both his political downfall and the preservation of Malaysia's ruling power (Chin and Wong 2009: 73–76). As such, I suggest that Raw understands these ideals as mere constructions and 'ideological artifices' (Sahlins 1999: 404) of sociocultural normativities. Raw's personal discourses of sexual authenticity are set in contrast with the 'fake' rhetoric of political personages who leverage on the condemnation of non-heteronormative sexual practices for 'the state's unity and stability, and . . . their own political longevity' (Dupont 1996: 22). The politicization of non-heteronormative sexualities manifests the reality that 'authenticity is relative to norms' (Leeuwen 2001: 395) and that norms can be manipulated for the sake of maintaining 'regime legitimation' (Dupont 1996: 14).

Plato, a Chinese-Malaysian professional in his mid-fifties who identifies as gay and a freethinker, reveals how post-coital moments embody a sense of sexual honesty and authenticity for him:

Mutual masturbation, anal sex, oral sex, er . . . caressing . . . Talking, and I don't mean talking dirty, is very important to me, especially after the act, because that is when you have bared the workings of your body and are now ready to bare your soul. Many connections can be made by just talking and touching during the after-glow period.

After acknowledging that he engages in various sexual practices with men, including 'mutual masturbation, anal sex, oral sex [and] caressing', Plato conscripts 'talking' as another form of sexual activity. What is significant for him is not 'talking dirty', or creative forms of discourse before and during sexual activity which incite strangely contradictory feelings of both erotic arousal and aversion as they carry elements of forbiddance and social indecency. Instead, Plato is referring to 'talking . . . after the act' of sexual engagement, in which 'bar[ing] the workings of [one's] body' leads to 'bar[ing one's] soul'. It is this 'after-glow period' in which discursive and tactile exchanges take place that the forging of intimate connections occurs. Plato introduces the notion of *a complementarity of sexual vulnerability* in baring his body through acts of physical copulation, as well as baring his soul through the use of words and touch to further enhance the connection. Vulnerability does not

only lie in the exposure, sharing and stimulation of genitalia through 'mutual masturbation, anal sex, oral sex [and] caressing', but is further extended in 'talking'. I argue that such moments articulate the doing of authenticity, because they allow Plato to position himself as a 'soul-baring' sexual subject who engages in bodily connections and life story connections that bespeak honesty.

Plato also speaks frankly of existing legalities in Malaysia that criminalize sexual activities between men:

Interviewer: What is your opinion on [laws against sexual activities between men]?

Plato: Totally archaic and pre-colonial.

By claiming laws against sex between men as 'totally archaic and pre-colonial', Plato denounces the idea of a 'heteronormative authenticity' as 'a static concept of values, as if somehow they are unchanging over time immemorial' (Ingleson 1998: 227). He foregrounds the reality that the use of outmoded legalities for the enforcement of purported genuineness does not '[encode] the expectation of truthful representation' (Theodossopoulos 2013: 339). In so doing, Plato recasts laws against sexual activities between men that relegate him as the rejected Other as *his rejected Other*. The doing of authenticity for Plato prompts him to engage in a strategy of 'attacking the stigmatizer' (Yip 1997: 117), or responding to the nullifying religio-political, sociocultural and legal rhetoric by upending them with his own nullifying discursive constructions that concomitantly restore agency and worth to him.

Vulnerability is also evinced in new configurations of relationalities. In situations where sexual engagements do not lead to committed relationships but to mutually beneficial erotic arrangements, there is a certain measure of modified vulnerability. The sexual subject performs authenticity by reflexively discovering new ways of relating to other sexual subjects. As Buck shares:

Interviewer: In your situation, when you have sex with someone, and then fall in love with him later, what are the elements that carry you from just sex to falling in love?

Buck: Well, you have to like that person first. You know, a lot of people you have sex with, you don't really like them that much as a person, and you find you have nothing in common . . . then after sex you just don't want to see them anymore. You know, unless you meet someone you find you're compatible with, and you like him, and you think you can grow to like him more, and then you start seeing each other. I'm not expecting love, you know, you are stupid to expect love. You start going out, you start seeing each other more and more . . . and if you fall in

love, then, fine. If you don't, you just become good friends . . . I mean I have a few guys I have sex with and we are friends.

Buck, a fifty-six-year-old, gay-identifying, Chinese-Malaysian Christian who works in the entertainment industry, responds to an earlier question in which he indicates his experience of '[having] sex with someone, and then [falling] in love with him later'. Thus, casual sexual encounters harbour possibilities for greater intimacies. He explains how the transformation from sex to 'falling in love' with someone is guided by a premise of '[having] to like that person first'. Buck unpacks the meaning of '[liking a] person' as being 'compatible with' someone, having things 'in common', and possibilities of '[growing] to like him more' and 'seeing each other'. I suggest that the dynamics of a growing, mutual liking constitutes possibilities for the augmentation of intimacy. Conversely, the potentialities of 'falling in love' disintegrate in situations in which '[one doesn't] really like [people one has sex with] that much as a person, and [one finds one has] nothing in common . . . then after sex [one] just don't want to see them anymore'. Hence, 'falling in love' is a connection based on forms of attraction that rely more on enduring charms of compatibility and personality than in the sole lure of genital activity. Buck is quick to add that he is 'not expecting love'. In stating that one is 'stupid to expect love', he acknowledges and prioritizes the quotidian realities that exist in the dynamics of love, whereby the dynamics of love stretch beyond idealistic and utopic projections.

Thus, for Buck, any form of experimentation in love and sex commences with adopting a pragmatic attitude that eschews presumptuous expectations of love, as well as a fact-finding strategy that seeks to understand the other by 'seeing each other more and more'. Buck admits that such strategies may or may not lead to a serendipitous consequence of 'falling in love'. He offers an alternative in which the possibility of eventuality not 'falling in love' can be transformed into '[becoming] good friends'. I suggest that this reflexivity on Buck's part demonstrates the doing of sexual authenticity, because it confronts with truthfulness the reality that not all connections can lead to a relationship, and requires him to respond accordingly to shifts and changes in such connections. Thus, to do authenticity as a sexual subject leads one to encounter and evaluate the multifarious, rhizomatic incarnations of human relationships. He states that '[he has] a few guys [he has] sex with and [they] are friends'. Buck offers interesting insights into how the explorations of casual sexual encounters can either lead to more intense forms of love or to the creation of friendships in its many forms.

'Queering friendship', a term used by John Nguyet Erni, is 'the means for opening up the many scenarios of social possibilities available to young people who are caught in the paradox between sexual curiosity and sexual

self-restraint' (2003: 382–383). Erni's insight into non-heteronormative youth also resonates with significance in matters of love and sex for more mature gay-identifying men like Buck. In recognizing that certain sexual exploits are uncondusive to relationships, he explores 'an alternative logic of relationship' (Erni 2003: 382) that affords a potential option for social interaction. This alternative logic may involve a singular or even occasional sexual trysts, but does not evolve into love commitments. Buck queers friendship in that he devises alternative ways of 'doing love' when conventional patterns of relationship prove impossible. When a committed relationship is not a practical consideration, sexual partners can become friends, and friendships can be bundled with 'sexual benefits'. Buck's pliable methods of 'doing love' are concomitantly methods of 'doing authenticity'. He constructs sexual authenticity by recognizing the fluid, haphazard and changing qualities of human relationships, and duly engages with such instabilities.

Nonetheless, Buck is also aware of the constraints of sexual authenticity in Malaysia:

Interviewer: What's your opinion on [laws against sexual activities between men]?

Buck: Well, it's not just Malaysian . . . mainstream Christianity also condemns it . . . [I don't scream] that I'm gay. Christianity itself needs to be questioned . . . on this issue.

Buck realizes that akin to the Penal Code or Syariah laws that penalize sexual activity between men, 'mainstream Christianity also condemns it', and as such 'needs to be questioned . . . on this issue'. He names institutional Christianity in Malaysia as yet another key contributor to the disapprobation of gay-identified activities in Malaysia. Similar to Alex and Shanghai Fun, Buck finds it necessary to be discreet in relation to his gay-identifying by not '[screaming] that [he's] gay'. The acute cognizance of religio-political, socio-cultural and legal realities in Malaysia does not inhibit him from pursuing sexual authenticity. Instead, such realities hone the strategizing skills necessary for him in journeying towards greater self-actualization in a country that frequently execrates non-heteronormative sexualities.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown how authenticity is, in a sense, a verb rather than a noun. It is the *doing* of certain acts, with their convictions, inconsistencies and transformations that give rise to 'authenticity'. Authenticity in the lived realities of sexual subjects is not a simplistic concept of being

'true to the essence of something [or] the "self", construed as a constant and unified "character", which at best slowly "evolves" or "matures"' (Leeuwen 2001: 393). Authenticity is the discursive construction of self-representation and self-determination in the becoming of one's subjectivity in messy and indeterminate ways. Gay-identifying Malaysian men experience authenticity on a personal level when they submit to an honest cognizance of their sexual identifications and sexual expressions. They often find sex more 'real' or 'not fake' when it involves love, when sex is deliberately deferred for a prolonged period of time to foster longing and when a sense of trust is established. A sense of authenticity also emerges from intimate connection, 'soul-baring', mutuality, vulnerability and reciprocity during sex, not when sex occurs purely for physiological release. This sense of authenticity shifts according to how the meaning that is ascribed to sex is evaluated, modified and responded to in relationship changes.

I have also shown that the construction of authenticity is not a purely personal endeavour. Rather, it is an interminable process of dialogical engagement with the liberties and constraints of Malaysian gay-identifying men's religio-political, sociocultural and legal realities. In the doing of authenticity, these men experience the unruliness and instabilities of lived realities by being located in situations that often seek to impose 'authentic heteronormative values' on them. Yet ironically, these dynamics assist them in striving after self-actualization. Consequently, the doing of authenticity conscripts various avenues for mental and physical distancing, strategies of unobtrusiveness and trivialization, the construction of nullifying rhetoric to counter homonegative condemnations and laying bare the 'fakeness' of politically motivated heteronormative agendas. The interplay between the micro and the macro of sexual authenticity, as such, remains an interminable process.

NOTE

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants.

Chapter 4

Ini Bukan Budaya Kita

This Is Not Our Culture

Julian CH Lee

1

'We really need to have "Ini budaya kita" for the new magazine', Jason Tan said in 2012. We were sitting at the branch of Old Town White Coffee that lies on the ground floor of the building that houses Business FM (BFM) Radio station. We were discussing a new magazine that he was pulling together and which would be published by BFM. That magazine came to be called *The B-Side*. It would be distributed through tablet computers, but be of roughly the same genre of magazine as *Off The Edge* was—a magazine that addressed Malaysian culture, politics and society.

Jason's suggestion of reviving 'Ini budaya kita'—which translates as 'This is our culture'—was not what I had in mind. I knew how time-consuming it had been. It involved writing to anthropologists around the world months in advance of their prospective article, anthropologists who declined the invitation to write as often as they accepted it. It would've been easier to write the articles for the column myself than trying to find people to write for it. And in any case, I had pretty much run out of anthropologists to ask.

2

My mobile phone was pressed against my left ear as I listened to Jason, then editor of the magazine *Off The Edge*. As I paced around the ground floor of Palm Court, the condominium I lived in 2007 when we first spoke on that late morning, I listened to him discuss the idea I had pitched to him. That idea was for a regular column that I would manage and which would feature anthropologists who had done research in Malaysia. They would write for

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