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3 IDENTITY FORMATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: TRAVERSING AND TRANSCENDING ETHNICITY

MARCO FERRARESE, JOSEPH N GOH,
JULIAN CH LEE & CARYN LIM

Prior to 2004, it had been decades since Malaysia had held elections without former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. His successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, led the BN in that year to its most convincing win ever, winning over 90 per cent of the seats at the federal level. While election results in Malaysia may be subject to multiple interpretations (Lee, 2010; p. 113), such a result can easily appear to be a validation of the triumvirate of leading BN parties, UMNO, MCA and the MIC. The ethno-political *raison d'être* of these parties is clear in their names, containing as they do the constituencies they seek to represent—Malays, Chinese and Indians.

However, on the trampled grass of the *bilik gerakan* (campaign office) of a Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) candidate in Selangor during the 2004 election campaign period, one of the present authors (Lee) held

in his hand evidence that changes were both afoot and already in process in the realms of ethnicity and politics in Malaysia. That PKR candidate, Sivarasa Rasiyah, an erstwhile civil society activist-lawyer, had produced a flyer describing a 'third way'. This 'third way' flyer eschewed both ethnic and religious politics, and articulated a political vision that went beyond these markers of identity, which had previously dominated Malaysia.

That 'third way' flyer was both a symptom of sentiments already in existence in Malaysia and a sign of sentiments that would become increasingly apparent to those observing Malaysian society in the 21st century. In the main, ethnicity has been a predominant—in fact, *the* predominant—framework for interpreting Malaysian society and politics (cf. Abraham, 2005). The Malaysian socio-political environment is one in which Malaysians have been subject to ethnicisation, the process through which identities in Malaysia are constructed in principally ethnic terms, as Frederik Holst (2012) describes. However, one increasingly also sees evidence of Malaysians who either reject or are ambivalent about 'racial' identities, who participate meaningfully in other identity-formations, or who are otherwise involved in processes that put into question the long-elevated position of ethnicity in Malaysia. A few of these examples have been described by authors who have noted occasional evidence that the place of ethnicity in identity is evolving or diminishing (e.g. Mandal, 2004; Yeoh, 2010; Wong, 2010; Martin, 2012; Lee, 2013). This chapter seeks to contribute to this growing understanding and description of these important developments in identity construction through the examination of a handful of instances that indicate that ethnicity as a point of primary identity construction is being traversed and transcended.

These words—*traversed* and *transcended*—we choose deliberately. The former seeks to indicate that the developments observed here do

nor all dispense with ethnicity or even always render it secondary. Rather the 'classic' identity 'boxes' are often found to be problematic for some Malaysians, such as those of 'mixed race' which we describe below. At other times they appear in tension—tension that, as with physical substances in tension, causes changes—such as in the case of the nexus of ethnicity and sexuality, also described below. We also examine ethnicity as appearing to be transcended, such as in areas of civil society and music. What is apparent is that, in the realm of identity, there are clear shifts taking place.

The causes of the identity shifts of many Malaysians are manifold. Important among these will, of course, be the increasing diversity of sources of information to which Malaysians are exposed. One impact of this is that discourses originating from within the state and from state-sanctioned sources have lost some of their predominance. Malaysians have increased access to alternative ways of framing their understanding of the world, and have increased abilities to explore interests and engage with others who may be geographically distant but close in personal interest. This enables the binding interest to play an increasingly important role in their lives and to some extent displace pre-existing or given preoccupations. Thus people are more able to reside with communities of their choice rather than be entirely dependent on the communities into which they, through the circumstances of the birth and socialisation, are placed.

A further impact of this access to a widening diversity of sources of information is that, in addition to providing *alternative* discourses and ways of framing the world, existing authoritative structures and discourses can also be directly *challenged* and shown to be inadequate. Thus, as well as enabling people to form communities around hobbies, aesthetics etc., one can be exposed to critiques of the status quo and,

in the case of Malaysia, the viability of the notion that ethnic political parties operate to ostensibly safeguard the interests of those belonging to their constituencies. On alternative online news portals like *Malaysiakini.com* (Steele, 2009), one may read about cases of alleged corruption by politicians who appear to be 'playing the racial card' in their pursuit of power. Such observations can have little effect other than disenchantment with the ostensible basis for the shared identity.

The internet is not, of course, the only way to gain exposure to alternative ways of viewing the world and one's self. Malaysians have long travelled overseas for their education (Smart, 1988) and Malaysia has likewise been a destination to which others travel for various reasons. Among the latter are those motivated by business, the impacts of which have resulted in increased interethnic interactions among Malaysia's ethnic groups (Smith, 2003) as well as between Malaysians and non-Malaysians (Gurowitz, 2000). Whether it is periods away from Malaysia or encounters with non-Malaysians who feel and express sentiments of belonging to Malaysia (Abeer and Batul, 2012), these interactions have not left people unaffected. The nature of these effects is still being described, but we hope here to advance our understanding of developments in the identity formation processes of contemporary Malaysians through our descriptions.

This chapter thus describes some of these identities and processes which appear to be beginning to affect the place of ethnicity in the identities of (at least some) Malaysians. There are four areas which we focus on to explain some of the variety in identity processes that we have observed. These four areas are disparate, but it is their very disparity that we hope indicates the wider myriad of processes and trans-ethnic identities that are manifesting in contemporary Malaysia.

We begin with Caryn Lim's description of Malaysians of 'mixed

race'. Through her description of interviews with a number of mixed-race Malaysians, the inadequacy of the standard ethnic identities in incorporating these individuals, who do not belong neatly in any of the pre-existing ethnic categories, becomes apparent. While the identity thread in question is still 'ethnic', the outcomes of their negotiating through their ambiguity often leads to self-consciousness about identity-formation processes and sometimes to non-ethnic understandings of themselves. The place of ethnicity is further explored in Marco Ferrarese's examination of youth in extreme music subcultures which facilitate the transcendence of the ethnic identities of Malaysians who participate in the scene. Whereas music here is of clear importance to the identities of these Malaysians, sexuality also assumes a crucial position in identity negotiations. Joseph N. Goh not only argues in favour of the fluidity of sexuality-related identities, but he explores how the suppression of non-heteronormative sexualities paradoxically facilitates a greater visibility of non-heteronormative Malaysians. Moreover, Goh discusses how acerbic attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexualities contribute to a reinforcing and transcending of ethnic identities. Following this examination of events in the public sphere, Julian CH Lee explores some of the evidence of another shift from ethnic predominance in identity at the socio-political level through an examination of some of the discourses propounded by and levelled at the civil society movement for electoral reform, Bersih (Clean).

Together, these examinations give us some insight into the socio-cultural terrain in which contemporary Malaysian identities are being formed. In doing this, we should also note that there are a number of assertions that we do not seek to make. We do not seek to suggest that 'racial' identity is 'dead' in Malaysia. Such identities are still in evident force in Malaysia and circumstances could yet come to pass that elevate

ethnicity to greater prominence. We thus also do not seek to suggest that it is inevitable that in time ethnic identities will be discarded and become unimportant. Rather, what we strive for is to explore some of the identities and identity-formation processes that now run alongside, within and across ethnicity.

MIXING UP ETHNICITY¹

Instances of cultural boundary crossing and hybridity are often ignored or suppressed in favour of traditional narratives of rigidly defined groups co-existing in Malaysia. Thus, racialisation, the process through which the concept of 'race' is discursively produced and increasingly reified, is particularly ubiquitous in Malaysia (Mandal, 2003). 'Race' and racial identities such as 'Indian', 'Malay' and 'Chinese' are understood as primordial, immutable and utterly inescapable, yet, miscegenation occurs if we accept the premise that distinct 'races' exist. As a result, more and more Malaysians are finding it necessary to identify with the label 'mixed' or to create their own hybridised identities such as Chindian, Chalay, or occasionally, Anak Malaysia (*The Star*, 2011).

Unlike in other parts of the world, there is not an established discourse about being 'mixed' in Malaysia. In South America, for instance, generations of intermarriage and miscegenation between Spanish colonialists and indigenous peoples, or 'Indians', have resulted in a large population of mixed peoples called the Mestizo (Hurd, 2008; Weismantel, 2001). The Mestizo, unlike mixed Malaysians, are very much visible in political and social discourse, so much so that they are often thought of as a third 'race' or ethnicity besides the Spanish descendants or 'white race' and the indigenous Indians (Hurd, 2008). As a consequence of this absence of an established discourse about being mixed in Malaysia, 'mixed race' Malaysians must negotiate at an

individual level their identities in a context that presents only a small number of ethnic 'boxes' (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Orang Asli), into which they do not unproblematically fit.

Of interest to us in this section is elucidating points at which problems occur for 'mixed' Malaysians. Through responses to questions asked by Caryn Lim in 2011 to nine Malaysians aged between 21 and 29 who identified as 'mixed-race', we can see the predominant ways in which they experience the inadequacy of standard ethnic categories. Three markers stood out as most important: physical characteristics, language, and customs or behaviour.

With respect to the first marker, many interviewees referred to characteristics such as skin tone and eye shape as problematising existing ethnic categories.

P: ... people will always think I'm Malay cause of my skin tone but when I take out my glasses, my eyes... my Chinese eyes can be seen. See? [*Takes off her glasses.*] Yeah.

I usually get more mixed reaction when I'm not wearing my glasses for some reason. That's why I said my Chinese *mata* [eyes] comes out when I'm not wearing my glasses. It's usually mix [sic] between Chinese or Malay *lah*, though. I think I look pretty Chinese or Malay rather than anything else.

CL: Which side (of your family) do you affiliate more with, your Eurasian or your Chinese side?

D: I think I affiliate more with the Eurasian side (of my family) because I don't really look Chinese.

¹ Some of the text below has been reproduced with permission of the copyright holders from the chapter by Lim in the volume *Thinking Through Malaysia*, Hopkins and Lee, 2012.

CL: What does that mean?

D: Well my features are very... more Portuguese, I guess, compared to Chinese... and people don't really say "oh, you look Chinese", they say, "oh, you either look Malay... Indian... Eurasian" maybe, but never Chinese.

In the above abstracts, both interviewees demonstrate how common ideas about ethnic characteristics result in difficulties for others and themselves in locating their identities within the usual ethnic boxes. However, as intimated above, such as with P, 'mixed race' Malaysians can also be commonly mistaken as belonging clearly to one ethnic group until some further trait is revealed. This latter trait is not always a further physical characteristic, but also includes learned ones. Language proficiency arose in interviews as a common complicator of the ethnic categorisation process.

As has been noted by others, language has historically played a key role in marking ethnic identities (Brown, 2005; p. 5). Today, language continues to function as an important marker of ethnic difference where 'Malays' are expected to converse primarily in Bahasa Melayu,² and 'Indians' and 'Chinese' in one of a number of dialects that originate from India and China respectively. Meanwhile, 'mixed' Malaysians such as Z and S use this ethnic marker to place themselves based on which language they consider themselves most proficient in.

CL: And what do you usually put down in official forms and documents?

S: Usually I put in Malay, because in terms of culture it's more Malay. For example, language... my Chinese grandma did not bring down Mandarin or Chinese

² Bahasa Melayu, which is the Malay language, is now officially called Bahasa Malaysia, meaning the Malaysian language.

culture... my mum can speak some dialects, a few words, though there's no over-powering influence. And my grandpa, although he could speak Tamil, and he tried with his children... saris and dressing... but it did not really go down with my father.

CL: What about culturally? Do you feel like there's a stronger influence from any one ethnicity?

Z: Well... I'm Malaysian definitely. That kind of says it all, right? Well I don't think I'm more Malay... well, because my Bahasa Melayu sucks. My Malay is very bad and I don't know Chinese. My dad knows a bit of Tamil, but I don't know Tamil at all.

That both Z and S link their identity with their ability or inability to speak languages associated with the various officialised ethnic identities demonstrates the significance of language in the construction of 'the Malay', 'the Chinese' and 'the Indian'.

In addition to language and physical features, many interviewees also referred to behavioural or cultural characteristics as identifiably Chinese, Malay or Indian. For example, H preferred to relate to 'being Chinese' with customs and values associated with family dynamics rather than with language (although she seemed aware that speaking Mandarin is usually associated with being Chinese).

CL: What do you think it means to be Chinese?

H: What do you think it means... like things you do? Um...

I think ... [*laughs*] It's probably the way that you act, maybe? Like... like you know Chinese cultural stuff, like respecting parents and like... having family dinners and gatherings. Not so much speaking the language since I don't know it... but [*laughs*]... I mean I would want to learn Mandarin. It will be beneficial *lah*... and just the whole... family orientation of Chinese culture? But I can't really relate because I'm like the only child and I only live with my dad so...

When asked to describe Malay culture, Z similarly refers to values and expected behaviour associated with 'being Malay'.

Z: Culturally I wouldn't say I fit into the Malay stereotype...

CL: [Can you please expand?]

Z: Um because I can't think of any... oh wear baju kurung! The girls are very very soft spoken. They don't raise their voice... they're not really like... uh... I don't know, liberated, in a way? Like the ways of thinking... you gotta watch what you say and... stuff. Um what's that term you use? Face? Keep face... show face... what face?

CL: Save face?

Z: Yes! Don't create unnecessary attention. It will be embarrassing to the family... blah blah blah... dishonour! So like, yeah, culture!

As well as outlining the common methods by which people are constructed as belonging to one ethnic category or another, evident in the above is the common inadequacy of these methods, in this case with

those who are of 'mixed race'. But these problems are also frequently encountered by Malaysians who would regard their ethnic heritage as unproblematic but who also feel as if they, for one reason or another, do not fit well into the mould which that ethnic category would cast them. In addition to being unable to speak 'one's own' language, as is often the case, or not conforming to ethnic stereotypes, a further disjuncture as we shall now see can occur with participation in communities which do not originate from any ethnic group, such as extreme rock.

IF THE KIDS ARE UNITED, THEY WILL NEVER BE DIVIDED

The line from a famous chorus by the punk band Sham 69, which titles this section, alludes to the impact of participation in music subcultures on identity formation. The subculture in question is Malaysia's extreme rock music underground scene. This umbrella term refers to youth communities involved to various degrees in the performance and development of local punk rock and heavy metal popular music. In contrast to other Southeast Asian nations, these genres have been largely embraced by significant sections of Malaysian society over the past three decades, while a wide array of British- and American-originating rock music has always been readily available in Malaysia (Lockard, 1991, 1998; Thompson, 2002; Wallach, 2011). It is, however, worth noting that Malay versions of rock music often outsell the foreign ones, especially among ethnic Malay consumers (Thompson, 2002; p. 60). One example is Search, Malaysia's most popular 1980s, all-Malay, hard rock band. In Malaysia, it would appear that fans of rock, as well as its heavier derivatives, are largely composed of ethnic Malays. Thus, it is not surprising that the stereotypical Malaysian rockers portrayed in the movie *Rock* (Khalid, 2005) were four young, long-haired, wild, urban Malays. The movie satirically tells the story of a

local hard rock band and juxtaposes their dead-end jobs at the post office with their incredible rock memories.

This suggestion is not so far from reality. Observations during fieldwork by one of the present authors (Ferrarese) seem to indicate that in terms of ethnicity, participants were largely Malay. Importantly, however, there were, albeit in relatively smaller numbers but nevertheless present and very much part of the scene, participants who would otherwise have been described by many as Chinese and Indian (see Ferrarese, 2012a; Matusky and Tan 2004). It is worth observing at this point that, as Jeremy Wallach concluded after his pioneering work on the heavy metal scenes of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, 'the *exclusive* Malayness of metal is entirely illusory' (Wallach, 2011; p. 90; emphasis added). Without question, non-Malays have played and continue to play crucial roles in the development of the region's extreme music scenes.

As with most Western societies (Hansen and Hansen, 1991), there is in Malaysia a marked distinction between punk and heavy metal music. Although the two genres crossed boundaries more than just occasionally during the worldwide development of extreme music (Waksman, 2009; p. 213), in the Malaysian scenario, punks and metalheads still seem to belong to either of the two distinct worlds. However, importantly, these worlds are not ethnicised ones; instead, these scenes produce a peaceful, creative, multi-ethnic setting in which Malaysians interact in terms other than their ethnicity. During an interview conducted with ethnic Chinese Cole Yew, guitarist, manager and producer of Soundmaker—Penang island's prime alternative rock venue and recording studio—he reported that

People of all races come to support the bands, whose anti-racist messages are well portrayed to the crowds,

[...] although the dominant core is Malay, the number of Chinese and Indians is increasing (Ferrarese, 2012b).

The same perception is shared by another important member of Penang's punk rock scene, Edd Lewis, a mixed-race Eurasian of Portuguese descent and guitarist with the thrashcore band WEOT SKAM. Lewis, who has also booked many international touring bands to perform in Malaysia, commented with respect to the role of different ethnic groups in the development of rock music in Malaysia that 'there is no supreme race or religion to praise' (Ferrarese, 2012b).

Despite the music scenes contributing to inter-ethnic interaction which is oft sought by various authorities in Malaysia, the participants have constantly struggled to negotiate the 'climate of fear' initiated in 2001 after the Malaysian authorities sought to suppress local black metal bands (*AP*, 2005; *BBC*, 2001; *CNN*, 2001). As a consequence, spaces to gather in have become difficult to find and venues often resemble the 'DIY' punk squats abundant in Europe. Whereas one might think that such attempts at extinguishment might threaten these non-ethnic identity forms, they can, as we describe below with respect to sexuality, have the opposite effect.

SUPPRESSING/INSTANTIATING THE (NON-HETERONORMATIVE) SEXUAL SUBJECT

Akin to how participants in the rock scenes of Malaysia have been the subject of moral panics in Malaysia, and like those of 'mixed-race' described earlier who often do not comply with expectations in the arena of ethnicity, likewise is the case of those whose identities and behaviours defy heteronormative expectations in sexuality. In Malaysia, these often legally enforceable (and frequently enforced) expectations engage

in a 'dialogue' of sorts with perceived contrary behaviours. Ironically, despite the repeated suppression of non-heteronormative sexualities, the identities of non-heteronormative persons are further represented. Non-heteronormative persons often find themselves on the punitive end of ill-fitting, grossly misunderstood impositions of meaning on negotiations of identities. Malaysians who lack congruity with heteronormative categories of gender and sexuality, notably Malay-Muslim³ gay men and *mak nyahs* (pre- and post-operative male-to-female transsexuals) (Yik, 2008), often encounter discrimination, alienation and persecution when the complexities of their identity negotiations meet with civil and religious arraignments that have already pronounced condemnatory verdicts on what constitute 'appropriate' and legitimate sexual identities (Goh, 2012a). Yet, as we shall see, these arraignments also serve to construct subjects in terms of their sexuality.

Mahathir's vehement opposition to Anwar Ibrahim by accusing the latter of being a sexual miscreant dragged the topic of homosexuality into public consciousness (Fuller, 2008). Similarly, the sexuality rights festival, Seksualiti Merdeka, proved to be a veritable site of contestation for the legitimacy of sexual identities when it was banned in 2011 (*Bernama*, 2011). As noted by those who participated in, and have observed the movement and reactions to the festival (including authors Goh and Lee), the understanding of the acronym 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) has, since the high-profile banning of Seksualiti Merdeka, become understood and used in a manner not seen prior to the ban. The use of 'LGBT' by newspaper articles without parenthetical explanation is increasing.

In response to the banning of Seksualiti Merdeka's activities and the vitriolic condemnation of the movement in some mainstream media, co-founder Pang Khee Teik asserted that the festival was intended as a space

³ According to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160(2). Malays are defined as those who 'profess the religion of Islam'.

for sharing the vicissitudes of non-heteronormative Malaysian subjects (Seksualiti Merdeka, 2011). Rebuttals against the legitimacy of the movement were made most vehemently by Islamic echelons, who argued that the perverse acts of non-heteronormative persons were reflective of a *budaya binatang* (culture of animals) (*Utusan Melayu*, 2011a). Malay-Muslims in particular were expressly forbidden from participating in the event (*The Malaysian Insider*, 2011). Nevertheless, what is of greater consequence to our discussion in this chapter is the declaration of the organisers of Seksualiti Merdeka that 'we are Malaysian citizens who are being denied our rights to our identity and self-determination' (Seksualiti Merdeka, 2011). Just as 'mixed-race' Malaysians actively negotiated their identities as a result of the inadequacies of existing categories, participants in Seksualiti Merdeka performed something similar, except on a more organised and declarative level. The reference to self-determination was not used unthinkingly here.

Sadly, as a consequence of the furore over Seksualiti Merdeka, non-heteronormative persons—particularly Malay-Muslims—who were engaged in their own ongoing struggles towards greater self-understanding, became fixed 'marked identities' of deviance (Duggan, 2006). Not long after, discourses on the moral turpitude and necessary rehabilitation of non-heteronormative persons were formed and deployed by those prescribing heteronormativity. A startling instance lies in an anti-homosexuality roadshow with the theme LGBT Mengundang Bala Allah (LGBT invites the wrath of God) that was held in Universiti Malaya on 22 April 2012 (*Urusan Melayu*, 2011b). During the sessions, the identities of non-heteronormative Malay-Muslims were reified as traitors of Islam and civilisation, threats to society and followers of Satan (Hussaini and Saiful, 2012; *Malaysiakini*, 2012a; *Urusan Melayu*, 2012b).

The intensity of these inflammatory discourses was surpassed only by a claim made by the deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department Mashitah Ibrahim, in which she stated that Article 8 of the Malaysian Constitution assured only gender rights, not rights related to sexual orientation (Mazwin, 2012). Mashitah's statements came in direct contradiction with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's stance that he was ushering in an era that protected individual freedom, rather than one that delimited it (Chooi, 2012). September 2012 witnessed the issuance of 'guidelines' on identifying characteristics of non-heteronormative sexualities in children (such as the predilection among gay males for wearing V-neck shirts, and lesbian women who are repulsed by men and women with the exception of their own female partners) in order to weed them out at incipience. This was the result of the collective efforts of the Yayasan Guru Malaysia Bhd., the Putrajaya Consultative Council of Parents and Teachers Associations, and the Education Ministry (the latter subsequently denied having endorsed the guidelines) (see *Malaysiakini*, 2012b; *The Star*, 2012). Some 'netizens' responded to these guidelines by declaring the evening of 30 September until noon of 1 October 2012 as 'National Wear V-neck Day'. On the associated Facebook page the announcement that 'we do not tolerate bullies and stereotyping' (Adam, 2012) and the call for a meetup at Suria KLCC, one of Malaysia's premiere shopping malls, drew a small gathering of 10 people on 30 September, 2012 (Zulaikha, 2012). Evidently, the originator(s) of this quote and participants of the 'National Wear V-Neck Day' understood the power in subverting oppressive tactics to their advantage by parodying and resisting stereotypes.

While the various aforementioned efforts were intended as a means to extinguish non-heteronormative sexualities, they ironically contributed to a greater acknowledgement of the presence of non-heteronormative

subjects in Malaysia. Moreover, despite the concentrated gaze on non-heteronormative Malay-Muslims as purveyors of perversion, non-heteronormative Muslims and non-Muslims alike seem desirous of transcending such ethno-religious markings by appealing to sexuality as an alternative strategy of identity. They uphold the reality that sexual identities are never immutable projects, least of all for those who struggle with everyday endeavours in the meaning-making of who they are becoming as non-heteronormative Malaysians, and for whom facile and 'natural' binary divisions of hetero/homosexual and man/woman fracture in the reality of lived experiences. Non-heteronormative Malaysians engage in a lifelong activity of 'queer self-naming,' (Shimizu, 2007) through which they appropriate, relinquish, regurgitate and reconstitute existing and new identity descriptors that best reflect their inner shifts at various nodes of life. The work of sexuality rights activists, such as those in Seksualiti Merdeka, as well as scholars involved in the diversity of queer studies in Malaysia can be seen as continuing in some ways the work of queer theorist Judith Butler (1993), who sought to destabilise the sedimentation of sexual identities. Butler exposed the naturalising illusion of stable sexualities which was born of a series of unquestioned reiterative roles and acts in categories of gender, sex and sexuality. Queer theoretical analyses—which seek to undermine the fixities of sexual identities—have proven to be unforgiving critiques of the manipulative machinations of identity and discourse, and disrupted monolithic meanings trapped in sexual stereotypes.

The evidence suggests that Malaysian authorities are seeking to foreclose the evolution of identities among non-heteronormative citizens by assigning descriptions of sin, insubordination and treason (Goh, 2012b) on them even before they have opportunities for self-discovery, thereby attempting to annul those who would be subtracted (Althaus-Reid, 2000;

p. 13). Yet, contrary to their intended outcomes, such efforts appear to instantiate non-heteronormative subjects who respond with greater fortifications. In Malaysia's sexual landscape, sexual identities continue to be shifting, evolving negotiations, never tethered by permanence, and unrelentingly deciphered within the subjects who embody them in relation to historical, social, political and religious forces.

BERSIH—REFRAMING MALAYSIAN POLITICS

The impact of civil society movements on identity processes in Malaysia is evident not only with respect to sexuality, but also with respect to ethnicity and the transcendence of ethnicity to embrace non-ethnic causes. Here the example of the civil society coalition, Bersih, is especially instructive.

Bersih is a coalition that seeks a number of reforms to Malaysia's electoral practices. At the time of writing, Bersih sought eight reforms namely: the cleaning up of the electoral roll; reforms to postal ballot procedures; the use of indelible ink; an extended campaign period (of at least 21 days); fair media access; public institution independence and quality; corruption; and an end to dirty politics. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe in depth the structure and composition of Bersih (see instead Bersih.org), it shall suffice here to note the following for the purposes of this chapter. The coalition that is Bersih is endorsed by 84 organisations from civil society in Malaysia. These organisations represent a diverse array of interest groups ranging from those relating to women lawyers, environmentalists, students, as well as some relating to religious and ethnic groups. Bersih's first iteration in 2007 also included political parties. While any political party could join, only opposition parties initially participated, leading to allegations of partisanship. In Bersih's second iteration, these

political parties were excluded to improve the apparent impartiality of Bersih's demands, and this revised form came to be referred to as Bersih 2.0. (It bears noting, however, that there is much slippage in the nomenclature of this movement. In general, the movement is often just referred to as Bersih, but when its first formulation is deliberately referred to, it is commonly labelled Bersih 1.0. The referent for Bersih 3.0 is discussed shortly.)

With respect to this chapter, it is of pertinence to note that the composition of the steering committee of Bersih 2.0 is cross-ethnic. Although this could be seen as, and in some ways is, a recapitulation of ethnic identities through the perceived necessity of having representatives from each of the 'main' ethnic groups in Malaysia, such cross-ethnic representation neutralises the potential harm that could be done by allegations of an ethnic bias or an ethnic-specific agenda to the movement. Thence, the movement is able to focus its message on the array of non-ethnic issues and demands with respect to electoral procedures, thus introducing into the public sphere a discourse in which ethnicity is irrelevant.

To demonstrate the popular support for Bersih's demands, the coalition organised three major rallies in Kuala Lumpur on 10 November 2007 (Bersih 1.0), 9 July 2011 (Bersih 2.0), and 28 April 2012. Although estimations of how many people attended each rally vary, the numbers commonly cited for those in attendance in 2007 are about 40,000 people (Lee, 2010; p. 128), in 2011 about 50,000 (Welsh, 2011), and in 2012 as many as a staggering 250,000 (Choong, 2012). A number of facts emanating from this support and the reaction of Bersih's opponents is of particular relevance.

The first of these is the scale of support for the movement. Rallies of any size have been relatively infrequent in Malaysia, with

former Prime Minister Mahathir alleging, with reference to a series of rallies held in 2007 (Lee, 2010; p. 127–30), that ‘Holding a street demonstration is not our culture’ (Habibu *et al.*, 2009; cf Watson, 2010; Lee, 2005). As has been observed by those who attended the Bersih demonstrations (three of the authors, Lee, Lim and Goh, observed the Bersih demonstrations; Lee at the demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur in 2007 and 2012, and the Global Bersih demonstration in Melbourne in 2011, and Lim and Goh at the Bersih demonstration in Kuala Lumpur in 2012) the demonstrators were drawn from an array of social groups and contained considerable numbers from each ethnic group thus making it simultaneously a trans-ethnic and non-ethnic event. Ethnicity did not form a ground on which thousands of feet milled and marched through the streets of Kuala Lumpur in support of electoral reform.

A further point of relevance here pertains to the manner in which opponents of Bersih sought to attack the movement. The most vociferous and outspoken of these opponents was Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (the Malaysian Supremacy of Native [Malaysian] Supporters), commonly known as Perkasa. A non-government organisation with no *prima facie* interest in opposing electoral reform, it needs to be noted that although ostensibly non-partisan, Perkasa is widely understood as acting in a manner sympathetic to UMNO (O’Shannassy, 2011; p. 169; Chooi, 2011) and articulating Malay-chauvinist opinions that UMNO, as a political party in a coalition with non-Malay parties, is unable to articulate itself (*Mysin Chew*, 2009).

Prior to Bersih’s demonstration on 9 July 2011, Perkasa staged an ‘anti-Bersih’ rally on 19 June 2011. At this rally, Ibrahim Ali, who helms Perkasa, sought to racialise Bersih. For example, Ibrahim warned Chinese Malaysians to stay indoors because ‘anything could happen’ and that ‘if

the Bersih rally is not cancelled... I believe the Chinese community will have to stock up on food’ (Yow, 2011). To Malaysians who heard or read his remarks, they were clear references to the riots of 13 May 1969, whose lasting impact on ethnic relations in Malaysia is elsewhere well described (e.g. Kua, 2007).

Whereas the purpose of the above remarks was to instil trepidation amongst Chinese Malaysians about supporting the demonstration, further remarks were evidently aimed at provoking Malay Malaysians into perceiving Bersih as a veiled attack on their community’s political and societal position in Malaysia. Among the ways this was attempted was through Ibrahim’s description of Ambiga Sreenevasan, Bersih 2.0’s chairperson, as ‘an agent of the Jews’. At the rally, flyers describing her as a ‘dangerous Hindu woman’ were circulated and images of her burned. At around the same time, UMNO-linked newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* alleged that in addition to Ambiga being anti-Islam, the Bersih 2.0 rally was funded by Christian groups (Ding, 2011), a thorny issue in Malaysia where there are occasional moral outcries about their alleged proselytisation activities to convert Muslims to Christianity.

As a consequence of these remarks emanating from Perkasa, there was a good deal of condemnation from various quarters and the alternative online media. It is also important to note that the failure of these remarks to stop the demonstration, provoke ethnic skirmishes or disrupt the trans-ethnic participation in the demonstration, appear to be evidence of the increasing inefficacy of racialising discourses in Malaysia. That those who deployed them in 2011 also recognise this seems evident given the absence of such attempts surrounding the 2012 Bersih demonstration. Although Bersih and Ambiga were the target of attacks by BN-acolyte organisations, the emphasis shifted from Bersih’s alleged threat to the ethno-political status quo to the threat

it posed to the economic prosperity of Kuala Lumpur and its traders. An UMNO minister claimed that the 2012 rally resulted in the loss of a RM20 million (US\$6.5 million) investment from South Korea (cf Aidila, 2012; Hazlan and Pathmawathy, 2012). A group of reputedly independent (Koh, 2012) 'petty traders' meanwhile called for Ambiga's arrest and compensation for their losses as a result of lost trade during the 2012 demonstration (Woon, 2012). Owing to the apparent inability of ethnic discourses to have the sociological impact they once might have had, attempts to undermine Bersih appear to have shifted from those seeking to frame Bersih as being ethno-politically irresponsible to being economically irresponsible.

CONCLUSION

Through our descriptions, we have sought to explore some of the ways in which identity in Malaysia is transforming—both in terms of the array of identity categories and the processes through which those identities come into being and are maintained. The relevant processes occur at various levels, and some of these we hope to have captured. At the wider socio-political level we can see that members of civil society movements, such as Bersih or Seksualiti Merdeka, have deliberately sought to either explore non-ethnic identities or challenge the efficacy of racialising discourses. Meanwhile, those of 'mixed race' have been shown to struggle with extant ethnic categories which ill-fit them, thus causing them to negotiate the formation of their identities by themselves and against pre-existing identity categories. And in the realm of music, we gain insight into a further space that has accommodated ethnic identities to be traversed and transcended, in this case, through the participation in forms of extreme music that are a complex mix of aesthetic, political and social elements and that make reference to a now global music

subculture, one which often explicitly rejects 'race' as a basis for identity, and certainly for discrimination.

Whether it is through official 'racial' categories, or as a result of attempted suppression, the state here has been key in modulating the formation of these identities. This is clearest, perhaps, with respect to sexuality, where in an attempt to exterminate sexual diversity the categories of persons so decried were introduced into public consciousness. For Malaysia's punks and metalheads, their repression by state apparatuses only brings their experiences closer to musicians in countries where the genre originated and for whom resistance to the state was a key theme in their lyrics.

While members of Malaysia's government would have liked to have had greater control in the identities to which Malaysia's citizens would cleave, their denigrations and persecutions of them are themselves indications that these formations are too far underway to be extinguished. In spite of, and in part because of, the attempts at suppression and the inadequacy of official identity formations for many, the phenomena described above, along with others, will form part of Malaysia's diverse and developing landscape in which people's identities will continue to evolve.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Sharon Bong is Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Monash University Malaysia. Dr Bong's teaching and research interests lie in gender, sexuality and religions in a Southeast Asian context. Her publications include *The Tension Between Women's Rights and Religions: The Case of Malaysia* (2006).

James Chin is the inaugural Director of Asia Institute, University of Tasmania. He is also a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies, Jaffrey Cheah Institute on Southeast Asia, Sunway University. He served as the first head of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia from 2008 to 2014. He was previously Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. His recent publications include *50 Years of Malaysia: Federalism Revisited* (2014) and *Awakening: The Abdullah Badawi Years in Malaysia* (2013).

Joern Dosch is Professor and Chair of International Politics and Development Cooperation at the University of Rostock, Germany. He previously held professorial appointments at Monash University Malaysia and the University of Leeds, UK. Dosch has published widely on Southeast Asian politics and international affairs. He is co-author of the *New Global Politics of the Asia-Pacific* (2011).

Jonathan Driskell is Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Monash University Malaysia. He is the author of *Marcel Carné* (2012) and *The French Screen Goddess: Film Stardom and the Modern Woman in 1930s France* (2015).

Joseph N. Goh holds a PhD in Arts with a specialisation in gender, sexuality and theology from Monash University, Malaysia. He is the co-editor of *Queering Migrations: Towards, From and*

Beyond Asia (2014). Goh owns a weblog at <http://josephgoh.org>.

Julian CH Lee is a Senior Lecturer in Global Studies and a member of the Executive Committee for the Centre for Global Research, both at RMIT University. He is the author of several books including *Second Thoughts: On Malaysia, Globalisation, Society and Self* (2015) and *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society, and the State* (2011), and editor of books including *Narratives of Globalization: Reflections on the Global Condition* (2016) and *Thinking Through Malaysia* (2013).

Caryn Lim is a PhD candidate at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. She has worked on issues of identity politics and the negotiation of ethnic identity amongst 'mixed-race' Malaysians. In 2012, she published a chapter entitled 'Locating Mixed Identities in a Racialised Society' in the book *Thinking Through Malaysia*, edited by Julian Hopkins and Julian CH Lee. She is currently working on an ethnographic study of death spaces and practice in the Klang Valley.

Joel D. Moore is the Deputy Head of School for Education in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia. He received his PhD in Political Science at Emory University in 2011. His research interests include the politics of economic development, the political economy of corporate governance and family firms, comparative political institutions and poverty alleviation.

Marco Ferrarese is a musician, freelance travel writer, author of the subcultural novel *Nazi Goreng* (2013) and PhD candidate at Monash University, Malaysia. He has been teaching, travelling and researching in the greater Asian region since 2008, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia and its extreme music scenes.

He currently plays lead guitar with the thrashcore band WEOT SKAM in Penang, Malaysia.

Linda Quayle holds a PhD from The University of Melbourne, and teaches and researches International Relations at The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus. She specialises in Southeast Asian regional politics and in the 'English School' approach to International Relations. She is the author of *Southeast Asia and the English School of International Relations: A Region-Theory Dialogue* (2013).