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QUEER MELAYU: QUEER SEXUALITIES AND THE POLITICS OF MALAY
IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

SEPTEMBER 2011

STATEMENT

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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*QUEER MELAYU: QUEER SEXUALITIES AND THE POLITICS OF MALAY
IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN
LITERATURE AND CULTURE*SUMMARY

This thesis examines Malay identity construction by focusing on the complex processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays living in Malaysia and beyond. By analysing representations of queer Malays in the works of contemporary Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, and filmmakers, as well as queer Malays on the internet and in the diaspora, the thesis demonstrates how self-identifying gay, lesbian, bisexual, *and* transgendered Malays create and express their identities, and the ways in which hegemonic Malay culture, religion, and the state affect their creation and expression. This is especially true when queer-identified Malays are officially conflated with being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” because queer sexualities contravene Malay cultural and religious values. This thesis begins by discussing the politics of Malay identity, particularly the tension between “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” notions of being Malay that opens up a space for queer-identified Malays to formulate narratives of Malayness marked by sexual difference. The thesis then discusses how queer-identified Malays specifically construct their identities via various strategies, including strategic renegotiations of ethnicity, religiosity, and queer sexuality, and selective reappropriations of local and western forms of queerness. The ways in which “gay Melayu” identity is a hybrid cultural construction, produced through transnational and transcultural interactions between local and western forms of gayness under current conditions of globalization is also examined, as well as the material articulation of queer narratives of Malayness and its diverse implications on queer-identified Malays’ everyday lives and sense of belonging. The thesis concludes with a critical reflection on the possibilities *and* limitations of queerness in the context of queer Malay identity creation. Such reflection is crucial in thinking about the future directions for research on queerness and the politics of queer Malay identity. It is hoped that this study will show that queer-identified Malays reshape and transform received ideas about

“Malayness” *and* “queerness” through their own invention of new and more nuanced ways of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” This study also fills up the lacunae in the scholarship on Malay identity and queer Malays by addressing the productions of Malay ethnicity and sexual identity among queer-identified Malays within and beyond Malaysia’s borders.

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¹ Sail away with a bunch of bananas/One ripe fruit remains on the box/Debts of money we can repay
/ Debts of kindness, we take to the grave (trans. Sim 30; qtd. in Lim Kim-Hui 31). This Malay “pantun” is often used to express one’s sincerest gratitude to others, particularly for their “budi” (“kindness and good deeds”), which is unrepayable and will be remembered from now till the end of time.

² Osman Ali’s credit line: “...terima kasih kerana memilih filem Bukak Api sebagai bhan thesis. Anything just keep in touch” [thank you for choosing the film, Bukak Api, as the material for your thesis. Anything just keep in touch] (my translation). Amy Ikram Ismail’s credit line: “...terima kasih atas pilihan anda terhadap naskhah comolot bg kajian tesis anda.” [...many thanks for your decision to use the film in your research project] (my translation).

Introduction

My homosexuality as far as I am concerned, is perfection in God's eyes. I didn't ask to be gay. I was born gay. I never knew anything else.

Haji Zainal, *I am Muslim*

The short film *Comolot* by Amy Ikram Ismail, which was released in 2007, has aroused much controversy and criticism for being the first gay-themed film ever to be made in Malaysia. Although this eight minute experimental film was first (and only) shown at private screenings in Kuala Lumpur, I was very fortunate to have been able to watch it a year later on the popular video sharing website, YouTube.¹ I never realised what the controversy was all about until I saw the erotic shower scene between the two leading male characters, Daniel and Aiman – a scene that has been considered by many to be the most explicit of its kind in the history of the Malaysian film industry (see fig. 1).



Fig.1. Aiman is being embraced by his lover, Daniel, in *Comolot*, with permission from Amy Ikram Ismail.

I found that viewers' reactions to the film, as evidenced in the comments that they posted on the YouTube channel, were equally, if not far more, controversial. Phrases such as "memalukan bangsa Melayu" ("bring shame to the Malay race"), "menjatuhkan

maruah orang Melayu” (“bring down the dignity of Malays”), and “menghancurkan umat Islam” (“disintegrate the Muslim community”) were frequently and extensively used to express their shock and disapproval of Amy Ikram’s bold and unashamed take on male same-sex eroticism. As one viewer who addressed himself online as “rizwan614” wrote:

aku seratus peratus bangkang gay!! tlg la... jgn jatuhkan maruah org melayu... Islam pulak tu... taubat la korg... wahai insan... korg nk dunia terbalik mcm zaman nabi luth tu ke? astaghfirullah...
cite ni bagus utk org yg pndai pk mana baik mana buruk, jgn jadi camni...
gay adalah dilarang sama sekali dalam ISLAM!! DILARANG SAMA SEKALI!! (rizwan614, “Comolot” March 29, 2010)

[I object gay 100%!! Please... don’t bring down the dignity of Malays... not to mention Muslims... People, please repent... Do you wish to see the world to be turned upside down like how it did during the time of Prophet Lut? Astaghfirullah (I seek forgiveness from Allah SWT)...
This is an excellent movie for those who can think what’s good or bad.
Don’t be like this... Gay is totally prohibited in ISLAM!! COMPLETEY PROHIBITED!!] (translation mine)

Looking back at those phrases now, there is, I believe, a disturbing and profound truth about the powerful impact that male same-sex sexuality has on viewers’ understandings of what it means to be “Melayu,” on the one hand, and what it means to be a member of “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam,” on the other. Why is it that male same-sex sexuality becomes so intensely resented by the viewers, to the extent that they frame and articulate their resentment through the cultural and religious notions of “dosa” (“sin”), “haram” (“prohibited”), “malu” (“shame”), and “maruah” (“dignity”), as well as the prevailing ideas about Malay race and Muslim community? There are, at least, two tentative explanations. First, Islam, which has become a definitive marker of

Malaysian Malay identity, forbids male same-sex sexuality on the grounds that it is an abominable crime and the most heinous of human sins. Malay Muslims in Malaysia, like other Muslims the world over, are constantly reminded of the story of the Prophet Lut, particularly the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a consequence of God's wrath against male same-sex erotic practices. As other viewers, "ziafrun" and "ummieathirah," maintain:

Allah melaknat gay. hang penah denga dak cita psai bumi saddum, yg buminya diterbalik pasai gay (ziafrun, "Comolot" March 29, 2010)

[Allah (SWT) condemns gay. Have you ever heard of the story of Sodom that was turned upside down because of gay?] (translation mine)

Ini lah yang telah di sebut di dalam Al Quran, sebenarnya bukan dunia yang nak kiamat tapi manusia di dalamnya, sebelum Malaysia juga akan dilanda musibah dan bala dari Allah swt, maka bertaubatlah... kaum luth dah lama di terbalikkan malaikat... nak ikut contoh kaum yang dilaknat Allah..nauzubillahminzalik... (ummieathirah, "Comolot" March 29, 2010)

[This is what has been mentioned in the Quran. It's not so much about the end of the world, but the end of mankind. Please repent before Allah (SWT) brings disaster and calamity to Malaysia. The people of the Prophet Lut were toppled by the Angels... Do you want to follow the example of the people whom Allah (SWT) condemns? ... Nauzubillahminzalik (May Allah (SWT) prevent this from happening)] (translation mine)

The centrality of the Prophet Lut's story, as evidenced here, explains why gay-identified Malay men are often accused of bringing shame and destruction to the Malay Muslim community, in particular, and the Muslim-majority Malaysian nation-state, in general, for committing the very sins of "kaum Lut/ kaum Sodom" (the people of the Prophet Lut/ the people of Sodom). Second, queer-identified Malays are often

perceived by many Malays to be “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” not just because they defy the standard teachings of Islam, but also because they fail to actualize their “fitrah” (“innate and unalterable natural disposition”) as Muslim men and women by engaging in “liwat” (“sodomy”) and “musahaqah” (“lesbian sex”). In other words, the dominant Malay Muslim community often attributes queer-identified Malays’ involvement in same-sex erotic practices to a failure to comply with cultural and religious expectations of masculinity/femininity. This is probably because Malay identity remains predicated on the widely held notion that one *must* adhere to normative gender and sexual roles as dictated and inscribed by the dominant Malay Muslim community. More importantly, queer-identified Malays’ engagement in same-sex sexual practices is also regarded as a failure to possess adequate “iman” (“religious faith”), “taqwa” (“God consciousness”), and “ahlaq” (“good moral behaviour”), which are crucial to the formation of Malay identity and its articulation in a community that valorises heteronormativity and the importance of maintaining one’s status, reputation, and dignity.² If, as Wazir Jahar Karim maintains, a Malay without “maruah” (“a sense of honour”) or “nama” (“social recognition”) is “a social outcast within his or her community and may be stigmatized for life” (16-17; qtd. in Milner 239), then the same can be said of queer-identified Malay men and women who are always at risks of not only losing, but having their “maruah” and “nama” *smeared* for engaging in the sinful and shameful act of “liwat” and “musahaqah.” It is important to note that the term “queer” in this study refers to “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgendered” Malays in Malaysia. Since there are no equivalent words for “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” and even “queer” in Malay, terms such as “pondan,” “bapok,” “kedi,” “darai,” “pengkid,” “tomboi,” as well as “mak nyah” are often used to address queer identities and subjectivities locally.³

The potent impact of same-sex sexuality on viewers' perceptions of what "Melayu" means, in my view, raises pertinent issues regarding the difficulties and complexities of being "Malay" in present-day Malaysia. It is indeed difficult to identify and position oneself as "gay"/"lesbian"/"bisexual"/"transgender" *and* "Malay," considering that identities based on Malay ethnicity and its conflation with Islam continue to be sanctified and highly valued by the Malay state elites and the vast majority of Malays within the borders of Malaysia. The processes of Malaysian Malay identity creation, as Hussin Mutalib, Raymond L.M. Lee, Susan Ellen Ackerman, Sylva Frisk, Vidhu Verma, and others have pointed out, are so deeply entrenched in ethnicity and religion. This gives the impression that ethnoreligious identities are indeed stronger and more significant than those organized around, for instance, same-sex sexuality and desire. Vidhu Verma, for instance, maintains that "people's stronger ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations" continue to have a pervasive influence on notions of identity and sense of belonging in the modern Malaysian nation-state (40). It is, therefore, not wrong to say that being "Melayu" is *always already* equated with being Muslim. Such a "unique" and, at times, irrevocable equation between ethnicity and religion is inscribed in the Malaysian Constitution which defines "Malay" as a person who routinely speaks Malay, adheres to Malay customs, and professes the religion of Islam. To complicate matters further, there are tensions and conflicts which arise from identifying oneself as "queer" in relation to others within the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community. This is precisely because same-sex desires and practices go against the very grain of Malay culture and religion that reinforce heterosexual gendered roles and sanctify heterosexual marriage as the legitimate means for sexual gratification. The very reinforcement of gender and sexual normativities within the Malay Muslim community impacts directly on the lives of many ethnic

Malays, particularly those of queer-identifying Malay men and women. Azwan Ismail, a self-identified gay Malay man and the editor of Malaysia's first Malay anthology of queer writings, claims that:

Dalam membicarakan mengenai seksualiti terutamanya homoseksualiti, kita tidak dapat lari daripada menyentuh mengenai agama dan budaya... Terdapat krisis dalam diri dan melibatkan orang lain, termasuk ahli keluarga (dan rakan-rakan) serta masyarakat dalam mana-mana situasi yang melibatkan homoseksualiti (11)

[In deliberating about sexuality, particularly homosexuality, we cannot avoid discussing religion and culture...There are crises within and between oneself and others, which include family (and peers) and society in any situation that involves homosexuality] (translation mine).

While these tensions and conflicts are not completely divergent from those experienced by queer-identified people around the world, the question that needs to be asked here is whether identities based on same-sex sexuality and desire can be created and expressed, despite the normative pervasiveness of culture, ethnicity, and religion in the formation of Malaysian Malay identity. In other words, can Malay men and women identify and regard themselves as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “transgender” in a country where being “Melayu” is officially conflated with being “Muslim”? If, as Anne McClintok contends, people's identities “are *always already* gendered” (89), then the so-called “unique” and, at times, irreversible, equation between ethnicity and religion can perhaps be rethought and redressed. This is because ethnic Malays are not only Muslims, but are gendered beings who routinely perform various gendered roles and fulfil a wide range of bodily desires. More importantly, these gendered roles and bodily desires continue to have profound effects on many ethnic Malays' diverse perceptions of being “Melayu” and “Muslim.” Such profound effects are readily observed in some

(if not many) queer-identified Malays' own ideas about Malay Muslim identity. For example, Haji Zainal who is featured in Dina Zaman's book, *I am Muslim*, asserts that same-sex sexuality *is* an essential component of his Malay Muslim identity. "My homosexuality," as Haji Zainal asserts, "is perfection in God's eyes. I didn't ask to be gay. I was born gay. I never knew anything else...I am very comfortable being a Muslim who happens to be gay. And vice-versa" (qtd. in Dina Zaman 107).

Furthermore, if one acknowledges that Malay identity construction is a complex process that is *always already* fraught with the tension between "authority-defined" and "everyday-defined" conceptions of Malayness (Shamsul, "Debating About Identity" 478), a point to which I shall discuss more in detail in the next chapter, then the difficulties of identifying oneself as "queer" *and* "Malay" can perhaps be adequately resolved. This is because such a dialectical tension furthers the notion that being "Melayu" is not only formulated and constituted by the Malay state elites, but also by many ethnic Malays, which includes queer-identifying Malay men and women. It is, therefore, possible to say that a Malay sense of identity can be *reformulated* and *reconstituted* through queer-identified Malays' everyday experiences of being "queer" *and* "Melayu." This is most salient in the case of many queer-identified Malay men and women, particularly those whom I shall discuss throughout this thesis, who specifically formulate their own visions of being "Melayu" through their actual lived experiences, which are constantly mediated by same-sex sexuality and desires, *in addition to* official markers of Malayness; namely, Malay culture and religion.

Based on this premise, I wish to explore and examine the complexities of Malay identity construction by focusing specifically on the processes of self-identification, self-definition, self-inscription, and self-assertion among queer-identified Malay men

and women living in Malaysia and also beyond. The growing visibility of self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays, as well as the thriving gay, lesbian, and transgendered “scenes” and communities in Kuala Lumpur and other cosmopolitan centres throughout Malaysia, have opened up a critical avenue through which to consider the issues concerning the complexity of Malay identity construction. This is precisely because many queer-identified Malays continue to assert and establish their own ethnic identities marked by queerness, despite the ways in which same-sex sexuality remains a social taboo and is legally considered a crime in a Muslim-majority country such as Malaysia. I am particularly interested to find out how self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays formulate and articulate their identities, and the ways in which the hegemonic Malay culture, religion, and the state affect their creation and expression. More importantly, I am keen to investigate how queer-identified Malays forge new and more nuanced ways of being “Melayu,” which I believe redefine and radically transform discursive confluences of Malay and Muslim identities. Some of the questions that I would like to ask throughout this study are as follow: What does it mean to be “queer” *and* “Malay” within and outside Malaysian borders? How do Malay men and women identify and realign themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” in relation to others, to the Malay Muslim community, and to the Malaysian nation-state? What are the strategies employed in creating and articulating “Melayu” identity characterized by sexual difference? What are the material implications and ramifications of asserting and inhabiting a queer narrative of Malayness”? How do queer-identified Malay men and women subvert and reshape received ideas about “Malayness” *and* “queerness” as understood and perpetuated within the local social landscape?

The study of identity-formation among queer-identified Malays is important for a number of reasons. First, it attempts to provide a critical lens through which to rethink received narratives of Malayness by taking further the notion that being “Malay” is not fixed because it cannot be constructed solely through Malay culture and religion. Liana Chua, for example, has argued that being “Malay” in Malaysia is both “dangerously and inescapably fixed” (264).⁴ This is because the Malay state elites, as Chua points out, have played an important role in attributing and perpetuating a sense of fixity to Malay ethnic identity through various state policies and practices over time. The Malaysian Constitution, as earlier discussed, provides a means through which the Malay state elites exert *and* exercise their power to create a distinct Malay ethnicity by officially defining “Malay” as a person who follows Malay customs and traditions, and embraces the Islamic faith. This conjures up the idea that Malays in Malaysia cannot be *but* Muslims (Shamsul, “Identity Construction” 209). The distinct and irrevocably fixed notion of Malay identity is further reinforced by the ways in which ethnic Malays within the borders of Malaysia will lose their legal rights and special privileges as “Malay” and “Muslim” for renouncing their faith (“keluar Islam”). To aggravate matters, ethnic Malays are not only liable to a hefty fine and/or imprisonment, but may also face the death penalty if they are found guilty of committing apostasy (“murtad”).⁵ But I would like to argue that the religion of Islam and Malay culture are one, but not the only paradigm for thinking about Malay ethnicity. I say this because there are diverse *and* multiple ways of being “Malay” as felt, practiced, and experienced by many ethnic Malays in Malaysia and in the diaspora. This view corresponds with the tenet of the fluidity and permeability of Malayness shared by many prominent scholars of Malay studies.⁶ Anthony Milner, for instance, has argued that being “Malay” is fluid and flexible, rather than rigid and fixed. Some Malays of Indian and Arab descent, as

Milner points out, adopt a more flexible approach to articulating their sense of Malayness. This is particularly prominent in the case of some Malays of Indian ancestry (“Darah Keturuan Keling”) and Malays of Arab ancestry (“Darah Keturunan Arab”) who regard themselves “Malay” in one situation and “Indian/Arab” in another, while others identify themselves as “Malay” *and* “Indian/Arab” at the same time (233).⁷ Eric C. Thompson, on the other hand, contends that Malayness is a characteristically permeable construct composed of varied elements that interact *and* intersect with one another. He points out that a Malay sense of identity cannot be determined by Malay culture and religion alone simply because being “Malay” is constantly shaped and reshaped by a *multitude* of intersecting variables such as gender, sexuality, class, age, and place, *in addition to* Malay culture and religion (15). My study of queer Malay identity creation adds to the existing literature on the permeability and fluidity of Malay ethnic identity by demonstrating that queer-identified Malays do not always align themselves with the irrevocably fixed notion of Malayness, but instead create more flexible and nuanced ways of being “Malay” using a wide range of identity strategies. These include queer-identified Malays’ strategic reconciliations of their sexuality and cultural and religious heritages. Such strategies, as I will discuss in more detail in this study, allow queer-identified Malays to redefine and radically transform official configurations of Malay ethnicity and its conflation with Islam. This is especially notable in the case of many queer-identifying Malay men and women (particularly those whom I shall discuss throughout my thesis) who continue to identify and reposition themselves as “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer,” despite the fact that the dominant Malay Muslim community constantly perceives queer-identified Malays to be “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” on the basis that queerness contravenes indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices.

Second, the study of queer Malay identity construction attempts to fill a gap in the fields of Malay studies (Malay identity studies in particular). I personally find that issues pertaining to queer sexuality as an equally important component of Malay ethnicity have often been pushed to the margins of Malay studies. This is because Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Joel S.Kahn, Anthony Milner, Leonard Andaya, Judith Nagata, and other well-established Malay studies scholars have placed too much emphasis on Islam, social class, race, ethnicity, cultural traditions (“adat”), and/or geographical spatializations in examining the production and articulation of Malay ethnic identity.⁸ Although there is already a growing body of scholarly research on sexuality *and* gender in Malay identity politics, most of this research, especially that by Aihwa Ong, Maila Stivens, Ungu Maimunah Mohd Tahir, and Wazir Jahar Karim, rigorously address heterosexual women in Malay culture and society.⁹ Eric C. Thompson himself admits that

[...] the gendered experiences of (Malay) women, and to, a lesser extent, men, under recent conditions of social change have been richly documented. Likewise, an abundant literature, both in Malay and English, addresses the subject of Islam in Malaysia and the relationship with Malay Muslim identities. By comparison, identities of age and (queer) sexuality have been less prominent concerns in scholarship on Malaysia (16)

One of the possible reasons why queer sexualities do not figure prominently in research on Malay identity construction is that many scholars in the field of Malay studies have found that culture and religion, along with class, race, ethnicity, *and* heterosexuality are salient markers of Malay identity. My study, however, attempts to redress the lack of critical attention paid to queer sexualities by demonstrating that queer sexualities (like Malay culture and religion) play a pivotal role in the processes of self-identification among some (if not many) ethnic Malays living within and beyond Malaysia’s national

boundaries. I will demonstrate in my thesis that queer sexualities take centre stage in the production of identities among many queer-identifying Malay men and women. I'm certainly not the first to point this out simply because numerous scholars have already noted the centrality of queer sexualities in the lives of queer-identified Malays in modern-day Malaysia.¹⁰ Khartini Slamah, for example, contends that many Malay "mak nyahs" ("male-to-female transsexuals") identify themselves strongly as "women" and assert their identities through cross-gendered identification and through the adoption of traditionally feminine gender roles and behaviours. Some Malay "mak nyahs" have undergone sex-change operation as a way of becoming completely "women," despite the ways in which sex reassignment surgery is criminalized under Malaysia's Islamic law. Michael G. Peletz, on the other hand, maintains that "pondan" ("effeminacy"/"sissiness") is a crucial feature of identity for many queer-identified Malay men. This is particularly true for Malay men who have come to regard and think of themselves as "pondan"; that is, "an adult male who dresses or otherwise adorns himself as a woman [or] walks like a woman, or behaves sexually as a woman (i.e., have sex with men), or acts like a woman in other ways (e.g., prefers the company of women to men)" (Peletz, *Reason and Passion* 123). Interestingly, some "pondans" reclaim sissiness with pride and take it on as a subject position within the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community. This is especially prominent in the case of some pondan-identified Malay men who continue to assert their sissiness because they are well-accepted and revered by many Malays living in both urban and rural areas for taking on the roles of "mak andam" ("bridal beautician"). What research on queer-identified Malays by Khartini, Peletz, and others show is that there are members belonging to the Malay Muslim community who forge their ethnic identity and sense of self through queer sexualities. My study adds to these research projects by showing that

queer-identified Malays not only view queer sexualities as an integral component of their identities, but reassert them (albeit with much difficulty) along with cultural and religious heritages in defining themselves and their sense of belonging to the Malay Muslim community and to the Malaysian nation-state. This, in my view, reinforces the point that queer sexualities *must* be taken into account by scholars of Malay studies simply because queer sexualities also serve as an important marker of Malayness for some (if not many) ethnic Malays. Taking into consideration queer sexualities (*alongside* other so-called “standard” salient markers of ethnicity) when examining Malayness, allows one to understand more comprehensively the complex formulations of identity among people who call themselves “Malay.”

Finally, my study attempts to fill up the lacunae in the literature on queer identities and cultural formations in Malaysia by examining how queer-identified Malays create their own sense of being “queer” that radically reshape and redefine dominant local understandings of queerness. I find that studies by Ismail Baba, Khartini Slamah, Olivia Khoo, and Teh Yik Koon on queer identities and queer cultures in non-western indigenous contexts such as in Malaysia, have not explored fully the *multiple* competing meanings of being “queer” as envisioned by many indigenous men and women. For example, the term “gay,” as Ismail Baba contends in his ethnographic study on gay and lesbian couples in Malaysia, is often perceived locally to be closely associated with effeminate indigenous men. I strongly disagree with Ismail on the grounds that some (if not many) gay-identified indigenous men do not see themselves effeminate, but instead adopt hypermasculine mannerisms in calling themselves “gay.” Some effeminate indigenous men, particularly “pondan” and “mak nyah,” do not regard themselves gay. This is simply because some “pondan” and “mak nyah” strongly

believe that they are “women” who must assume feminine roles in their relationship with other men. Clearly, notions of being “gay” conjure up different meanings to different indigenous people in Malaysia. I also find that studies on local forms of queerness have not directly addressed issues pertaining to the official conflation of queerness with western cultural influences. The Malay state elites, along with religious authorities and the local media, not only perpetuate, but attempt to imprint queer sexualities (male same-sex sexualities in particular) as part of a destructive and decadent western culture in the minds of many indigenous people. Foremost amongst these state elites is the former Malaysian premier, Mahathir Mohamad, who once maintained that “[w]estern societies are riddled with single-parent families, which foster incest, with homosexuality, with co-habitation [...] surely these are all signs of an impending collapse” (qtd. in Obendorf 184). The former officer of Malaysia’s Islamic Affairs Department, Abdul Kadir Che Kob, on the other hand, stated that “[homosexuality] is a crime worst than murder [...] How can men have sex with men? God did not make them this way. *This is all Western influence*” (qtd. in Williams 10; emphasis added). But I would like to argue very strongly that queer sexualities in local contexts cannot be conflated with western cultures and societies. This is because queer sexualities (particularly male same-sex sexualities) are not entirely western, but are always already present in the Malay culture in the form of the “pondan” tradition. Interestingly, male same-sex sexuality in the modern western sense has also been brought into the local social landscape through a long history of colonialism, and via current trends of globalisation. I will demonstrate in this study that globalising instruments such as travel and tourism, and the advances in technologies such as the internet have opened up a critical site of exchange for queer-identified people in both local and western contexts to negotiate diverse ideas about queer sexualities, desires,

identities, and practices in formulating a plethora of queer self-inscriptions and self-representations. This, I believe, is crucial because it offers a more nuanced understanding of what being “queer” means in Malaysia, which cannot be perceived, understood, and even officially propagated as a form of western decadence.

To buttress my argument about the ways in which queer-identified Malays challenge dominant local understandings of “Malayness” *and* “queerness,” I will analyse representations of queer Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature and culture. More specifically, I will examine queer-identified Malays as represented in the following genres and media; namely, literary works by contemporary Malaysian Malay writers (e.g. Abdul Aziz, Dina Zaman, and Karim Raslan), ethnographic studies on local queer sexualities by Malaysian Malay scholars (e.g. Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah), queer-themed films by Malaysian Malay filmmakers (e.g. Amy Ikram Ismail and Osman Ali), and online discussion “threads” taken from a local gay Malay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu.” I have decided to focus on these genres and media mainly because they convey diverse ideas about being “queer” *and* “Malay” in Malaysia and beyond. What is more important is that these ideas are grounded in, and organized around, Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, filmmakers, and online members’ everyday observations and/or lived experiences of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” Such materially grounded *and* everyday-defined ideas about identity are crucial for my study that attempts to demonstrate how queer Malays subvert and reshape discursive configurations of Malayness via their own notions of self-identity. This is clearly in line with Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s theory of “two social realities” (namely, the authority-defined and the everyday-defined notions of Malay ethnicity) of being “Malay” in present-day Malaysia. In his article, entitled “Debating about Identity

in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” Shamsul contends that being “Malay” cannot always be understood in terms of the “authority-defined” conceptions of Malayness which are formulated by members of the elite governing bodies and local authorities. This is because these “authority-defined” notions of Malay identity are constantly being redefined and reconceptualised by the “everyday-defined” ideas about being “Malay.” Such ideas, which have been documented in works of many anthropologists and historians of Malay society, are derived from ethnic Malays’ personal narratives of their lives and identities (Shamsul, “Debating about Identity” 478). Interestingly, the “everyday-defined” beliefs about Malay identity also take “popular forms of expression” or “popular culture” (e.g. cartoons, songs, poems, short stories) that are created based on ethnic Malays’ lived experiences of being “Malay” (Shamsul, “Debating about Identity” 478). I would like to extend Shamsul’s theory of “two social realities” by pointing out that the “everyday-defined” visions of Malayness take *multiple* forms of popular culture, including queer-themed films and gay online social networking websites. I say this because numerous scholars such as James E. Combs, Marcel Danesi, Paul Berardino, and others have pointed out that popular culture is composed of diverse sources. Paul Berardino, for instance, maintains that movies, television, the news media, radio, music, *and* the Internet, are all important sources of popular culture in the contemporary world (231). With this in mind, I will show in my study that queer-themed films and gay online social networking websites, *in addition to* literary works and socio-anthropological/ethnographic studies of Malay culture and society, cannot simply be described as forms popular expression or popular culture because they also function as a site for “queer,” where contemporary Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, filmmakers, and members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” discuss, document, and disseminate “everyday-defined” notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay.”

More importantly, queer-identified Malays who are represented in works of Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, and filmmakers, as well as members of “Komuniti Gay Web Melayu” formulate and express their own “everyday-defined” narratives of Malayness which radically reshape discursive formulations of Malay ethnic identity. By extending the concept of “everyday-defined” visions of Malayness to include *multiple* forms of popular culture allows this study to achieve its central objective, which is to show how queer-identified Malays in Malaysian literature and culture redress received narratives of Malay identity (particularly its conflation with Islam). It is pertinent to note that my analysis of queer Malays and their numerous forms of self-identification is shaped and influenced by my reading on studies that concern identity and identity-formation, particularly those by leading scholars in the fields of Malay studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, and globalisation studies. Foremost amongst these scholars are Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Anthony Milner, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Homi K. Bhabha, Arif Dirlik, Arjun Appadurai, and Jan Nederveen Pieterse. The works of Dennis Altman, Martin F. Manalansan, Michael G. Peletz, Tom Boellstorff, and others studying queer sexualities in non-western indigenous contexts have also influenced my analysis. Such a “multidisciplinary” reading is crucially important for me to present a critical examination of the ways in which queer-identified Malays as represented in the chosen genres and media produce and assert a queer narrative of Malayness.

I have divided my study into the following six chapters; namely, the politics of Malaysian Malay identity, the representations of queer Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature, the construction of queer Malay identities in contemporary Malaysian culture, the material implications of asserting a queer narrative of Malayness, and the possibilities *and* limitations of queerness in the politics of queer

Malay identity within and outside Malaysia's national boundaries. The study is organized in such a way as to explore in greater detail how ethnic Malays, particularly self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays specifically formulate and articulate their identities and the ways in which the hegemonic Malay culture and religion, as well as the state affect their creation and expression. This is essential because it enables one to understand more fully how queer-identified Malays radically transform discursive narratives of Malayness and the various consequences of doing so.

In Chapter 1, I present a brief overview of the politics of Malaysian Malay identity by specifically focusing on the official configuration of Malayness and its diverse implications on ethnic Malays' own understandings of what it means to be "Malay" in present-day Malaysia. I demonstrate that Malay ethnic identity is not only defined by the state through "authority-defined" notions of being "Malay," but is also configured through Malays' "everyday-defined" vision of Malayness. This is especially salient in the case of Malays whom scholars of Malay studies have identified as "Other Malays" (Kahn xxii) and "New Malays" (Abdul Rahman 157; Halim 148). Some "Other Malays" and "New Malays" do not define themselves in terms of the "authority-defined" conceptions of Malayness (that is, in terms of the key markers of Malay ethnicity such as Malay culture and religion), but instead formulate their own ethnic identities based on their everyday lived experiences of being "Malay." Such experiences are deeply shaped by social class and/or diverse cultural and religious beliefs and practices among "Other Malays" and "New Malays." This provides the very basis for my argument throughout this study that queer-identified Malays can also create their own sense of Malay identity. Many queer-identifying Malay men and women whom I shall discuss in my thesis define their sense of Malayness in terms of

their everyday lived experiences of being “Malay.” These experiences are profoundly influenced by queer-identified Malays’ sexuality and their involvement in same-sex erotic and affectional relationships. Such characteristically “queer” narratives of Malay ethnicity radically reshape “authority-defined” conceptions of Malayness, where Malays are officially designated as Muslims who *must* fulfil normative gender and sexual roles as prescribed *and* enforced by the dominant Malay Muslim community.

In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, I explore and examine how queer-identified Malays in the works of contemporary Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, and filmmakers, as well as members of the local gay Malay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu,” specifically construct their own notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” These chapters are important for two reasons. First, they discuss various strategies employed by self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays in creating their own ethnic *and* sexual identities. These include queer-identified Malays’ strategic renegotiations of their ethnicity, religiosity, and sexuality, and selective reappropriations of both local and western forms of queerness. Second, these chapters examine how contemporary Malaysian literature and multiple forms of popular culture (including queer-themed films and gay social networking websites) function as a space for “queer,” where Malaysian Malay writers, scholars, and filmmakers, as well as members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” convey “everyday-defined” ideas about being “Malay” *and* “queer.” Chapter 2, for instance, examine how queer-identified Malay men and women who are featured in the works of Abdul Aziz, Dina Zaman, and Karim Raslan formulate their own ethnic identities by strategically reconciling conflicting elements such as queer sexuality and Islamic faith. Such a “queer” narrative of Malay identity challenge official designations of Malayness which are conceived and

sustained through the hegemonic Malay culture and religion, as well as heterosexuality and heteronormativity. The chapter also discusses the ways in which the processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays as represented in contemporary Malaysian literature is fraught with the tension between articulating identities based on culture and religion, and those marked by queerness. This is important because it shows that contemporary Malaysian Malay writers are not only interested to discuss queer-identified Malays' "everyday-defined" ideas about being "Malay," but are keen to delve into the complexity of queer Malay identity-formation by highlighting the difficulties, conflicts, and anxieties that queer-identified Malays may experience in identifying themselves as "queer" *and* "Malay." The same can be said of my own study which attempts to examine how queer-identified Malays construct their identities and explore the material implications of articulating these identities within the borders of Malaysia. Chapter 3 carries my analysis of queer Malays and their *multiple* forms of self-identification a little further by discussing the complex processes of identity creation among queer-identified Malays who are featured in ethnographic studies on indigenous queer identities and cultures by Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah, and in local queer-themed films by Amy Ikram Ismail and Osman Ali. The central aim of this chapter is to show that queer-identified Malays in these works (much like those portrayed in literary works by contemporary Malaysian Malay writers) also adopt diverse strategies to create their own visions of being "queer" *and* "Malay." These strategies include queer identified Malays' reconciliation of their sexuality with Islamic faith, and selective reappropriations of local *and* western queer identities and cultures. More importantly, this chapter demonstrates that Malaysian Malay scholars and filmmakers are also keen to address the complex identity-formation processes among queer-identified Malay men and women by showing that such processes are intimately

entwined with deeply held indigenous cultural *and* religious beliefs and practices. This is especially true when concepts such as “halal/haram” (“religiously lawful/unlawful”), “nafsu/akal” (“passion/reason”), “dosa/taubat” (“sin/repentance”), and “dunia/akhirat” (“this world/the afterlife”), which have become deeply ingrained in the minds and in the lives of queer-identified Malays continue to inflect and, at times, become a major obstacle to the formation and articulation of their own ethnic identities which are marked by queerness. In Chapter 4, I extend my earlier discussion of queer Malay identity construction in Chapters 2 and 3 to include an examination of diverse notions of being “gay” *and* “Malay” as envisioned and embraced by members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu.” The chapter demonstrates that notions of being “gay” *and* “Malay” are assembled through an amalgamation of both local and western forms of male same-sex sexuality. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates that gay male identities in non-western indigenous contexts such as Malaysia are not absolute duplicates of those prevalent in the West, but are hybrid *and* heterogeneous cultural formations which are shaped by various factors pertaining to subjectivity, and are influenced by the English term “gay” and the language which has been used to describe this term within and outside the western domains. By taking further the notion that local forms of gayness are characteristically hybrid *and* heterogenous cultural constructs enables this study to provide a more nuanced understanding of being “queer” in modern-day Malaysia, which cannot be officially rendered and propagated as a form of western decadence. What is more important is that this chapter also shows that “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” is not merely a form of popular culture among local gay Malay community, considering that it also provides a much-needed avenue for gay- *and* bisexual-identified Malay men to create and express visible and assertive male same-sex sexual identities both online and offline.

While acknowledging that there are various ways in which queer-identified Malays assert and establish their own versions of Malayness *and* queerness, it is important not to lose sight of the issues surrounding the material articulation of queer Malay identity in Malaysia and beyond. In Chapter 5, I examine diverse material implications of inhabiting a Malay ethnic identity marked by queerness. The main purpose of this chapter is to show that my study on queer Malay identity-formation does not simply examine the various strategies used by queer-identified Malays to create their own notions of self-identity, but delves into the consequences of taking it on as a subject position within and even beyond the borders of Malaysia. This is especially true when the articulations of a queer narrative of Malayness have direct material impacts on queer-identified Malays' everyday lives and their sense of belonging to the Malay Muslim community and to the Malaysian nation-state. For example, queer-identified Malays cannot protect themselves from harassment, detention, and violence by the police and local authorities. One of the main reasons is that queerness remains legally and religiously prohibited in a Muslim-majority country such as Malaysia. In Chapter 6, I conclude my study by highlighting important strands of my study and reflecting on *both* the possibilities *and* limitations of "queerness" (as sexuality, as a mode of critique, and as a political strategy) in the context of queer Malay identity creation. Such a reflection, I believe, is vital especially when thinking about future directions for research on queerness and the politics of identity creation among queer Malays living in Malaysia and in the diaspora.

It is pertinent to point out that this study does not set out to ascertain whether queer-identified indigenous men and women are *still* "Malay" or "Muslim" or both despite the fact that they continue to be regarded as less Malay and less Muslim by members of

the dominant Malay Muslim community. Furthermore, this thesis does not set out to assert that queer-identified indigenous people, particularly those who are depicted in the genres and media that I shall examine, valorise and glorify queer sexualities, to the extent that being “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual” and “transgendered” are *more* important than being “Malay” and “Muslim.” This is because there are diverse, yet possible, ways of being “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer” as felt, imagined, and understood by many queer-identified indigenous men and women, which cannot be fully explored in and by this study alone. But there still remains a problem: how can an “outsider” like myself, who is neither “Malay” nor “queer Malay” understand, let alone write “genuinely” about Malays and queer Malays’ notions of identity, without being firmly ensconced within the Malay and queer Malay communities? Such a problem, I believe, can perhaps be adequately resolved by rethinking the “inside/outside” dialectic that Diana Fuss cogently demonstrates in “Inside/Out,” where she maintains that, “to be *out* is really to be *in* – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, [and] the culturally intelligible” (4; emphasis added). Although Fuss problematizes the “inside/outside” dialectic with regard to how binary oppositions operate in language and culture, and also in relation to the processes of coming out within the gay and lesbian communities in the West, I find that her discussion is very helpful to show that I can be both “inside” and “outside” the Malay and queer Malay communities at the same time. This is especially true of how being “Melayu,” in my view, is not completely dissimilar from my own experiences of being “Bidayuh” – one of the main non-Malay “Bumiputera” ethnic groups in Sarawak, Malaysia. If ethnicity, religion, and culture are central to dominant discursive configurations of Malayness, the same can be said in regard to the ways in which many Bidayuhs whom I know place greater emphasis on cultural traditions (“adat”) and religious beliefs (i.e. Christianity), *in addition to* ethnic and

communal affiliations, in constructing their Bidayuh identity. Moreover, if “homosexuality” is perceived by the Malay Muslim community as violating the Quran and Sunnah, the same can be said of how being a “homosexual” and “Bidayuh” defies and defiles religious beliefs and practices of the Bidayuh community. It is based on these “similarities,” *along with* my “adequate” knowledge of the Malays and queer Malays, and my Malaysian citizenship and background that I am able to reposition myself “inside” the Malay and queer Malay communities whilst concurrently remaining ensconced in the “outside” in presenting a pragmatic, rather than a “genuine,” analysis of the difficulties and complexities of queer Malay identity-formation. What I mean by “adequate” here is the sufficient amount of knowledge that I have gained about Malays, in general, and queer Malays, in particular, through years of observations and experiences of socially mixing with my Malay neighbours, relatives, students, friends, work colleagues, and superiors) and by engaging in their culture. Such knowledge, along with my ability to speak Malay – a language that myself and other non-Malay Malaysians have learnt through the course of our lives – have enabled me to understand what being “Malay” means, especially when it is conveyed by Malays and queer Malays whom I know. But this does not imply that I can “genuinely” comprehend and even write about ethnic Malays’ own sense of self and identity simply because I believe that only Malays can *truly* understand what being “Malay” *really* means. It is, however, imperative to mention that I am willing to be corrected by more knowledgeable sources if I give inaccurate depictions of Malays and queer Malays throughout this study. What I aim to accomplish in this project is to examine the ways in which people in non-western indigenous contexts form, express, and inhabit a queer narrative of “Melayu-ness,” while engaging critically with the legal and material implications of doing so. More importantly, my analysis of queer-

identified Malays and their self-identities is aimed at opening up a critical avenue through which to consider queer sexuality as an equally important component of Malayness. I say this because queer sexuality is not only central to notions of being “Malay” for some (if not many) ethnic Malays (queer-identified Malays in particular), but it can be incorporated along with discursive markers of Malay ethnicity; namely, culture and religion, into indigenous people’s own sense of Malayness. By taking into consideration queer sexuality as an equally salient marker of Malay identity helps engender meaningful and thoughtful insights into the complexities of being “Malay” in Malaysia and in the contemporary world.

Notes

¹ See “Comolot” at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rKtvq1nd0>>.

² See Asrul Zamani’s *The Malay Ideals*, especially pp. 348-353 where he discusses how Malays living in Malaysia will only be able to *truly* self identify as “Malay Muslim” and, ultimately, return to *true* Islam by possessing adequate “iman” (“faith”), “taqwa” (“God-consciousness”), and good “ahlaq” (“morals and behaviours”). He argues that it is only through religiosity and morality that Malays within Malaysia’s national borders are able to overcome the problems of moral decay and social ills (e.g. gambling, rape, drug abuse, incest, cohabitation, and homosexuality) which are prevalent within the Malay Muslim community. See also Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, especially pp. 239 where he demonstrates how ethnic Malays in Malaysia place greater emphasis on status, reputation, and dignity in identifying and resituating themselves in relation to others and to the world.

³ Terms such as “pondan,” “bapok,” “kedi,” and “darai” are used to describe indigenous men who are effeminate or “feminine” in their appearances, mannerisms, and/or behaviours. “Pengkid” and “Tomboi” are terms that are often used to address indigenous lesbian women who adopt masculine mannerisms, while “mak nyah” is regularly used to denote indigenous male-to-female transsexuals.

⁴ See Liana Chua’s article, entitled “Fixity and Flux: Bidayuh (Dis)engagements with the Malaysian Ethnic System,” for her discussion of how ethnic minority groups in Malaysia such the Bidayuh “portray Malay-ness as dangerously and inescapably fixed” (264). Chua argues that such fixity is attributed by the ways in which many Bidayuhs, who have “become Malay” (“masuk Melayu”) by converting to Islam and following the Malay customs, find it difficult to “un-become” or cease to be “Malay” simply because there are legal implications for renouncing Islam, which is intrinsic to being “Malay” in Malaysia.

⁵ See Asrul Zamani’s *The Malay Ideals*, especially pp. 133-136 for his discussion of the legal ramifications of apostasy (“murtad”) in Malaysia. See also Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed’s *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, especially pp. 149-159, for their discussion of various apostasy laws in Malaysia, including death penalty under the *hudud law* in the Malaysian Islamic state of Kelantan.

⁶ See, for instance, Timothy P. Barnard and Henrik M. J. Maier’s book, entitled *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, and Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, especially Chapter 7 for their detailed discussions of the fluidity and permeability of Malay identity in Malaysia and in the countries of Malay Archipelago. The fluidity and permeability of Malayness, in my view, corroborates other scholars’ assertion that ethnic identity is characteristically fluid and flexible. Foremost amongst these

scholars are Christopher A. Airriess, Ines M. Miyares, Jean Phinney, Mary Fong, Rueyling Chuang, Timothy A. Schouls, and others. Jean Phinney, for instance, contends that ethnic identity is “a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one’s identity, or a sense of self, as a member of an ethnic group. Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of the self and group that changes with age, time, and context. An ethnic identity is constructed and modified as people become aware of their own and other ethnic groups and of the differences among them and attempt to understand the meaning of their own ethnicity within a larger setting” (347). I agree with Phinney mainly because queer-identified Malays also reconstruct and modify dominant notion of Malay ethnicity as the result of their own realization that they are “different” from other (heterosexual) members of the Malay Muslim community. This can be seen in the ways in which queer-identified Malays not only incorporate queerness into their own notions of being “Malay,” but assert it as a mark of differentiation from many dominant (heterosexual) members of Malay Muslim community who continue to regard queer-identified Malays as “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” because of their sexuality.

⁷ See Mustapha Hussain, Insun Sony Mustapha, and Jomo Kwame Sundaram’s “Malay Nationalism Before UMNO: The Memoirs of Mustapha Hussain,” especially p. 124 for their discussion of Malays of Indian or Arab descents. Many ethnic Malays in Malaysia tend to regard Malays of Indian or Arab descents are not “true” Malays and use the term “Darah Keturunan India” (DKI) to address Malays with Indian forefathers, and “Darah Keturunan Arab” (DKA) to describe Malays with Arab ancestry.

⁸ See Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s article, entitled “Debating About Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” Joel S. Khan’s *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, Leonard Andaya’s *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*, and Judith Nagata’s essay, entitled “What is a Malay?: Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society,” for their in-depth discussions of the significant role of ethnicity, religion, culture, and place in the historical and cultural constructions of Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia.

⁹ See Wazir Jahar Karim’s *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*, Ungku Maimunah Tahir’s article, entitled “Perceptions of the Ideal Women in the Works of Selected Malaysian Women Novelists,” Maila Stiven’s *Matriliny and Modernity: Sexual Politics and Change in Rural Malaysia*, and Aihwa Ong’s essay on “State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women’s Bodies, and the Body Politics in Malaysia,” for their laborious discussions of identities and the social positions of Malay Muslim women in modern Malaysian nation-state.

¹⁰ See Ismail Baba's "Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia," Khartini Slamah's "The Struggles to be Ourselves, Neither Men Nor Women: *Mak Nyahs* in Malaysia," Teh Yik Koon's "Male to Female Transsexuals (Mak Nyah) in Malaysia," Michael Peletz's *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia*," and Tom Boellstroff's "Domesticating Islam: Sexuality, Gender, and the Limits of Pluralism," for their rigorous examinations of queer sexualities and cultural formations in the Malay Muslim community in particular, and in the Muslim-majority Malaysia in general.

Chapter 1 Queering the Politics of Malaysian Malay Identity

It has proved impossible to find a notion of being “Malay” that has achieved stability – that has become secure. It is an idea in motion – something which can present danger as well as opportunities.

– Anthony Milner, *The Malays*

What does it mean to be “Malay” in Malaysia? This chapter sets out to discuss the politics of Malay identity in its relation to what it means to be “Malay” in the modern Malaysian nation-state. It begins by examining the legal definition of Malay identity and its diverse implications on the lives of those who have come to regard and think of themselves as “Malay.” This is followed by a discussion of how Malay identity is not only defined by the state, but also by the Malay populace. By using Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s “two social realities” approach (i.e. the authority-defined and the everyday-defined), which I believe is not completely dissimilar to Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of the pedagogical and the performative, I will demonstrate that there is a dialogical tension between the authority-defined and the everyday-defined notions of Malayness in the politics of Malaysian Malay identity-formation. This is especially true when the official designation of Malay identity is constantly being reworked and reconfigured by the everyday lived experiences and social practices of Malays living in Malaysia. The dialectical tension between the authority-defined and everyday-defined ideas about being “Malay” provides the very basis for my argument that being “Malay” can also be defined by the actual material conditions and everyday lived experiences of queer-identified Malays. I will also demonstrate how cultural, religious, *and* social class differences in the Malay society open up a space for many Malays to formulate and articulate new ways of being “Malay.” This provides yet another basis for my contention that queer-identified Malays can also assert and establish a Malay identity

marked by sexual difference, which I believe cannot be defined solely in terms of distinct cultural and religious markers of Malayness. Finally, this chapter concludes by discussing potential problems that may arise as the result of “queering” (used here as a verb; that is, to subvert, resist, and transform) discursive formulations of Malaysian Malay identity.

Rethinking Malayness in the Malaysian Nation-State

Issues concerning the identity of those who identify themselves as members of the Malay community remain the subject of much debate to this day. This is probably because there has never been a satisfactory answer to the questions of “Who is “Malay”?” and “What it means to be “Malay”?” Many would associate the term “Malay” with Malays living in Malaysia. To date, there are nearly thirteen million Malays within the borders of Malaysia with a total of twelve million in West Malaysia (also known as Peninsular Malaysia) and close to a million in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak).¹ But the term “Malay” also includes Malays from other countries in the Malay Archipelago (also known as the “Malay World”) such as Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The “Malay World,” as Geoffrey Benjamin posits, encompasses “*at least* Isthmian Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, the central east-coast parts of Sumatra, and much of the coastal northern, western and southern Borneo, Brunei, parts of Malaysian Sarawak, and parts of Indonesian Kalimantan” (1; qtd in Milner 5; emphasis added).² Interestingly, the term “Malay” is also used to refer to members of diasporic Malay communities in Sri Lanka and South Africa, and in other parts of the world. Although Anthony Milner, Syed Husin Ali, and others have pointed out that ethnic Malays within Malaysia’s territorial boundaries, and those from the Malay Archipelago and the Malay diaspora, are Malayo-Polynesian

(now called Austronesian) speakers who share a common historical origin and cultural heritages, the term “Malay” carries different meanings for different people in different contexts.³ For instance, Malays in Malaysia are legally defined in terms of the three important markers of Malayness; namely, Muslim religion, Malay language, and culture. Article 160 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution clearly states that, “Malay” is “a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks Malay, [and] conforms to Malay custom” (qtd. in Husin 2). The Constitution also recognizes Malay as the official language and, Islam, as the official religion of the Malay-dominated Malaysian nation-state. Khoo Gaik Cheng, Michael G. Peletz, and others have argued that Islam in particular not only functions as a key symbol of Malayness, but has become a crucial feature of Malaysian Malay identity. This is particularly true when many Malaysian Malays identify themselves first (and foremost) as Muslim, which reinforces the conflation of “Malay” with Muslim in the national imaginary.⁴ The former Lord President of the Supreme Court of Malaysia, Tun Dato’ Haji Mohamed Salleh bin Abas, acknowledges and endorses the intimately entwined and, at times, seemingly irrevocable, relationship between Islam and Malay ethnicity. As Mohamed Salleh explains:

The notion of a non-Muslim Malay is alien to the mind. Such a person would be *murtad* – excluded from the faith. To be Malay one must be Muslim, although he may not be a practising or devout Muslim. This complete identification of religion with race is so fundamental to Malay thought that the religion of Islam has become an important constituent element in the legal and constitutional definition of ‘Malay’ (qtd. in Lim 122).

The Constitutional definition of Malay ethnic identity, however, does not adequately express the myriad and complex ways in which the term “Malay” have been configured

and understood *outside* the national borders of Malaysia. Malays in Singapore, for example, do not necessarily comply with legal narratives of Malaysian Malayness. David C. L. Lim contends that the Singapore Constitution does not define “Malays” living in Singapore as Muslims, but only ““recognises” the special position of the “Malays” and the Muslim religion” (118). He asserts further that “[the Singapore Constitution] does not contain a separate clause defining who the Malay people are, except for the reference in Article 152(2), which explains that they are “the indigenous people of Singapore”, and that “accordingly,” the Government has the “responsibility to protect, safeguard, support, foster, promote,” among other things, their “social and cultural interests and the Malay language” (118).⁵ The prominent Malay studies scholar, Anthony Milner, on the other hand, has pointed out that Islam is one, but not the only, paradigm for defining Malayness elsewhere. The Christian Batak people in Sumatra, Indonesia, for example, continue to regard themselves as “Malay” mainly because they have adopted the language and culture of ethnic Malays over time. Such appropriations of “cara Melayu” (“ways of the Malays”), as Milner posits, are largely attributed to a long history of acculturation, where the Christian Bataks engaged in the process of “Malayization” (“becoming Malay”) following their contacts with ethnic Malays through various means including trade and commerce.⁶ Milner also argues that Malay language is not always a salient feature of Malay ethnic identity beyond Malaysia’s national boundaries. Malays in Sri Lanka and South Africa, whose ancestors came from Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula, use languages other than Malay as the medium of daily discourse.⁷ Sri Lankan Malays, for example, speak mostly Sinhala, while South African Malays use Afrikaans and English to communicate with one another (Milner 3).⁸

What discussion by Milner on varied and multiple meanings of Malayness demonstrates is that many “Malays” who live beyond Malaysia’s borders do not necessarily take on distinctive markers of Malay ethnicity, nor fulfil religious and/or linguistic requirements for being “Malay” as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution, in calling themselves “Malays.” This amplifies Jean Phinney’s contention that ethnic identity (and, in my case, Malay ethnic identity) is not a fixed categorization, but rather a fluid and dynamic understanding of the self and his/her ethnic group that changes as it moves across various locales and contexts (347). But what if some (if not many) Malaysian Malays, who have fulfilled these legal requirements, rethink and, perhaps, reshape the formal definition of Malayness? I pose this question mainly because I believe that such definition conjures different meanings to different Malays living in Malaysia. This is probably true when a Malaysian Malay sense of identity is not only expressed through cultural and religious emblems of Malay ethnicity, but is always already mediated by a *multitude* of diverse factors (e.g. age, sex, gender, descent, social class, political and regional affiliations) which are not specifically spelt out in the Constitution. Although these factors are intimately linked and intersect one another in the formulation of Malay ethnicity, they may appear to be mutually exclusive where one may exclude or preclude the other. For instance, social class is probably more significant than age or gender in the processes of self-identification among the upper middle class or working class Malays. Loyalty or strong ties to the home state, on the other hand, may appear to be more important than social class in the formulation and expression of Malayness among “orang Johor” (“the people of the Malaysian state of Johor”) or “orang Kelantan” (“the people of the Malaysian state of Kelantan”). The same can be said of the pivotal role that sexuality plays in the production of self-identities among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays. But the processes of

self-identification as members of the Malay Muslim community can become especially complicated (if not more intriguing) when non-Malays *and* non-Muslims in Malaysia can “masuk Islam/masuk Melayu” (“become Islam/become Malay”) through intermarriages with Malay Muslims and/or by converting to Islam and conforming to Malay custom. This is particularly prominent in the case of many “mualaf” or “saudara baru” (“Muslim converts”), most of whom are Malaysian Chinese and Indians, who have embraced the Islamic faith, and have taken new Muslim names and adopted the Malay language, style of dress, and manners in asserting their new Malay Muslim identity.⁹ This gives the impression that *anyone* can be “Malay” in Malaysia as long as one complies with the legal requirements of being “Malay.” As Dina Zaman, following Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, notes, “...the Malay equals Muslim is a very Malaysian thing.” The main reason is because constitutionally, no one can be Malay without being a Muslim, although curiously enough, one doesn’t have to be ethnically Malay to be constitutionally Malay” (219).¹⁰

The point here is not to question the Constitution, but rather to expose its limited and, at times, ambivalent formulation of Malay identity. This is mainly because the state-defined notion of Malayness may not be helpful in expressing and accommodating the different narratives of Malay identity as envisioned and embraced by those who call themselves “Malays.” It is, however, important to note that discursive narratives of Malay ethnicity are remnants of colonialism, which have a powerful and pervasive influence on what it meant to be “Malay” historically and how “Malay” was to be defined by the Constitution. The Malaysian social scientist, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, has argued that categories such as “Malay” and “Malayness” are colonial inventions and constructions, which not only provided a legal definition of Malay ethnic identity,

but helped reinforce in the public mind the very idea of Malayness (“A History of Identity” 363). The Malay Reservation Enactment of 1913, for example, describes “Malay” as “a person belonging to any Malayan race who habitually speaks the Malay language or any Malayan language and professes the Moslem religion” (qtd. in Khoo and Abdur-Razzaq).¹¹ The Federation of Malaya Agreement of 1948, on the other hand, stipulates that, “to be considered a Malay...one must be a Muslim, speak Malay, and observe the tradition of Malay culture” (qtd. in Noritah, “Islam and State” 129). These definitions (the latter in particular) have been employed by the Malay state elites of post-independence Malaysia in officialising Malay language, Muslim religion, and Malay custom (“adat”) as the key pillars of Malay ethnic identity. “Bangsa Melayu” (“Malay race”), on the other hand, is also a legacy of colonial knowledge which has profound influence on how Malay race/nation is understood and elaborated locally. Anthony Milner, for instance, maintains that one of the earliest and most influential definitions of “Malay” as a form of community was conceived by Sir Stamford Raffles in the early 1800s.¹² Raffles wrote: “I cannot but consider that the Malayu nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs” (103; qtd. in Milner 119). Such definition has been employed by the Malay state elites in implementing various governmental policies and practices which have placed immense emphasis on “bahasa” (“Malay language”), “adat” (“Malay culture”), and “agama” (“Muslim religion”) as key markers of “Malayness” *and* “bangsa Melayu.” More importantly, the Malay state elites have also utilised these ethnic identity markers in creating yet another official Malay category; that is, “Bumiputera” (“sons of the soil” or “indigenous people”), as a way of protecting and bolstering Malays’ special rights and privileges as the nation’s ethnic core. It is pertinent to mention that non-Malay indigenous people of the Malaysian

states of Sabah and Sarawak are also legally designated as “Bumiputera,” who share the same rights and special privileges enjoyed by ethnic Malays, including entry into the public service, the provision of scholarships, and the allocation of business licenses and permits. Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution clearly states that:

1. It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.
2. Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, but subject to the provisions of Article 40 and of this Article, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong shall exercise his functions under this Constitution and federal law in such manner as may be necessary to safeguard the special provision of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and to ensure the reservation for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak of such proportion as he may deem reasonable of positions in the public service (other than the public service of a State) and of scholarships, exhibitions and other similar educational or training privileges or special facilities given or accorded by the Federal Government and, when any permit or licence for the operation of any trade or business is required by federal law, then, subject to the provisions of that law and this Article, of such permits and licences.¹³

What is clearly evidenced here is that Malay ethnicity is not only intimately tied to language, culture, and religion, but is characterized by a sense of “security” (Mak 5) and “exclusivity” (Fazil 5). In other words, to be legally defined as “Malay” *always already* secures one’s status, rights, *and* privileges as Malaysia’s dominant ethnic community. Moreover, to be officially identified as “(Malay-Muslim) Bumiputera” within the multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious Malaysian nation-state *always already* distinguishes oneself from members of the non-Bumiputera communities, namely the Chinese and Indians, whose ancestors moved to Malaysia from China,

India, and other parts of Southeast Asia. It is important to mention that Chinese and Indians (as well as other immigrant communities in Malaysia) do not enjoy the same rights and privileges afforded to Malay and non-Malay Bumiputeras on the basis that they are not indigenous people of Malaysia. This is mainly because many Malaysian Chinese and Indians' ancestors came to Malaysia in the 19th and 20th centuries as the result of the British "open-door" economic *and* immigration policies, which encouraged a large number of Chinese and Indian immigrants to come to Malaya in order to work in the tin mining industries and rubber plantation estates. Malays, as Vidhu Verma asserts, were allowed by the British to retain their traditional roles as Sultans ("rulers"), aristocrats, and farmers (26). On April 1, 1946, the British proposed a centralized administration in Kuala Lumpur under the Malayan Union scheme. The Malay nationalist elites reacted strongly against the proposal not just because it would reduce the power of Sultans ("kings") of the Malay states and also because the Malayan Union scheme had set out to grant equal citizenship to all races including immigrant Chinese and Indians. The Malay nationalist elites claimed that the rights of citizenship could *only* be granted under the condition that immigrant Chinese and Indians *must* acknowledge "ketuanan Melayu" ("Malay supremacy/dominance") and Malays' special position as *both* the indigenous people *and* the rightful owners of the country. The Malayan Union Scheme was soon replaced by the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, which officially endorsed the "idea of general citizenship for all communities while asserting the special rights and protection for the Malays" (Vidhu 29). The rights and privileges of the Malays are further enshrined in Article 153 of the post-independence Malaysian Federal Constitution.

While it is possible to say that ethnic Malays in Malaysia assert their ethnic identity and mark their ethnic difference through cultural and religious identity markers, I would like to argue strongly that these markers cannot fully define what being “Malay” means for many Malays. Queer studies scholars, such as Phillip Brian Harper, have argued that sexual orientation should not be conceived as a primary identificatory marker of sexual identity simply because sexual identity is constantly inflected by the pressures of various factors pertaining to subjectivity (26). Although Harper is more interested in calling into question essentialised notions of sexuality (queer sexuality in particular), his contention that sexuality cannot be determined by sexual orientation alone can be used to demonstrate that Malay ethnic identity is not constructed and expressed solely through indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices. This is because Malay ethnic identity (like sexual identity *and* other forms of identity) is also shaped by diverse variables, including age, gender, sex, social class, to name just a few. A Malay man, for instance, can identify himself as a young, urban, educated, middle-class, gay man in relation to others and to the world. This, in my view, demonstrates that cultural and religious markers of Malayness inflect upon and/or intersect with a myriad of factors in the production of Malay ethnic identity. As Eric C. Thompson rightly asserts, “gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, age, and place *all intersect* at the crossroads of (Malay) identity (construction)” (15; emphasis added). While this illuminates the *multiple* and intersectional nature of Malay ethnicity, it is also important, I think, to highlight that notions of being “Malay” are not only created by the state (i.e. the Malay nationalist elites), but also by many ethnic Malays. To carry this argument further, I shall now refer to Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s “two social realities” approach which he uses to examine the politics of Malay identity creation in modern-day Malaysia.

In the article entitled “Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis,” Shamsul contends that the process of Malaysian Malay identity creation can meaningfully be understood in relation to the “two social realities” of being “Malay.” These social realities consist of the “authority-defined” and the “everyday-defined” notions of Malayness. The authority-defined conceptions of Malay identity, as Shamsul posits, are created by those who are part of the elite governing bodies and local authorities who observe and interpret the social reality of being “Malay” (477). Such observations and interpretations are mostly documented and disseminated through oral and written political dialogue or rhetoric. The everyday-defined ideas about Malayness, on the other hand, often take the form of the articulation of everyday experiences in the course of Malays’ lives (477). While acknowledging that the “two social realities” of being “Malay” are central to the process of Malaysian Malay identity construction, it is necessary to point out that there is always a tension between the authority-defined and the everyday-defined perceptions of Malayness. This is especially true when the everyday-defined notions of being “Malay,” particularly those created by the “voices from the below”/ the “subaltern voices,” are often regarded as invalid sources of Malay identity (Shamsul, “Debating About Identity” 479). This is mainly because members of the elite governing bodies continue to enshrine and perpetuate their own versions of Malay ethnicity (i.e. “Bumiputera” category) as the only legitimate way of being “Malay” whilst simultaneously marginalizing and even excluding other, everyday-defined visions of Malayness (I shall return to this point shortly).

The dialogical tension between the authority-defined and the everyday-defined ideas about being “Malay” in Malaysia, in my view, is not completely dissimilar to Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of the pedagogical and the performative. In “DissemiNation: Time,

Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Bhabha asserts that there is always a split between the pedagogical and the performative in the process of writing the nation. Bhabha writes, “[i]n the production of the nation as narration there is always a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of the modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*” (297; original emphasis). What is notable here is that the process of narrating the nation is often fraught with the tension between the pedagogical conceptions of the nation (i.e. those which are configured by the state elites through their visions of what the nation should be) and the performative visions of the nation (i.e. those which are constructed based on the actual lived experiences of being the nation’s people). The split between the pedagogical and the performative opens up an ambivalent site in the process of narrating the nation, where the state elites’ vision of the nation is constantly being rewritten by the nation’s citizenry. As Bhabha rightly contends, “the nation, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation ... opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (“DissemiNation” 300). Although Bhabha does not directly address Malay identity, I find that the theory of the pedagogical/performative not only complements Shamsul’s notion of the authority-defined/everyday-defined, but provides a means through which to think of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of Malaysian Malay identity-formation. This is because in the process of constructing Malay ethnic identity, there is always a split between the pedagogical and the performative (or the authority-defined and everyday-defined) formulations of Malayness. This is particularly true when the Malay state elites and many members of the Malay community constantly create and articulate diverse *and* competing notions of being “Malay.” It is through the process of splitting that the politics of Malaysian

Malay identity construction becomes an ambivalent site, where many ethnic Malays continue to reshape and even transform pedagogical narratives of Malayness by asserting and establishing a Malay identity which is grounded in, and mediated through, their everyday experiences of being “Malay.” The dialectical tension between the pedagogical and the performative perceptions of Malayness can be observed most readily in the processes of self-definition and self-inscription among “Other Malays” (Kahn xxii), “New Malays” (Abdul Rahman 157; Halim 148), and “Queer Malays.” It is essential to point out that since there is no equivalent word for “queer” in Malay, the term “queer Malay” in this study is used to refer to self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays. My decision to include a discussion of the “Other Malay” and “New Malay” in this chapter is largely motivated by the fact that these Malay categories (much like “Queer Malay”) are characteristically “queer” (used here as an adjective; that is, transgressive). This is because the “Other Malays” and “New Malays” use non-normative identificatory markers in constructing their own ideas about being “Malay.” For instance, the “Other Malays” use their native language rather than Malay to communicate with one another, while the “New Malays” establish their own sense of Malayness by pledging allegiance to political leaders, rather than to the Malay rulers (“Raja”). Interestingly, there are also Malays living in Malaysia who formulate their own versions of Malay identity via a *multitude* of identity markers which are not spelt out in the dominant discursive formulation of Malayness.¹⁴

The ‘Other Malays’

In his most recent work entitled *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*, Joel S. Kahn has argued that notions of being “Malay,” as felt and practiced by “Other Malays,” do not cohere with discursive conceptions of

Malay identity. This is especially true when “Other Malays” in Kahn’s ethnographic research (many of whom are Malays of Javanese, Banjarese, Bugis, or Acehnese descent whose ancestors came to Peninsular Malaysia from Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia), tend to use their native language, rather than Malay, as the medium of daily interaction. The “Other Malays,” as Kahn contends further, do not lend themselves easily to dominant and, at times, stereotypical, traits and images of indigenous Malays (particularly those in rural Malay “kampong” or villages). For instance, the “Other Malays” are “highly mobile” and “commercially astute merchants” compared to the “village-dwelling” and “commercially-naïve agriculturalist” indigenous Malays (Kahn xxii). Moreover, the “Other Malays” adopt a more liberal and tolerant attitude toward Islam, unlike indigenous Malays who embrace traditionalistic and syncretistic religious beliefs and practices (Kahn xxii).¹⁵ Kahn also points out that the “Other Malays” demonstrate a lack of loyalty to their new homeland (i.e. Peninsular Malaysia) and show little or no respect to the Malay rulers, which is in contrast to indigenous Malays’ strong sense of attachment to their country and to their leaders (xxii). What is particularly notable here is that “Other Malays” do not align themselves easily with *both* the dominant conceptualization of Malay identity *and* the indigenous Malay community. This is because “Other Malays” create and inhabit performative narratives of Malayness, which are assembled out of their actual lived experiences of being “Malay,” in marking their difference from the indigenous Malay community. More importantly, these experiences are shaped and influenced by “Other Malays” cultural and linguistic differences. But the major obstacle to expressing a sense of *difference* and *otherness* through socio-cultural diversity lies in the ways in which the “Other Malays” performative notions of being “Malay” are dominantly perceived to be “un-Malay” or not Malay. This is particularly true when the Malay state

elites continue to sanction and privilege pedagogical constructions of Malay ethnicity (i.e. “Bumiputera” category) as the *only* valid *and* legitimate way of being “Malay.” Kahn himself has pointed out that the state-defined Malay identity is an “exclusive and racially exclusionary narrative [that suppresses, but not extinguishes] other identities and narratives” (xxii) including those created by the “Other Malays.” This, in my view, amplifies Neil Lazarus’s contention that the nation’s elites tend to recognize and represent themselves as the “true” or the legitimate voice of the nation’s people (109). This is readily observed in what Lazarus calls “the elitist cultural practice” where the state elites speak for themselves, while simultaneously silencing others (most of whom are members of the subaltern classes), in claiming their rights as the legitimate people of the nation (109). I agree with Lazarus’s assertion mainly because the Malay state elites also acknowledge and portray themselves as “authentic Malays” (“Melayu Asli/Melayu Jati”) on the grounds that they are the “Bumiputeras”; that is, the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula. It is accurate to say that the formation of the “Bumiputera” category not only marks and reinforces further ethnic Malays’ indigenous status, but functions as an elitist mechanism by/through which the Malay state elites marginalize and even exclude the “Other Malays” on the basis that they are not indigenous inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia and, therefore, cannot be called “Bumiputera” or “Malay” (hence Kahn’s use of the word “other” to describe the “Other Malays”).¹⁶

The “New Malays”

The marginalization of the “Other Malays” within the dominant Malay Muslim community as the result of their cultural difference is similarly felt and experienced by the “New Malays.” The term “New Malays” or “Melayu Baru,” which was first

introduced by the former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad in 1991, refers to members of the new Malay middle class.¹⁷ Abdul Rahman Embong, Halim Salleh, Terence Chong, and others have pointed out that the “New Malays” (many of whom have come from rural Malay villages) are highly-skilled and highly-educated Malay professionals, administrators, managers, technicians, and entrepreneurs living in Kuala Lumpur and other modern, cosmopolitan centres throughout Malaysia. It is important to note that the new Malay middle class was created by the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was launched in 1971 to foster national integration by alleviating poverty and improving the socio-economic conditions of all ethnic communities in Malaysia.¹⁸ But the state policies and programmes which were implemented during the NEP period strongly favoured ethnic Malays on the basis of their Bumiputera statuses. This is particularly true when ethnic Malays were given special privileges such as quotas for higher education, public sector employment, and corporate equity ownership. Halim Salleh, for instance, asserts that, “[b]esides eradicating Malay poverty, the primary objective [of the New Economic Policy] was to achieve 30 per cent Malay equity in existing and future wealth, particularly in corporate wealth, employment, and professional manpower development. For this purpose, the government imposed a Malay quota in all critical areas of economic activities, employment, and higher education.” (139) It is possible to say that the lives of many ethnic Malays in Malaysia have been greatly affected by the NEP policies and this holds true for members of the new Malay middle class. For example, some (if not many) “New Malays” overall outlook on life has changed as a result of the exposure to western knowledge and culture they gained through overseas studies and training programmes. This is vividly portrayed in “New Malays” preference for English over Malay as the language of daily communication, and their adoption of a modern western lifestyle. Many young

members of the new Malay middle class express their identities through western (i.e. American) culture and fashion. The GAP and other famous American retail clothing stores, as Khoo Gaik Cheng notes, have become prestige items for urban Malay middle-class youths (235). This appropriation of western style of dress, in my view, is important because it enables the “New Malays” (the youngsters in particular) to articulate a sense of modernity and assert their difference from Malay youths in rural, traditional “kampong” (“village”) settings. Khoo, following Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Wah, also points out that some “New Malays” formulate and express new ways of being “Malay” through alternative identificatory markers such as “attachment to a leader or patriarch and/or a tradition of egalitarianism and democracy” (27). This is probably attributed by “New Malays” exposure to western liberalism and egalitarian democracy via overseas education. Such new and “alternative” ways of being “Malay” challenge received narratives of Malayness, especially when traditional loyalty to/toward the Malay rulers (“Raja”) has always been a defining feature of the dominant Malay identity. Interestingly, some (if not many) “New Malays” advocate a moderate and liberal interpretation of Islamic faith which they believe is more compatible with their new modern lifestyle. This is particularly evidenced when some “New Malays” downplay the significance of Islam in configuring their own notions of being “Malay.” These modern or “westernised” Malays, as Halim Salleh asserts, “have indeed become accommodative and conciliatory in their religiosity. Notwithstanding those who are lax in their religious practice (irreligious) ...What this seems to mean is that a Malay today does not necessarily carry the integrated Malay-Muslim person as it did in the past... it is possible for a Malay today to claim Malay status but without bringing Islam into it” (153).

What is worth noting here is that many members of the new Malay middle class do not identify or align themselves closely with discursive formulations of Malay ethnic identity. This is because many “New Malays” create and assert their own ethnic identity through performative visions of being “Malay.” These performative visions of Malayness are constructed based on “New Malays”’ everyday lived experiences, which are mediated through social class differences *and* diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious practices. It is, however, crucial not to lose sight of the problems that may arise from articulating performative notions of being “Malay.” This is precisely true when many “New Malays” have often been regarded as “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” for being too “modern” and “westernised.” Asrul Zamani, Halim Salleh, Syed Husin Ali, and others have argued that members of the new Malay middle-class who adopt modern western lifestyles and culture tend to abandon traditional values pertaining to sexual morality and behaviour, as well as marriage and conjugal relationships that are central to the configuration of pedagogical narratives of Malay ethnicity. Asrul Zamani, for example, contends that many Malay Muslims in modern-day Malaysia, particularly Malay Muslim youths, are “nominal Muslims” (“Muslims only by/in name”) simply because they do not possess strong religious convictions as a result of their involvement in cohabitation, homosexuality, and prostitution, to name just a few.

As Asrul writes:

Cohabitation and abortion are also rampant in large cities [...] Wife swapping and “open” marriages are not unheard of. Casual sex as well as polyandry is a life trend for many. Homosexuality, lesbianism, and transsexualism are alarmingly prevalent, usually starting in schools and universities. The problem of homosexuality extends itself as these individuals begin to work and thus it has now involved many Malay professionals (319).

All prohibitions of religion, namely *zina* (fornication), prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse [and] other ills in society have been acknowledged in Islam to be against the commandment of God [...] Moreover, those who are engrossed in social ills, are the ones who hardly pray. If they are Muslims, they are just nominal Muslims (350-351).

To complicate matters, “New Malays” who downgrade the importance of religion in asserting and inhabiting a modern Malay identity have also been called “Melayu murtad” (“Malay apostates”). Such a term is used to refer to Malays who renounce their religious faith in order to convert to another religion, which is considered a very serious offence under Shariah law in Malaysia. This is because Malay Muslims cannot renounce their religion and would be liable to persecution (including the death penalty) if they were found guilty of committing apostasy.¹⁹ The ways in which many “New Malays” are criticised for being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” have indeed created a heightened sense of anxiety and confusion that often undermine the potential for forging and asserting a modern narrative of Malayness among members of the new Malay middle class. As the Malaysian Malay writer, Karim Raslan, rightly asserts in questioning his own notion of being a “Melayu Baru” (“New Malay”): “Could I still be a modern Malay and still be a Malay? Or had I, in fact, betrayed my roots, my *adat* and my faith by being so modern?” (“Ceritalah” 15)²⁰

My discussion of complex processes of self-identification among “New Malays” and “Other Malays” has demonstrated that there is indeed a tension between the pedagogical and the performative notions of Malayness in the politics of Malaysian Malay identity-formation. Such tension can be observed in the ways in which official designations of Malay ethnicity are constantly being reworked and reconfigured by “New Malays” and “Other Malays” actual lived experiences of being “Malay” in the

course of their lives. These experiences, as discussed earlier, are moulded by various factors, including specific socio-cultural practices, social class (i.e. “New Malays”), immigrant origin (i.e. “Other Malays”), *in addition to* Malay culture and Islam. I have also pointed out that there are various ramifications of expressing dissident narratives of Malayness, especially when the Malay state elites and members of the dominant Malay Muslim community continue to regard the legal definition of Malayness as a valid source of being “Malay.” For example, the “Other Malays” are considered not “true” Malays because of their non-indigenous status, while “New Malays” are regarded as “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” for being too “westernised” and “irreligious.” But I would like to argue strongly that the very dissonance between the pedagogical and the performative conceptions of Malayness not only provides a means through which “New Malays” and “Other Malays” can create their own Malay identity based on their actual lived experiences, but opens up a space for “queer” in the politics of Malaysian Malay identity creation. Queer theorists such as David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz have pointed out that the term “queer,” which entered into public consciousness in the 1990s, has been used extensively to

[challenge] the normalizing mechanism of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality (1).

Although Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz do not directly address Malay identity, I believe that their assertion of the political promise of the term “queer” is useful to explain how the split between the pedagogical and the performative ideas about Malayness opens up

a site for “queer” in/within the process of Malaysian Malay identity construction. I say this because it is through this process of splitting that “New Malays” and “Other Malays” are able to challenge normalizing mechanisms through/by which the Malay state elites exercise their power to designate a distinct Malay ethnic identity. This is particularly true when “New Malays” and “Other Malays” “queer” (i.e. challenge, subvert or undermine) dominant formations of Malay ethnicity by creating a Malay identity which is characterized by cultural, religious, and/or social class differences. For instance, “New Malays” do not adhere to normative prescriptions of being “Malay” as inscribed in the Constitution by preferring English over Malay *and* by downplaying the importance of Malay culture and Muslim religion in defining their own sense of self and identity. The split between the pedagogical and performative notions of Malayness provides the very basis for my argument that queer-identified Malays also engage in the project of “queering” (i.e. resisting and radically transforming), the politics of Malaysian Malay identity-formation by forging a Malay ethnic identity marked by sexual difference.

“Queer Malays”

Many queer-identified Malay men and women within the borders of Malaysia construct their own ethnic identities around/based on their everyday lived experiences and actual material conditions of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” Gay Malay men in Ismail Baba’s ethnographic study, for instance, identify and reposition themselves as “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “gay” by embracing both their sexuality and Islamic faith. Azlan, whom Ismail had interviewed in his research, is an educated and “a very liberal and open-minded” middle class gay Malay man who claims that religion is a personal choice and views same-sex sexuality as a work of God (Ismail 152). Roslan, whom Ismail also

interviewed in his ethnographic study, is a young gay Malay professional and a devout Muslim who thinks that same-sex sexuality is wrong, but claims that as long as he regularly performs the “solat” (“obligatory daily Muslim prayers”), God will understand his desire for men (Ismail 151). Many young, urban, educated, middle class gay Malay men in the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu,” on the other hand, create a “gay Melayu” identity in the virtual sphere by organizing their lives and notions of self and identity around male same-sex sexuality and desire. What is interesting is that gay Malay men in “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” continue to assert their gayness without necessarily discarding their ethnic and religious heritages in identifying themselves as “gay Melayu” *both* online *and* offline.²¹ The same holds true for gay Malay men and lesbian Malay women in Dina Zaman’s book, entitled *I am Muslim*, who construct their own narratives of Malay ethnicity by maintaining *both* their ethnnoreligious *and* same-sex sexual identities. “Tudung lesbians” (lesbian Malay Muslim women who don the head veils) who are featured in Dina’s book, for example, continue to perform culturally and religiously designated roles and duties as members of the Malay Muslim community. This is readily observed in the ways in which “tudung lesbians” put on the head veils out of obedience to God and as a way of becoming good Muslim daughters and women. Interestingly, “tudung lesbians” continue to articulate their desire for women despite strong religious *and* legal prohibitions against female same-sex sexuality.²²

What is particularly evidenced here is that many queer-identified Malay men and women (much like “Other Malays” and “New Malays”) formulate performative visions of Malay ethnicity based on their actual lived experiences of being “Malay.” These experiences are constantly being shaped by queer Malays’ diverse socio-cultural and

religious practices, as well as social class and sexual differences. Such characteristically “queer” narrative of ethnicity reshapes and redefines pedagogical conceptualisations of Malayness, where Malays are designated by the nationalist elites *and* the dominant Malay Muslim community as Muslims who *must* strictly adhere to normative prescriptions of gender and sexuality. In other words, queer-identified Malays “queer” (used here as a verb; that is, radically transform) official configurations of Malayness by defining themselves as “Malays” who not only embrace Muslim religion and practise Malay culture and tradition, but organize their lives and identities around same-sex sexuality, desires, and practices. It is, however, pivotal to point out that there are obstacles to articulating identities marked by queerness in a Muslim-majority country such as Malaysia. For example, queer-identified Malays living in Malaysia are often conflated with being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” for committing the sinful acts of “Kaum Lut/Kaum Sodom” (“the people of the Prophet Lut (pbuh)/ the people of Sodom”). One may recall viewers’ reception of Amy Ikram Ismail’s film, *Comolot*, where phrases including “memalukan bangsa Melayu” (“bring shame to the Malay race”), “menjatuhkan maruah orang Melayu” (“bring down the dignity of Malays”) and “menghancurkan umat Islam” (“disintegrate the Muslim community”) were used to criticize and even delegitimize queer-identified Malays’ sense of Malay identity and their membership in the Malay Muslim community. This is because many viewers (most of whom are Malay Muslims) claim that a Malay sense of identity *must* always be defined and sustained through heterosexuality and one’s strong adherence to the Quran and the Sunnah.²³ To aggravate matters, queer-identified Malays’ lives remain subject to juridical surveillance, especially when same-sex sexuality is both punishable under civil and Shariah laws in Malaysia. For instance, sodomy is punishable by flogging and/or imprisonment under Sections 377A and 377B of the

Malaysian Penal Code while “liwat” (“sexual relations between male persons”) and “musahaqah” (“sexual relations between female persons”) are punishable by a hefty fine, imprisonment, and/or whipping under Section 25 and Section 26 of the Shariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1977.²⁴

My point here is not to question Islam, but rather to demonstrate its significance in the politics of Malaysian Malay identity. This is precisely true when many ethnic Malays place a very strong emphasis on culture and religion in particular in the process of self-identification and self-inscription simply because Islam secures their sense of Malayness. Some (if not many) ethnic Malays, as Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan maintain, “believe that Islam secures their identity as Malays and that Malay identity is assumed within their Islamic identity, [which protects] both their rights as Muslims and as Malays” (48). It is not wrong to say that queer-identified Malays will always have to struggle to position themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” within the ethnic, cultural, and social milieu, given that being “Malay” remains firmly entrenched in, and is profoundly shaped by, the hegemonic impulses of Malay culture and religion. Such a deep and, at times, inescapable connection between identity, ethnicity, culture, and religion amplifies Louis F. Miron’s assertion that “the processes of identity-formation within the social contexts of ethnicity ... is *inseparable* from the broader social relations of power and material and ideological structures” (81; emphasis added). This can be seen in the ways in which pedagogical notions of “Malay” and “Malayness” as mentioned in an earlier section of this chapter, are legacies of colonial knowledge that had a powerful influence what it meant to be “Malay” historically. The institutionalization of Malay culture and religion as defining *and* definitive markers of Malay ethnicity during the late colonial and post-independence periods formed and

perpetuated culturally authoritative, raced-based ideas about Malayness. These pedagogical ideas about Malay ethnicity were then reinforced and became deeply ingrained in the minds of many Malaysian Malays over time. But I would like to argue strongly that the Malay state elites also adopt a rather “queer” (i.e. transgressive) approach to producing and sustaining pedagogical conceptions of Malay ethnic identity. I say this because many Malay studies scholars have demonstrated that the Malay states elites have given varied and unequal emphasis on religion, culture, language, and loyalty to the Malay rulers, to an extent that it has become difficult to decide on the specific marker which best constitutes and represents the state-defined notion of Malayness. For instance, during his long tenure as Malaysia’s prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad placed a particularly strong emphasis on English *and* spiritual and religious values as crucial features of the official narrative of Malay identity.²⁵ This pedagogical narrative of Malayness is characteristically “queer” (used here as an adjective; that is, transgressive) because it downplays the significance of Malay language and culture, which are the key pillars of Malay ethnicity. Such “transgressive” pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnicity, in my view, help buttress my contention that the politics of Malaysian Malay identity is indeed an ambivalent site (and also a site of contestation) where Malayness is constantly being “queered” (i.e. redefined, reconfigured, reshaped, and reproduced) by *both* the Malay state elites *and* the Malay populace. This is especially true when the Malay state elites and the Malay populace, which include queer Malays, “Other Malays,” and “New Malays” continually create and express diverse, competing versions of Malay identity.

My discussion of the politics of Malay identity shows that there is no satisfactory answer to what it means to be “Malay” in the modern Malaysian nation-state. This is

because there are different ways in which Malays define their own notions of being “Malay” in the course of their lives. This supports the central tenet of my study that Malay identity is neither fixed nor impermeable, but is contingent and contested as a result of the diverse and ongoing configurations of Malayness by/among those who have come to regard and think of themselves as “Malay.” Anthony Milner himself admits that “it has proved impossible to find a notion of being “Malay” that has achieved stability – that has become secure. It is an idea in motion...it is always open to contest” (17). Being “Malay” in Malaysia, then, cannot be fixed nor determined by legal markers of Malay ethnicity simply because some (if not) many Malays may or may not rely on these markers in configuring their own ethnic identities. The “Other Malays,” “New Malays,” *and* queer Malays, whom I discussed in this chapter, rely on various factors pertaining to subjectivity in constructing Malay ethnic identities marked by difference which stand as a challenge to the culturally authoritative ones. This demonstrates that the dominant conceptualization of Malayness is a social invention precisely because there will always be Malay identities that do not fit. My discussion of the dialectical tension between the pedagogical and the performative notions of Malayness, on the other hand, has also shown that the politics of Malaysian Malay identity is an ambivalent site where discursive formations of Malayness are constantly redefined and rearticulated by “Other Malays,” “New Malays,” and other members belonging to the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia. Such tension creates the very opening for queer-identified Malays to construct a Malay identity marked by sexual difference, and take it on as a subject position in identifying themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” in the modern Malaysian nation-state.

Notes

¹ See Anthony Milner's *The Malays*, especially p. 1 for his detailed discussion of the number of Malays living in Malaysia. It is pertinent to point out that Malaysia is made up of two regions; namely, West Malaysia and East Malaysia. West Malaysia, which comprises eleven states and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, is bordered by Thailand to the north and Singapore to the south. East Malaysia, which consists of the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the Federal Territory of Labuan, is located on the northern coast of Borneo Island. Malays are the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, followed by the Chinese and Indians, and other ethnic minority groups, including "Orang Asli" ("the Aborigines," namely, Jakun, Senoi, and Negrito) in West Malaysia, Iban, Bidayuh, and Melanau in Sarawak, and Kadazan, Bajau, and Murut in Sabah.

² Anthony Milner has argued that it seems impossible to come to any definite conclusion regarding the "accurate" classification and/or categorization of the Malay population. Milner contends that some Malay activists claim that the whole population of Indonesia and a large proportion of the people in the Philippines, not to mention those living in Madagascar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, can be regarded as "Malay" on the basis that they are "Austronesian-speaking peoples" (1-2).

³ Malayo-Polynesian languages are subgroups of Austronesian languages. Indonesian Malay, Malaysian Malay, Javanese, Balinese, Tagalog, Samoan, and Tongan, are some examples of the languages which belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language family. See Narendra S. Bisht and T.S. Bankoti's book, entitled, *Encyclopaedia of the South East Asian Ethnography*, especially on pp. 413-414 for their discussion of the Malayo-Polynesian languages, which are spoken by the indigenous people of Madagascar, the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, the Philippine islands, Taiwan, the islands of the Pacific Ocean, and southern areas of Vietnam and Cambodia.

⁴ See Patricia Martinez's article, entitled "Malaysian Malays: Living with Diversity," where she presents the findings from a survey she conducted in December 2005 on Malaysian Malay Muslims' perceptions of their notions of self and identity. Almost 80% of 1,000 randomly selected Malaysian Malay Muslims, whom Martinez had interviewed, claimed that being "Muslim" was much more important than being "Malay" or "Malaysian." This, in my view, buttresses my contention that many Malays within the borders of Malaysia identify themselves first (and foremost) as "Muslim." See also Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's article, entitled "Identity Construction, Nation Formation, and Islamic Revivalism in

Malaysia,” for his discussion of Islam and its significant role in shaping the politics of Malay identity-formation in present-day Malaysia.

⁵ Although the Singapore Constitution does not define Malays in Singapore as “Muslims,” many Singaporean Malays claim that religion serves as a distinctive marker of their ethnicity. See Suraiya Mohd Ali’s article, entitled “Malay Ideals Revisited: Constructing Identities,” where she reports the findings from a survey she carried out in March 2004 on Singaporean Malays and Malaysian Malays’ perceptions of their ethnic identity and cultural and religious heritages. Suraiya maintains that “Singaporean Malays and Malaysian Malays have a strong sense of racial and religious identity as well as the sense of a shared cultural heritage” (211). The similarities in opinion between these groups of Malays, in my view, may be attributed to the fact that Singapore had once been part of Malaysia. After declaring independence from British rule on 31 August 1963, (six years after Malaya, now called Peninsular Malaysia, declared its own independence), Singapore merged into the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. The merger, as Šumit Ganguly points out, “was part of a larger plan that sought to bring together the former British Colonies of Sarawak, Northern Borneo (now known as Sabah) and Brunei (*in addition to* Singapore and Malay)” (250-251; notes added). But Singapore was evicted from the Federation of Malaysia on 9 August 1965 and became an independent nation-state as the result of the conflict between the Chinese-dominated leadership in Singapore (led by Lew Kuan Yew from the People’s Action Party) and the Malay-dominated leadership in Malaya (led by Tunku Abdul Rahman from the Alliance Party). See, for instance, Šumit Ganguly’s “Ethnic Policies and Political Quiescence in Malaysia and Singapore,” and Dan Slater’s *Ordering Power: Contentious and Authoritarian Leviathans in Asia*, for their elaborate discussions of the political tension between Singapore and Malaya.

⁶ See Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, especially pp. 84-90 for his comprehensive discussion of the ways in which many non-Malay, non-Muslims in the countries of Malay Archipelago have engaged in a long process of “Malayization,” that is, “becoming Malay,” which took place over many centuries.

⁷ Scholars such as Alexander Adeelar and D.J. Prentice contend that the ancestors of Sri Lankan Malays came to Sri Lanka between 1656 and 1850. The Dutch brought them in as soldiers, deportees, slaves, and servants via Batavia (Jakarta) from Ambon, Banda, Bali, Java, Madura, and from the Bugisnese and Malay areas (685). The ancestors of South African Malays, who originated from Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula, and Madagascar, were also brought to South Africa by the Dutch as slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries.

⁸ Obviously, Malays in Sri Lanka do speak their own version of Malay, which is a mixed fusion of Sinhala, Tamil, and Malay. See, for instance, Umberto Ansaldi's article, entitled "Contact Language Formation in Evolutionary Terms," for a detailed discussion of Sri Lankan Malay. Malays in South Africa, on the other hand, also speak Malay which is heavily influenced by Afrikaans. However, scholars such as Alexander Adelaar and Nikolaus P. Himmelmann have pointed out that this version of Malay is no longer spoken by South African Malays, also known as the "Cape (Town) Malays." See, for instance, Jamie Stokes' book, entitled *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East*, especially pp. 136-137 for his discussion of the "Cape Malays," particularly their language and culture.

⁹ See Timothy P. Daniels's *Building Cultural Nationalism in Malaysia: Identity, Representation, and Citizenship*, especially pp. 69-70 for his analysis of Malaysian Chinese and Indian converts ("mualaf"/"saudara baru"), and the various ways in which they express their sense of being "Malay" and "Muslim," including wearing "baju melayu" ("Malay dress") and assuming Muslim names by adding "bin Abdullah" (for men) or "binti Abdullah" (for women) to their birth or given names.

¹⁰ It is, however, imperative to mention that the practice of "masuk Islam"/"masuk Melayu" is fraught with difficulties and complexities. Some (if not many) ethnic Malays do not regard "mualaf"/"saudara baru" who adhere to Malay customs, speak Malay, and profess the Islamic faith as "true" Muslims or "authentic" Malays. Timothy P. Daniels asserts that many Indian Muslims living in Malaysia often experience a deep sense of exclusion within the Malay Muslim community mainly because they are not considered "pure" Malay and Muslim. The "*Mamak*," as Daniels asserts, "is the high-level category used to refer to the Indian Muslim minority in Malaysia. They are a minority in both the "Indian" and "Muslim" communities. In the "Indian" community, they are an enigma because they are not Hindu, and in the "Muslim" community, they are an enigma because they are not (ethnic) "Malay." Because they are not (ethnic) "Malay," they are not considered to be "pure" Muslims, and are stigmatized as "Indian" converts to Islam. People considered "*Mamak*" to be one type of *mualaf* or converts to Islam (*saudara baru*); converts with some degree of "Indian" ancestry (69; notes added).¹⁰ For more discussion of the problematics surrounding the practice of "masuk Islam"/ "masuk Melayu," see Timothy P. Daniels's *Building Cultural Nationalism in Malaysia: Identity, Representation, and Citizenship*, Jolanda Lindenberg's article, entitled "Interethnic Marriages and Conversion to Islam in Kota Bahru," and Syed Husin Ali's *The Malays: Their Problems and Future*, especially pp. 3-4.

¹¹ The Malay Reservation Enactment of 1913 was created by the British officials in Malaya to protect Malays against the loss of their traditional lands to Chinese immigrant capitalists and Indian money lenders. Many Malays at the time sold their lands in order to pay off their debts, particularly the money they borrowed from “Ceti” or “Chettians” (Indian money lenders). For more discussion of The Malay Reservation Enactment, see Chee Kiong Tong’s *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness*, especially p. 86, and Paul H. Kratoska’s *The Chettiar and the Yeoman: British Cultural Categories and Rural Indebtedness in Malaya*, especially p. 17.

¹² Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles (1781-1826) is widely known as a scholar of Malay history, language, literature, and culture. He is also well recognised as the former governor of Java and the author of “The History of Java.” Raffles is probably better known as the founder of Singapore (Hodge 584; Lim 138; Mark 47). Hodge, for instance, contends that Raffles played a crucial role in establishing Singapore as an important British trading post in the late nineteenth century. This is especially true when Raffles was able to secure treaties with local leaders/chiefs by promising them the aid and protection which they specifically asked from the British government at the time. These treaties provided Raffles and the British government in particular the power and authority to turn Singapore into a major British trading port (Hodge 584).

¹³ The Yang di-Pertuan Agong is the supreme ruler of Malaysia. While Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with an elected monarch as head of the state, it is important to point out that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong acts on the advice of the Prime Minister, who is the head of the government of Malaysia. Yang di-Pertuan Agong plays several roles, including the Supreme Commander of the Malaysian Armed Forces, and the head of Islam in Penang, Melaka, Sabah, Sarawak, the Federal Territories, and the Malay state of which he rules (Quay and Chan 423). For more discussion of the scope of Yang di-Pertuan Agong’s power, and Malaysia’s constitutional monarchy and system of government, see, for instance, Andrew Harding’s *Law, Government, and the Constitution in Malaysia*.

¹⁴ See, for example, Eric C. Thompson’s *Unsettling Absences: Urbanism in Rural Malaysia* for his excellent analysis of the importance of place in the process of ethnic identification among rural and urban Malays. See also Maila Stiven’s article, entitled “Sex, Gender, and the Making of the New Middle Classes” and Syed Husin Ali’s *The Malays: Their Problems and Future* for their discussions of the significance of class in the productions of ethnic identity among upper, middle, and working class Malays. See Anthony Milner’s *The Malays* for his interesting argument about some “Malays” in

Malaysia (i.e. Bajau and Suluk in Sabah) who do not call themselves “Malays” and Joel S. Kahn’s *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* for his examination of “hybrid Malays” who create their identities by embracing both traditional and cosmopolitan values.

¹⁵ See Khoo Gaik Cheng’s *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Literature and Film* for her analysis of the traditionalistic *and* syncretistic religious beliefs and practices among many ethnic Malays in Malaysia. Khoo contends that many Malaysian Malays adopt a syncretistic approach to religion by practicing normative teachings of Islam alongside “adat” (“Malay custom”), which are characterized by their beliefs in magical healing, the world of spirits, mysticism, and animism (5). Such a syncretistic approach to Islam is largely attributed to the fact that animism, *in addition to* Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and practices, had been a central feature of Malay culture and society long before Islam was introduced to the Malay Peninsula in the 14th century via Indian and Arab Muslim traders.

¹⁶ Another prominent Malay studies scholar, Clive Kessler, also contends that Malays of immigrant origin who have resided in Malaysia are not legally regarded, nor defined, as “Bumiputera.” These include “Muslims Malays who are not bumiputra (e.g., Achinese immigrants from Sumtra)” and “Malays who are neither bumiputra nor Muslim (e.g., Javanese and Batak Christian immigrants)” (139-140; qtd. in Sarkissian 176).

¹⁷ The former Malaysian premier, Mahathir Mohamad, introduced the term “Melayu Baru” during his presidential address at the general assembly of the ruling Malay party, UMNO (United Malays National Organization) in November 1991. See Shamsul Amri Baharuddin’s “From *Orang Kaya* to *Melayu Baru*: Cultural Construction of the Malay ‘new rich’” and Abdul Rahman Embong’s “*Melayu Baru* and the Modernization of Malay Society” for their discussions of “Melayu Baru,” particularly in relation to how the term was created as part of the national project of transforming and modernising Malays *and* the Malay society in Malaysia.

¹⁸ The New Economy Policy (NEP) ended in 1990 and was succeeded by the National Development Policy (NDP) in 1991. Many have argued that the NDP is a continuation of the NEP, where Malays continue to be given preferential access to economic opportunities. See the collection of essays on Malaysia’s economic policies in Collin Barlow’s *Modern Malaysia in the Global Economy: Political and Social Change into the 21st Century*.

¹⁹ See Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed's *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, especially pp. 149-159, for their discussion of various apostasy laws in Malaysia, including death penalty under the *hudud law* in the Malaysian Islamic state of Kelantan.

²⁰ See Khoo Gaik Cheng's *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Literature and Film*, especially pp. 72-73, for her discussion of Karim Raslan as the epitome of the New Malay, who experiences difficulties in asserting a sense of Malay identity marked by social class difference. Karim, a well-known Malaysian Malay writer, finds that he has to play conflicting roles in order to be considered "Malay": he is torn between the traditional model that emphasized "loyalty, obedience and blind devotion to authority," and the NEP model – "a dynamic, cosmopolitan businessmen, hunting down business opportunities in Yangon, Tashkent, Jo'burg and Santiago" (15; qtd. in Khoo 73).

²¹ See Chapters 4 of this thesis for my discussion of the formation of "gay Melayu" identity among many gay Malay men in the local gay social networking website, "Komuniti Web Gay Melayu."

²² See Chapter 2 of my study for a detailed analysis of gay Malay men and women as represented in the works of Abdul Aziz, Dina Zaman, and Karim Raslan,.

²³ See viewers' comments on Amy Ikram Ismail's film, *Comolot*, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rKtvq1nd0>.

²⁴ See Chapter 5 of this thesis for more discussion of the legal repercussions of being "queer" and "Malay" in Malaysia.

²⁵ See Anthony Milner's *The Malays*, especially Chapter 7 on "Multiple Forms of 'Malayness' for his discussion of Malay states elites who constantly redefine what it means to be "Malay" by giving varied emphasis on the key pillars of Malayness.

Chapter 2 Representations of Queer Malays in Contemporary Malaysian Literature

The acceptable notion of sex in Malay culture is that it must be conjugal, procreative and heterosexual. We see that through the window, but through the same window, we also see sex is celebratory, pleasure and fantasy oriented, regendered and non-heterosexual. Malay writers in English are sometimes resented because the sexualities they depict are not within the parameters of the prescribed and also because they disturb the formulated notions of ethnicity with their problematic sexualities.

–Lily Rose Tope, *The Hushed Identity: Malay Ethnicity and Sexuality in Malaysian and Singaporean Literature in English*

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated that there is a dialectical tension between pedagogical and performative (or authority-defined and everyday-defined) conceptions of Malayness in the process of Malaysian Malay identity-formation. This is especially true when official narratives of Malay ethnicity are constantly being reworked and reconfigured by many Malays living in Malaysia, who construct their own ethnic identities through their everyday lived experiences of being “Malay.” Such experiences are deeply shaped by various factors pertaining to subjectivity, including social class and diverse cultural and religious practices among many ethnic Malays. The very dissonance between pedagogical and performative narratives of Malayness provides the basis for my argument which proposes that pedagogical formulations of Malayness are also constantly being reconstituted and reformulated by queer-identified Malays who create their own notions of ethnic identity based on their actual lived conditions and material struggles of being “queer” and “Malay.” In this chapter, I will develop this argument a little further by analysing representations of queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature. More specifically, I will explore and examine how queer-identifying Malay men and women in literary works by contemporary Malaysian

Malay writers (namely, Karim Raslan, Abdul Aziz, and Dina Zaman) construct their own narratives of Malayness. I have decided to focus on these literary works mainly because they convey diverse performative ideas about Malay identity, which are drawn from Malaysian Malay writers' own knowledge, observations, and/or reflections on the complex processes of identity-formation among queer-identified Malays. This corresponds with Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's contention that everyday-defined (or performative) ideas about Malay identity often take "popular forms of expression" or "popular culture" (e.g. short stories, songs, poems, and cartoons), which are created based on ethnic Malays' lived experiences of being "Malay." I would like to extend Shamsul's argument by demonstrating that literary works are not simply popular forms of expression since they also function as a space for "queer" where contemporary Malaysian Malay writers deliberate and disseminate performative ideas about being "Malay" as felt and experienced by queer-identified Malays, which radically revise and redefine dominant pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnicity. By extending the idea of popular forms of expression to include queerness enables this study to achieve its objective; that is, to examine queer-identifying Malay men and women in contemporary Malaysian literature and the various ways in which they redress received narratives of Malayness.

My analysis of literary representations of queer Malays is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss the portrayal of queer-identified Malay male characters in Karim Raslan's shorts stories, entitled 'Go East!' and 'Neighbours.' This will be followed by my examination of a self-identified gay Malay male character in Abdul Aziz short story, 'From the Journal of Azlan Muhammad.' Finally, I will explore the actual lived conditions and everyday struggles of gay Malay men and lesbian Malay women who

are featured in Dina Zaman's book, entitled *I am Muslim*. The aim of the analysis is to find out how queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature identify and realign themselves as "queer" and "Malay," particularly the various strategies they employ in formulating a queer Malay identity and the ways in which they resist and radically transform pedagogical conceptions of Malayness produced and sustained through cultural, religious, gender, and sexual normativities. The analysis also examines the tensions and conflicts queer-identified Malays often experience in asserting and inhabiting their own notions of self and identity. This can be observed in, for instance, the tension between articulating identities based on religion and culture, and those marked by queerness. The analysis is important because it shows that contemporary Malaysian Malay writers are not only interested to discuss queer-identified Malays' performative visions of Malayness, but are also keen to delve into the complexities of queer Malay identity-formation by highlighting the difficulties, conflicts, and anxieties queer-identified Malays may experience in identifying themselves as "queer" and "Malay" in the Malay Muslim community and in the Malaysian nation-state.

Constructing Identities, Negotiating Desires: Gay and Bisexual Malay Men in Karim Raslan's Short Stories, 'Go East!' and 'Neighbours'

Karim Raslan is a prominent Malaysian-born, British-raised, Malay Muslim writer and columnist for major newspapers in Malaysia and abroad. Karim is probably better known for his articles and essays about Malaysia and Southeast Asia which have been published in his *Ceritalah* ("Tell Me a Story") book series.¹ Interestingly, Karim is also widely recognized for his short stories, most of which have appeared in his first (and only) anthology of short fiction, entitled *Heroes and Other Stories*. I find that the short

stories ‘Go East!’ and ‘Neighbours’ in this anthology are important because they provide useful insights into the complex processes of self-identification among gay- and bisexual-identified Malay men. This is most readily observed in the ways in which gay- and bisexual-identified Malay male characters in Karim’s short stories employ diverse strategies in creating their own ethnic identities which subvert and reshape pedagogical conceptualizations of Malay ethnicity.

The story ‘Go East!’ depicts the life of Mahmud, a young Malay man who has recently moved from Kuala Lumpur (read: West Malaysia) to take up the post of a plantation manager in Sabah (read: East Malaysia). The story, which was told from the third-person point of view, provides the reader with some valuable insights into the intricacies and complexities of Malay life in present-day Malaysia. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Mahmud’s decision to move to East Malaysia (hence the title of the story, ‘Go East!’) is partly motivated by his desire to break away from the social and cultural constraints imposed by the dominant Malay community in West Malaysia. For Mahmud, Sabah is the “land of the free” where he can free himself from the stifling and suffocating milieu of Kuala Lumpur. As Mahmud explains:

I like Sabah. I liked it from the day I arrive. I knew it was going to be different and it was. It was noisy, dirty, rough and un-Malay... You don’t have to attend bloody boring kenduris of relatives you hardly know. There’s something nice about not having too many *Melayu* about: they’re always so disapproving – all *tak boleh*, *tak halus*, *tak manis* – it makes me sick. We’re not in an Istana anymore and we carry on as if we’re all courtiers or something (Karim, ‘Go East!’ 105).²

Such a deep resentment against repressive indigenous cultural beliefs and practices, which constrain the lives of some (if not many) Malays, is similarly expressed by the

Malay informants who are featured in Dina Zaman's book, *I am Muslim*. As one Malay informant states, "[t]he trouble with us Malays [is that] we have too many traditions and *adat*. We can't do this, we're Malays, we must do that, we're Malays" (201). What is evidenced here is that being "Malay" is indeed governed and regulated by the hegemonic impulses of Malay culture. This can be seen in the ways in which ethnic Malays *must* adhere strictly to traditional Malay customs and etiquette, and fulfil their social duties and obligations as members of the Malay community. Scholars of Malay society and culture such as Michael G. Peletz assert that, "[i]n a Malay culture the person is most fully realized in social relationships, not autonomously or in privacy or in isolation...The person is not construed as standing apart from and above the world of social relationships and institutions, but as both thoroughly grounded in, and in a very basic sense defined by, the relationships and institutions in which he or she participates" (*Reason and Passion* 203, 204). While I concur with Peletz's assertion that a Malay sense of identity must be defined and organized around one's relationship to Malay society and culture, I would like to argue that Mahmud adopts a "queer" (used here as an adjective; that is, transgressive) approach to defining his sense of Malayness. This is because Mahmud's decision to move to Sabah provides a means through/by which he can create a new Malay identity, which is not rigidly tied to, and governed by, restrictive rules and conventions of the traditional Malay culture. This is especially true when Mahmud's notions of being "Malay" are clearly marked by his refusal to fulfil his obligations to his family and the Malay community. Mahmud himself claims that "[i]t is a kind of relief [to be in Sabah]...No family: it's a liberation" (Karim, 'Go East!' 104). Interestingly, Mahmud liberates himself from the constraints of the hegemonic Malay culture and religion by consuming alcohol and frequenting the local brothel, despite the cultural and religious sanctions against drinking and "zina" ("pre-marital

sex”) among Malay Muslims. Such liberation allows Mamud to create his own Malay identity, which radically reconfigures dominant pedagogical conceptualizations of Malayness. This is precisely because ethnic Malays living in Malaysia are dominantly designated as Muslims who *must* refrain themselves from religiously prohibited (“haram”) or “un-Islamic” activities, including drinking and premarital sex.

As the story ‘Go East!’ progresses, the reader is exposed to the intimate details of Mahmud’s private life on the plantation estate in Sabah. These include Mahmud’s intimate relationships with his Javanese maid, Suriya, and his Filipino male servant, Anton. Mahmud, who is already engaged to his girlfriend, Farida, in Kuala Lumpur, admits to being sexually attracted to Suriya. Despite every attempt to avoid physical contact with Suriya, Mahmud fails to contain his strong sexual urges and finally submits himself to her. The only problem is that Mahmud is unable to perform sexually. As Mahmud recalls the embarrassing incident, “Suriya seemed to understand without me having to explain anything. She wasn’t upset. She held me and patted me as I cried. I think she thought I was miserable. But I wasn’t. I was angry, angry with myself for my uselessness and my inability to give her good and proper... (Karim, ‘Go East!’ 108). The shameful incident with Suriya has not only made Mahmud fully aware of his sexual impotence, but has continued to haunt him to the point that he fears of becoming a laughing stock to his male co-workers on the plantation estate: “I was afraid [Suriya would] tell the workers, they’d laugh and make fun of me” (Karim, ‘Go East!’ 109). Anxious to prove his manhood to his male colleagues, Mahmud forces himself on Tia, a girl prostitute from the local brothel. Mahmud’s success with Tia (a point to which I shall discuss again later) should not be read as a mere validation of his masculinity. This is because the ability to perform sexually with Tia not only helps

overcome the emotional distress that Mahmud has to bear as a result of his erectile dysfunction, but provides a much-needed means through which Mahmud can identify himself as a Malay man in relation to his fellow colleagues and to others on the plantation estate. Few weeks after the humiliating event, Suriya introduces Mahmud to the young Filipino boy called Anton, who is to assist her with household duties, particularly those which involve attending to Mahmud's personal needs and requests. This is indeed Suriya's subtle way of letting Mahmud know that Anton might be able to help him overcome his sexual inadequacy. Interestingly, Mahmud finds himself sexually drawn to Anton, especially to the young boy's lean and toned physique. "Even now," as Mahmud recalls it, "I can still remember the line of [Anton's] muscle along his arm" (Karim, 'Go East!' 110). Anton, on the other hand, is also attracted to Mahmud and acknowledges their attraction (albeit tacitly) for one another. The two men soon develop an intimate relationship which does not go unnoticed by the members of Mahmud's household.

What is worth noting here is the strategy Mahmud specifically uses to create his own concept of self-identity. This is most salient in the ways in which Mahmud places a strong emphasis on sexual performance (that is, the ability to achieve and maintain an erection for sexual intercourse) in configuring his own Malay male identity. Moreover, Mahmud also places a great deal of importance on his strong sexual desires for Anton *and* women in defining his own ideas about being a Malay man. Such a new and more nuanced way of being "Malay," which is deeply shaped by Mahmud's bisexual desires, challenge and radically transform pedagogical conceptions of Malay identity. This is especially true when dominant pedagogical formulations of Malay male identity are built upon culturally endorsed beliefs that Malay men *must* desire women and fulfil

cultural expectations of masculinity by entering into a legitimate and socially sanctioned conjugal relationship. Michael G. Peletz contends that in order to become “a full-fledged social adult” and a full-fledged member of the dominant Malay Muslim community, “[Malay men] must enter into legitimate marriage (with socially approved member of the opposite sex) and bear or father (or adopt) children” (*Reason and Passion* 304). Mahmud clearly contradicts these culturally endorsed *and* enforced notions of Malay male identity by organizing his life and sense of ethnic identity around his desires for, and his relationships with, *both men and* women (i.e. Anton, Suriya, and Faridah).

Although Mahmud is able to subvert and reshape pedagogical ideas about being “Malay” by forging his own concept of self-identity, it is important not to lose sight of the tensions and conflicts which arise from asserting a Malay identity marked by bisexual desires. This is particularly true when Mahmud fears that the workers on the plantation estate might find out about his strong sexual desires for Anton. This, in my view, reinforces my earlier contention that Karim Raslan (and, perhaps, other contemporary Malaysian Malay writers) is not only interested to write about ethnic Malays’ (queer-identifying Malays in particular) own performative visions of being “Malay,” but is keen to highlight the consequences of using these performative visions as an alternative means of ethnic self-identification. Unfortunately, nothing can be kept secret from the workers as they eventually discover Mahmud’s sexual feelings toward Anton. As Mahmud recalls, “[i]n retrospect, I don’t know what came over me but because of Anton, I forgot about the rest of the workers. They had noticed the preference I showed to Anton: nothing was private on [this] estate (Karim, ‘Go East!’ 113). To make matters worse, the workers express their strong reactions against

Mahmud's sexual preferences in the form of a graffiti that reads "'Tuan sundal Anton' ('Tuan is Anton's bitch')'" (Karim, 'Go East!' 113), which Mahmud stumbles on while inspecting the estate.³ In a desperate attempt to defend himself against the workers' accusations of being Anton's sexual partner, Mahmud joins the workers at the brothel and ends up having sex with a girl prostitute named Tia. However, Mahmud's desires for Anton are so strong that he imagines making love to him whilst simultaneously forcing himself on Tia. As Mahmud revives the incident:

Closing my eyes and lying in bed, I imagined the hands were not [Tia's] but Anton's. It was all Anton; his smell, his body and his cries. I dreamt so hard that even when [Tia] started moaning and pushed her tiny breasts into my face, the charade continued in my mind. But I had performed – I had passed the test I had set myself" (Karim, 'Go East!' 115).

The story is brought to an abrupt end with Anton being sacked by Mahmud the day after the latter spent the night with Tia, leaving the reader (and myself in particular) with a deep sense of bewilderment and confusion. This is because Karim leaves the reader perplexed about many things, especially Mahmud's notion of self-identity. Perhaps, it is all about sexual performance, where the ability to perform sexually *is all that matters* to Mahmud's notion of being a Malay man, even if he has to imagine engaging in sexual intercourse with Anton.

Karim Raslan's short story, entitled 'Neighbours,' on the other hand, offers further insights into the multiple ways in which queer-identified Malay men specifically create their own notions of Malay male identity. The story 'Neighbours' follows the life of Datin Sarina who is married to a rich Malay businessman named Datuk Mus.⁴ As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Datin Sarina is a nosey and gossipy housewife who spends most of her time with her close friends, updating themselves with the latest

celebrity news and meddling in other people's affairs. This is probably because Datuk Mus is always away on business trips, thereby leaving Datin Sarina to her own devices. But the arrival of Datin Sarina's new next-door neighbour changes *everything*. Narrated mainly from Datin Sarina's point of view, the story 'Neighbours' reveals intimate details of Kassim's private life: his sexuality and his fictive marriage to a "pondan" ("effeminate indigenous man"). Prior to the discovery of Kassim's "true" self, Datin Sarina admits that she became immediately infatuated with Kassim the first time she caught a glimpse of him. Datin Sarina confesses that she felt a tremor of excitement rushing through her body when she saw her handsome new neighbour: "[Kassim] was almost six feet tall. Somehow she had known he'd be tall. He was ramrod straight, smooth shaven, golf-tanned and smiling. Such a smile; she was disarmed. He couldn't have been more than thirty-five years old and was well-dressed... her new neighbour was so good looking" (Karim, 'Neighbours' 120). When Kassim finally comes over for tea, Datin Sarina admits that she is extremely excited (albeit with a tinge of jealousy) about the prospect of meeting Kassim's "wife," who turns out to be her close relative.

[Sarina] Encik Kassim, I do hope that your *wife* will do me the pleasure of calling on me when *the family* has settled in. Please don't be afraid to ask for any help. I understand how tiring it is to be moving house.

[Kassim] I will tell her... actually my mother says she is related to you, Datin; her mother is Datin's cousin (Karim, 'Neighbours' 124; emphases added).

What is most notable here is that Kassim (at least in Datin Sarina's eyes) epitomizes the dominant Malay male subjectivity. This is mainly because Kassim presents himself as a heterosexual Malay man who has fulfilled the requirements necessary to become a full-fledged member of the Malay community, including entering into marriage and

becoming a husband and the head of his household. But I would like to argue strongly that Kassim adopts specific strategies in constructing his own notions of being a Malay man. This is especially true when Kassim takes on a heterosexual public identity as a way of identifying and portraying himself in relation to others (particularly to his neighbours, Datin Sarina and Datuk Mus) whilst simultaneously maintaining *both* a private homosexual identity *and* a conjugal relationship with a “pondan.” Such strategic renegotiations of a homosexual private identity *and* a heterosexual public identity are central to the complex processes of self-identification and self-assertion among some (if not many) gay men in the contemporary world.⁵ Many gay male informants in Steven Seidman’s ethnographic study, for instance, claimed that they identified themselves publically as heterosexual as a way of resolving the conflict between their sexuality and the social expectations about marriage and raising a family (36). Seidman contends further that the gay male informants, whom he interviewed for his research, were also able to fit into the heterosexual world by consistently projecting a heterosexual public image whilst simultaneously concealing their homosexual identity (36). While I agree with Seidman’s findings on gay men’s strategic renegotiations of heterosexual *and* homosexual identities, I would like to point out that Kassim does not simply adopt a public heterosexual persona as a means of resolving the tensions which arise from the social and familial pressures for marriage. I believe that Kassim is able to construct his own narratives of Malayness, which radically reshape and redefine pedagogical conceptions of Malay ethnicity, precisely through his strategic reassertions of public heterosexual *and* private homosexual identities. What it means to be “Malay” for Kassim is not configured and sustained through gender and sexual normativities in Malay society simply because he defines his own sense of Malayness in terms of male same-sex sexuality. The very projection of a public

heterosexual persona, in my view, probably functions as a veil or a screen that Kassim uses to protect himself against societal discrimination on the basis of his sexuality. Moreover, being a Malay man for Kassim is obviously not constructed on the widely held notion that Malay men *must* marry socially approved members of the opposite sex. This is because Kassim establishes and asserts his own visions of a Malay male subjectivity through a conjugal relationship with his “pondan” wife. What I find particularly interesting is that the fictive marriage between Kassim and his “pondan” wife presents a same-sex sexual subversion to the institution of heterosexual marriage which has been culturally and religiously sanctified as a legitimate means of sexual gratification among Malay Muslims in Malaysia. This is precisely true when this fictive marriage opens up a space for “queer” where gay Malay men radically transgress traditional normative expectations concerning Malay men by developing male same-sex erotic and emotional relations that are “haram” (religiously prohibited”) in Islam.

I would also like to point out that the story ‘Neighbours’ by Karim Raslan not only demonstrates how queer-identified Malay men challenge and transform pedagogical narratives of Malayness, but conveys important insights into the various ways in which queer-identified Malay men subvert and radically reshape dominant local understandings of queerness. This is clearly in line with one the aims of my study, which is to fill the gaps in the literature on indigenous queer identities and cultural formations by examining how queer-identified Malays redress received ideas about queer sexualities in local contexts. The subversion of dominant local ideas about queerness can be seen in the shocking revelation of Kassim’s true identity at the turning point of the story. This takes place when Datin Sarina spies on Kassim and his “wife” through their bedroom window. As Datin Sarina recalls vividly the incident:

“[Kassim’s wife] or at least what she thought was a woman, had a penis of her own that was also erect. It was a *pondan*...[Kassim’s wife] pulled herself out suddenly and slapped Encik Kassim hard across the buttocks as if he were a fat kerbau and sneered...Encik Kassim, moaned like a woman (Karim, ‘Neighbours’ 130-131).⁶

Although this incident has put Datin Sarina to shame for prying into her neighbours’ privacy, I find that the shocking discovery is important because it demonstrates that Kassim and his “wife” revise settled beliefs regarding male same-sex sexuality, desires, and practices in present-day Malaysia. For instance, there is a common assumption among many ethnic Malays *and* members of the local gay Malay community that “straight-acting” gay Malay men *must* always take the dominant, penetrative role in same-sex sexual relations. This is mainly because taking the passive, receptive position has locally been associated and conflated with being “pondan” (“effeminate”/“sissy”). The “hypermasculine” Kassim strongly undermines this assumption by taking and even enjoying the receptive role in anal intercourse with his partner. What makes it interesting is that Kassim does not regard himself a “sissy” for doing so. As Ann Cvetkovich rightly asserts with regard to sexual binary categories or “sexualized dichotomies” (e.g. top/bottom, dominant/submissive) that remain prevalent in lesbian and gay relationships: “being penetrated need not always represent being topped or dominated [simply because] the “feminized” experience of “getting fucked” or of being sexually “receptive” cannot be reduced to a single consistent meaning” (133, 135). The same holds true for Kassim (and, perhaps, other gay Malay men) who cannot be locally designated as a “sissy” just because he enjoys “getting fucked.” This means that being sexually “penetrated” by other men can conjure up a *multitude* of meanings for many members of the local gay Malay community.

Kassim's "wife," on the other hand, subverts normative notions of same-sex sexual practice among "pondans" ("effeminate men") and "mak nyahs" ("male-to-female transvestites") in Malaysia. Many "pondans" and "mak nyahs" claim that they must assume feminine roles in their intimate relationships with other men simply because they have come to regard and think of themselves as "women." The self-identified "mak nyahs," Khartini Slamah, admits that "[a]s mak nyahs, we had accepted some of the conditioning that in a sexual relationship there needs to be someone in the "male" role and someone in the "female" role – a "husband" and a "wife" (101). Kassim's wife radically subverts such a conditioning by playing the active, penetrating role in same-sex sexual acts. My whole point here is that some queer-identified Malay men (Kassim and his "wife" in particular) challenge received ideas about same-sex sexuality in local contexts. I say this because the various sexual roles Kassim and his "wife" play in same-sex sexual relations demonstrate that what it means to be a "queer" for some queer-identified Malay man cannot always be expressed through dominant local conceptions of "gay" and "pondan" (i.e. that being "gay" is always masculine, and "pondan" feminine). Judith Butler has pointed out that, "gender and sexuality are performative, rather than fixed or determined by biology or 'nature'" (*Gender Trouble* 25). This means that gender and sexuality are not biologically determined and/or naturally given, but are constantly fluid and shifting as the result of one's performance of varied and multiple gender and sexual roles. Sexual roles, like gender ones, then, are performative, rather than fixed or innate. Performing the active, penetrative or the anal, receptive role in the case of some queer-identified Malay men cannot be conflated with an "innate" same-sex sexual identity. For instance, a self-identified "straight acting" gay Malay man cannot always be equated with being the penetrative partner in anal intercourse between men. The same can be said of how "pondans" and "mak nyahs"

cannot always be equated with being the receptive partner in same-sex sexual relation. It is possible to say that the story 'Neighbours' fills an important gap in the scholarship on local queer sexualities by demonstrating different, yet possible ways that gay Malay men, "pondans," and "mak nyahs" can play sexually.

Love, Sex, and Relationship: Gay Malay Man in the City in Abdul Aziz's Short Story, 'From the Journal of Azlan Muhammad'

Abdul Aziz is a young Malay Muslim writer who originally hails from Sibu, a town in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Abdul's short story, 'From the Journal of Azlan Muhammad' was first published in *Silverfish New Writing 3*, an anthology of fictional works by new writers from Malaysia and beyond. I find that the story is important because it provides useful information on the strategies used by self-identified gay Malay men in forging their own versions of being "Malay." Azlan, the main character of the story, formulates his own ethnic identity by defining himself primarily in terms of male same-sex sexuality and his close attachment to the local gay community. This is especially true when the story reveals that Azlan lives an openly gay life in Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, where he socializes mostly with other gay-identified men, particularly his two best friends, Juan and Terry. Azlan even goes to the extent of using the phrase "all in the name of sisterhood" (Abdul, 'From the Journal' 117) to describe his close *and* mutually supportive relationships with Juan and Terry, which resembles those between sisters/women. Interestingly, the story also reveals that Azlan is on a quest for love and happiness, which he seeks to achieve by finding the right "man" who is willing to commit fully to a long-term, male same-sex relationship. What is worth noting here is the strategy Azlan specifically employs to create his own sense of self-identification as a Malay man. This is can be readily observed in the ways

in which Azlan gives more prominence to male same-sex sexuality and desire in establishing his own notions of being a Malay man. Such queer notions of being “Malay” challenge pedagogical narratives of Malay ethnicity, especially when Azlan does not comply with cultural expectations of masculinity and marriage (both of which are crucial for the formation of pedagogical conceptions of Malayness), but instead uses male same-sex sexuality as a means of asserting his own sense of Malayness.

It is necessary to point out that the story ‘From the Journal of Azlan Muhammad’ by Abdul Aziz not only demonstrates how gay-identified Malay men reshape and transform received ideas about Malay ethnicity, but offers useful information about the diverse ways in which gay-identified Malay men redress dominant local understandings of gayness. Such information is crucial to my study, which aims to fill up the lacunae in the literature on indigenous queer identities and cultures by demonstrating how queer-identifying Malay men and women resist and revise dominant narratives about being “queer” in non-western indigenous contexts such as Malaysia. Male same-sex sexuality in modern, Muslim-majority Malaysia has always been officially conflated with sin and same-sex sexual acts (i.e. sodomy). The former top officer of Malaysia’s Islamic Affairs Department, Abdul Kadir Che Kob, claims that “[male same-sex sexuality] is a sin, end of story. How can men have sex with men? God did not make them this way.” (qtd. in Williams 10) I strongly disagree with Abdul Kadir’s view mainly because male same-sex sexuality in Malaysia cannot always be equated with same-sex sexual practices. This is because Azlan disrupts such an equation by placing a strong emphasis on developing a long-term, loving, *and* committed relationship with a man. Azlan clearly states that, “[I do not] hunger for sex anymore. Commitment is the new quest in [my] life” (Abdul, ‘From the Journal’ 120). What is evidenced here is that male same-

sex sexual practices are not the only paradigm for thinking about gayness locally simply because notions of being “gay,” as felt and practiced by Azlan, are more readily defined in terms of same-sex affectional and romantic relationship. This corroborates Matt Mutchler’s contention that many young gay men in the contemporary world organize their lives and identities around romantic love, *in addition to* erotic adventure, safer sex, and sexual coercion (qtd. in Plummer 188). I would also like to argue that Azlan and other gay men in Abdul Aziz’s short story redress dominant local ideas about male same-sex sexuality, particularly those with regard to male same-sex erotic acts and gay bars. In an article entitled “Homosexual’s Life of Moral Decadence,” the secretary-general of the Malaysian Muslim Consumer Association (PPIM), Datuk Dr Maamor Osman, claims that “(male) homosexuality” is on the rise in Malaysia, following the recent expansion of gay *and* gay friendly bars and clubs in cosmopolitan centres throughout the country.⁷ Dr Maamor asserts further that there is always a strong tendency among local gay men to “perform homosexual acts” in these gay bars and clubs. The president of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Yusri Mohamad, who strongly concurs with Dr Maamor’s view, urges the police and local authorities to take immediate action against gay bar and club owners for opening up avenues where local gay men gather and engage in “homosexual acts.”⁸ But I disagree with Dr Maamor and Yusri’s arguments against male same-sex sexuality mainly because gay bars and clubs cannot be perceived solely as a place for local gay men to meet up and have sex. To equate gay bars and clubs with sex dismisses the fact that they function as a critical space for local gay men to develop social and/or political bonds with other self-identified gay men, especially when male same-sex sexuality remains subject to governmental control and surveillance in present-day Malaysia. Carol Warren, for instance, rightly asserts that, “[gay bars] are not only used to make sexual

contacts, *but to expand the circle of sociability*” (184; emphasis added). Azlan’s closest friend, Juan, for instance, complains that, “[i]t’s not everyday that I get to come down [to Kuala Lumpur]. Tomorrow it’s back to Sungai Petani. And they don’t have gay bars there– I’m dying here!” (Abdul, ‘From the Journal’ 116)⁹ Juan’s sense of agony and desperation reinforces Warren’s assertion (and also my own) that gay bar and other gay venues in metropolitan centres such as Kuala Lumpur are crucial for the process of socialization among gay men. This is particularly true when gay bar and other gay venues become a site in which local gay men are able to expand the circle of sociability by organizing social activities with much comfort and ease, and establishing and maintaining social support systems and social networks with other gay men from the local gay community.¹⁰

“I am a Muslim, too...”: Pious Gay Malay Men and Lesbian Malay Women in Dina Zaman’s Book, *I am Muslim*

Dina Zaman is a Malaysian Malay Muslim writer and editor whose works have appeared in one of Malaysia’s leading English-language newspapers, *The New Straits Times*, and on the popular local news websites, *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider*.¹¹ Dina is also well known both locally and internationally for her fictional works which have appeared in *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No. 2: The Pen is Mightier than the Sword* and in her first anthology of short fiction, entitled *night & day*.¹² Dina’s most recent nonfiction book, *I am Muslim*, explores diverse, competing views among many self-identified Muslims in Malaysia (most of whom are Malays) on Islam and what it means to be “Muslim.” The book, which comprises Dina’s short articles that were mostly published on *Sajakkini* and *Malaysiakini*’s websites, is divided into four main sections: “Travels in Faith,” “Sex within Islam,” “Soul Searching,” and

“Portraits.” I consider the article, entitled ‘It’s a Muslim Issue: How Gay Are You?’ in the second section of the book, to be an important piece which highlights the various strategies used by gay Malay men and lesbian Malay women in formulating a queer Malay identity, and the ways in which gay Malay men and lesbian Malay women revise and radically redefine pedagogical conceptions of Malayness.

Haji Zainal Abidin, whom Dina had interviewed for this article, is a 35-year-old businessman who identifies himself as a gay Malay man.¹³ As Haji Zainal asserts: “[the] thing is, I don’t see myself in conflict with God...The [Quran] talks about how God creates perfection. So if you’re born handicapped – without an arm or leg, or you’re blind; that in God’s eyes is perfection itself. My homosexuality as far as I’m concerned, is perfection in God’s eyes. I didn’t ask to be gay. I was born gay. I never knew anything else.” (Dina, *I am Muslim* 107).¹⁴ What is most notable here the strategy that Haji Zainal specifically adopts in constructing his own notion being “Malay.” This can be seen in the way Haji Zainal reconciles his sexuality with his religious faith and finds no difficulty in doing so. This is mainly because Haji Zainal views his sexuality and male same-sex sexuality in particular as a unique creation and a natural endowment by God, which must be acknowledged and embraced, rather than rejected and judged. Such a positive outlook on same-sex sexuality amplifies Andrew Yip’s contention that many queer-identified Muslims, particularly those whom he discussed in his ethnographic research, believe that their sexuality is God’s creation and, therefore, is not inseparable from their sense of self and identity. “Sexuality (for many queer-identified Muslims),” as Yip posits, “is a ‘gift,’ and flawlessly made in the image of God...Sexuality, therefore, should not be isolated from one’s being (e.g., one’s spirituality, emotions, body)” (277). It is, however, important to mention that not *all*

queer-identified Malays living in Malaysia would agree with Haji Zainal and Yip's positive views regarding same-sex sexuality. The lesbian-identified Hajah, whom Dina also interviewed for her article, is a good case in point.¹⁵

Unlike Haji Zainal, Hajah claims that her sexuality is always at odds with her religious beliefs mainly because same-sex sexuality and desire are strictly prohibited and punishable under Islamic law. Hajah contends further that if she embraced her sexuality fully, she would never be able to secure a place in heaven. Moreover, unlike Haji Zainal, Hajah does not regard her sexuality as a divine gift, but has asked God to help her get rid of it completely. The only problem is that Hajah cannot contain, nor eliminate fully, her feelings and desires for women. As Hajah confesses:

I don't know what to do. When I went to Mecca for my Hajj, I prayed to God to take away my sexuality, make me normal, because no matter how hard I try to justify myself, the [Quran] does not sanction homosexuality. But when I came back... imagine. It's been years since I've been on a date with a woman. I go off for my second pilgrimage and wham! Women everyway!

What do I do? (Dina, *I am Muslim* 106)

The unresolved tension between Hajah's religious beliefs and her sexual desires is similarly experienced by "tudung lesbians" who are also featured in Dina's article. "Tudung lesbians," as Dina notes, are young, Muslim lesbian women (most of whom are Malays) who wear the "hijab"/"tudung" ("head scarves").¹⁶ While acknowledging that the act of donning the "hijab"/"tudung" conjures a wide range of meanings to Muslim women in Malaysia, "tudung lesbians" wear the "hijab"/"tudung" as a way of fulfilling their religious obligation; that is, to protect and preserve their modesty by covering their "aurah"/"aurat" ("a woman's entire body with the exception of her face

and hands”). More importantly, “tudung lesbians” put on the “hijab”/”tudung” to demonstrate their obedience and devotion to God. Such a profound sense of religiosity, which has become the foundation of “tudung lesbians” self-identity, is largely molded by the ways in which “tudung lesbians” have been raised in religious families that instilled strong moral and religious values. But the only problem is that “tudung lesbians” continue to desire women and find that such desire is always in conflict with their strong moral and religious upbringings. “Tudung lesbians”, as Dina writes, “were confused and frightened. They asked me the same question: how could they be gay when they were brought up as good Muslims? They wore scarves, they didn’t mess about, they prayed they were good daughters and friends, *but they desired only women*” (*I am Muslim* 110; emphasis added).

Dina’s discussion of Hajah and “tudung lesbian” reveals the tensions and conflicts queer-identified Malays often experience in constructing and articulating their own notions of self and identity. In other words, Dina demonstrates that, while some queer-identified Malays (e.g. Haji Zainal) are able to identity and realign themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” by strategically embracing *both* queerness *and* religion, other queer-identified Malays (e.g. Hajah and “tudung lesbians”) are not able to do so because they cannot resolve the dissonance between their religious faiths and their sexuality. This helps elucidate the point I’m trying to make in this chapter and throughout this study that queer-identified Malays often experience difficulties in asserting and inhabiting their own sense of Malay identity, which they specifically create based on their lived experiences of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” It is not wrong to say that the processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malay men and women living within the national borders of Malaysia are fraught with *both*

possibilities *and* limitations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, has pointed out that self-identification is a complex process which is rife with immense potentialities *and* complications. This is because the very act of identifying is constantly inflected by multiple forms of identification, which include one's identification *with* and one's identification *as against*. As Sedgwick posits, "[a]fter all, to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, loss, reparation, and disavowal" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 61; original emphases). Although Sedgwick problematizes the notion of identification in relation to women and gay men in the West, I find that her discussion of identification *as*, identification *with*, and identification *as against* can be used to explain the complex processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays in Malaysia. Haji Zainal, for instance, opens up the possibility of forging and sustaining a gay Malay identity through his identification *with* male same-sex sexuality and religion. More importantly, Haji Zainal is able to identify himself unproblematically and unconditionally as a gay Malay man because he does not consider his identification *with* religion and male same-sex sexuality to be at odds with each other. As Haji Zainal asserts, "I am very comfortable being a Muslim who happens to be gay" (Dina, *I am Muslim* 107) "Tudung lesbians" and Hajah, on the other hand, also open up the potentiality of formulating a lesbian Malay identity through their identifications *with* female same-sex sexuality and religion. But because of their strong religious beliefs and religious upbringings, "tudung lesbians" and Hajah often experience difficulties in resolving the tension between their identifications *with* same-sex sexuality and their Islamic faith. This unresolved tension and its attendant emotional effects including

anxiety, fear, and confusion have caused “tudung lesbians” and Hajah to identify themselves *as against* “lesbian.” In other words, “tudung lesbians” and Hajah desire women, but because they believe that these desires are unacceptable in Islam, they find it hard to embrace their lesbianity, to the extent that they are not able to identify themselves fully as “lesbians.” To complicate matters, some “tudung lesbians” whom Dina interviewed for her article identify themselves *as against* “lesbian” because they view and define themselves more in terms of their relationships with others including family, friends, and God. As one “tudung lesbian” states, “I’m trying to define who I am, not just in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God. I talk to some people, they say to me, if you’re gay, you’re gay, just embrace it. *I can’t, I think a lot about religion.*” (Dina, *I am Muslim* 112; emphasis added).

It is essential to note that Dina’s discussion of queer-identified Malays’ actual lived experiences and material conditions also offers further insights into the ways in which queer-identified Malays radically reshape and redefine pedagogical conceptualisations of Malayness. Haji Zainal and Hajah, for example, disrupt dominant notions of “Haji” and “Hajah” as understood by many Malay Muslims in Malaysia. “Haji (for men) or “Hajah” (for women) is a term which is often used to denote Malay Muslims who have fulfilled their religious obligations of performing the fifth pillar of Islam; that is, the Hajj. Many Malay Muslims have come to associate the terms “Haji” and “Hajah” with piety and submission to God. Interestingly, Malay Muslims who have completed the Hajj often demonstrate their sense of piety by assuming a religious persona which is visibly expressed through various external markers. William R. Roff, for instance, notes that many Malay Muslim men would put on white skull caps as a way of asserting their “Haji” status (38). Roff maintains further that some Malay Muslims,

who have returned from their pilgrimage to Mecca would express their “Haji” or “Hajah” status in a variety of ways, including wearing Arab clothing and taking more “Islamic” names to suit their new status denoted by the title “Haji” or “Hajah” (49). I would like to argue that Haji Zainal and Hajah undermine and revise dominant pedagogical configurations of “Haji”/“Hajah” by creating new and radical notions of being “Haji”/“Hajah.” This is particularly true when Haji Zainal and Hajah continue to sustain their Islamic status and religious faiths without necessarily denouncing their sexuality and/or desires for members of the same sex. The same holds true for “tudung lesbians” who radically subvert hegemonic ways of thinking about the act of donning the “hijab”/“tudung” among Muslim women within Malaysian national territory. Many Muslims in Malaysia, as discussed earlier, have come to regard the act of wearing the “hijab” /“tudung” as a way of showing their obedience to God and as a means of preserving and protecting Muslim women’s chastity and modesty. More importantly, Malay Muslim women who don the “hijab”/“tudung” are often perceived by the dominant Malay Muslim community to be heterosexual women of good moral character and with strong religious convictions. “Tudung lesbians,” however, revise and redefine received ideas about “hijab”/ “tudung” by continuing to put on the “hijab”/“tudung” to fulfill their obligations as Muslims whilst simultaneously sustaining their feelings and desires for women. Even Dina herself was, at first, shocked when she learned about “tudung lesbians”:

What struck me was my ignorance and small-mindedness pertaining to this matter: I actually thought that there was no way a girl in a *tudung* could be homosexual. *You’re wearing a tudung, for crying out loud, you have taken a divine oath to be a good Muslim, you can’t be lesbian.* Later I thought, what you wear and practise has no bearing on the person who you really are (*I am Muslim* 110; original emphasis).

I believe that Dina's concluding remark is important because it demonstrates that notions of being "Malay" *and* "Muslim" as felt and experienced by "tudung lesbians" cannot simply be defined in terms of religious markers and practices. This is because female same-sex sexuality, religious obligations, and external religious markers (i.e. "tudung"/"hijab") constitute an important part of their identity as Malay Muslim women. The same can be said of Haji Zainal and Hajah whose notions of being "Malay" *and* "Muslim" cannot be configured through religious symbols and practices. This is because Haji Zainal and Hajah use *both* their sexuality *and* the title "Haji"/"Hajah" as a means of identifying and realigning themselves as pious, queer Malay Muslims in the Malay Muslim community. The point here is not to question the significance of "hijab"/ "tudung"/ "Haji"/ "Hajah" as religious markers of Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia. What I'm trying to do here is to show that "tudung lesbians," Haji Zainal, and Hajah offer a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be "Malay" *and* "Muslim." This is vividly portrayed in the ways in which "tudung lesbians," Haji Zainal, and Hajah construct their own ethnic identity through sexual difference while simultaneously maintaining cultural and religious features of Malayness. Such new and radical ways of being "Malay" buttress my contention that Malay ethnicity cannot be constructed solely through cultural, religious, gender, *and* sexual normativities simply because many ethnic Malays (queer-identifying Malay men and women in particular) are not just "Muslims" who who practise Malay traditions and customs, but organize their lives and identities around same-sex sexuality, desires, and practices.

My analysis of representations of queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature has demonstrated that literary works by Malaysian Malay writers function as

a site for “queer” where they discuss and convey diverse performative ideas about being “Malay,” which challenge and redefine dominant pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnic identity. This corroborates the overall aim of the thesis which attempts to show how Malays, particularly queer-identified Malays in “popular forms of expression” such as contemporary Malaysian literature, redress received narratives of Malayness by forging performative notions of being “Malay.” Queer-identified Malays in the works of Abdul Aziz, Dina Zaman, and Karim Raslan employed a wide range of strategies in formulating their own ethnic identities. These strategies include placing more emphasis on same-sex sexuality and desire, and embracing both sexuality and religion. Such “queer” notions of Malay ethnic identity radically reshape pedagogical conceptions of Malayness, which are configured and sustained through the Malay culture and religion, as well as normative expectations of gender and sexuality as enforced by the dominant Malay Muslim community. My analysis of literary representations of queer-identified Malays also shows that contemporary Malaysian literature functions a site where Malaysian Malay writers discuss the tensions and conflicts queer-identified Malays often experience in asserting and inhabiting their own visions of Malayness. This, too, is crucial for the study which attempts to find out how queer-identified Malays construct and articulate their identities and the various material implications of doing so. Such tensions and conflicts can be seen in the form of the dissonance between same-sex sexuality and religion, which has become a major obstacle to some queer-identified Malays who wish to assert identities marked by queerness, but are not able to do so because of their strong religious convictions and/or religious upbringings. It would be interesting, for future research on queer Malay identities, to find out the strategies queer-identifying Malay men and women specifically employ in resolving the difficulties, conflicts, and anxieties which arise

from the producing and asserting a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity. This, I believe, may provide more useful insights into the complex processes of self-identification and self-assertion among queer-identified Malays in modern-day Malaysia.

Notes

¹ These series include *Ceritalah: Malaysia in Transition*, *Ceritalah 2: Journeys through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2*, *Ceritalah 3: Malaysia: A Dream Deferred*, and *Ceritalah Indonesia*.

² It is pertinent to note that the lives of many Malays in Malaysia are still governed and regulated by complex codes of behaviour and etiquette (“adab”). This is especially true when Malay society places a strong emphasis on respect, esteem, sensitivity towards others’ needs, and social restraints on behaviour in *both* the public *and* private domains (Carr 205). Phrases such as “tak boleh” (“not allowed”), “tak halus” (“unrefined”), and “tak manis” (“unpleasant”) are often used to describe one’s failure to adhere to and demonstrate the standards of proper Malay behaviour. See, for instance, Alwi bin Sheikh Alhadi’s book, *Malay Customs and Traditions* and Cathrine Lim GS’s *Gateway to Malay Culture* for their elaborate discussions of the Malay concept of social behaviour.

³ The word “Tuan” here means “master” and is used by the workers not only to address, but to show their respect to Mahmud as the manager of the plantation estate. Interestingly, the word “Tuan” continues to be used as a title of respect for certain high officials or people of high social ranks as it did in the past. This is especially true when the term “Tuan” (“master”) was commonly used by indigenous people to refer to colonial officials and foreigners.

⁴ The word “Datuk” (for men) and the word “Datin” (for women) are non-hereditary honorific state titles, which are conferred by a ruler or a governor who is appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (“head of the Malaysian nation-state”). The wife of a “Datuk” is a “Datin.” For more discussion of Malay styles and titles, see, for instance, Abdullah Ali’s *Malaysian Protocol and Correct Forms of Address*.

⁵ See Steven Seidman’s *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* for his discussion of the negotiations of identities among gay men and lesbians in the America.

⁶ “Kerbau” is a Malay word “buffalo.”

⁷ See Datuk Dr Maamor Osman’s view on homosexuality in Malaysia in Melati Mohd Ariff’s article, entitled “Homosexual’s Life of Moral Decadence” at

<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news_lite.php?id=344763>.

⁸ See Yusri Mohamad’s ideas about homosexual acts in non-western indigenous locales such as in Malaysia in Melati Mohd Ariff’s article “Homosexual’s Life of Moral Decadence” at

<http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news_lite.php?id=344763>.

⁹ Sungai Petani is a town in the Malaysian state of Kedah.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Gerald P. Mallon's *Social Work Practice with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People*, for more discussion of gay bar and other gay establishments as site for social support among gay men.

¹¹ See The New Straits Times' website at <<http://www.nst.com.my/>>, Malaysiakini's official website at <<http://malaysiakini.com/>>., and The Malaysian Insider's official website at <<http://themalaysianinsider.com/>>.

¹² See Skoob Pacifica at <<http://www.skoob.com/pub/pacifica/index.html>>.

¹³ The Arabic word "Haji" is an honorific title given to Muslim men who have completed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

¹⁴ Haji Zainal's equation of homosexuality with being handicapped could be considered as being problematic. This is because such an equation reinforces the widely held belief among many Malaysian Malays that being gay is "cacat" ("handicapped", "disabled"). Many Malays living in Malaysia believe that despite being endowed by God with male reproductive organs, gay Malay men are "cacat" because of their inability to establish sexual relations with women (hence their inability to reproduce and procreate). But I would like to argue strongly that not *all* Malay gay men equate being gay with being handicapped. Gay Malay men whom I know do not see themselves as "handicapped" or as having physical disabilities. Some of these gay Malay men knew that they were gay when they were very young and have long embraced their sexuality as an important part of their lives. Other Malay gay men view their sexuality as a constant source of conflict rather than a physical or mental defect. This is especially evidenced when some Malay gay men find that being "different" from the norm is always in conflict with cultural and familial expectations placed on them as Malay Muslim men. My point here is to show that Haji Zainal's problematic equation is one *but* not the only way to understand gay Malay men's perceptions of homosexuality and what it means to be gay in Malaysia.

¹⁵ The Arabic word "Hajah" is an honorific title given to Muslim women who have successfully performed the haj.

¹⁶ The Arabic word "hijab," and the Malay word "tudung," are used interchangeably in Malaysia to refer to women's headscarf.

Chapter 3 What Does It Mean to Be “Queer” *and* “Malay”? : Exploring the Construction of Queer Malay Identities in Contemporary Malaysian Culture

The influence of Western ideas and cultures on these new imaginings of Asian homoeroticism is complex. Western gay/lesbian styles and terminology have often been appropriated as strategies to resist local heteronormative strictures and carve out new local spaces. However, these appropriations have not reflected a wholesale recreation of Western sexual cultures in Asian contexts, but instead suggest a selective and strategic use of foreign forms to create new ways of being Asian and homosexual.

–Peter A. Jackson, *Pre-Gay, Post-Queer: Thai Perspectives on Proliferating Gender/Sex Diversity in Asia*

What does it mean to be “queer” *and* “Malay” in modern-day Malaysia? In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that there are various ways in which queer-identified Malays specifically created their own notions of ethnic identity. This is particularly notable in the case of queer-identified Malay men and women in literary works by Malaysian Malay writers who employed diverse strategies in constructing their own sense of Malayness. I want to extend my discussion of queer Malay identity construction by focusing on the complex processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays in the works of Malaysian Malay scholars and filmmakers. More specifically, in this chapter I want to further explore and analyse how queer-identified Malay men and women in ethnographic studies by Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah, and in queer-themed films by Osman Ali and Amy Ikram Ismail, formulate their own visions of being “Malay.” My decision to focus on the works of Malaysian Malay scholars and filmmakers is largely motivated by the fact that they present *multiple* performative ideas about being “Malay.” What is more important is that these performative ideas are derived from the scholars and filmmakers’ own personal observations and reflections on the processes of

identity production among queer-identified Malays. This clearly corresponds with Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's assertion that everyday-defined (or performative) ideas about being "Malay" often take multiple forms of expression including ethnic Malays' personal narratives of their lives and identities (which are documented by anthropologists and historians of Malay society), *and* popular forms of expression or popular culture (e.g. songs, poems, and short stories). I would like to broaden Shamsul's assertion by pointing out that popular forms of expression also include queer-themed films by Malaysian Malay filmmakers. This is mainly because, queer-themed films also function as a means through which local filmmakers discuss queer-identified Malays' performative ideas about being "Malay" and the various ways in which queer-identified Malays challenge dominant pedagogical conceptions of Malay ethnicity. By broadening the idea of popular forms of expression to include queer-themed films enables this study to realize its central aim; that is, to examine how queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature *and* culture redress received narratives of Malayness.

My analysis of queer-identified Malays in the works of Malaysian Malay scholars and filmmakers is divided into two parts: First, I will examine queer-identifying Malay men and women's personal narratives of their lives and identities, which are documented in ethnographic studies by Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah. This will be followed by an analysis of self-identified gay and bisexual Malay men, and "mak nyahs" ("male-to-female transvestites) who are featured in the film *Bukak Api* by Osman Ali, and the film *Comolot* by Amy Ikram Ismail." The overall aim of the analysis is to explore and examine multiple strategies employed by queer-identified Malays (particularly those represented in ethnographic studies and local queer-themed films) in inventing their

own ethnic identities and the ways in which they subvert and radically reshape pedagogical narratives of Malayness that are produced and sustained through cultural, religious, gender, *and* sexual normativities. My analysis also includes an examination of the tensions and conflicts which arise from creating and expressing a Malay ethnic identity marked by queerness. This is particularly true when the processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays living in Malaysia are intimately entwined with indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices. I will specifically show how concepts such as such as “halal/haram” (“religiously lawful/unlawful”), “nafsu/akal” (“passion/reason”), “dosa/taubat” (“sin/repentance”), and “dunia/akhirat” (“this world/the afterlife”), which have become deeply ingrained in the minds and in the lives of queer-identified Malays, present a major obstacle to the formation and articulation of a Malay identity marked by queerness. The analysis is important because it helps validate one of the central assertions of my thesis; that is, the various material implications of defining and asserting oneself as “queer” *and* “Malay” in present-day Malaysia.

Defining Oneself as “Queer” *and* “Malay”: Queer-identified Malay Men and Women in Ethnographic Studies by Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah

Ismail Baba’s article, entitled “Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia,” which was simultaneously published in *Journal of Homosexuality* and *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, in my view, is important because it highlights and discusses various psychosocial issues pertaining to self-acceptance, social isolation, role models, and socialization process which deeply affect interracial same-sex erotic and affectional relationships in modern-day Malaysia. Although Ismail does not directly address issues relating to queer Malay identity-formation, I find that his

discussion of queer-identified Malays who are involved in these relationships is very useful because it provides important insights into the complex processes of queer Malay identity creation. In this article, Ismail analyzes three long-term, interracial same-sex intimate relationships: two gay male couples (Azlan and Ramli; Roslan and his Chinese partner, Lee) and one lesbian couple (Rokiah and her Caucasian spouse, Susan). These same-sex couples are in their mid-30s and 40s and come from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. For instance, Roslan, Lee, Azlan, and Susan are all working professionals, while Ramli works as a mechanic and Rokiah runs her own small food business. Ramli, Roslan, Rokiah, and Azlan (all of whom are Malay Muslims) align themselves with dominant narratives of Malayness by adhering to the standard teachings of Islam, and by fulfilling cultural and religious expectations of masculinity/femininity. For example, Rokiah, Ramli, and Roslan have complied with both social and familial expectations of marriage. These marriages, however, all ended in divorce. Rokiah, a single parent with four children, had few unsuccessful marriages while Roslan had been married once and has a six year old son who now lives with his former wife. Ramli, on the other hand, had at least three failed marriages. Rokiah, Roslan, and Ramli all claim that they got married because heterosexual marriage is expected of Malay men and women. Rokiah, as Ismail notes, maintains that Malay women are expected to enter into marriage because being “single” is always frowned upon by many members of the dominant Malay Muslim community. This is especially true when Malays must enter into a legitimate marriage with socially approved members of the opposite sex and bear or adopt children in order to be accepted and recognized as a full-fledged (heterosexual) member of the Malay Muslim community (Peletz, *Reason and Passion* 304). Rokiah probably got married because she wanted to be accepted and acknowledged as a legitimate member of her community. Interestingly,

Rokiah, Ramli, and Roslan have been able to maintain intimate relationships with their same-sex partners over the years, to the extent that these relationships are much more important than their heterosexual marriages. Ramli's relationship with Azlan, as Ismail points out, was disrupted when Ramli decided to get married (as a result of societal pressure) for the third time. The marriage, however, lasted for three years mainly because Ramli was not happy and realized that his happiness lies with Azlan (Ismail 153). Although Azlan, Roslan, Ramli, and Rokiah are self-identified Muslims, they differ greatly in their religious beliefs and practices. For instance, unlike Azlan and Ramli, whom Ismail describes as "not religious" (153), Roslan is a devout Muslim who performs regularly the "solat" ("obligatory daily Muslim prayers") and observes the annual fast during the month of Ramadhan; two of the important pillars of Islam (151). Rokiah, on the other hand, admits that there is always a conflict between her sexuality and her Islamic faith. Rokiah claims that she is often confused about how to live her life as a lesbian woman mainly because Islam disqualifies and invalidates lesbianism, particularly the deviant practice of "musahaqah" ("lesbian sex") (Ismail 150). Azlan and Roslan, however, do not find themselves in conflict with religion, but have embraced *both* their religious beliefs *and* sexuality as a way of living in this world as "gay," "Malay," *and* "Muslim." Azlan, for instance, believes that "there is nothing wrong with being gay and sees any act of love between men or women as the work of God" (Ismail 152).

What is worth noting here is that queer-identified Malays adopt various strategies in creating their own notions of being "Malay." This is readily observed in the ways in which queer-identified Malays in Ismail Baba's ethnographic study construct their own sense of Malayness through strategic renegotiations of ethnicity, Islamic faith, and

same-sex sexuality. For example, some queer-identified Malays reconcile their sexuality with their religious beliefs, while others fulfil dominant expectations of heterosexual marriage whilst simultaneously engaging in same-sex relationships in defining themselves as “Malay.” Such nuanced ways of being “Malay,” which are forged through queer-identified Malays’ strategic reconciliations of their sexuality and ethnic and religious heritages, redefine and radically transform dominant pedagogical conceptions of Malayness. This is especially true when pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnic identity are built upon culturally enforced and endorsed beliefs that Malays *must* be heterosexual and maintain socially approved sexual relationships. Queer-identified Malays in Ismail Baba’s research obviously undermine such beliefs by defining themselves as “Malay” and “Muslim” who develop *and* maintain same-sex erotic *and* affectional relationships. Another point worth mentioning is that queer-identified Malays open up the possibility for thinking about Malay ethnic identity as a form of struggle, rather than as something which is fixed, coherent, and/or neatly given. I say this because queer-identified Malays cannot be “neatly” defined as Muslims who practice Malay traditions and customs, and speak Malay. Rokiah, for example, cannot be simply designated as “Malay” because she is constantly struggling to define her own sense of Malayness. Ismail’s research shows that Rokiah cannot resolve the dissonance between being Muslim and being a lesbian, to the extent that she finds it very difficult to identify and assert herself as a lesbian Malay Muslim woman within the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community. Rokiah’s struggle for her own ethnic identity reinforces the idea that being “Malay” is never straightforward and cannot be fully determined by ethnic Malays’ cultural and religious heritages. This, in my view, buttresses the central argument of my study by showing that what it means to be “Malay” for some (if not many) ethnic Malays living within Malaysia’s territorial

boundaries is permeable and therefore, cannot be constructed solely through Malay culture and religion. This is mainly because Malayness is constantly being shaped and reshaped by *multiple* variables, including same-sex sexuality, Malay culture, and Islam.

It is crucial to point out that Ismail Baba's study not only demonstrates how queer-identified Malays radically revise pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnicity, but offers some insights into the production of queer identities and queer cultures in modern-day Malaysia. Such insights are crucial to my thesis which aims to discuss how queer-identified Malays rethink dominant local understandings of queerness. For instance, Ismail maintains that because there are no exact equivalent words for "gay" and "homosexual" in Malay, derogatory terms such as "pondan," "mak nyah," "darai," "bapok," and "kedi" are used predominantly to address effeminate men, male cross-dressers, transvestites, and male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysia (144-145). Ismail maintains further that the term "gay" is often used interchangeably with "pondan" to denote indigenous men who are effeminate, men who prefer men, men who behave like and see themselves as women (145). Ismail also asserts that the term "gay" is used most frequently to describe non-effeminate indigenous gay men who align themselves with the "modern manifestation of homosexuality"; that is, the western standards of masculine gayness (145). While I concur with Ismail that there is no Malay equivalent word for "gay" and "homosexual," I cannot agree with his contention that "gay" is used to refer to "pondan" *and* non-effeminate indigenous gay men. I say this because queer-identified indigenous men create varied *and* competing notions of "pondan" and "gay," which challenge dominant local configurations of "sissiness" and "gayness." For instance, the term "gay" cannot always be used to refer to "pondan" because many self-identified gay Malay men in Malaysia do not identify themselves as "sissy" or

“effeminate.” The same can be said of how the term “gay” does not primarily signify effeminate indigenous men simply because effeminacy is not always a marker of gay male identity in the West. As Robert Alan Brookey, following Kinsey, rightly notes, “(e)ffeminacy cannot be a marker to identify homosexuality, because homosexuality is not a discrete category” (36). This means that effeminacy is one, but not the only, paradigm for thinking about gayness since there are diverse and multiple ways of being “gay” in non-western contexts such as Malaysia. Many Malay men who have come to regard and think of themselves as “gay” dissidentify with, and disengage from, “pondan” because the term “pondan” is often used by the dominant Malay community to shame indigenous men for being “kewanitaan” (“womanly”) and “tidak jantan” (“unmanly”).¹ This corroborates Judith Butler’s assertion that sexuality is regulated through the policing and shaming of gender, particularly with regard to how gay men are often called “feminine” on the basis that they are no longer “real” or “proper” men (*Bodies that Matter* 238). It is the fear of being called “kewanitaan” and “tidak jantan” that explains why many gay-identified Malay men do not regard “pondan” as a marker of their gay identity. This is particularly true when gay-identified Malay men in Ismail’s ethnographic study claim that they are not “pondan” because they do not behave like women or even see themselves as women (Ismail 157).

I would like to redress Ismail’s assertion of the term “gay” by showing that such term cannot be used interchangeably with “pondan” because “mak nyahs” (“male-to-female transsexuals”), who are often referred to as “pondan,” seek to differentiate themselves from gay men whilst simultaneously reclaiming “pondan” in constructing their own notions of self and identity. This is crucial because it demonstrates that many queer-identified Malays in Malaysia resist and revise dominant ideas about local forms of

queerness by formulating their own queer identities. In her article, entitled “The Struggle To Be Ourselves, Neither Men Nor Women: *Mak Nyahs* in Malaysia,” Khartini Slamah maintains that “mak nyah,” which was originally coined in 1987 in conjunction with the formation of the short-lived Association of Transsexuals in Federal Territory, is a term that defines Khartini herself and other transsexuals in Malaysia. As Khartini explains:

The term ‘mak nyah’, which derives from *mak* (mother), was coined in 1987 by Malaysia’s male transsexuals in an attempt to define ourselves. Our attempt at self-definition emerged from two streams: first, a desire to differentiate ourselves from gay men, transvestites, cross-dressers, drag queens and other ‘sexual minorities’, with whom all those who are not heterosexual are automatically lumped; and, second, because we wanted to define ourselves from a vintage point of dignity rather than from the position of derogation in which Malaysian society had located us, with names such as *bapok*, *darai*, *pondan*, and *bantut*, all of which mean ‘men who are effeminate’ (99).²

What is particularly worth noting here is that “mak nyahs” not only distinguish, but also disassociate themselves from “gayness” which Ismail describes as being locally conflated with “pondan.” Although the term “mak nyah” was created because Khartini herself and other transsexuals did not want to be described derogatively as “pondan,” I would like to point out that some “mak nyahs” continue to regard themselves as “pondan.” The transsexual character, Kak Tipah, in Osman Ali’s film *Bukak Api*, for example, claims that she is *both* “mak nyah” *and* “pondan,” and uses these two terms interchangeably in expressing her transsexual identity. Interestingly, Kak Tipah and other “nyahs” reclaim the term “pondan” by dismantling its pejorative associations. This is especially true when “pondan” is reclaimed and performed as a site of resistance, where “nyahs” take on “pondan” with dignity and pride as part of

indigenous tradition by subverting and undermining the homophobia and misogyny (i.e. “tidak jantan”/ “kewanitaan”) that are often associated with it. This, in turn, creates a new site of hybridity where “pondan,” which many “nyahs” regard as a marker of their identity, comes out of Malay culture, but is, at times, layered with western notions of queer, as queer has been reclaimed as agency and defiance in the West. There are also some (if not many) “nyahs” who specifically adopt the strategy of accommodating various and, at times, overlapping identities in creating their own forms of self-identification. As Khartini asserts:

In our community, having sex change operation is not a must to qualify for *mak nyah* status. This is mainly because most *mak nyahs*, who live in conditions of economic marginalization, cannot afford to have sex change operations. Our *mak nyah* identity is fluid enough to encompass the diversities of gender and sexualities. *Mak nyahs* define themselves in various ways along the continuums of gender and sexuality: as men who look like women and are soft and feminine, as the third gender, as men who dress up as women, as men who like to do women’s work, as men who like men, etc. (100)

Khartini’s remarks on the flexibility and fluidity of “mak nyah” identity reinforces the idea that indigenous male-to-female transsexuals open up the possibility of inventing a dynamic description of themselves in relation to others and to the world, which cannot be defined in terms of fixed normative ideas about gender and sexuality. Judith Butler has maintained that gender and sexuality are not fixed because a *stable* sex cannot always be sustained through a *stable* gender on the basis that sexuality and gender do not always align themselves heteronormatively (*Gender Trouble* 208). The same holds true for “mak nyahs” whose sense of identity cannot be sustained and regulated by rigid normative ideas about Malay male subjectivity. This is because “mak nyahs” can *still* identify themselves as “men” while simultaneously maintaining their femininity and

femaleness. Such a fluid and dynamic notion of self and identity amplifies the American transgender activist, Dallas Denny's assertion that there are indeed diverse and possible ways of being "transgender." As Denny points out, "[w]ith new ways of looking at things, suddenly all sorts of options have opened up for transgendered people: living full time without gender surgery, recreating in one gender role while working in another, identifying as neither gender, or both, blending characteristics of different genders in new and creative ways, identifying as genders and sexes heretofore undreamed of..." (1; qtd. in Ekins 185)

Finally, I would like to argue that the term "gay," which Ismail uses in his ethnographic research, does not refer solely and specifically to non-effeminate indigenous gay men who realign themselves with the "modern manifestation of homosexuality"; that is, the western standards of masculine gayness (Ismail 145). It is important to emphasize that not *all* self-identified gay Malay men express their sexuality in terms of western masculine gay male identity. Some gay-identified Malay men living in Malaysia employ various strategies in forging their own notions of being "gay" locally. These include gay Malay men's selective reappropriations of *both* local *and* western forms of gayness. Peter A. Jackson, for example, has argued that western forms of queerness are continually redeployed and recontextualised by many queer-identified people in Asia as a way of constructing and expressing their own notions of being "queer" which are not absolute renditions of those prevalent in the West. As Jackson writes:

The influence of Western ideas and cultures on these new imaginings of Asian homoeroticism is complex. Western gay/lesbian styles and terminology have often been appropriated as strategies to resist local heteronormative strictures and carve out new local spaces. However, these appropriations have not reflected a wholesale recreation of Western sexual

cultures in Asian contexts, but instead suggest a selective and strategic use of foreign forms to create new ways of being Asian *and* homosexual (6).

I agree with Jackson mainly because western queer identities and cultures are also strategically adopted and reworked by queer-identified Malays as a way of reclaiming queerness which is not reducible to its rendition of western culture. This can be observed in the ways in which some “lelaki lembuts” (“effeminate indigenous gay men”) do not necessarily adopt “manly” or “straight” mannerisms of western masculine gay men in expressing their sense of gayness. This is particularly true when some “lelaki lembuts” in the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” (whom I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter) continue to maintain their femininity as a way of distinguishing themselves from “str8” or “straight-acting” indigenous gay men. Interestingly, some “lelaki lembuts” do not regard themselves as “nyahs” as a result of creating and maintaining an illusion of femininity through cross-dressing. For instance, some “lelaki lembuts,” particularly those who cross-dress at drag shows in Kuala Lumpur’s gay bars and clubs, continue to self-identify as “gay” and do not see or think of themselves as “nyahs” simply because their motivation for cross-dressing (which is a crucial feature of “mak nyahs”’s subjectivity) is *mainly* to entertain others.³ It is not wrong to say that some gay-identified Malay men (“lelaki lembuts” in particular) open up the possibility of inventing their own gay identity by *selectively* and *strategically* reappropriating both local and western forms of male same-sex sexuality. Such nuanced ways of being “gay” challenge local understandings of gayness, especially when the term “gay,” as Ismail Baba asserts, often denotes non-effeminate indigenous gay men. The term “gay,” then, can also be used to refer to “lelaki lembuts” who identify and reposition themselves as “gay” on their own terms and in their own unique ways.⁴

Sexuality, Desire, and Identity: Queer Malays in Queer-themed Films by Osman Ali and Amy Ikram Ismail

My discussion of Ismail Baba and Khartini Slamah's ethnographic studies have demonstrated that many queer-identified Malays formulated new versions of Malayness through (among others) strategic renegotiations of various elements such as ethnicity, religiosity, and same-sex sexuality. My discussion also showed that queer-identifying Malay men and women forged their own notions of queer identity by selectively reappropriating local and western forms of queerness. It is imperative to highlight that queer-identified Malays also create new ways of being "Malay" by incorporating a strong desire to be "women" or bisexual desires and practices into their own sense of Malayness. This is especially prominent in Osman Ali's film, *Bukak Api*, and Amy Ikram Ismail's film, *Comolot*.

Bukak Api ("Open Fire"), which was directed by Osman Ali and produced by Pink Triangle Malaysia, is a groundbreaking semi-documentary film about the trials and tribulations of being "mak nyahs" in modern-day Malaysia.⁵ The film follows the lives of Jelita and a small, close knit group of "mak nyah" sex workers in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur. Jelita, the young "mak nyah" from Alor Setar, a town located in the northwestern part of Peninsular Malaysia, has come to Kuala Lumpur to realise his ultimate dream; that is, to become a "woman." Throughout the film, the audience is introduced to a myriad of characters, including Kak Su and Kak Tipah as the elderly "mak nyahs" or "mak ayam" ("mamasan") and Riena, the beautiful, yet temperamental, "mak nyah" who feels threatened by the newcomer, Jelita. The film highlights pertinent issues affecting various aspects of "mak nyahs" sex workers' lives such as cross-dressing, sex reassignment surgery, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, love and relationship, as

well as the legal implications and ramifications of identifying themselves as “transsexual.” The film ends with the death of Manisha, one of the “nyahs” closest members, who died after being pushed to the ground by a police officer during a police raid. But life goes on for this small community of “mak nyah” sex workers as they continue to remain strong through their love and support for each other.

Although the film was originally produced to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS among local transsexual community, female sex workers, and drug users, I find that the film’s depiction of “nyahs” provides meaningful insights into the various ways in which Jelita and other “mak nyahs” construct their own Malay ethnic identity. Jelita and Riena (see figs. 2 and 3), for example, have distinct views about their sense of self and identity.

Akhirnya sampai jugak aku ke Kuala Lumpur ni.
Sebuah kota impian bagi setiap insan yang mengejar sejuta impian.
Namun, kedatangan ku ke kota ini dengan satu impian sahaja.
Aku nak jadi perempuan sepuas-puasnya (Jelita, *Bukak Api*)

[At last! I’ve finally arrived in Kuala Lumpur.
A “city of hope” for those seeking to realise their dreams
But I’ve come here with one dream only
I want to be completely woman] (translation mine)

Jadi mak nyah macam aku ni
Banyak pulak angan-angan
Nak jadi ratu, nak glamer, nak operation
Hai, aku ni dah cantek, buat aper nak operation lagi?
Kan mak ku kata operation tu tak bagus. Lawan kuasa tuhan...
(Riena, *Bukak Api*)

[Being a “mak nyah” like myself
There are so many dreams

I want to be a queen, I want to be glamorous, I want to go for a sex change
Well, I'm already beautiful; why do I have to go for a sex change?
My mum used to say that sex change operation is bad. It goes against God.]
(translation mine)



Fig.2. Jelita arrives in Kuala Lumpur in *Bukak Api*, with permission from Osman Ali.



Fig.3. Riena is getting ready for work in *Bukak Api*, with permission from Osman Ali.

What is especially evidenced here is that Jelita and Riena adopt different strategies in crafting their own sense of self-identification as “Malay.” Jelita, for instance, places greater emphasis on her strong desire to be a complete “woman” in configuring her own visions of being “Malay.” Riena, on the other hand, asserts and establishes her own sense of Malay identity by sustaining her transsexuality without necessarily discarding her religious beliefs. This is vividly expressed through Riena’s fear of punishment for disobeying God’s law against sex change operation. It is not wrong to say that the desire to be women *and* religion are important components of Malay “mak nyahs” self-definitions and self-identifications. This corroborates Khartini Slamah and Teh Yik Koon’s assertion that Islam *and* transsexuality play a significant part in the lives of many Malay “mak nyahs” in present-day Malaysia. Malay “mak nyahs” in Teh’s ethnographic study, for example, claim that their ultimate goal in life is to be completely women, which can be achieved by undergoing sex reassignment surgery. The Malay “mak nyahs” also claim that they continue to identify themselves as Muslim and “nyah” because they do not see themselves in conflict with religion as a result of their transsexuality. Such nuanced ways of being “Malay” which are forged through “nyahs” strategic renegotiations of ethnicity, religiosity, and transsexuality, radically transform pedagogical narratives of Malayness. This is especially true given that pedagogical notions of Malay ethnicity are produced, sustained, and normalized through gender, sexual, and religious normativities. Transsexualism (like lesbianism and male same-sex sexuality) is strictly prohibited in Islam on the basis that Muslims *must* fulfil and actualise their “fitrah” (“innate and unalterable human disposition”) by becoming “husbands/fathers” (and the heads of the households) or “wives/mothers.” More importantly, cross-dressing and the adoption of feminine behaviours by Muslim men, and masculine behaviours by Muslim women are frowned upon by the Prophet

Muhammad (S.A.W). The Hadith (“recorded deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) in Sahih Bukhari states that “the Prophet cursed effeminate men and those women who assumed the manners of men, and he said, ‘Turn them out of your houses’” (qtd. in Teh, “Politics in Islam” 91). The Hadith in Sunan Abu-Dawud, on the other hand, states that, “the Apostle of Allah cursed the man who dressed like a woman and the woman who dressed like a man” (qtd. in Teh, “Politics and Islam” 92). Reina and Jelita, however, radically redefine, rather than realign themselves with, pedagogical conceptions of Malay ethnic identity. This is most readily observed in the ways in which Reina and Jelita undermine their “*fitrah*” as Muslim men and even going against religious prohibitions against transsexualism by continuing to cross-dress and adopting feminine behaviours and mannerisms.

It is important to emphasize that the film *Bukak Api* not only demonstrates how queer-identified Malays radically reshape pedagogical formulations of Malayness, but offers useful information on the various ways in which queer-identified Malays challenge dominant local understandings of queerness. This coheres neatly with one of the central aims of my study, which is to examine how queer-identified Malays redress received ideas about being “queer” locally. Jelita, for example, develops a sexually dynamic description of herself in relation to others. Although Jelita has expressed her strong desire for sex reassignment surgery, she still wants to retain her penis simply because she enjoys “*apom jantan*” (“to fuck a man”). Jelita’s preference for taking the active, penetrative role in same-sex sexual intercourse challenges the ways in which “*mak nyahs*” are often conflated with being exclusively sexually passive and submissive. This is particularly true when there is a widely held belief among many ethnic Malays living in Malaysia that “*nyahs*” sexual relations with men are configured primarily in

terms of the husband-wife relationship. Khartini Slamah herself admits that there needs to be someone in the ‘male’ role and someone in the ‘female’ role” in “nyahs” erotic and affectional bonds with their partners (107). Jelita, as mentioned earlier, subverts such beliefs by showing a strong preference for fucking her man. This demonstrates that “nyah-ness” cannot be defined solely in terms of the husband-wife relationship and/or “nyahs” passive, submissive roles in same-sex sexual relationship since there are diverse *and* multiple ways of being “nyahs” in present-day Malaysia.

Gay and bisexual Malay men in Amy Ikram Ismail’s short film *Comolot* (“Kiss the Lips”), on the other hand, also establish and maintain their own ethnic identities which radically redefine dominant pedagogical narratives of Malayness.⁶ The plot of the film revolves around the complex relationship between Aiman and Daniel, who is already engaged to his girlfriend, Juita. The film opens with a scene where Daniel, who is clad only in a bath towel around his waist, is shown smiling to himself whilst munching on a handful of grapes in the living room of his apartment. A few minutes later, Juita enters the apartment with the intention to surprise Daniel with a floral gift, but finds that he is nowhere to be seen. When Juita enters Daniel’s bedroom, she is shocked to see men’s underwear, a condom, and a tube of lubricating gel are strewn all over the bed. Juita then goes to the bathroom where she is about to get the biggest shock of her life: to see her fiancé making love to another man in the shower! (see fig. 4). Juita bursts into tears and runs off while Daniel rushes after her and calls her “sayang” (“dear”/“darling”) to explain what she has just seen. As they descend the stairs, Daniel begs Juita to listen to his explanation until the two enter her car as Daniel’s lover, Aiman, sadly looks on from the apartment’s balcony. What follows next is a scene where Aiman receives the news about Daniel and Juita’s wedding from his friend, Khairul. Interestingly, this

scene is set in a park where many Malay men cruise each other in the dark, hold hands, and engage in erotic activities. Determined to rescue Daniel and salvage their relationship, Aiman rushes off to the wedding the following day. Aiman takes Daniel by the hand in the midst of “akad nikah” (“solemnising of the marriage contract”) and leaves behind Juita who is already in tears, as well as relatives and guests who are already seated at the “kenduri” (“wedding reception”). Some of the relatives and guests are so shocked that they all exclaim loudly, “Pengantin lelaki lari!” (“The groom is running away!”). The film ends with the two men holding hands as they run toward Aiman’s car to flee from the wedding scene (see fig. 5).



Fig.4. Juita’s shocking discovery of Daniel and Aiman in *Comolot*, with permission from Amy Ikram Ismail.



Fig.5. Daniel and Aiman fleeing from the wedding scene in *Comolot*, with permission from Amy Ikram Ismail.

Although the short film *Comolot* is intended to address the complexities of human desire and relationships on the premise that “Berahi tidak memiliki sempadan” (“Desire has no boundaries”), I find that its portrayal of Daniel and Aiman’s relationship sheds interesting insights into the various ways in which they construct and perform their self-identities. Daniel, for instance, aligns himself with received narratives of Malayness by complying with dominant cultural expectations of Malay masculinity. This is particularly true when Daniel maintains a heterosexual relationship with girlfriend, Juita, and fulfils the social and familial pressures for marriage (although he does not get to recite the “lafaz nikah” (“wedding vows”) when Aiman grabs him by the hand during the “akad nikah” ceremony). Interestingly, despite being engaged to Juita, Daniel develops and maintains a loving, intimate relationship with Aiman. What is notable here is the strategy Daniel specifically uses to formulate his own visions of Malay male identity. Daniel incorporates his bisexual desires (as evidenced in his relationship with *both* Juita *and* Aiman) into his own definition of being a Malay man. Aiman, on the other hand, also adopts a distinct approach to creating his own ethnic

identity. This is evidenced in the way Aiman strategically reconciles his sexuality with his ethnic and religious heritages in crafting his own idea of being a Malay man. In the film *Comolot*, Aiman is not only portrayed as Daniel's lover, but is depicted as a man who identifies himself as "gay," "Malay," and "Muslim" in relation to others and to the world. For example, Aiman identifies himself as a gay Malay Muslim man in relation to his friend Khairul (who is also a self-identified gay Malay Muslim man) and to other indigenous men who engage in the cruising, pickup, and mating rituals in the park.⁷ It is possible to say Daniel and Aiman's own ideas about being "Malay" undermine pedagogical conceptions of Malay ethnicity that are configured and sustained through enforced normative ideas about Malay male subjectivity. Notions of being a Malay man, as mentioned earlier, remain predicated on the dominant cultural assumption that Malay men *must* be heterosexual and develop socially endorsed heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, a Malay man's sense of identity is visibly marked by, and expressed through, his role as the guardian of "rumah tangga" ("household"). This is precisely true when Malay men are expected to carry out their culturally designated roles and responsibilities to protect the sexual virtue and modesty of female members within their households. The prominent scholar of Malay society, Aihwa Ong, for example, contends that "*rumah tangga*—a 'house served by a single staircase'—[is] considered essential to male adulthood...A basic aspect of a man's role [is] guardianship—of his sisters', wife's, and daughters' virtue" ("State versus Islam" 164, 165).⁸ Queer-identified Malay men, however, radically subvert and reconfigure pedagogical notions of Malay male identity. Daniel in the film, *Comolot*, organizes his life and identity around his desires for both men and women, while Aiman creates his own notions of self and identity based on male same-sex sexuality and desire. Such "queer" narratives of Malayness validate the point I'm trying to make in this study that

Malay ethnicity cannot be constructed solely by/through gender, sexual, cultural, and religious normativities. This is simply because Malay ethnicity is constantly inflected by other factors pertaining to subjectivity, which include ethnic Malays' diverse sexualities and sexual desires and practices.

It is, however, necessary to mention that the film *Comolot* not only highlights the ways in which queer-identified Malay men radically redefine pedagogical formulations of Malay ethnicity, but demonstrates how queer-identified Malay men revise dominant local understandings of gayness. This is crucial because it helps to fill the gap in the literature on queer identities and queer cultures in local contexts, precisely by showing that queer-identified Malays constantly reshape and reconfigure settled ideas about being “queer” in present-day Malaysia. As discussed in Chapter 2, male same-sex sexuality in modern, Muslim-majority Malaysia is officially equated with same-sex sexual acts. Many members of the Malay Muslim community associate and conflate the term “gay” with “liwat” (“penetrative sexual acts between men”), which is one of the most heinous sins in Islam. Malay Muslims in Malaysia, like the vast majority of Muslims the world over, continue to regard the destruction of the Sodom and Gomorrah as God’s wrath against homosexuality (male same-sex penetrative act in particular) which was widely practiced at the time. Although scholars, such as Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, have argued that there are no specific words for “homosexuality” and that there is no explicit mention of punishment for homosexual relations in the Quran (199), many Muslims often turn to Quranic references to the people of the Prophet Lut (pbuh) simply because such references reinforce God’s condemnation of homosexuality. As the Quran states:

And (We sent) Lut when he said to his people: What! do you commit an indecency which anyone in the world has not done before you? Most surely

you come to males in lust besides females; nay you are an extravagant people. And the answer of his people was no other than that they said: Turn them out of your town, surely they are a people who seek to purify (themselves). So We delivered him and his followers, except his wife; she was of those who remained behind. And We rained upon them a rain; consider then what was the end of the guilty (7:80-82; trans. Shakir 850)

While I do not intend to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the Quran, I would like to argue very strongly that Daniel, Aiman, and, perhaps, other gay-identified Malay men open up the possibility of radically subverting the conflation of homosexuality with “liwat.” This is because “liwat” is one, but not the only, paradigm for thinking about male same-sex sexuality locally. That is, notions of being “gay” or “homosexual,” as perceived and understood by many gay-identified Malay men, are composed of diverse elements, including ethnicity, religiosity, love, affection, and sexual intimacy, *in addition to* same-sex erotic acts. Although it is possible to say that *Comolot* offers new understanding of gayness in non-western indigenous contexts such as in Malaysia, it is important not to lose sight of how the film may have trivialised the actual material conditions and everyday struggles of many gay Malay men. For example, the film’s “fairy tale ending” (where Daniel and Aiman flee from the wedding scene) cannot be fully realised in the material world simply because many gay Malay men face strong social and cultural pressures to marry and have children. Roslan and Ramli, as discussed earlier in regard to Ismail Baba’s ethnographic research, have had several marriages and claim that they entered into heterosexual marriage to fulfil social and familial expectations. Roslan claims that “he got married because of societal pressures” while Ramli maintains that “heterosexual marriage is expected of Malay men and he did it out of duty” (Ismail 150, 153). I also believe the film, *Comolot*, may have trivialised the actual lived experiences of many Malay gay men, especially when

there are legal ramifications of being and becoming “gay” locally. This is because gay Malay men who develop and maintain same-sex erotic and affectional relationships, as well as those who engage in erotic acts in gay meeting places in Kuala Lumpur, face greater risks of prosecution if discovered or found out by the police and religious authorities. Gay Malay men who are found guilty of committing “liwat,” for instance, could be charged and punished under Section 25 of the Syariah Criminal Offences Act and under Sections 377A and 377B of the Malaysian Penal code. The question that I will address in the following chapter is whether gay-identified Malay men can protect themselves from being prosecuted for asserting and inhabiting a Malay identity marked by sexual difference in Muslim-majority Malaysia.

While acknowledging that queer-identified Malays, particularly those featured in the works of Malaysian Malay scholars and filmmakers, used various strategies to construct their own ethnic identities, it is essential to emphasize that the processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays are intimately entwined with indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices. This elucidates the central point of my study that there are diverse implications of identifying oneself as “queer” and “Malay,” especially when the lives of many ethnic Malays living in Malaysia continue to be governed by the hegemonic Malay culture and religion. Reina in Osman Ali’s film *Bukak Api*, for example, is hesitant about going through sex change surgery, despite admitting that it is a crucial step toward realizing her ultimate dream of becoming a complete “woman.” This is mainly because Reina, a self-identified Malay Muslim “mak nyah,” fears the dreadful consequences for going against religious laws that prohibit sex change operations. One possible explanation for this fear is that transsexuality (like other forms of gender and sexual transgression) is considered a sin

(“dosa”) in Islam and will be severely punished not only in this world (“dunia”), but also in the afterlife (“akhirat”). Michael G. Peletz, for instance, points out that Malay Muslims in Malaysia strongly believe in “hukum akhirat” (“the laws of the afterlife”), which states that one’s deeds in “dunia” (“this world”) have divine punishments *and* rewards in “akhirat” (“the afterlife”) (*Social History* 51). Peletz contends further that, “[the] Islamic notions of sin (dosa) likewise place a premium on the concept of the individual and that, second to God, ultimate responsibility for one’s fate in this world and in the Afterlife lies with the individual” (*Islamic Modern* 279). I agree with Peletz mainly because the religious concepts of “dosa,” “dunia,” and “akhirat,” *in addition to* “halal” (“religiously lawful”), “haram” (“religiously unlawful”), “nafsu” (“passion”), and “akal” (“reasoning”) have become deeply engrained in the lives of many ethnic Malays *and* queer-identified Malays, to the extent that these concepts continue to have a pervasive influence on their notions of self and identity. Riena, whom I’ve just mentioned, probably has a great deal of anxiety over her fate in “akhirat” because she knows very well that her “worldly” involvement in transsexual practices is *both* “haram” *and* “lawan kuasa Tuhan” (“go against God”). Some queer-identified Malays, particularly self-identified gay men in the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” (whom I shall discuss in the next chapter), even go to the extent of perceiving same-sex sexuality as “dosa besar” (“a mortal sin”), which can be eliminated easily through “taubat.” For example, a Malay Muslim member who calls himself “Toms” claims that gay Malay men could eliminate completely male same-sex desires and avoid punishments in the afterlife through “taubat nasuhah” (“true repentance and forswearing”). As “Toms” writes:

harap2 taubat nasuhah...coz aku takut mati dengan keadaan berdosa beso cam sekarang nih!! ... memang berdosa besar aku nih...padahal aku bleh lawan sifat2 gay ni... (Toms, “Kawin Sesama Lelaki” December 10, 2009)

[I really hope that I can truly repent...because I'm afraid to die with the sins that I carry right now!!!...I am utterly sinful...I know I can resist these homosexual desires...] (translation mine)



Interestingly, some gay Malay men in this social networking website view same-sex sexual desires as a momentary “nafsu,” which can be removed completely through “akal.”⁹ Malay Muslim members, who address themselves online as “TePPanyaki” and “☞mus — Zc☞” (as written and appeared online), claim that gayness is “nafsu” that can be extinguished easily by restraining the self from being overwhelmed by male same-sexual desire. As “TePPanyaki” and “☞mus — Zc☞” note:

ni sume naluri semulajadi... kalo man rase xnak lukakan family n xnak langgar hukum, jgn cebur diri dalam dunia PLU, tapi kalo xleh tolak... man kena trima n pandai2 cover (TePPanyaki, “aku keliru” June 29, 2008).

[These are all instinctual desires... if you do not want to hurt your family and defy religious law, then don't get yourself involved in the PLU world. But if you can't eliminate these desires...you need to accept the fact and know how to “cover up”] (translation mine)

itu sema nafsu, hasutan yang menyesatkan manusia... yang peliknya, kite mudah sangat terperdaya dengan bende2 macam ni, kan? orang kata, ikut hati... mati, ikut rasa.binasa, ikut nafsu...lesu... (☞mus — Zc☞, “aku keliru” July 20, 2008).

[These are all desires; the devil's instigation that leads people astray... the funny thing is, why are we so easily deceived by all these things? People say, follow your heart ...and you shall perish. Follow your feelings and you shall be ruined, follow your desire... and you shall be listless] (translation mine)

“Toms,” “TePPanyaki,” and “mus — Zc”’s views of male same-sex sexuality as “instinctual desires” and as the instigation of the devil give the impression that some (if not many) queer-identified Malays in present-day Malaysia may not be able to identify themselves unproblematically and unconditionally as “queer” *and* “Malay.” This is mainly because queer-identified Malays’ deeply held religious beliefs about sin and repentance, reason and passion, as well as the afterlife *suppress*, rather than proliferate, the potential for the creation and expression of their own notions of self and identity. This certainly validates my point in writing about the complex processes of queer Malay identity-formation, particularly the various ramifications of articulating a Malay ethnic identity marked by queerness. That is, although many queer-identified Malays (particularly those whom I discuss in this study) may be able to construct their own ethnic identities which radically challenge dominant pedagogical formulations of Malayness, they may not always be able to take these identities as subject positions within the Malay Muslim community. This is due to the fact that queer-identified Malays whose lives are strongly governed by Islam *fear* the repercussions of defying religious prohibitions against same-sex sexual identities, same-sex sexual desires, and practices.

My examination of queer-identified Malays in this chapter has shown that the works (i.e. ethnographic studies and queer-themed films) by Malaysian Malay writers and filmmakers become a means through which they discuss various performative visions of being “Malay” as felt and experienced by self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual Malays. This underscores my central argument that many queer-identified Malays in contemporary local forms of expression or popular culture radically undermine pedagogical narratives of Malay ethnicity by continually creating and

asserting their own notions of Malayness. Queer-identifying Malay men and women in works of Ismail Baba, Khartini Slamah, Osman Ali, and Amy Ikram Ismail, for instance, do not define themselves in terms of the dominant Malay ethnic identity, but instead constructed their own ethnic identities based on their actual lived experiences and everyday struggles of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” My analysis of queer-identified Malays in ethnographic studies and films by Malaysian Malay writers and scholars has also demonstrated that there are various implications of asserting and inhabiting a queer narrative of Malayness. What makes it more complicated is that queer-identified Malays may not be able to assert their own ethnic identities which are marked by queerness because of their deeply held religious and cultural beliefs and practices. This helps amplify the central assertion of this study that the complex processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays are fraught with difficulties and challenges. Such difficulties and challenges often become a major obstacle to formulation and assertion of queer-identified Malays’ own self-identities. An interesting question to be addressed by future research would be whether a queer narrative of Malayness can *still* be created and even expressed, despite the pervasiveness of indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices. This, in my view, can provide a useful means through which one can understand more comprehensively how queer-identified Malays continue to define and align themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” in this world.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Ruzy Suliza Hashim's article, entitled "Meniti Ranjau dan Duri: Pembikinan Gender dan Seksualiti dalam Konteks Dunia Melayu," especially her discussion of "pondan," which is often conflated with "mak nyahs" and that "pondan" is intimately entwined with homophobic and misogynist traces (i.e. "kewanitaan" and "tidak jantan") in the dominant Malay Muslim community. It is important to mention that masculinity is understood as "jantan" or "kejantanan" in hegemonic discourses about Malay male sexuality. See Shamsul Amri and Mohammad Fauzi's "Making Sense of Malay Sexuality: An Exploration," especially p. 65 for their discussion of the way in which the dominantly heteronormative Malay community regards sex scandals (particularly those involving Malaysian Malay political leaders and their mistresses) as "bukti kejantanan" ("a proof of one's "maschismo"), and perceives "same-sex affairs" (particularly the alleged "same-sex scandals" involving the former deputy premier, Anwar Ibrahim, and other men) as "tidak jantan" ("unmanly").

² The term *mak nyah*, as Teh Yik Koon posits, is derived from the word "mak" meaning mother and "nyah" which refers to ladylike or feminine behavior ("Politics and Islam" 89).

³ Obviously, there are various reasons why "lelaki lembuts" cross-dress. It would be interesting to hear what "lelaki lembuts" have to say about their own motivations for cross-dressing at drag shows or performances. This, I believe, may provide interesting insights into the ways in which cross-dressing function as a paradigm for thinking about the broad continuum of gay male sexuality in local contexts. See, for instance, the videos uploaded at <<http://www.youtube.com/user/arezeo?blend=1&ob=4>>. Many YouTube viewers claim that "lelaki lembuts" who are featured in these videos are "handsome" by day and "beautiful" by night. This is especially true when these "lelaki lembuts" cross-dress for drag performances held at Blue Boy gay bar in Kuala Lumpur. In a video recorded on November 20, 2006, viewers are able to see these men in their "baju Melayu" ("Malay dress") as they celebrated "Hari Raya Aidilfitri" ("the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Fitr") with their self-identified gay friends. See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhyD2je6v54&feature=channel_page>.

⁴ I believe that more research should be carried out on "lelaki lembut" simply because there are diverse, yet possible, ways of being "lelaki lembut" within the borders of Malaysia. I say this because the dominant Malay society often conflates "lelaki lembut" with "mak nyahs" who act like women. Some "lelaki lembut" who behave feminine and see themselves as "women," take on a gay, rather than a transsexual identity, for their self-identification and self-assertion. One of the many reasons why these

“lelaki lembuts” take on a gay identity (which often involves adopting a more masculine mannerism whilst simultaneously suppressing feminine behaviours) is that it enables them to find (more) potential partners and/or lovers. This is mainly because many gay-identified Malay men living in Malaysia prefer to develop same-sex sexual relationships with non-effeminate gay men. It is, however, important to emphasize that not *all* “lelaki lembuts” are homosexual. Some “lelaki lembut” are heterosexual who continue to maintain their “lembut” (“soft”) mannerism and behaviour. This, in my view, gives the impression that notions of being “lelaki lembut” are not fixed, but are instead configured through “lelaki lembuts” performances of various roles and identities.

⁵ See the film “Bukak Api” by Osman Ali at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCPWtBfEwUA&playnext=1&list=PLCB56156BD8385140>>.

⁶ See the film “Comolot” by Amy Ikram Ismail at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rKtvq1nd0>>.

⁷ The park in the film, *Comolot*, is one of the many “port gay” (“gay meeting places”) in Kuala Lumpur and other metropolitan centers throughout Malaysia. Many gay Malay men living in Kuala Lumpur and in the Malaysian state of Selangor can be seen hanging out (“lepak”) and even making out (“beromen”) in popular gay meeting places such Taman Tasik Titiwangsa, Taman Tasik Permaisuri, and Taman Tasik Kelana Jaya; all of which are recreational public lake parks.

⁸ Although Ong and Peletz have conducted ethnographic studies on gender and sexuality in rural Malay society, I find that their works can be used to demonstrate that notions of being “Malay” as envisioned and embraced by many ethnic Malays in Malaysia (both in rural and urban areas) remain predicated on heterosexuality *and* heteronormativity.

⁹ The concepts of “akal” and “nafsu” figure prominently in the lives of ethnic Malays living in Malaysia. Many Malays, as Michael G. Peletz notes, believe that “nafsu” (“desire or passion”) is innately present in all humans and animals. The major difference between animals and human beings is that the latter are more superior because they are endowed by God with “akal” (“reason,” “rationality,” and “intelligence”) (*Reason and Passion* 205). Peletz maintains further that “nafsu” and “akal” play a very significant role in Malays’ everyday lives, especially when “nafsu” and “akal” continually shape and influence various aspects of Malays’ material existence, which include dietary consumption, gender relation, their psyches, and the ways in which they perceive themselves in relation to others and to the world. One of the ultimate goals in life for many Malays is to strive for self-restraint and control by making sure that they are not easily consumed by “nafsu.” This is because “unrestraint” or “uncontrollable” passions, as

evidenced in overindulgences in sex, food, and material possession, demonstrate one's absence of virtue, which is highly disapproved and condemned by the Malay society. This, in turn, explains why Malays claim that "akal" must work together with "hati" and "iman" in order to control "nafsu." "*Akal* (hereafter "reason"), as Peletz asserts, "distinguishes human from the rest of the animal world and is [Malays'] special gift from God; and that "reason" "cooperates" or "works together" with the *hati* (or liver, the seat of emotions) and with *iman* (faith, strong belief or trust in God, resoluteness, sincerity) to guide the individual along the proper path(s) (*Reason and Passion* 226).

Chapter 4 “Who Are Gay Melayu?”: Emerging Gay Male Identities and Cultural Practices in “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu”

What do we mean when we say *gay* in a world where hybridity and syncretism provide the grist of cultural production, distribution, and consumption?

–Martin F. Manalansan, *In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma*

What exactly does it mean to say that “gay Melayu” identity is a hybrid cultural construct? And what does it mean to say that notions of being “gay” *and* “Melayu” are configured through the process of hybridization under current trends of globalization? In this chapter, I broaden my earlier discussion of queer Malay identity-formation to include an examination of diverse *and* multiple notions of being “gay” *and* “Malay” as envisioned and embraced by members of the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” (hereafter cited as *KWGM*). More specifically, I would like to analyze the various strategies used by self-identified gay Malay men in *KWGM* in crafting their own self-identities. Such strategies include (but are not limited to) gay Malay men’s selective reappropriations of *both* local *and* western forms of male same-sex sexuality. I would also like to explore more deeply the production of gay male identities and cultural practices in non-western contexts such as Malaysia. Emerging gay male identities and gay male cultures as evidenced in *KWGM*, for instance, are not complete mimics of those prevalent in the West, but are hybrid *and* heterogeneous cultural formations which are shaped by age, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and other factors pertaining to subjectivity. More importantly, gay male identities and gay male cultures as evidenced in *KWGM* are also influenced by western notions of gayness and the language which have been widely used to describe these notions within and outside

the western domains. Furthering the notion that gay Malay male identity is a hybrid cultural construct is necessary because it helps elucidate the central point of this study; that is, to show that “gayness” *and* “queerness” in present-day Malaysia cannot be officially conflated with, and propagated as, western decadence. The decision to examine the production of “gay Melayu” identity in *KWGM* is primarily motivated by the fact that everyday-defined (or performative) visions of Malayness take multiple “forms of popular expression” or “popular culture.” Shamsul Amri Baharuddin contends that everyday-defined beliefs about Malay identity, which are created based on ethnic Malays’ everyday lived experiences of being “Malay,” can be found in various forms of popular expression or popular culture such as songs, poems, cartoons, and short stories. I would like to argue strongly that the Internet and gay social networking websites in particular are also sources of contemporary popular culture. Kevin Filo, for instance, asserts that Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and other social networking websites are staples of popular culture because of their immense popularity among today’s youth. Local gay social networking websites such as *KWGM*, however, cannot simply be regarded as a form of popular culture among gay Malay youth because they also function as a pivotal site for many young indigenous gay men to express their own sense of Malay identity that are created based on their actual lived experiences of being “gay” *and* “Malay.” This reinforces my argument throughout this study that ethnic Malays, particularly queer-identifying Malay men and women in contemporary Malaysian literature *and* culture, continue to redefine and reshape pedagogical narratives of Malayness, precisely by inventing ethnic identities marked by queerness.

It is, however, crucial to note that many self-identified gay Malay men in *KWGM* take on a visibly consumerist and western-style gay identity in expressing their gay male subjectivities. Moreover, some members of *KWGM* identify themselves more strongly as “gay sejati/gay tulen” (“authentic gay”) by replicating, to varying extents, western standards of masculine gayness. This compels a rethinking of “gay Melayu” as a hybrid cultural construction mainly because what it means to be “gay” for many gay Malay men challenge Homi K Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a form of resistance to fixed and essentialised cultural identities. This is especially true when many *KWGM* members sustain, rather than resist, western gay hegemony as they either take on the consumerist, western-style gay identity or “gay sejati/gay tulen” as a way of identifying and repositioning themselves online as “gay Melayu.” I will also argue in this chapter that not *all* gay-identified members of *KWGM* express male same-sex sexual identities through “gay sejati/gay tulen” or through the consumerist, western-style gay identity. There are, indeed, diverse and highly contested notions of being “gay” *and* “Melayu” as felt and practiced by many gay men in this emerging gay Malay online community. In brief, Komuniti Web Gay Melayu was the brainchild of Edie Mohamad, a self-identified gay Malay man who developed the website primarily for gay Malay youths in Malaysia using Ning, one of the world’s largest platforms for creating social websites. *KWGM* became an instant hit when it was launched in 2009, drawing 6184 members, most of whom were gay-identified Malay men. Some of the website’s major points of attraction were its online forum discussions and online personal ads. Interestingly, the website’s huge popularity (I remembered it was dubbed at the time as “the best place” for gay Malay men to find potential partners or lovers compared to other local gay social networking websites such as www.gayromeo.com and www.manjam.com) had prompted some gay Malay men to establish their own *offline*

community of gay men in various Malaysian states such as Johor, Negeri Sembilan, and Malacca. Such initiatives enabled *KWGM* members to meet up and physically interact with other gay Malay men within their localities.

Being “Gay” *and* “Malay” in “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu”

I have discussed in previous chapters the various strategies queer-identified Malays specifically employed in formulating their own forms of self-identification. These include queer-identified Malays’ selective reappropriations of local and western queer identities and queer cultures. For example, many “lelaki lembuts” (“effeminate indigenous men”) whom I mentioned in Chapter 3, formulate their own gay male identity by reconceptualising local forms of “pondan-ness” on the one hand, and western standards of masculine gayness on the other. Interestingly, some “lelaki lembuts” neither necessarily adopt the practice of cross-dressing common among many “pondans,” nor reify images of western masculine gay men as a way of articulating their own notions of being “gay.” Such strategic reappropriation and reconceptualisation of disparate forms of male same-sex sexuality and culture demonstrate that gayness in Malaysia can be understood and elaborated as a product of hybridization which is *queerly* born out of “transnational” (Povenelli and Chauncey 439) and “cross-cultural exchanges” (Jolly and Manderson 1) between local *and* western gay male identities and cultural formations. Dennis Altman, Diane Richardson, Gerard Sullivan, Peter Jackson, Steve Seidman, and others have argued that these exchanges are fostered and facilitated by globalization. These scholars contend further that the globalizing instruments such as international travel and tourism, and the advances in technologies such as the internet have increased and eased interactions between gay men and lesbians from different parts of the world. Gerard Sullivan, for

instance, points out that the interaction with/between gay men and lesbians through tourism and the internet are crucial to “the process of (trans)cultural (ex)change [which] provides knowledge of other possibilities and an understanding of their suitability for oneself” (262). This means that these transcultural *and* transnational sites of exchange open up advantageous possibilities for gay men and lesbians in both western and non-western domains to formulate and express *multiple* forms of same-sex sexual self-identification by renegotiating diverse ideas about same-sex sexuality, desire, and practice.

But these transnational and transcultural sites of exchange may not always provide an adequate means for understanding the various ways in which gay identities are constructed and articulated locally. This is because what it means to be “gay,” or, at times, “PLU” (“People Like Us”) conjures up a multitude of meanings to many gay Malay men in Malaysia, particularly members of the emerging gay Malay online community, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu.” Moreover, gay Malay men’s diverse understandings of “gay,” “gay identity,” “gayness,” “gay sex,” and “gay relationship” are, on the one hand, influenced by various axes of social positioning and are, on the other, implicated by western gay male identities and the language which have been widely used to describe these identities within and outside the western domains. This is particularly true with regard to the widespread of western gay male identities and cultures under the current process of globalization, which continues to exert a pervasive influence on the production of male same-sex sexual subjectivities and cultural practices in non-western locales such as in Malaysia. In the online forum discussion “thread” (“topic”) on “Cara Utk Tahu Bagaimana Lelaki Itu Gay?” (“How To Know/Tell If A Man Is Gay?”), many gay Malay men in *KWGM* claim online that there

is a host of “identifiable” and “distinguishing” features which mark their gay male subjectivities. These include stylish, branded clothing, and accessories as well as expensive colognes that gay Malay men regularly wear. Many *KWGM* members maintain that a gay Malay man can easily be seen wearing a body fitting T-shirt (which shows off his toned and muscular physique), sporting a spiky “gay boy” hairstyle, carrying an oversized designer bag, and strutting in trendy “pointy” leather shoes in public spaces such as Bukit Bintang shopping and entertainment district or Tasik Permaisuri, Kuala Lumpur’s popular “gay port” (“gay meeting place”). There are also some *KWGM* members who appropriate the western homosexual practice of wearing an earring on the right ear as a way of expressing a “*sejati/tulen*” (“authentic”) sense of gayness. As one *KWGM* member who refers to himself online as “comot” writes:

i setuju yg pki subang belah kanan tuh gay. Kart amerika sane. Gay pki subang belah kanan. (comot, “Cara Utk Tahu Bagaimana Lelaki Itu Gay?” June 7, 2009)

[I agree that those who wear earrings on their right ears are gay. Gays in America wear earrings on their right ears.] (translation mine)

However, one can never really tell if a Malay man is “gay” based on these features alone (or any more than is the case in the West) which I believe *only* and *narrowly* configure coded appearances and behaviours of many young, urban, educated, middle-class, and upwardly mobile members of *KWGM* whose sense of gayness is evidently influenced by western (i.e. American) fashion and consumer culture. Such a westernized notion of being “gay,” which does not necessarily represent the diversity of gay-identified Malay men’s understandings of gayness, reinforces Dennis Altman’s view on the emergence of a globalising gay identity in non-western societies which is “conceptualized in terms that are very much derived from recent American fashion and

intellectual style” (“Rupture or Continuity?” 20). Altman maintains further that the homogenising effects of queer globalization have fostered and proliferated the emergence of “highly consumerist” gay male identities, *in addition to* “lipstick lesbians” and “macho” gay men in indigenous contexts (“Globalization” 419). This is readily observed in the ways in which western-style gay and lesbian identities, which are transmitted through the instruments of globalization such as advertising and international mass media, are visibly appropriated and adopted by many gay men and lesbians in non-western settings as a way of identifying themselves as “gay/lesbian” while simultaneously becoming part of a globalised “gay/lesbian” community.¹

Obviously, fashion is not the only marker of gay male subjectivities in Malaysia. Many Malay gay men in *KWGM* maintain online that they do not always rely on specific styles of dress or appearance as a means of expressing their gay male identities. Malay gay men in *KWGM* claim online that eye contact is the most “reliable” and “effective” method of determining if a man is “gay,” especially when an eye contact that they initiate with another man is mutually acknowledged, rather than cruelly rejected. Such mutual acknowledgement not only signals same-sex physical and emotional attraction, but reaffirms and reassures the other man’s same-sex sexual identity and preference. As one *KWGM* member who identifies himself online as “Micka29” explains:

I can tell you it's from the eye contact...You can spot it there...
The way he looks at yours [sic] eyes (at you basically) will make you feel unease...Why so: Guys generally not or less [sic] having an eye contact when someone saying something. They rather look down or pretend not to look interested. Tapi bagi gay, they'll look straight at [sic] your eyes..And you just feel different... Your instinct can tell you. (Micka29, “Cara Utk Tahu Bagaimana Lelaki Itu Gay?” August 22, 2009)

“Gayness,” or, at times, “PLU-ness” (“People Like Us”) is also said to be visually “identifiable” and easily “detectable” in the form of effeminate behaviours of “lelaki lembut” as compared to “str8 act”/“straight acting” gay Malay men who are more discreet about their same-sex sexual identity. Many *KWGM* members assert online that “lelaki lembuts” tend to express their sexual attraction to other men more openly than “str8”/“straight acting” Malay gay men. As one *KWGM* member who goes by his online name “Hazimie” asserts:

Yang senang nak detect tu adalah golongan songsang yang patah riuk... lembut...atau pun yang tak kisah nak mengexposekan diri tp golongan plu yang str8 act...discreet ...yang nie susah nak detect...dan mempunyai ‘commercial value’ yang tinggi di kalangan plu-plu. (Hazimie, “Cara Utk Tahu Bagaimana Lelaki Itu Gay?” July 6, 2009)

[It is easy to detect “inverts” who are limp-wristed and effeminate or those who don’t mind exposing themselves in the public. But discreet and straight-acting PLUs are difficult to detect and they have high commercial value among other PLUs.] (translation mine)

Physical attractiveness, on the other hand, is also frequently cited (and highly disputed) as another visual marker of local gay male subjectivities. Many Malay gay men in *KWGM* claim online that “hensem/ensem” (“handsome”) and “cute” men are either “gay/PLU” or “bisek” (“bisexual”). Such claims are substantiated by Malay gay men’s personal observations and experiences of socially mixing (and sexually engaging) with these “hensem/ensem” or “cute” men. It is pertinent to note that self-identified gay Malay men in *KWGM* and in the local gay community in particular place a strong emphasis on physical attractiveness, rather than on personality, when it comes to choosing potential partners or lovers. In his story short, entitled *Sembang Ratu I*, Nizam Zakaria maintains that many gay Malay men in modern-day Malaysia have a strong

tendency to prefer “hensem” (“handsome”) and, at times, “cans/can do” (“nice or average looking”) men as their lovers or partners (45). Nizam Zakaria, a Singapore-born Malay scriptwriter, director, and producer of popular television dramas in Malaysia, is very well known in the local gay community for his gay erotic and romance fiction, all of which are written in Malay. Some of his most popular works include gay novels such as *Nafas Aku*, *Rama-rama* and *Potret*, and gay short fictions such as *Sembang Ratu I* and *Sembang Ratu II*, which I discussed in this chapter. I find that Nizam’s fictional works reflect, to a great extent, gay Malay men’s actual lived experiences in Malaysia. Azwan Ismail, the editor of Malaysia’s first Malay anthology of queer short stories, *Orang Macam Kita*, himself claims that Nizam’s gay short stories and novels have a deep resonance for gay Malay men and the gay Malay community in general. This is especially true when many gay Malay male readers identify themselves strongly with the characters, the language used, the conflicts, and even the settings in Nizam’s fictional works. The gay Malay male characters’ understandings of “hensem/ensem” in *Sembang Ratu I*, for instance, resonate with *KGWM* members’ varied understandings of handsomeness. As Nizam writes:

Apa nok? Ko kata yang penting personaliti bukan *good looks* nok? Nok... ko dah ting tong ke?...Bila ko bawa balik jantan berangkut, mesti nak yang *can do*. Nak yang macho dan jantan. Lepas main, ko terus *call* mak, cakap jantan tu *cans* lah, *taste* lah, *handsome* mautz lah...Ada ko cerita dekat mak yang dia ada personaliti yang vaasst? Nama betul dia pon ko tak kenal... (46)

[What nok? You’re saying that personality is more important than good looks? Are you out of your mind nok?...When you bring guys home, you definitely want those who are nice looking. You prefer the macho and manly type. After sex, you’d call me and tell me that the guy is good looking, of your “taste” and is “deadly” handsome... But have you ever

told me that he has an exceptionally good personality? You don't even know his real name...] (translation mine).²

While I agree with Nizam's view on the important role that physical attractiveness plays in courtship and mate selection processes among Malay gay men, I would like to argue that what is meant by "hensem" differ from one gay Malay man to another. First, handsomeness is subjective simply because it lies in the eye of the beholder. Gay Malay men whom I know perceive the concept of handsomeness differently. For instance, an average looking underweight (or overweight) guy is "handsome" in their eyes. In other words, what they find handsome or attractive in a man (in the physical sense) is not necessarily defined in terms of the culturally acceptable standard of handsomeness; that is, "tinggi lampai, berwajah tampan, berdada bidang, dan berbadan tegap" ("tall, handsome, broad-chested, and strongly built"). Second, handsomeness can also mean an inherent quality of the body. This is especially true when some gay Malay men maintain that "jejaka Melayu berdarah kacukan"; that is, mixed-blood Malay men of European-Malay or Pakistan/Arab-Malay parentage are "kacak/tampan" ("handsome") mainly because most of the men are blessed with good looks and/or fine physiques.³ Third, handsomeness can be defined as a perfected and deliberate construction of an image. Some (if not many) members of the local gay Malay community have come to regard gay Malay men with well-groomed beard and moustache, and who maintain lean and toned physiques, and adopt masculine mannerism as "hensem." What is interesting is that some well-groomed gay Malay men construct and *perform* an image of handsomeness in order to give the illusion that it is an objective quality of the body. This, in my view, illuminates the idea that "hensem" can be thought of as *performative*. Judith Butler contends that gender is performative, rather than innate or naturally given. Gender performativity, as Butler points out, "is a

matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted... [These gender] norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity” (“Critically Queer” 21). Although Butler uses the concept of gender performativity to subvert notions of stable gender identities, I find that the same concept can be employed to demonstrate that being “hensem” is constructed through the reiteration of the ideals or the norms pertaining to physical attractiveness as envisioned by the local gay Malay community. This is especially salient in the case of some (if not many) Malay gay men who establish and present an image of “kehensemen/kekacakan/ ketampanan” (“handsomeness”) through the maintenance of facial hair and muscular physique and through the appropriation of masculine mannerisms.

My point here is that Malay gay men employ various strategies to express their gay male identities. Such strategies include Malay gay men’s reappropriation of visibly consumerist and westernized markers of gayness and the adoption of specific styles of dress or appearance. As some *KWGM* members assert, “it is hard to know about a gay person personality” simply because “there is no spesific [sic] way/method to determine the “gayness” of one guy.” This buttresses the point I’m trying to make in this chapter and throughout the study that male same-sex sexual identities in non-western contexts are culturally *and* historically specific constructions and, therefore, cannot be officially conflated with western decadence, nor can they be regarded as absolute renditions of gay identities and gay cultures in the West. As Diane Richardson and Steve Seidman maintain, “[i]ndividuals never experience being gay in a general way, but in a specific and varied ways” (4). My point on the various ways in which gay-identified Malay men conceive and articulate their gay male subjectivities, on the other hand, calls into

question William Leap and Tom Boellstroff's assertion on the use of the English term "gay" as the already existing and universalized way of talking about male same-sex sexuality and desire within and outside the Euro-American contexts.⁴ This is because the term "gay" may *or* may not be employed and understood in the same way in non-western locales such as Malaysia. The word "gay" is not only differently appropriated and locally adopted in the process of gay Malay identity-formation, but conjures up a wide range of meanings to many gay-identified Malay men in general, and *KWGM* members in particular. In the forum discussion thread on "Sejak Bila Korang Jd Gay Nih?" ("Since When Did You Become Gay?"), many gay Malay men in *KWGM* claim online that they *became* "gay" as a result of direct physical contacts with male siblings, male relatives, and male peers. These forms of physical contact, which were mostly experienced during childhood and adolescent years, include being coerced into fondling another male's genitalia, assisted and/or mutual masturbation, and oral and/or anal sex. However, many gay Malay men did not have a specific word or vocabulary at the time to describe, explain, and express their firsthand same-sex sexual encounters and experiences. It was when Malay gay men entered secondary school and, later, the university, that they eventually acquired the knowledge and information about "gay" and the "gay world" mostly through peers and library references. Many *KWGM* members also maintain online that they *initially became* "gay" in all-boys boarding school dormitories, which provided a conducive environment for same-sex sexual experimentation, and *embraced gradually or fully* a "gay lifestyle" during and after university years primarily by engaging in same-sex erotic acts with other gay-identified men. Although gay indigenous men on *KWGM* assert that they are gay because of having been touched, fondled, abused, and/or attended boys' boarding schools, it is important to emphasize that there is no obvious origin to being "gay" in Malaysia. If, as

Philip Brian Harper contends, sexual orientation should not be conceived as a primary identificatory marker of sexual identity, then the same can be said of how sexual identity among gay Malay men cannot be constructed solely through/by same-sex sexual encounters and experiences. This is because some gay indigenous men on *KWGM* maintain online that they did not become “gay” as a result of being sexually abused by siblings, male relatives, or peers, or through experiences in all boys’ schools. The members claim that they *realized* that they were “gay” after watching gay porn and/or after “cuba-cuba gay sek” (“experimenting with gay sex”). Other members claim online that they *decided* to be “gay” after many failed attempts to maintain intimate relationships with women. The members believe that developing and maintaining intimacy with men is *far less complicated* than with women on the basis that “hanya lelaki sahaja yang memahami lelaki” (“only men can understand men”) and women simply don’t.

Although it is evidenced here that many *KWGM* members frequently and extensively rely on the term “gay” to define erotic encounters with men as a salient marker of gayness, it would be rather fallacious to assert that this western-derived terminology has become a standard nomenclature for describing what being “gay” means locally. This is because western gay male identities are not always helpful in describing the *plurality* and *particularity* of indigenous gay male experiences and cultural practices. Many Malay gay men, particularly those in *KWGM*, not only appropriate and adopt the word “gay,” but often use this word alongside local idioms to formulate a *multitude* of male same-sex sexual self-inscriptions and self-representations. This is readily observed in the ways in which local and western expressions of gayness are *enmeshed*, *conjoined*, and/or used *interdependently* by many Malay gay men in *KWGM* in

constructing a plethora of gay male identities and practices. These include “Geiboi/Gayboy,” “Lelaki Lembut,” “Lelaki Rempit PLU,” “Bisek,” “Str8,” “Anak Ikan,” “Abang Polis/Askar,” “Gay Sarawakian,” “Gay Tahfiz,” “Chubs,” “BDSM,” to name just a few. It is important to understand that these gay male identities and cultural practices are mediated by age, class, and various axes of social positioning, *in addition to* male same-sex sexuality and desires. “Gay Tahfiz,” for instance, is a term that is used to describe gay-identified Malay Muslim members of *KWGM* who preach the word of God online to encourage other Malay Muslim members to repent and to live in accordance with the standard teachings of Islam. Some “Gay Tahfizes” may use religion as a façade to find sexual partners online. “Gay Tahfizes” may offer help and advice to emotionally vulnerable and confused Malay Muslim members of *KWGM* and may gradually develop relationships with them, which often veer off into sexual intimacy. “Anak Ikan,” on the other hand, is a term that can be used to address young Malay boys who are both desirable and desired by older men. Some “Anak Ikan” may be financially supported by wealthy (often older) men in exchange for companionship or sexual favours. “Abang Polis/Askar” is another term that is often used to refer to men in the police and armed forces who engage in same-sex erotic acts without necessarily identifying themselves as “gay” or “bisexual.” Many *KWGM* members, who post their comments in the online forum discussion “thread” on “Abang-Abang Askar... ALOHA!!!”, claim that “Abang Askars” are highly desired by the local gay community. This is because it has been proven (mostly through *KWGM* members’ personal experiences) that “Abang Askars” who engage in “gay sex” are exceptionally good at it. Unlike “hensem” and “cute” gay men whom I mentioned earlier, “Abang Askars” are especially fetishized and, to an extent, iconicised because of their “jantan-ness” (“manliness”) and also because of the militaristic style of dress which helps

enhance “Abang Askars” “jantan” (“manly”) appearances. As one *KWGM* member who identifies himself online as “VoLuptuous,” maintains:

cuma yg menjadi kan mereka (abg2 askar) ni jadi idaman aku rasa pada
UNIFORM yg mereka pakai ni...tak kira lah askar ker.. air force ker... navy
ker....pdrm ker... kastam ker...bila dia org pakai uniform ni ader sesuatu yg
menarik perhatian kita semua....first impression kita nmpk askar
beruniform....WOW abg2 askar! (Voluptuous, “Abang-Abang Askar...
ALOHA!!!” June 21, 2009)

[I think what makes them (abg2 askar) the object of desire lies in the
UNIFORM that they wear...It doesn’t really matter if these men are in the
military, air, or naval forces... Royal Malaysian Police... or Royal
Malaysian Customs...There’s always something that captivates our
attention whenever these men put on their uniforms...Our first impression
when we see these men in their uniforms: WOW abg2 askar!] (translation
mine)

Such fetishization is largely attributed to the fact that many gay Malay men in general, and members of *KWGM* in particular, place greater emphasis on developing erotic and/or affectional relationship with “macho” or “jantan,” rather than with “lembut” or “effeminate” gay men. Many gay Malay men who sexually engage with “macho” or “jantan” gay men do so as a way of disidentifying and disassociating themselves from “lelaki lembut” who are often conflated with being “kewanitaan” (“womanly”) and “tidak jantan” (“unmanly”). There seems to be a widely accepted belief among many Malay gay men in Malaysia that “main” or “beromen” (“having sex”) with “lelaki lembut” is similar to “berlesbo” (“engaging in lesbian sex”). This is probably because many Malay gay men regard themselves as womanly for desiring men (and “womanly” for being “gay”) and cannot accept the idea of making love to “lelaki lembuts” who are already equated with being “kewanitaan.” As some *KWGM* members maintain online:

“How can two “womanly” men make love?”⁵ The conflation of “beromen dengan lelaki lembut” with “berlesbo” gives the impression that gay Malay men tend to prefer “macho” or “jantan” gay men as partners or lovers, rather than to be involved in a so-called “lesbian” relationship with “lelaki lembut.”⁶ Such attitudes towards “lelaki lembut,” a point to which I shall elaborate shortly, shed crucial insights into the ways in which many *KWGM* members marginalize effeminate gay Malay men whilst simultaneously privileging “gay sejati/gay tulen” (“authentic gay”) as an “authentic” marker of “gay Melayu” identity.

My discussion of diverse notions of being “gay” as felt, experienced, and understood by gay-identified members of *KWGM* is important for two reasons. First, it helps to fill lacunae in the literature on queer identities and cultural formations in Malaysia by showing that many queer-identified Malays (gay Malay men in particular) create their own sense of being “queer” that radically reshape and redefine dominant local understandings of queerness. I say this because studies on local forms of queerness have not explored fully the *multiple*, competing meanings of being “queer” as envisioned by many queer-identifying indigenous men and women. Second, my discussion of gay Malay men’s diverse ideas about being “gay” also adds to the literature by demonstrating that queerness in local contexts cannot be rendered as absolute mimics of those existing in the West. This is simply because western gay male identities, and the language which has been universally used to describe these identities, neither dominate nor homogenise local understandings of male same-sex sexuality and desire. Arjun Appadurai posits that local-global interaction is never a unidirectional process, but one that is often fraught with the dialogical conflict between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation. The West, as Appadurai

contends further, does not fully homogenize indigenous culture simply because forces that flow from western domains “tend to become indigenized” in non-western societies (51). Although Appadurai does not specifically address male same-sex sexuality and desire, his view on cultural homogenisation-heterogenisation opens up a viable lens through which to think of gay male identities in Malaysia as hybrid *and* heterogeneous cultural formations which are assembled through transnational and transcultural exchange of/between local and western forms of gayness. The consumerist, western-style gay male identity, “Anak Ikan,” and “Gay Tahfiz” which I have mentioned earlier help illuminate what is “global” and what is “local” (Jyoti, “Gay Sexualities” 62), and what counts as “same” or “different” (Leap and Boellstroff 6) in understanding the characteristically hybridised *and* heterogenized local forms of gay identities and cultural practices. But many gay-identified Malay men and *KWGM* members in particular take on the consumerist, western style gay identity and “gay sejati/gay tulen” (“authentic gay”) in expressing their notions of being “gay.” This compels a rethinking of “gay Melayu” as a hybrid cultural formation because what it means to be “gay” for these gay Malay men challenge Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a form of resistance to essentialised and fixed cultural identities. Moreover, the ways in which many gay Malay men in *KWGM* view “gay sejati/gay tulen” as an essential marker of “gay Melayu” identity calls into question who and what (exactly) is “gay Melayu,” and whether “gay Melayu” identity is useful in articulating competing narratives of being “gay” *and* “Melayu” as envisioned by *both* Malay *and* non-Malay members of this local gay social networking website.

Who Are “Gay Melayu”?

KWGM has become an increasingly popular gay social networking website among many Malay gay men in Malaysia over the last couple of years. The website’s popularity is largely attributed to the increased public access to computers and the internet. To date, there are 16.9 million internet users in Malaysia and the number of internet users is expected to rise in the next few years following the government’s commitment to upgrading high speed broadband infrastructure on a national scale. This is in line with the national vision to transform Malaysia into a fully developed and technologically advanced nation by the year 2020. Now, with the availability and variability of highly advanced broadband services such as TMnet Streamyx, P1-WiMAX, and Maxis Wireless Lan throughout the country, *in addition to* unrestricted access to unfiltered information over the internet, more and more people are able to log on to *KWGM*’s website and other locally produced and maintained gay social networking websites.⁷ However, the highly debated government proposal to install internet filters to block access to pornographic and other “inappropriate” websites may affect people’s access to *KWGM* in the near future.⁸ To make matters worse, *KWGM* has already been blocked on several occasions even before the installation of these internet filters take place. It is crucial to point out that the internet functions as a highly effective means for gay Malay men to communicate and socialise, as well as to discuss and reflect on issues pertaining to same-sex sexuality and desires with relative ease and safety, especially when homosexuality remains legally and religiously prohibited in the modern Malaysian nation-state. Dennis Altman, Helmut Graupner, Olivia Khoo, and Philip Tahmindjis have argued that the internet has facilitated the construction of “online” or “virtual” gay and lesbian communities in Malaysia. These scholars contend further that the internet has provided gay and lesbian Malaysians with advantageous

opportunities to exercise their sexual agency and erotic autonomy in expressing same-sex sexualities and desires online as a way of resisting juridical surveillance and control. Olivia Khoo, for example, maintains that despite governmental containment of homosexuality, gay men and lesbians in Malaysia are able to find new ways of voicing same-sex sexualities and desires through online communities. “Online participation,” as Khoo points out, “is a way for local [gay and lesbian] community to assert agency through integration, collaboration, and [the] sharing of differences...” (235). Such integrative and collaborative online participations are readily observed in *KWGM* which has so far recruited almost ten thousand members, comprising gay Malaysian Malay men, gay Malay men from the countries in the Malay Archipelago such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei, and other gay Malay men from diasporic Malay communities. *KWGM* also extends its membership to non-Malay Malaysian and non-Malay non-Malaysian gay men who wish to develop social, political, erotic, and/or affectional ties with gay Malay men. Interestingly, *KWGM* has recently gone more global in its appeal by setting up its very own Facebook webpage under the organization (clubs and societies) category which is crucial in its attempt to recruit new members from all over the world (see fig. 6). I believe that the setting up of *KWGM*’s own Facebook website is also important because it provides a useful means through which Malay gay men can resist excessive governmental monitoring and the social control of homosexuality. This is especially true when gay Malay men continue to negotiate and organize same-sex sexual activities with other gay men on *and* off *KWGM*’s Facebook webpage, despite the possibilities of arrest if found out or discovered. For instance, many Malay gay men continue to post and publish information such as contact and meeting details, as well as nude and semi nude profile pictures on *KWGM*’s Facebook webpage, regardless of the fact that this information

and the photos can be easily accessed or used by the local police and religious authorities as substantial evidence to carry out prosecutions against them (see fig. 7).⁹



Fig. 6. “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” on Facebook.



Fig.7. Email and postal addresses, mobile phone numbers and other personal contact details which members have posted and published on *KWGM*'s Facebook webpage.

It is possible to say that the internet is not just a staple of popular culture among/for gay Malay youth, but functions as a critical site where Malay gay men create and express visible and assertive gay male identities. The internet, in my view, has also enabled Malay gay men to develop a hybrid form of resistance to juridical surveillance which

is, at times, infused with western understanding of agency and defiance. In other words, gay Malay men do not materially enact their resistance in the form of gay pride marches or gay lobbying as evidenced in the West, but instead, utilise gay social networking websites as a hybrid space in which to assert various forms of sexual agency in defying the laws prohibiting same-sex sexuality in Malaysia.

But I argue that despite its growing popularity among many Malay *and* non-Malay gay men, *KWGM* is evidently fraught with “double standard practices” which contradict its role in representing a diverse membership through the use of the term “gay Melayu.” This is because many gay-identified Malaysian Malay members of *KWGM* privilege “gay sejati/gay tulen” (“authentic gay”) as an essential marker of “gay Melayu” identity whilst marginalizing “lelaki lembut,” “pondan,” and “bisek” who do not fit this so-called “authentic” gayness. Although there is no single, satisfactory definition of “gay sejati/tulen,” many *KWGM* members claim that “gay sejati/gay tulen” is produced through the reinstantiation of “macho” and “tough” appearances and mannerisms. These *KWGM* members also claim that they often look up to idealised images of muscular and masculine gay men, and try to emulate such images as a way of disassociating themselves from the more effeminate behaviours of “lelaki lembut” and “pondan.” What is especially evidenced here is that effeminacy has always been regarded by many gay Malay men in Malaysia (and gay men elsewhere) as a problematic trope in the formation and expression of male same-sex sexual identities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tim Bergling, and others have argued that there is a *problematic* relationship between effeminacy and male homosexuality. In “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay,” Sedgwick argues that effeminate boys (and effeminate gay men in general) have always been marginalized or stigmatized by and within the

western gay community. As Sedgwick writes, "...the official gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys. There is a discreditable reason for this in the marginal or stigmatized position to which even adult men who are effeminate have often been relegated in the movement" (20). Such marginalization and stigmatization are largely attributed to what Sedgwick describes as effeminophobia; that is, the fear of effeminate boys in general and effeminacy in particular among many western gay men. I believe that the same holds true for effeminacy in *KWGM*, particularly in the ways in which many *KWGM* members express their gay subjectivities through the hypermasculine model of "gay sejati/tulen," rather than through the effeminate models of "lelaki lembut" and "pondan." This is mainly because many *KWGM* members fear of being perceived or identified as "lelaki lembut" and "pondan" which have always been stigmatized as being "kewanitaan" and "tidak jantan." It is this fear of effeminacy or effeminophobia that probably compels self-identifying "gay sejati/gay tulen" members of *KWGM* to look for "macho," "tough," and/or "straight-acting" gay men as a potential partner or a lover.

Effeminophobia among many Malay gay men has negative impacts on effeminate members of *KWGM*. For instance, one self-identified "lelaki lembut" laments that he finds it very difficult to find a partner (not to mention a decent friend!) mainly because many *KWGM* members are more interested in developing erotic and/or affectional relationship with "sejati/tulen" gay men. It is essential to point to out that the hypermasculine model of "gay sejati/gay tulen" which many *KWGM* members take on as a marker of their gayness is also repressive because it fixes gay male identity and further devalues gender fluidity. This is especially true when the privileging of "gay sejati/gay tulen" among many gay-identified members of *KWGM* gives the impression

that what it means to be “gay” online (and even offline) is essentially and rigidly configured through the reification of hegemonic masculinity. This, I believe, creates another impression that other forms of gay subjectivities, particularly those which are marked by more fluid forms of gender, are not “gay” and would probably continue to be regarded by many *KWGM* members as “kewanitaan” and “tidak jantan.” The question is whether lembut-identified and pondan-identified Malay men will ever be able to resist the repressive hypermasculine model of “gay sejati/gay tulen” and take on *femininity* as a way of being “gay” in this gay Malay online community.

“Bisek” or bisexual-identified Malay men, on the other hand, are also marginalized by many gay Malay men in *KWGM* who maintain that “biseks” are not “gay sejati” (“real gay”) and may not be able to “truly” self-identify as “gay” because of “biseks” sexual preferences for both men and women. In the forum discussion thread on “LelaKi bIseK” (“Bisexual Men”), many *KWGM* members assert online that bisexual Malay men are not able to identify themselves as “gay sejati,” let alone commit themselves fully to a “gay relationship.” This is mainly because bisexual Malay men continue to “main puki/cari perempuan” (“have sex with women/look for women”) whilst engaging in same-sex erotic practices. Furthermore, the ways in which “biseks” conceal or hide their sexuality from their female spouses or partners have prompted many *KWGM* members to regard “biseks” as “penipu” (“liars”). Rather than calling bisexual Malay men liars and deceitful, it may be more useful to understand the very act of concealing same-sex sexual preferences as primarily motivated by bisexual Malay men’s fear of being revealed and/or identified as “bisexual.” The same holds true for many gay-identified *KWGM* members who also conceal their same-sex sexuality and continue to keep it as a secret because they do not want to be stigmatized, harassed, and even

humiliated for being found out. This corroborates Ismail Baba's contention that many gay Malay men living in Malaysia conceal their same-sex sexuality for fear of social stigmatization and discrimination. Gay Malay men in Ismail's ethnographic study, for example, construct their sense of gayness based on the notion that "one must act like a "straight man"" (157) and adopt straight acting behaviour to avoid the consequences of being identified as "gay," which include the estrangement from family and friends. It can be said, then, that the act of covering up same-sex sexuality or "cover," a term which many *KWGM* members regularly use to describe this very act, cannot simply be taken as a form of self-deception or denialism. The term "cover" provides a veil or a screen through which many gay-identified *and* bisexual-identified Malay men can circumvent social prejudices against homosexuality *and* bisexuality. Moreover, it would be wrong to assert that bisexual Malay men in *KWGM* are not be able to "truly" self-identify as "gay," let alone commit themselves fully to a gay relationship as a result of their sexual preferences for both men and women. I believe that it would be more appropriate to think that bisexuality opens up advantageous possibilities for bisexual-identified Malay men in *KWGM* to resist normative notions of gender and sexuality. In *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*, Clare Hemmings maintains that although bisexuality has always been perceived as inhabiting the middle ground between sexes, genders, and sexualities, it is from this middle ground that bisexual-identified men and women are able to engender "the great bisexual escape" in resisting, subverting, and transcending normative gender and sexual categories (2-3). Hemmings's notion of "the great bisexual escape," in my view, can be used to explain how bisexual Malay men engender a similar form of escapism from rigid notions of gender and sexuality. This is evidenced in the ways in which bisexual Malay men, particularly those in *KWGM*, do not conform to the cultural and religious expectations

of being “a heterosexual Malay man.” Rather than adhering to gender and sexual norms as inscribed and enforced by Malay culture and religion, bisexual-identified Malay men redefine and reshape dominant Malay male identity by continually engaging in erotic and affectional relationships with *both* women *and* men. As one bisexual-identified member of *KWGM*, Azri, writes:

aku lelaki boleh pompuan pun boleh gak tapi perasaan aku more kepada lelaki ntahlah kekeliruan perasaan... pernah bercinta ngan 2 orang lelaki ngan 1 perempuan semuanya putus tengah jalan tapi bukan dalam masa yang sama le..... i hope will found true love one day... jgn ler benci lelaki bi mcm kami nih :) peace (azri, “LelaKi bIseK” February 7, 2009)

[I can be with both men and women but I feel more attracted to men... I don't know, maybe I'm still confused about my feelings... I've been in love with two men and a woman but these relationships didn't last and they didn't take place at the same time... I hope I will found [sic] true love one day... please, don't hate bisexual men like us :) peace.] (translation mine)

It is important to highlight that many non-Malay Malaysian and non-Malay non-Malaysian gay men, as well as Malay gay men from the Malay Archipelago and the diasporic Malay communities often find themselves marginalized by the dominant Malaysian Malay members of *KWGM*. A gay Malay man who identifies himself online as “KoolMalay” is a case in point. KoolMalay who currently resides in San Francisco *fails* to draw *KWGM* members' attention to his discussion “thread” on what it means to be “gay” in the West. Such a failure is due to the medium of expression (i.e. English language) that KoolMalay uses to recount his experiences of being “gay” in a western homosexual metropolitan centre. Moreover, KoolMalay's inability to direct *KWGM* members' attention to his discussion “thread” is also due to the fact that many gay Malay men in *KWGM* are more interested to discuss issues which are closer to “home”

such as popular local “port gay” (“gay meeting places”), local gay clubs and massage centres, erotic and romantic relationships, homosexuality and religion, to name just a few. Since these issues are discussed online in colloquial Malay spoken by a large number of urban gay Malaysian Malay men, it is possible to assert that language becomes an obstacle to developing a “genuine” feeling of community and a sense of belonging for many non-Malay speaking members of *KWGM*. In his discussion of what characterizes a gay community, Laszlo Toth contends that “[A] genuine (gay) community requires the existence of specific institutions within which a common consciousness can be expressed, which may include a community-specific language (true of many homosexual subcultures, and now apparent in the emergence of clearly defined gay slang(s) in Indonesia and the Philippines)” (qtd. in Altman, “Global Gaze” 103). Such a common consciousness which is expressed through a community-specific language is evidenced in *KWGM*, especially in the ways in which young, urban, gay Malay men who make up a large portion of *KWGM* membership frequently and extensively use colloquial Malay to communicate with each other online.

While standard Malay and English are also used by these members and *KWGM* administrators in writing the contents of the website’s main sections, I believe that the use of colloquial Malay (which incorporates standard Malay and other languages, and the practices of code-switching between English and Malay) *specifically* develops a sense of community and belonging among young, urban, gay Malaysian Malay members of this gay Malay online community (see figs. 8 and 9).



Fig.8. The main section of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” website.



Fig.9. The use of standard Malay and English, as well as colloquial Malay in one of the website’s main sections.

I say this because many *KWGM* members, most of whom are young and urban gay Malay men living in Kuala Lumpur, often use non-standard Malay as a way of communicating with each other online. This can be seen in almost all online forum discussion “threads,” where these members debate and deliberate the problems and issues primarily affecting their lives. Other members of *KWGM*, however, may not be

able to participate in these online forum discussions. Non-Muslim members, for example, may not be able to respond to the “threads” on matters concerning religion simply because they do not possess adequate knowledge of Islam. Non-Malay speaking members from countries such as Spain, Brazil, and Portugal may not be able contribute to, and participate in, these online discussion forums mainly because they do not understand the language used by young, urban, Malay gay men. Race and ethnicity, on the other hand, present another challenge to some non-Malay Malaysian members who, like “*lelaki lembut*” and “*pondan*,” struggle for acceptance in *KWGM*. For instance, a young, gay Malaysian Chinese man literally “begs” *KWGM* administrators not to terminate his membership because he is a non-Malay man who desires and loves Malay men. There is another notable case where a Malaysian Malay member strongly cautions Malaysian Indians not to add him to their friends’ lists because he is not sexually attracted to these men. Clearly, race and ethnicity, *in addition* to language, become a hindrance to the very process of creating a genuine feeling of community in *KWGM*. Some non-Malay Malaysian members face difficulties in gaining acceptance and developing a sense of belonging to *KWGM* given the tendency among many gay Malay men to exclude these members because of their race. But such exclusion, in my view, is central to the formation of *KWGM* as a gay online community and gay Malay men’s sense of identity. By keeping out Indians and Chinese Malaysian members, gay Malay men in *KWGM* are able to secure their racial identity by using this identity to differentiate themselves from others (in this case racial others). More importantly, gay Malay men exclude Indians and Chinese Malaysians as a way of exerting their superiority over racial others, which I believe is crucial to maintaining their rightful place and sense of exclusivity in a social networking website which was created primarily for gay Malays in Malaysia. However, there remains the vital question: why

does racial identity remain prior and, to a certain extent, take over sexuality even within a group that is marginalised by the official formulations of that racial identity? One tentative answer might be that despite being called “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” because of their sexuality, many Malay gay men in *KWGM* demonstrate a strong sense of Malayness (“semangat kemelayuan”) by identifying themselves strongly in terms of their racial rather than sexual identity. Such a strong racial self-identification is still very salient in the lives of many Malays in Malaysia who have come to regard themselves as Malays living in a multiracial, multiethnic, and multireligious country such as Malaysia. Another vital question that needs to be asked is whether *KWGM* as an emerging gay Malay online community can represent a *sexually, linguistically, geographically, and ethnically* diversified membership through the term “gay Melayu.” Who and what exactly is “gay Melayu” then? What constitutes “gay Melayu” as a gay male identity *and* as a gay online community?

My point here is that the privileging of “gay sejati/gay tulen” as an essential marker of “gay Melayu” identity compels a rethinking of “gay Melayu” as a hybrid cultural construct. “Gay sejati/gay tulen,” as discussed earlier, sustains, rather than resists, western gay hegemony. This, I believe, reevaluates Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a form of resistance against essentialised and fixed cultural identities. Gay Malay men’s reification of the images of western masculine gay men reinforce Feroza Jussawalla’s view on how “true hybridity cannot be achieved because those who would most speak for hybridity most want to retain their essentialisms...” (qtd. in Dirlik 109). Many Malay gay men in *KWGM* who replicate, to varying extents, western standards of masculine gayness, do so because this would enable them to “truly” self-identify as “gay” as understood in the West. More importantly, many Malay gay men believe that

they could assimilate into and become part of the larger western homosexual world, which has been perceived as the epicentre of/for gay community, by replicating western models of masculine gayness. However, this is not to suggest that gay Malay men would want to be *more* like “gay kat Amerika/Negara Barat” (“gay men in the West”). This is because gay Malay men look up to homosexual westerners as some sort of a role model of how they would like to live their lives as gay men in Malaysia. In his article on “Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia,” Ismail Baba points out that one of the psychosocial issues that continue to affect actual lived conditions and material struggles of many gay-identified Malay men in present-day Malaysia is the apparent lack of positive gay role models (156). Baba argues that although there already exists a traditional model of expressing male same-sex sexuality, which is in the form of “pondan” tradition, many gay Malay men find that this model is not always helpful in expressing their sense of gay male identity and gayness. Being “gay” and what it means to be “gay” for many gay Malay men within the borders of Malaysia, then, may neither be appropriately articulated through the effeminate behaviours of “pondan,” nor expressed through “pondan’s” daily routine of cross-dressing. Because of the apparent lack of positive local gay role models, many gay Malay men in *KWGM* consider western masculine gay men as a role model whom they can emulate and with whom they can identify as a way of expressing a gay male identity in a more “masculine,” rather than in a “feminine,” manner.

But if one acknowledges Michel Foucault’s contention on “the plurality of resistances” (96); that is, how resistance may take multiple shapes and forms, it would be more productive to view how “gay Melayu” is configured along a broad continuum of hybridities *and* resistances. In *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*, Jan

Nederveen Pieterse argues that local-global interactions under recent conditions of globalization produce a *multitude* of hybridities that may range from “assimilationist” to “destabilizing” types. These include “on one end, an assimilationist hybridity that leans towards the center, adopts the canon and mimics the hegemony and, at the other end, a destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverses the current, [and] subverts the center” (79). The privileged “gay sejati/gay tulen” may be read as an assimilationist hybrid gay male identity which not only appropriates, but, to an extent, imitates images of western masculine gay men, while the marginalized “lelaki lembut” may be read as a destabilizing hybrid type that resists and subverts these images simply because masculine and muscular features are not necessarily salient markers of gayness for many “lelaki lembuts.” This, in turn, demonstrates that gay male identities in Malaysia are culturally and historically specific constructions which take on *multiple* forms of hybridity *and* resistance. The ways in which “gay Melayu” is constructed along a wide spectrum of hybridities also help demonstrate that the *process* of constructing local gay male identities is visibly fraught with the tensions between localization and globalization, between assimilation and de-assimilation, and, most importantly, between reproducing and resisting western gay hegemony. This, I believe, amplifies Martin Manalansan’s assertion that notions of being “gay” in the contemporary world are affected by hybridity and syncretism (“Shadows of Stonewall” 213), where transnational and transcultural interactions under current globalization conditions have eased and expedited the formation, the dissemination, and the deployment of hybridised and syncretic gay male identities in local settings such as in Malaysia.¹⁰

My point on the marginalization of “lelaki lembut,” “pondan,” and “bisek,” as well as non-Malaysian Malay, non-Malay Malaysian, and non-Malay non-Malaysian members

of *KWGM*, on the other hand, raises pertinent issues concerning the role that this emerging gay Malay online community plays in representing a diversified membership through the use of the term “gay Melayu.” In “Survival through Pluralism: Emerging Gay Communities in the Philippines,” Michael L. Tan contends that the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” and “communities” run the risk of becoming monolithic simply because these terms are often used to describe “emerging,” middle-class gay and lesbian Filipinos who have sought to live their lives as homosexuals as understood in the West (129). Many middle-class Filipino gay men, as Tan cogently argues, reiterate western standards of masculine gay identity as a way for articulating their sense of “gayness.” He maintain further that “variables” such as age and ethnicity, *in addition to* class, are not only significant in shaping and differentiating gay “communities,” but also crucial to understanding emerging and evolving gay subcultures in the present-day Philippines, which include “bakla” (“effeminate men”) and “silahis” (“bisexual men”) (131). Tan’s view coheres neatly with Martin Manalansan’s argument that social class, ethnic/racial affiliations, and varying cultural traditions and practices are crucial in defining what it means to be “gay” *and* “Filipino” for many gay-identified Filipino men (qtd. in Jyoti, *Encountering Nationalism* 434). The same holds true for *KWGM*, particularly in relation to how this gay Malay online community may not be able to represent members from diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds through the use of the term “gay Melayu.” Feelings of marginalization as felt and experienced by non-Malay Malaysian members whom I mentioned earlier, give the impression that *KWGM* may, after all, function as a gay social networking website which is created by “gay Melayu” and for “gay Melayu” only. This, in my view, demonstrates that it is impossible to speak of *KWGM* as a *homogenous* gay online community, let alone maintain that “gay Melayu” is a *homogeneous* term. But rather than conceding that the term “gay Melayu”

cannot be used to represent the diversified *KWGM* membership (hence its limited and limiting features), it would be more productive, I think, to discuss how *KWGM* members may be able to formulate an “exclusive” and “inclusive” vision of “gay Melayu” identity through collaboration, integration, and the sharing of differences. “Exclusive” in the sense that the term “gay Melayu” can be employed *specifically* to address gay Malaysian Malay men, and “inclusive” to the extent that the same term can be used to *include* and *acknowledge* gay Malay men from different parts of the world, as well as non-Malay Malaysian and non-Malay non-Malaysians gay men who seek to affiliate with gay Malay men without necessarily identifying themselves as “Malay” as understood in the Malaysia. Non-Malay members of *KWGM*, for instance, can identify themselves as “gay Melayu” without necessarily fulfilling religious, language, and cultural requirements of being “Malay” as inscribed in the Malaysian Constitution. The same can be said of Singaporean gay Malay men who can regard themselves as “gay Melayu” in *KWGM* without compulsorily conforming to the legal markers of Malaysian Malayness. This is because, unlike the Malaysian Constitution that defines “Malay” in terms of Muslim religion, *in addition to* Malay language and custom, there is no specific mention of Islam in the Singapore Constitution as an identificatory marker of Singaporean Malayness.¹¹ This in turn demonstrates that Singaporean Malay gay men and other gay Malay men who live outside of the Malaysian national borders are able to assert “gay Melayu” and take it on as a subject position without necessary identifying themselves as “Malay” as conflated with Malays living in Malaysia (I will discuss this further in Chapter 6). Moreover, the creation of an “exclusive/inclusive” vision of “gay Melayu,” I believe, can help *KWGM* to live up to its claim of being “the most popular community especially for Malay guys around the world.” But the problem is that not *all* *KWGM* members construct and articulate an “exclusive/inclusive” gay

Malay identity, let alone view their gay male identities as hybrid cultural formations. This is mainly because many *KWGM* members, regardless of their apparent socio-cultural differences, have come to the website in order to fulfil primary goals which include finding sexual partners and potential lovers, developing erotic and affectional bonds, and experimenting with “gay sex.” Furthermore, many *KWGM* members are apparently *more* interested in being “gay” rather than “Malay,” while some *KWGM* members aspire to be “gay suci” (“pure gay”) by developing same-sex romantic relationship or engaging in gay sex. Such a strong sense of gayness, in my view, is important because it helps one to understand the complex creation of gay Malay identity. Notions of self and identity among gay Malay men in *KWGM* are evidently dynamic and fluid. For instance, racial identity as mentioned earlier may take priority over sexual identity in the process of self-identification among gay Malay men, particularly those who demonstrate a strong sense of Malayness as a way of distinguishing themselves from racial others in Malaysia. Gayness, on the other hand, may take precedence over race in the creation of identity for Malay gay men who identify more strongly with being gay rather than being Malay. This is probably because sexuality is more important than anything else for this group of Malay gay men. Interestingly, there are some gay Malay men who display a more fluid and context-based self-identification by calling themselves Malay in one situation (e.g. when identifying themselves in racially mixed spaces) and “gay” in another (e.g. when identifying themselves in gay or gay-friendly establishments).

It is possible to say that there can never be a completely satisfactory answer to what it means to be “gay” in modern-day Malaysia. This is because notions of being “gay” as envisioned and embraced by many gay Malay men whom I’ve discussed in this chapter

are constantly shaped by various factors pertaining to subjectivity, and are also influenced by western gay identities and the language that has been universally employed to explain these identities within and outside the western domains. What I have found particularly interesting is that gay Malay men, particularly members of the local gay Malay online community, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu,” employed a multitude of strategies in formulating and expressing a plethora of gay male identities and cultural practices. This can be seen in the ways in which many gay-identified members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” strategically reappropriated local *and* western forms of gayness in crafting and expressing hybrid *and* heterogenous gay male identities. Some gay-identified members used the knowledge they have gained about indigenous *and* western gay male identities, and drew on local idioms and expressions in articulating their own particular and unique ways of being “gay” which are not wholly dependent on western-derived gay terminology. These include “Gay Tahfiz,” “Anak Ikan,” and “Abang Polis/Askar.” This, in my view, validates the main argument in this chapter and in this study more specifically that queer-identified Malays in contemporary popular culture (i.e. local gay social networking websites) invent their own self-identities and use them as a means of redressing received ideas about queerness in local contexts, particularly its conflation with western cultural influences. My discussion of what it means to be “gay” *and* “Malay” has also shown that many Malay gay men in “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” are able to construct an “exclusive” *and* “inclusive” vision of “gay Melayu” identity, which can be used to represent both Malays *and* non-Malay members of this emerging gay Malay online community. Such an “exclusive/inclusive” vision of “gay Melayu,” a point to which I shall argue in Chapter 6, opens up a critical lens through to think of how Malays living in the

diaspora revise and transform official versions of Malaysian Malayness by specifically creating a queer Malay diasporic identity.

Notes

¹ See Dennis Altman's *Global Sex*, "Globalization and the International Gay/Lesbian Movement" and "Global Gaze/Global Gays" for his substantive research on the emergence of "global gay" identities and communities in non-western societies under conditions of economic and cultural globalization.

² See Nizam Zakaria's short story, *Sembang Ratu I*, especially p. 45 for his discussion of indigenous gay men's diverse understandings of "handsome-ness" and "can do-ness" and their different "tastes" in men. It is important to note that the term "nok" (and, at times, "puki") is a Malay equivalent word for "vagina" which is often used by queer-identified Malay men ("pondans" and "mak nyahs" in particular) when communicating with each other. "Nok," in addition to "nyah," "perem/puan" ("woman"), "sundal" ("bitch") and "pelacur" ("prostitute") do not necessarily carry derogative meanings simply because these terms have been used by many queer-identified Malay men as common forms of address.

³ Ashraf Sinclair, Jimmy Shanley Norjahan Saleh, Stephen Rahman-Hughes are some Malaysian Malay male celebrities of mixed Malay and European parentage who are considered by some (if not many) gay Malay men as "hensem."

⁴ See William Leap and Tom Boellstroff's *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*, for discussion of the global circulation of the term "gay" or "a gay men's English," which originates in the U.S. Leap and Boellstroff, along with other scholars in this volume, have demonstrated how this term interacts with the already-existing ways of talking about same-sex sexuality and desire outside of and even within the western (i.e. North American) domains. This is most readily observed in the ways in which "people who have same-sex desires, subjectivities, and/or communities *mediate and renegotiate* linguistic process and product under conditions of the ostensible globalization of gay English" (Leap and Boellstroff 4; emphasis added). I agree with Leap and Boellstroff mainly because the term "gay" has also been reappropriated *and* recontextualised by many gay Malay men whom I discuss in this chapter, to the extent that the term *does* carry different meanings to different people in different contexts, particularly in non-western settings such as in Malaysia.

⁵ See Nizam Zakaria's short story, *Sembang Ratu II*, especially p. 201 for his discussion of why many gay Malay men avoid becoming intimately involved with "lelaki lembut."

⁶ I believe that there is some evidence of internalized homophobia, particularly effeminophobia, misogyny, and even lesbian phobia among many gay Malay men in *KWGM*. It would be interesting to investigate how all these affect the ways in which gay Malay men in *KWGM* and other gay Malay men in

Malaysia identify themselves as “gay” in relation to others, especially in the local gay and lesbian community.

⁷ See an overview of Malaysia’s broadband services at <<http://point-topic.com/content/operatorSource/profiles2/malaysia-broadband-overview.htm>> and a list of leading broadband internet service providers in Malaysia at <<http://www.mycen.com.my/malaysia/isp.html>>.

⁸ See Royce Cheah’s “Malaysia Denies Internet Filters Will Curb Dissent” and Daniel Chandranayagam’s “Malaysia: A Step Closer to Internet Censorship?” for their arguments regarding Malaysia’s stand on Internet censorship, which many believe presents an obstacle to the vision of transforming Malaysia into a fully technological and developed nation by the year 2020.

⁹ Although no one in Malaysia has ever been arrested for posting and publishing, for instance, nude and/or semi nude profile photos on Facebook, there is always a risk of prosecution. This is because many Malaysians have actually been arrested because of their Facebook profiles. For instance, in August 2010, two men were prosecuted by the police in the Malaysian state of Johor for impersonating the Johor Prince, Tunku Ismail Idris Sultan Ibrahim, on their Facebook profiles. See the article, entitled “Two Arrested for Johor Prince Impersonation on Facebook,” on *The Star*’s website at <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/8/31/nation/20100831133132&sec=nation>>. In 2009, the council officers in the Malaysian state of Terengganu raided a booze-and-drug party attended by more than 200 teenagers who had been invited to the party via their Facebook profiles. See the article, entitled “Council Officers Cut Short Beachfront Wild Party For Teens,” on *The Star*’s website at <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2009/5/17/nation/3925835&sec=nation>>.

¹⁰ See Martin F. Manalansan’s article, entitled “In the Shadow of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma,” especially p. 213 for his in-depth discussion of *hybridised* and *syncretic* notions of being “gay” as conceived and enacted by Filipino gay men in the Philippines.

¹¹ See David C.L. Lim’s “Race, Multi-Cultural and Accommodation and the Constitutions on Singapore and Malaysia,” Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied’s “Making Sense of An Evolving Identity: A Survey of Studies on Identity and Identity Formation Among Malay-Muslims in Singapore,” and Cheu Hock Tong and Teoh Boon Seong’s “Malay Studies in Language, Literature, Culture and Society” for their discussions of the way in which “Malay” is *both* legally *and* differentially defined in Malaysia and Singapore.

Chapter 5 The Articulation of Queer Malay Identity and Its Material Impact on Queer Malays' Lives and Their Sense of Belonging to "Bangsa Melayu"

However, the articulation of a *subcultural* identity has been, in the case of lesbian and gay subject, a practice always threatened by the intervention of a dominant heterosexist culture. The threats that emanate from the attempt at the closure of discourse to the articulation of a gay identity have material reality that impacts directly upon the subject.

– Carl F. Stychin, *Law's Desire: Sexuality and the Limits of Justice*

While acknowledging that queer-identified Malays adopt diverse strategies to formulate and express their own notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay,” it is crucial not to disregard important issues surrounding the actual material articulation of queer Malay identity in present-day Malaysia. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that there are various ramifications of establishing and asserting a queer narrative of Malayness in a Muslim majority country such as in Malaysia. I will argue that, although queer-identified Malays are able to construct a queer Malay identity through, for instance, strategic renegotiations of ethnicity, religion, and queer sexuality, there are diverse material implications of inhabiting this identity and taking it on as a subject position in a country where queerness remains subject to lived social and juridical surveillance. I will also demonstrate how the very articulation of a queer Malay identity deeply affects queer-identified Malays' sense of belonging and attachment to the Malay Muslim community, in particular, and to the Malaysian nation-state, in general. To buttress my argument about the articulation of a queer narrative of Malayness and its diverse material impacts on queer-identified Malays' lives and their self-identities, I shall address the following questions: what are the material ramifications of identifying oneself as “queer” *and* “Malay” in a world that

remains heteronormative and, at times, homophobic? Do material conditions of queer-identified Malays change as a result of taking on a queer Malay identity? Can strategic renegotiations and reassertions of ethnicity, religiosity, *and* queer sexuality protect queer-identified Malays from being persecuted, harassed, and even humiliated by the police and religious authorities? Can queer-identified Malays enact a hybrid form of resistance, which is not an absolute duplicate of western forms of resistance, but is, at times, overlaid, with western notions of agency and defiance, against juridical surveillance and monitoring? Can queer-identified Malays resist received narratives of Malayness, on the one hand, and queerness, on the other, by formulating and articulating their own notions of “queerness” and “Malayness”? In what ways does the articulation of a queer Malay identity affect queer-identified Malays’ sense of belonging and attachment to the Malay Muslim community and to the Malaysian nation-state? My discussion of the material implications of articulating queer Malay identity is important because it shows that my study on queer Malay identity-formation not only examines how self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays formulate and articulate their identities, but also pays specific attention to the ways in which the hegemonic Malay culture, religion, and the state affect their creation and expression. This, I believe, can provide a better understanding and further insights into the complexity of identity creation among ethnic Malays (queer-identifying Malay men and women in particular) within Malaysia’s territorial boundaries.

Being “Queer” *and* “Malay”: Implications and Ramifications

One of my central arguments and assertions throughout this thesis has been that notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay” as envisioned and embraced by many queer-identified Malays are configured through strategic renegotiations of conflicting elements such as queer sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. Such renegotiations amplify Homi K. Bhabha’s assertion that the reconciliation of diverse and competing elements is crucial to the construction of a hybrid cultural identity. In *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha describes cultural hybridity as a process that engenders “something different, something new and unrecognizable, [and] a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). In other words, cultural hybridity opens up an interstitial site in which antagonistic or contradictory elements of the colonizer and the colonized (i.e. colonial culture, the experiences of colonized people, and the ongoing effects of colonialism) are (re)negotiated in constructing a new hybrid identity which stands as a challenge to fixed and essentialised notions of cultural identity. This is especially true when the colonized subjects take this new hybrid identity as a form of resistance against the colonizer’s designation of the colonized as “uncivilized” and “inferior” (Said 207, 300). Although Bhabha discusses the process of cultural hybridity in relation to the history of colonialism in India, I find that his notion of hybridity, particularly the accommodation of conflicting elements, provides a useful means through which to examine and understand the complex processes of self-identification among queer-identified Malays living in Malaysia. Many queer-identified Malays, whom I discussed in this thesis, construct their own visions of being “queer” *and* “Malay” by reconciling *multiple* competing elements including same-sex sexuality and cultural and religious heritages. The reconciliations of diverse and contradictory elements enable many queer-identified Malays to invent new narratives of Malay ethnicity which resist and radically transform

pedagogical configurations of Malayness. This is particularly true when queer-identified Malays formulate a Malay identity marked by queerness and use it as a means of resisting and redefining dominant ideas about Malayness, where Malays are officially designated as Muslims who *must* fulfil their “fitrah” as heterosexual Muslim men and women. It is pertinent to point out that Bhabha’s concept of hybridity also provides a useful tool for understanding queer identities in non-western indigenous contexts such as in Malaysia. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that gay male identities and gay male cultures in modern-day Malaysia are hybrid *and* heterogeneous cultural formation. Notions of being “gay” as experienced and practiced by some “lelaki lembut,” for instance, are characteristically hybrid simply because they are deeply shaped by the indigenous tradition of “pondan” and western forms of gayness which have been brought into the local social landscape via colonialism and globalisation. What is more important is that some “lelaki lembut” selectively reappropriate both local and western forms of gay male identities and cultures in configuring their own visions of gay male identity. These characteristically hybrid forms of gayness challenge and radically reshape the western aberration argument used by the Malay nationalist elites. This is because gayness in Malaysia cannot be officially perpetuated as a degenerative western influence because it is a hybrid cultural formation that is constantly being shaped and reshaped by a *multitude* of factors, including western forms of gay identity, “pondan-ness,” indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices.

But it would be incorrect to assume that queer Malays can identify themselves *unproblematically* and *unconditionally* as “queer” *and* “Malay” by asserting a sexually dissident notion of Malay ethnicity. This is because there are various ramifications of

identifying oneself as “queer” *and* “Malay” in modern-day Malaysia, given that queer identities and practices remain subject to social and legal sanctions. Many queer-identified Malays, as I’ve discussed in this thesis, continue to be discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality. “Lelaki lembuts,” (“effeminate indigenous men”), “mak nyahs” (“male-to-female transsexuals”), and Malay gay men, for example, cannot adequately protect themselves from being humiliated by many members of the dominant Malay Muslim community. Ethnic Malays in Malaysia often use derogative and highly discriminatory terms such as “pondan,” “bapuk,” “kedi,” and “darai” to mock and degrade “lelaki lembuts” and “mak nyahs” for cross-dressing and/or behaving like women. The term “pondan” is also frequently used to deride Malay gay men for desiring other men. The very act of shaming queer-identified Malay men through derogatory terms corresponds with Judith Butler’s contention that sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. Calling gay men “feminine,” as Butler contends, is indeed a result of shaming gay men for failing to be a real or a proper man (*Bodies that Matter* 238). The same holds true for Malay gay men, “lelaki lembuts,” and “mak nyahs” who are often disparaged as/for being “kewanitaan” (“womanly”) and “tidak jantan” (“unmanly”) for failing to live up to culturally normative conceptions of Malay masculinity. It is also pertinent to note that queer-identified Malay men and women continue to be perceived by the dominant Malay Muslim community to be “less Malay” and “less Muslim.” This is because queer-identified Malay men and women do not adhere strictly to heteronormative cultural and religious practices, which have become potent markers of Malay Muslim subjectivity. Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf have argued that the concept of Malay Muslim subjectivity within the context of “dunia Melayu” (“Malay world”) is profoundly shaped by culture and religion.¹ Ruzy, for instance, maintains that Malay

Muslim women are expected to comply with and actualise their “fitrah” (“innate and unalterable gender dispositions”) by becoming “isteri” (“wives”) and “ibu” (“mothers”), while Malay Muslim men are expected to become fathers and the heads of the households (“Meniti Duri”¹⁶). Ruzy contends further that sexual relations between Malay Muslim husbands and wives are governed and regulated by the principles of the Quran and Hadith. This is especially true when marriage and conjugal relations are culturally endorsed *and* religiously sanctified as the legitimate means of sexual gratification. It is correct to say that the actualisation of “fitrah,” which is conceived through the fulfilment of cultural and religious expectations of masculinity/femininity including the social and familial pressures for marriage, is crucial to dominant heteronormative configurations of Malay Muslim subjectivity.

But the failure to actualise or fulfil one’s “fitrah” often calls into question one’s identity as “Malay” and “Muslim” within the dominant Malay Muslim community. This is readily observed in the ways in which queer-identified Malays have always been criticised for being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” on the grounds that queer-identified Malays defy their “fitrah” by articulating a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity. Queer-identified Malays’ involvement in same-sex sexual practices, on the other hand, has been viewed by many Malays in Malaysia as a failure to possess adequate “iman” (“religious beliefs”), “taqwa” (“God consciousness”), and “ahlaq” (“good moral behaviours”). Asrul Zamani, Zeenath Kausar, and others have pointed out that “iman,” “ahlaq,” and “taqwa” are distinctive features of Malay Muslim identity. Asrul, for example, maintains that homosexuality, cohabitation, and other forms of social ill, which are prevalent in the Malay Muslim community, are largely attributed to the declining levels of religiosity and morality among many Malay Muslim youth.² Asrul

asserts further that “those who are engrossed in these social ills, are the ones who hardly ever pray. If they are Muslims, they are *nominal* Muslims. There is no faith or God-consciousness within their hearts. There is no fear of God” (351; emphasis added). Asrul maintains that Malay Muslim youths can ultimately prevent social ills through “iman,” “taqwa,” and “ahlaq” and return to the teachings of Islam as way of becoming “true” Muslims.³ While I do not intend to determine whether queer-identified Malays are *still* Muslims or otherwise, I believe that Asrul’s view helps explain why many Malays regard queer-identified Malays as “Muslim” *only* in or by name at the least. In the eyes of many Malays, queer-identified Malays fail to practice the Muslim faith on the premise that queerness contradicts with Islamic principles and practices. This raises the question of whether queer-identified Malay men and women can assert their identity and mark their difference *unproblematically* and/or *unconditionally* within the dominant Malay Muslim community. Can queer-identified Malays identify themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” regardless of the official confluences of queerness with being “less Malay” and “less Muslim,” on the one hand, and with being “less of a man” or “less of a woman,” on the other? Can queer-identified Malays express and inhabit identities marked by sexual difference without the fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against on the basis of sexual difference?

It is important to emphasize that queer-identified Malays’ material conditions may not necessarily change or improve as a result of articulating a queer narrative of Malayness. This is mainly because queer-identified Malay men and women’s public and private lives continue to be monitored and policed by the state governing bodies and religious authorities. Azza Basarudin, Farish A. Noor, Julian C. H. Lee, and others have argued that the private and public lives of Malays in modern Malaysian nation-state are

governed and circumscribed by socio-juridical practices. Farish, for instance, asserts that the intimate aspects of Malays' everyday lives are regularly intervened by the state-employed "morality police" and "shariah enforcers."⁴ Such interventions, which are in accordance with the state-sanctioned Shariah law, are crucial to maintaining and policing Malay Muslims' morality in an Islamic nation-state such as Malaysia. It is important to mention that Islam in Malaysia is different culturally and socially from Islam in the Near and Middle East. Although it may be getting more conservative now in Malaysia, this does not necessarily mean that Islam as practised by many Muslims here, is synonymous with the so-called "radical" Islam. Afsaneh Najmabadi, Osman Bakar, Suad Joseph, and others have pointed out that almost all Malay Muslims in Malaysia are Ash'arite Sunni who follow the Shafi'ite school of thought in their interpretation and practice of Islamic law. Other Shafi'ites; that is, the followers of the Shafi'ite school of law, can also be found in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Many scholars have noted that Malaysia is a moderate and progressive Muslim state. This is mainly because the Malay-dominated government, led by the ruling Malay party UMNO (United Malay National Organization), adopts a more "liberal" approach toward Islam. But the intense Islamisation of the Malaysian nation-state and the Malay Muslim community in particular in recent years (as evidenced in the greater policing of Malay Muslims' public and private lives) can be said to be intimately linked with "political Islam" in Malaysia. Osman Bakar, for instance, maintains that political Islam has long been a key feature of the Malay-dominated Malaysian politics. This is especially true when Islam, as Osman contends, figures prominently in political ideas, values, and practices of/among Malaysian Malay Muslim leaders. What makes it more interesting is that Islam has often been used by the two dominant Malay Muslim political parties; namely, UMNO and PAS, to gain support from Malay Muslim voters.

Both the ruling Malay party UMNO, and the opposition Islamic party PAS (Partai Islam Se-Malaya), have different visions of Malaysia as an Islamic nation-state – the former is dedicated to develop a liberal, modern, and progressive Muslim nation, while the latter advocates a more traditional and religiously conservative vision of an Islamic state. But a major shift of Malay Muslim voters to PAS in recent years has, in many ways, forced UMNO to revise its vision of Malaysia as a Muslim state (that it can be modern and progressive, but must adhere to the normative tenets of Islam) as a way of gaining more voters' support to strengthen its political power and maintains its rule over the country. This is most readily observed in the ruling Malay party's enforcement of more stringent Islamic laws which regulate, monitor, and police *both* the public *and* private lives of Malay Muslims living in Malaysia.⁵

The “morality police” and “shariah enforcers” as mentioned earlier also form a significant part of the state's project of Islamization, which has set out to monitor and police queer-identified Malay Muslims' private lives and sexualities through regimes of control and surveillance. The state project of Islamization was a move taken by Malay nationalist elites in the 1980s as a way of responding to the growing influence of “dakwah” (“religious Islamic proselytizing movement”) at the time.¹ Shamsul Amri Baharuddin has argued that this movement was originally initiated by young Muslim graduates from University of Malaya in the early 1970s through the establishment of the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). One of the central assertions (and demands) of ABIM was to urge Malay Muslims to create a better society based on Islamic principles, while simultaneously strengthening their religious identity and Islamic faiths (Shamsul, “Islamic Revivalism” 213). ABIM gained momentum and influence throughout the 1970s and 1980s, to the extent that it

not only radically changed the local social milieu (as evidenced in the phenomena of donning the “mini-telekung” (“head veil”) among many Malay Muslim women), but had extended its reach into the local political arena. In order to cope with the growing social and political influences of ABIM and other Muslim youth organizations, the former Malaysian premier, Mahathir Muhamad, and other Malay state elites at the time developed their own version of “dakwah” by implementing state-sponsored Islamisation policies and programmes. These included the introduction of Islamic banking system and the establishments of the Southeast Asian Islamic Research Center and the International Islamic University in Malaysia. The lives of many Malay Muslims in Malaysia were (and still are) deeply affected by the nationalist project of “Islamizing” the Malaysian nation-state in general, and Malay society in particular. For instance, “un-Islamic” activities such as drinking and gambling, as well as pre-marital and extra-marital sex are all prohibited under the state-sanctioned Shariah law. Cross-dressing and other transgressive forms of gender, on the other hand, are not only criminalized, but remain under constant governmental surveillance via state religious authorities throughout Malaysia. In recent years, there has been a series of police raids on many gay and lesbian establishments in Kuala Lumpur and other cosmopolitan centres throughout Malaysia. These police raids are conducted and carried out on commercial premises and on private homes and residences.⁶ Gay Malay men and lesbian Malay women who have been arrested during these police raids could be charged and punished under Section 25 and Section 26 of the Shariah Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 for engaging in “liwat” (“sexual relations between male persons”) or “musahaqah” (“sexual relations between female person”). Section 25 clearly states that, “[a]ny male person who commits liwat shall be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding five thousand ringgit or to

imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to whipping not exceeding six strokes or to any combination thereof (“Shariah Offences” 17). Malay gay men who have been found guilty of engaging in “sodomy” during these police raids could also be prosecuted under Sections 377A and 377B of the Malaysian Penal Code for committing the “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” Section 377B, as inherited from British colonial rule, explicitly states that, “[w]hoever voluntarily commits carnal intercourse against the order of nature (i.e. the insertion of the penis into the anus or the mouth of the other person) shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to twenty years, and shall also be liable to whipping.”⁷ Malay “mak nyahs,” on the other hand, are liable to a hefty fine and/or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years under Section 28 of the Shariah Criminal Offences Enactment if they are charged for wearing women’s attire or posing as a woman for “immoral purposes” in the public.⁸ Similar punishments will be imposed on lesbian Malay women, particularly “pengkids” and “tomboys,” for engaging in cross-dressing and other forms of transgressive gender behaviour. To aggravate matters further, the Malaysian National Fatwa Council has recently issued a “fatwa” (“religious ruling”) which prohibits “pengkid” and “tomboyism” on the premise that cross-gendered appearances and same-sex sexuality among Malay Muslim women are “haram” (“religiously prohibited”) in Islam. As the English version of the “fatwa” reads:

The committee has decided that tomboy, women whose appearance, behaviour and sexual inclination are like men is forbidden in Islam. The committee urged the public to educate young girls properly especially in matters pertaining to dressing, behaviour and appearance so that this phenomenon can be prevented as this phenomenon can be prevented [sic] as this act [sic] contradictory to nature and sunnatullah (God’s laws).⁹

What is clearly evidenced here is that the actual material conditions of queer-identified Malays may not necessarily change or improve as a result of taking on a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity. This is precisely true when many queer-identifying Malay men and women cannot completely prevent regulatory and, at times, unwarranted, governmental invasion into their private lives. The unprecedented police raids on private homes and residences and on local queer establishments give the impression that queer-identified Malays face the risk of losing their personal privacy and, most importantly, their *rights to privacy*. Scholars such as Michael Warner and Vincent J. Samar have argued that the rights to privacy of queer-identified men and women in the U.S. have been and continue to be violated by the state law. This is mainly because the law of privacy in America, as Samar points out, protects only specific “states of affairs” and “human actions” (14), which include sexual relations and sexual practices between heterosexual married couples. This means that people who engage in sexual relations and sexual practices (and their *rights* to engage in these sexual relations and sexual practices) which take place *outside* of heterosexual marriage are not fully protected by the said law and, therefore, remain subject to state surveillance and control. As Warner rightly asserts:

As long as people marry, the (U.S.) state will continue to regulate the sexual lives of those who do not marry. It will continue to refuse to recognize our intimate relations – including cohabiting partnerships – as having the same rights or validity of married couple [...] All this and more the state will justify *because these relations take place outside of marriage*. In the modern era, marriage has become the central legitimating institution by which the state regulates and permeates people’s most intimate lives; it is the *zone of privacy* outside of which sex is unprotected” (*The Trouble with Normal* 96; emphases added).

The same can be said of the ways in which the Malaysian nation-state continues to infringe and encroach upon queer-identified Malay men and women's rights to privacy on the basis that same-sex sexual relations and sexual practices take place outside the legitimate and legitimised *zone of privacy*; that is, heterosexual marriage. This is because the Muslim-majority Malaysian nation-state, as I have mentioned, recognizes heterosexual marriage and conjugal relations as the *only* legitimate means of sexual gratification. But I would like to argue very strongly that queer-identified Malay men and women's rights to privacy *must* be recognized and protected because this will enable queer-identified Malays to articulate identities characterized by queerness and to engage in same-sex sexual relations and sexual practices with relative ease and safety in private spaces, especially when it is still illegal to be openly "queer" locally, and to claim erotic autonomy as a human right. I say this because there are still significant problems concerning the implementation or the enforcement of human rights locally. Despite claiming to be a democratic nation, many scholars have pointed out that Malaysia remains *quasi-autocratic* under the control of the Malay-dominated government, led by the ruling Malay party, UMNO (Ansell 248). Local NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) including Suara Rakyat Malaysia (People's Voice or SUARAM) challenge the practice of democracy in Malaysia mainly because there is still an apparent lack of protection of basic human rights, *in addition to* the limited freedom of the mass media, the denial of cultural rights to certain ethnic communities, and the repressive laws by the regime (Ramasamy 209). All these help illuminate the continuing presence of autocratic governmental policies and practices in present-day Malaysia. For instance, scholars have argued that the state-sanctioned Internal Security Act (ISA) is a draconian law, which violates human rights in Malaysia on the basis that it has been and continue to be used to detain individuals (both Malaysians and non-

Malaysians) *without trial* for their alleged involvement in subversive activities that endanger the country's security and sovereignty. To complicate matters, the concept of human rights espoused by the authoritarian Malaysian government, as Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, and Tan Beng Hui contend, does not include sexuality rights (and the protection of such rights) mainly because same-sex sexuality contravenes with the nation's religious values and principles (144-145). This, in turn, explains why many queer-identified Malays *and* queer-identified non-Malay Malaysians have a well-founded fear of prosecution because of their sexuality. Many have sought asylum in countries such as the UK to flee prosecution and to live an openly queer life in a safe and secure environment. If only human rights of queer Malaysians of all races were acknowledged, recognized, and protected locally, then the difficulties in identifying and repositioning oneself openly as "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," or "transgendered" in Malaysia could perhaps be overcome. But will it be possible for queer Malaysians to do so when their basic rights to organize their identities and their lives around same-sex sexuality, desires, and practices is officially and judicially *denied*?¹⁰

Queer-identified Malay men and women cannot adequately protect themselves from being persecuted, harassed, and humiliated by the local police and religious authorities. Many Malay "mak nyahs," as Khartini Slamah, Teh Yik Koon, and others have argued, are often asked to strip naked and expose their genital parts, and even cajoled into having sex with police officers during arrest or while in custody.¹¹ One may recall the character Manisha in Osman Ali's film, *Bukak Api*, who expresses her dissatisfactions with the ways "mak nyahs" are often cruelly mistreated and abused by local police officers. As Manisha points out:

Aku tak kisah sangat pasal undang-undang tu
 Yang aku geram sangat cara dia layan kita tu macam binatang tau tak!
 Suka-suka hati dia boleh sepak terajang kita ni
 Aaaa... Siapa tak geram? Aku pun biasa gak kena tangkap.
 (Manisha, *Bukak Api*)

[I don't care much about the laws
 But what really infuriates me is the way they treat us like animals!
 They kick and trample us as they like
 Aaaa... How can you not be angry? I'm used to being arrested too.]
 (translation mine)

Gay Malay men, on the other hand, cannot protect themselves from being beaten up and flogged by police officers before they are put on trial for engaging in legally proscribed same-sex sexual practices. In his article, entitled "Islam and the Politics of Homophobia: The Persecution of Homosexuals in Islamic Malaysia Compared to Secular China," Walter L. Williams asserts that gay Malay men (and their non-Malay counterparts) are subjected to harassment, detention, and abuse by the local police. It is increasingly difficult for gay Malay men to defend and protect themselves, given that it has become a common practice for the police to use their power to prosecute and, at times, abuse those who are guilty of engaging in the legally prohibited male same-sex sexual activities. As Williams rightly notes:

The fact that homosexuals are so commonly arrested is itself a sentence of punishment. A person who is arrested for a crime in Malaysia often has to wait in jail for a long time, sometimes up to eight years, before being brought to trial. Guards regularly beat prisoners. The torture of prisoners is justified by the commonly meted out sentence of being flogged with a cane. The practice of caning is so severe that prisoners often faint from the pain and are left with permanent scars. *In the case of prisoners who are homosexual, the extensive publicity regarding the government [sic]*

condemnation of homosexuality has sent the message to the police and others that the persecution of homosexuals is acceptable (16; emphasis added).¹²

While I concur with Khartini, Teh, and Williams' contentions on the legal ramifications of being "mak nyah" and "gay" in indigenous contexts, I would like to argue that the persecution of queer-identified Malays, *in addition to* governmental interventions into queer-identified Malays' private lives, do not fully contain the articulation of a sexually dissident notion of Malay ethnicity. This is because many queer-identified Malay men and women continue to articulate and sustain their own ethnic identities which are marked by queerness, despite ongoing governmental control and surveillance. Malay "mak nyahs," for instance, continue to assert notions of difference by sustaining cross-gendered identifications, regardless of the risk of prosecution. Many Malay "mak nyahs," as Khartini Slamah rightly asserts, challenge the "fatwa" on sex-change operation among all Muslims in Malaysia by going out to neighbouring countries such as Thailand to undergo gender reassignment surgery (101). Teh Yik Koon also points out that many Malay "mak nyahs" in her ethnographic study claim that they insist on being "nyahs," despite legal ramifications of doing so simply because "deep in their hearts, [many mak nyahs] feel that they are women" ("Male to Female"105). What is worth noting here is that Malay "mak nyahs" assert transsexuality and a strong desire to be women, *alongside* ethnic and religious heritages, as a way of resisting heteronormative notions of being "Malay" and the laws which continue to prohibit "mak nyah-ness." Such a strong desire to "truly" self-identify as women is clearly exemplified by Jelita in Osman Ali's film, *Bukak Api*. Manja, the actor who plays the character Jelita in the film, is a self-identified Malay "mak nyah" and her involvement with the film is part of her contribution to the Transsexual Programme under Pink

Triangle Malaysia – a non-governmental organisation that reaches out to “mak nyahs” and other local sexual minority groups. It is necessary to point out that Pink Triangle Malaysia, which is now known as PT Foundation, is the first non-governmental organization in Malaysia that deals with issues concerning HIV/AIDS. As a non-profit making and community-based organization, PT Foundation provides education on HIV/AIDS, prevention, care and support programmes, sexuality awareness and empowerment programmes for vulnerable communities which include drug users, sex workers, transsexuals, men who have sex with men (MSM), and people living with HIV/AIDS.¹³ Manja, along with other Malay “mak nyahs” who also contribute to the success of the film project and PT Foundation’s Transsexual Programme, take on “mak nyah-ness” as a subject position without necessarily discarding cross-gendered appearances and behaviours for fear of prosecution. More importantly, Manja and her fellow “mak nyahs” not only inhabit Malay identities marked by sexual difference by renegotiating “mak nyah-ness” *and* “Malay-Muslimness,” but engender a hybrid form of resistance against governmental control and containment. That is, Malay “mak nyahs” do not replicate western model of queer resistance as evidenced in radical queer activism in the West, but enact a similar form of resistance by reinforcing cross-gendered identifications and transgressive forms of gender as a way of defying legal and religious sanctions against “mak nyah-ness.” However, this hybrid form of resistance may not necessarily effect significant social changes in the lives of many Malay “mak nyahs” within the borders of Malaysia. This is because Malay “mak nyahs” continue to be socially and economically marginalized as a result of failing to comply with culturally normative notions of gender as prescribed and enforced by the dominant Malay Muslim community and the Malaysian nation-state in general. Khartini Slamah and Teh Yik Koon have pointed out that many Malay “mak nyahs”

living in Malaysia experience discrimination on various levels, which include access to education and employment, as well as health services and treatment for HIV (Khartini 103; Teh, “Male to Female” 101). To compound matters further, many Malay “mak nyahs,” as Teh Yik Koon contends, are forced to live in poverty as a result of the difficulty in renting accommodation and in securing housing loans (“Male to Female” 105). More than fifty percent of “mak nyahs” in Teh’s ethnographic research work in the sex industry and are involved in drug abuse. This prevents many Malay “mak nyahs” from obtaining loans and other forms of financial assistance which they genuinely need to improve their living conditions. Such difficulties strengthen my argument that the articulation of queer Malay identity brings about diverse material impacts on Malay “mak nyahs” actual lived conditions and everyday struggles. As the character Kak Tipah in Osman Ali’s film, *Bukak Api*, accurately summarizes:

Mereka ni ada satu impian. Mereka nak negara ni bersih. Bebas dari seks haram. Oklah, itu kerja mereka. Kerja aku cari duit nak hidup. Apa yang aku tahu sekarang melacur. Aku tak banyak modal berniaga. Aku tak diterima mana-mana tempat berkerja. Sebab aku ni mak nyah! Pondan!
(Kak Tipah, *Bukak Api*)

[They (i.e. the state authorities) only have one dream. They want this country to be “clean.” Free from illegal sex. Okay, that’s their job. My job is to earn money for a living. What I can do now is to be a sex worker. I don’t have enough money to start my own business. I’m not accepted in the workplace. Because I’m “mak nyah”! “Sissy”!] (translation mine)

Kak Tipah’s strong resentment toward the state authorities, in my view, raises the pertinent question of whether taking on a queer Malay identity in present-day Malaysia will ever be enough to overcome various forms of discrimination and marginalization on the basis of sexual difference. Will articulating a queer Malay identity ever be

enough for Malay “mak nyahs” to challenge discrimination in employment, education, health care, and public benefits as a way of effectuating significant change in their lives? Can Malay “mak nyahs” and other queer-identified Malays assert a queer Malay identity as a mark of differentiation from the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community and the Malaysian nation-state?

Many gay Malay men, on the other hand, continue to assert and inhabit identities marked by male same-sex sexuality, despite governmental monitoring and policing of homosexuality. The growing number of gay establishments in Kuala Lumpur and other cosmopolitan centres across Malaysia provide a much needed avenue for gay Malay men in particular, and the local gay community in general, to develop erotic, affectional, social or political ties with other gay-identified men. Local gay establishments, which include gay bars, clubs, saunas, and massage parlours, provide an avenue through which Malay gay men are able to engage in, for instance, same-sex erotic practices which are specifically prohibited by both the civil and Shariah laws in Malaysia. Instead of resigning themselves submissively to the laws against the articulation of male same-sex sexuality, many Malay gay men strategically renegotiate and accommodate their ethnic, religious, *and* same-sex sexual identities as they move fluidly across various social spheres, which include heteronormative and queer designated spaces. This is readily observed in the ways in which many of Malay gay men adopt a public heterosexual identity as a way of being in the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community while simultaneously identifying themselves as “gay” in relation to others within the local gay community. Some, if not many, gay Malay men continue to maintain their role as dutiful sons within the

domestic space of the family while simultaneously fulfilling various roles within the homosexual spheres such as gay bars and clubs. As Dennis Altman notes:

[T]he dutiful Confucian or Islamic Malaysian son one weekend might appear in drag at BlueBoy, Kuala Lumpur's gay bar, the next— and who is to say which is the real person? Just as many Malaysians can move easily from one style to another, from camping it up with full awareness of the latest fashion trends from Castro streets, to playing the dutiful son at a family celebration (*Global Sex* 92).

What is notable here is that it is *still* possible for many gay-identified Malay men to identify themselves as “gay” in a country where male same-sex sexuality remains subject to governmental control and surveillance. This is especially true when many gay-identified Malay men continue to self-identify as “gay” without necessarily ceasing to be “Malay” by renegotiating multiple roles *and* identities as they move fluidly between heteronormative *and* queer designated spaces. The internet, as discussed in the previous chapter, also provides a viable means through which Malay gay men are able to communicate and socialise with other gay-identified men with relative ease and safety. Many members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” (hereafter cited as *KWGM*) find it easier to exchange their contact details such as postal and email addresses, as well as telephone and mobile phone numbers online as way of initiating and maintaining contacts with other gay-identified members.¹⁴ Moreover, the internet provides a much-needed space for *KWGM* members to identify themselves online as “gay” with much comfort and ease, given that it remains difficult to be “gay” in heteronormative public spaces. This is can be observed in the ways in which many *KWGM* members identify themselves fully and, at times, unconditionally, as “gay” on the internet without having to worry about being derogatively depicted and publically shamed by the dominant Malay Muslim community. For example, phrases such as

“Aku gay/Aku gayboy,” (“I’m gay/I’m a gayboy”) “Aku PLU,” (“I’m “People Like Us”), and “Aku top/bottom/bisek” (“I’m top/bottom/bisexual”) are frequently used by many gay Malay men in *KWGM* to address themselves while/when communicating with other gay-identified members online.¹⁵ What I find fascinating is that the internet enables gay Malay men to redefine and transform heteronormative notions of being “Malay” by constructing a hybrid form of self-identification. This is especially true when many gay Malay men in *KWGM* redefine, rather than rigidly adhere to, their “fitrah” by continuing to engage in same sex eroticism whilst preserving ethnic and religious heritages in identifying and repositioning themselves as “gay” *and* “Malay.” Although gay Malay men cannot sufficiently protect themselves from being prosecuted by the police and religious authorities for their involvement with same-sex erotic practices, gay Malay men are able to engender a hybrid form of resistance against governmental monitoring and control. This is precisely true when gay Malay men’s notions of resistance are not complete duplicates of western model of resistance, but are, at times, infused with western notions of agency and defiance. Rather than asserting agency and expressing defiance by staging gay pride marches as evidenced in the West (and in some other metropolitan parts of postcolonial Asian countries), gay Malay men reclaim gayness with pride in the virtual sphere, and use gayness as a means of defying the existing laws that continue to criminalize homosexuality. Many Malay gay men in *KWGM* and other local gay networking websites formulate and express visible, assertive, *and* hybridised gay male identity online and use the internet to form, organize, and negotiate legally proscribed and religiously prohibited same-sex sexual activities. In an open note for visitors and members of *KWGM*, the founder of *KWGM*, Edie Mohamad not only extends his gratitude to all members of website for their support in dignifying the gay coterie (“memartabatkan golongan gay”), but

welcomes mIRC (Internet Relay Chat) users to show their support through *KWGM*'s official channel #GAYMELAYU at DALnet server.¹⁶ Edie's very idea of ennobling a group of people who share similar sexual interests and experiences, in my view, is crucial because it sends out a positive message to many *KWGM* members that it is not wrong to articulate gay male identities online.

While acknowledging that gay Malay men in *KWGM* can conveniently express notions of difference online, it is, however, important to note that gay Malay men and other queer-identified Malays experience difficulties in asserting their sense of agency as a way of undermining lived social and juridical surveillance. This is because queer-identified Malays' notions of agency, while sporadically influenced by the West, are intimately entwined with Islamic concept of agency. Raihannah Mohd Mydin posits that Muslim's concept of agency; that is, "Islamic agency," is intricately linked with one's responsibility to the Creator, to the family and community, and to oneself.¹⁷ Raihannah maintains further that Muslims are able to function more effectively at the personal and public levels by incorporating responsibility into their sense of agency (7). But if a Malay Muslim places more emphasis on the responsibility to himself or herself, rather than to God and to the family and community, then his or her sense of agency is considered "incomplete" in the context of Islam and in the eyes of many Malay Muslims. This explains why queer-identified Malays' notions of agency are often perceived by many Malays as placing too much emphasis on individual responsibility. Such notions of agency amplify what Raihannah describes as a western form of agency, which lacks a sense of moral responsibility and religious ethics in the context of Islam (8). I would like to argue very strongly that it is incorrect to say that queer-identified Malays' notions of agency are completely western and are, therefore, devoid of any

sense of responsibility to God and to the family and community. This is simply because many queer-identified Malays continue to show reverence to their family, to the Malay Muslim community, and, most importantly, to God by fulfilling filial and communal responsibilities including religious duties as outlined in the Quran. Many queer-identified Malays, particularly gay Malay men in *KWGM*, are fully aware that their involvement with same-sex erotic practices defies and defiles the Quran and Sunnah. But this does not prevent Malay Muslim members of *KWGM* from fulfilling religious obligations by performing regularly the “solat” (“obligatory daily Muslim prayers”), which is one of the five pillars of Islam. Moreover, many gay Malay men in *KGWM* are also aware of the dire consequences of going against “hukum Allah” (“God’s law”), which prohibits same-sex eroticism. For instance, in the forum discussion “thread” (“topic”) on “Kawin Sesama Lelaki, Sanggupkah Anda Lakukan...Jika Undang2 Mengizinkan... (Undang2 Negara Le)” (“Same-Sex Marriages: Are You Willing To Do It If The Law Permits?”), many Malay Muslim members of *KWGM* claim online that they would not enter into same-sex marriages even if the Malaysian government allowed and legitimised it. As some of *KWGM* members maintain:

Even mahkamah dunia pun benarkan kita kawin sejenis...kita xboleh ketepikan hukum agama. So think ur self... (boy, “Kawin Sesama Lelaki” October 7, 2009)

[Even “the world’s court” allows us to marry... but we cannot ignore religious laws. So think for yourself...] (translation mine)

Undang-undang yang paling ku takut adalah undang-undang Allah S.W.T. (ShaRyzal, “Kawin Sesama Lelaki” October 8, 2009)

[The law that I fear most is Allah’s (S.W.T) law.] (translation mine)

Kalau cakap bab sanggup maybe ramai yang sanggup (for non muslim rasanya tak jadi masalah) bagi yang Islam nie dah memang sah kita ni x boleh lawan agama...

(Zieclair Naphael, "Kawin Sesama Lelaki" October 13, 2009).

[If we talk about willingness, maybe many of us would (there's no problem for non-Muslims though). For Muslims, it is clearly stated that we cannot defy or go against religion...] (translation mine)

What is clearly evidenced here is that Malay gay men's own sense of agency, which they assert in engendering resistance against socio-juridical surveillance of male same-sex sexuality, is not completely western or "un-Islamic." This is because some Malay gay men, particularly "Boy," "ShahRyzal," and "Zieclair Naphael," fear the consequences of violating the law (God's law in particular) against same-sex marriages. What I find particularly interesting is that "Boy," "ShahRyzal," and "Zieclair Naphael" strongly believe that despite defining their own identities and organizing their lives in terms of male same-sex sexuality, they must continue to fulfil their duties as Muslim men and meet their responsibilities toward Islam by obeying the law of God as expressed and inscribed in the Quran. This illuminates the idea that gay Malay men's notions of agency are not "incomplete" in the context of Islam simply because some gay Malay men (and, perhaps, other queer-identified Malays) integrate a deep feeling of religious responsibility into their own sense of agency which they assert in defining themselves as "gay," "Malay," *and* "Muslim" in the contemporary world. While acknowledging that legal and religious sanctions against queer sexuality have a direct and substantial impact on queer-identified Malays' lives and their identities, the question that *still* needs to be addressed is whether the material articulation of a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity affect queer-identified Malays' sense of

belonging and attachment to the Malay Muslim community and the Malaysian nation-state.

Queer Malay Identity, Notions of Belonging, and “Bangsa Melayu”

I strongly believe that the articulation of queer Malay identity impacts materially on queer-identified Malays’ sense of belonging to the Malay Muslim community, in particular, and to the Malaysian nation-state, in general. Many queer-identified Malays in the media and genres I examined face the risk of having their statuses smeared and their membership into the Malay Muslim community invalidated as a result of identifying themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay.” One may recall Rokiah in Ismail Baba’s ethnographic study, who claims that she always finds it difficult to self-identify as a “lesbian” mainly because Islam and the dominant Malay Muslim community do not accept lesbianism, let alone allow Malay Muslim women to develop emotionally intimate bonds with other women. One may also recall viewers’ reactions to Amy Ikram Ismail’s film, *Comolot*, where gay Malay men have been accused of bringing shame and disgrace to “bangsa Melayu” (“Malay race”) and “umat Islam” (“Muslim community”) for committing the very sins of “Kaum Lut/Kaum Sodom” (“the People of the Prophet Lut/the People of Sodom”). What is notable here is that Rokiah, Malay gay men, and other queer-identified Malays experience a great deal of difficulty in asserting a sense of belonging to “bangsa Melayu” (“Malay race”) and “umat Islam” (“Muslim community”). This is because notions of belonging to the Malay race and to the Muslim community remain predicated on Malays’ strong attachments to ethnicity and religion.¹⁸ The extent to which Malay’s entry into the “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam” is determined by his or her strong adherence to culturally prescribed gender expectations reinforces further the idea that a Malay sense of belonging and community

is also conceived in terms of heterosexuality *and* heteronormativity. Michael G. Peletz, for instance, has argued that many Malays in Malaysia place a great deal of emphasis on marriage and the family in constructing their sense of self and belonging. Peletz contends that in becoming a “full-fledged social adult” and a full-fledged member of the Malay Muslim community, “one must enter into a legitimate marriage (with socially approved member of the opposite sex) and bear or father (or adopt) children” (“Neither Reasonable” 109). While this amplifies Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s contention that ideas about citizenship and belonging to the nation have always been configured on heterosexuality *and* heteronormativity, I would like to argue strongly that queer-identified Malays can overcome the difficulties of creating and maintaining a sense of attachment to “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam” by redefining and transforming heteronormative notions of membership of the Malay Muslim community. Benedict Anderson, Homi K. Bhabha, and others have demonstrated that nation is an imagined construct which is constantly being rewritten by the nation’s people. Anderson, for example, contends that there is no single, satisfactory definition of nation, nationality, and nationalism. This is because the nation, as Anderson notes, is a limited and an imagined political community: the nation is limited in the sense that “even the largest of [nations] [...] has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lies other nations”; and the nation is envisioned as an imagined political community because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 7, 6). Bhabha, on the other hand, views the nation as a form of an ambivalent narration which is configured through the dialogical tension between the “pedagogical” and the “performative.” Bhabha asserts that in the process of writing the nation, “there is a split between the

continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of the modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*” (“DissemiNation” 297). What Anderson and Bhabha both suggest here is that nation is neither a fixed nor a stable construct simply because it is constantly being created *and* recreated by the nation’s citizenry; namely, the state elites *and* the people of the nation, who hold different visions of what a nation should be. The state elites’ limited vision of the nation, which are constructed and maintained through pedagogical “instruments” such as culture and religion, is constantly redefined through the performative “forces” or “actions” of the nation’s people. This can be seen, for instance, in the ways in which many ethnic Malays reconfigure the Malay nationalist elites’ vision of the “bangsa Melayu” (“Malay race/nation”) through their everyday lived experiences of being *and* becoming members of the Malay community. Such experiences are not only shaped by varied notions of selfhood, nationhood, national sentiment and aspiration, but inflected by a multitude of subjectivizing factors such as age, race, class, gender, and sexuality, *in addition to* Malay culture and religion. This, in my view, demonstrates that “bangsa Melayu” is not fixed, but is an “imagined” and an “ambivalent” formation which is assembled through the integration of diverse, competing visions of the Malay race/nation as envisioned by *both* the state elites *and* ethnic Malays.

The same, I think, can be said of the dominant notions of membership of the Malay Muslim community. Such notions, which the Malay state elites formulate and sustain through Malays’ strong ethnic and religious attachments, are constantly redefined by queer-identified Malays’ lived experiences of being the member the Malay Muslim community. Many queer-identifying Malay men and women reconfigure dominant

ideas about a Malay sense of belonging and community by continuing to become a member of “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam” without necessarily ceasing to be “queer.” For instance, Rokiah and other queer-identifying Malay men and women, whom I mentioned in this thesis, maintain their sense of attachment to the Malay Muslim community without necessarily discarding their sense of queerness. It is, however, imperative to point out that although queer-identified Malays can redefine heteronormative notions of belonging, their membership into “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam” continue to be invalidated by the Malay state elites who officially conflate same-sex sexuality with western cultural influences. One possible explanation for this is that the Malay nationalist elites’ concept of “bangsa Melayu” is constructed through the state’s project of anticolonial nationalism which rejects western influences as a way of protecting the sanctity and purity of the national indigenous culture. This illuminates Partha Chatterjee’s assertion on the importance of understanding the two cultural domains; namely, the “outer/material” and the “inner/spiritual,” as intrinsic features of anticolonial nationalisms in Asian and African nation-states.¹⁹ According to Chatterjee, the “outer/material” domain embodies the western world and its great achievements in economy, science, and technology, while the “inner/spiritual” domain encapsulates indigenous people’s cultures and identities. He posits that, in exposing a postcolonial difference from, and an anticolonial resistance against the West, it has become crucially important for Asian and African nation-states to replicate the achievements of their western counterparts, while simultaneously preserving and protecting their distinct indigenous identities and cultural heritages. As Chatterjee writes: “[t]he greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonialisms in Asia and Africa”

(6). Although Chatterjee makes no specific reference to Malaysia, I believe that his discussion of the fundamental features of anticolonialism, *alongside* Anderson and Bhabha's definitions of the nation, provide a lens through which to rethink "bangsa Melayu" as an imagined community that is produced through the integration of various elements, including same-sex sexuality which the Malay state elites have come to regard as a degenerate western influence.

Many Malays in modern-day Malaysia have come to think of "bangsa Melayu" as a group of people whose sense of identity and belonging are defined in terms of "bahasa," "adat," and "agama." This is mainly due to the fact that the Malay state elites have placed an immense emphasis on Malay culture and language, and Islam as key markers "Malayness" and "bangsa Melayu." The former Malaysian premier, Mahathir Mohamad, for instance has utilised the key markers of Malayness (Islam in particular), in creating state-sanctioned and state-endorsed notions of Malay identity and Malay race. Mahathir has urged Malays living in Malaysia to preserve spiritual and religious values (i.e. "inner/spiritual domain") without refraining from the mastery of modern skills (i.e. "outer/material domain") as a way of identifying themselves as "Malays" who are able to function more productively and participate more fully in the contemporary world.²⁰ Moreover, Malays *must* also be able to maintain a complete abstinence from the so-called decadent and destructive western influences such as incest, cohabitation, and homosexuality, which Mahathir and other Malay political leaders regard as a threat to the disintegration of the Malay Muslim community and the Malaysian nation-state. "Western societies," as Mahathir asserts, "are riddled with single-parent families, which foster incest, with homosexuality, with cohabitation, with restrained avarice, with disrespect for others, and of course with rejection of religious

teachings and values... Surely these are signs of an impending collapse” (81; qtd. in Obendorf 184). Mahathir’s moral-political stance toward western values and societies is further amplified by members of “People’s Anti-Homosexual Volunteer Movement” (*Pasrah*) who launch nationwide campaigns against homosexuality by publically condemning it as a “defiling western import” and a threat to the Malay race and the nation. Homosexuality, as members of *Pasrah* strongly assert, “is a defiling western import that is profoundly threatening with respect to race and nation because it jeopardizes the reproduction and strengthening of Islamic and Malaysian values specifically and Asian values in general” (qtd. in Peletz, *Islamic Modern* 268).²¹ What is especially prominent here is that Malay nationalist elites in modern-day Malaysia not only construct the notion of “bangsa Melayu” through culture and religion, but sustain its cultural legitimacy through nationalist discourses which perceive homosexuality as a degenerate western influence. These nationalist discourses form a significant part of the state’s project of anticolonial nationalism which repudiates western influences in order to protect what Partha Chatterjee posits as the “sovereign domain” of Malaysia’s indigenous culture. But I would like to argue strongly that homosexuality cannot be regarded as emanating solely from the West simply because male same-sex sexuality has been present within the local social and cultural milieu. Male same-sex sexuality, a point to which I shall return shortly, is already inscribed in the Malay culture. This, I believe, opens up the possibility of rethinking “bangsa Melayu” as an imagined community which is composed of same-sex sexuality *and* other culturally authoritative markers of Malayness.

In recent years, there has been a growing number of literature on male same-sex sexuality (“pondan” in particular) within the Malay society and culture, and on the

ways in which “homosexuality” in the modern western sense has been brought into local social and cultural landscape through a history of colonialism and, most recently, globalisation.²² Michael G. Peletz, for example, has demonstrated that “pondan” and other transgressive forms of gender have always been treated with a great deal of kindness and tolerance within the Malay community. This is especially true when “pondan” or effeminate Malay men who act, behave, and dress like women are well accepted and tolerated by many “kampong” (“village”) dwellers.²³ Peletz contends further that some “pondans,” particularly those who take on the role of “mak andam” (“bridal beautician”), are revered for their contributions to the “kampong” community and to Malays living in the urban centres. Cultural openness and tolerance toward effeminacy in Malay men have also been exhibited and enshrined in the Malay familial traditions. By referring to the former minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman’s stance on the issue of transvestism in the Malay parenting culture, Peletz posits that some Malay parents have an accepting and tolerant attitude toward their children’s transgressive gender behaviours. Some Malay parents have even allowed their sons to develop “female characteristics” (i.e. having enlarged breasts) and that this has inadvertently facilitated transvestism in the Malay community. As Abdul Hamid maintains:

Boys brought up as girls has been the main reason they become transvestites...

Some parents who have sons and yearn for a daughter end up dressing one of their sons as a girl, buying him bangles and allowing him to develop female characteristics. They fail to realize the danger because the child, confused about his gender, grows up thinking he is a woman trapped in a man’s body...

Parents need to be told the importance of bringing up their children according to the child's natural gender. A daughter should realize she will eventually become a wife and a son should know he will be a husband someday, not the other way around.... (qtd. in Peletz, *Islamic Modern* 256).

I find that Abdul Hamid's view on transvestism is useful for two reasons. First, his assertion that Malay parents must bring up their children heteronormatively reinforces my earlier argument that notions of being a "Malay man" and a "Malay woman" in the context of "dunia Melayu" ("Malay world") are profoundly shaped by heteronormative cultural and religious practices. Second, Abdul Hamid's view on Malay parents' lenient attitudes toward fluid forms of gender takes further the notion that male same-sex sexuality cannot be officially conflated as a defiling western influence.²⁴ This is mainly because male same-sex sexuality *is* already embodied in, and regulated through, the cultural traditions and practices of the people who make up "bangsa Melayu." This, I believe, enables one to view "bangsa Melayu" as an imagined community which includes, rather than excludes, male same-sex sexuality. The ways in which some, Malay parents raise their kids to appreciate or tolerate more fluid forms of gender also enable one to understand that male effeminacy as inscribed in the Malay culture differs from how it is perceived and practiced in the West. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, William Spurlin, and other scholars have maintained that there is still a considerable lack of tolerance toward male effeminacy, particularly effeminate boys in western societies. Sedgwick, for instance, has pointed that effeminacy has been used in the western (i.e. American) psychiatrists' construction *and* pathologization of effeminate boys' identities and subjectivities.²⁵ This is especially true when Spurlin points out that effeminate boys in western families

can be diagnosed with “gender identity disorder in childhood (GIDC) – a “condition” defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) through *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* as a strong preference for cross-dressing and cross-gendered identifications.²⁶ Although effeminate boys in Malay families are not readily diagnosed as having GIDC or even clinically and psychologically treated for such a condition, it is important to mention that not *all* Malay parents express tolerant attitude towards transgressive forms of gender behaviour. Some Malay parents have forced their children to adhere strictly to conventional gender roles as a way of preventing them from becoming homosexuals. More importantly, “pondans” and “mak nyahs” in Malaysia continue to be policed and monitored, despite the ways in which effeminacy in Malay men have been treated with a great deal of tolerance, kindness, dignity, and respect. This is largely attributed to the Malay state elite’s project of more intense Islamization which values and valorises heteronormativity by enforcing a strict adherence to culturally and religiously prescribed gender roles whilst simultaneously policing non-normative genders and sexualities within the Malay Muslim community. As Peletz rightly asserts: “For a while pondan are certainly tolerated and accepted in village society, the past few years have seen concerted efforts by Islamic reformers and various state governments to crackdown and ultimately eliminate transsexuals, transvestites and all other types of gender crossers” (*Reason and Passion* 130).

“Homosexuality” in the modern western sense has been brought into indigenous contexts via colonialism and globalisation. Robert Aldrich, for example, contends that colonialism played an important role in encouraging the development of

male same-sex sexual *and* emotional relations in non-western settings. Colonialism, as Alrich posits, opened up advantageous opportunities for European men to develop and engage in a wide range of same-sex relationships with indigenous men, which included intimate friendships, male bonding, and hierarchical relations (i.e. entrepreneur/employee; master/slave; colonist/houseboy).²⁷ Interestingly, some of these intimate male bonds often veered off into sexual intimacy which provided a site in which European and indigenous men fulfilled same-sex sexual desires. By using documented evidence of male same-sex relations between European officers and indigenous men during the period of colonial rule in Malaya, Aldrich maintains further that “homosexuality” in the modern western sense had already permeated and penetrated the local social and cultural milieu. The western model of egalitarian homosexuality, on the other hand, has been brought into indigenous contexts via transnational and transcultural exchanges under conditions of economic and cultural globalisation.²⁸ Dennis Altman, Gerard Sullivan, Peter Jackson, and others have cogently demonstrated that these exchanges are fostered and facilitated by various globalizing instruments such as international travel and tourism, and advances in technologies such as the internet.²⁹ Such exchanges, as discussed in the previous chapter, have eased and increased interactions between gay men and lesbians from different parts of the world, providing them with new opportunities to form social or political alliances, and to articulate diverse ideas about same-sex sexualities, identities, desires, and practices.

Therefore, it is not completely inaccurate to say that male same-sex sexuality has already become a fundamental feature of “bangsa Melayu,” particularly when it

has been historically *cultivated* through the “pondan” tradition and *fostered* by colonialism and globalisation. This, I believe, enables one to comprehend that same-sex sexuality (particularly male same-sex sexuality) is not completely western simply because it has always existed in local indigenous culture. More importantly, the idea that male same-sex sexuality is already present in the Malay culture reinforces my argument that “bangsa Melayu” *is* indeed an imagined community which is created through the integration of various elements including male same-sex sexuality. If “bangsa Melayu” were acknowledged as an imagined community composed of diverse components, then the ramifications of identifying and realigning oneself as “queer” *and* “Malay” in present-day Malaysia could perhaps be adequately minimized. This is precisely true when queer-identified Malays can continue to formulate and articulate identities marked by queerness on the basis that same-sex sexuality cannot be officially conflated with western influences because it is one of the many components that make up the imagined “bangsa Melayu.” Moreover, if “bangsa Melayu” were recognized as an imagined community assembled through multiple elements, then the risks of having queer-identified Malays’ sense of self and belonging invalidated could perhaps be sufficiently overcome. This is because queer-identified Malays can continue to define their sense of identity and belonging in terms of queerness on the grounds that same-sex sexuality is one of the many elements that constitutes the imagined “bangsa Melayu.” But the question remains whether “bangsa Melayu” will ever be acknowledged or recognized as an imagined community, which is conceived in terms of same-sex sexuality *and* other culturally authoritative markers of Malayness. Will same-sex sexuality ever be regarded as a component of “bangsa Melayu,” given that heteronormativity

has been and continue to be regarded by Malay nationalist elites and many ethnic Malays in Malaysia as a definitive marker of Malay race? Will queer-identified Malays ever be able to create and maintain a queer narrative of belonging when heteronormativity and strong ethnic and religious attachments are indispensable to dominant notions of belonging to “bangsa Melayu” as envisioned by the Malay nationalist elites and a majority of Malays within Malaysia’s national boundaries?

I must admit that there are no easy answers to these questions, since it is difficult to disentangle and even reshape received narratives of “bangsa Melayu,” which have been so firmly ingrained in the minds of some (if not many) ethnic Malays living within Malaysia’s territorial boundaries. This is probably true when the dominant ideas about “bangsa Melayu” are built upon the widely endorsed notion that as members of the Malay race/nation, Malays *must* be heterosexual and adhere strictly to normative expectations of gender and sexuality as inscribed in Malay culture and religion. However, the questions I’ve raised here and throughout this chapter allow one to think more deeply about pertinent issues concerning the articulation of queer Malay identity and its material implications on queer-identified Malays’ lives and their sense of belonging to “bangsa Melayu.” This corresponds with the aim of my study that not only attempts to examine the various strategies used by queer-identified Malays to create their own notions of self-identity, but also delves into the consequences of taking it on as a subject position within the borders of Malaysia. This is especially true when the articulations of a queer narrative of Malayness have direct material impacts on queer-identified Malays’ everyday lives and their sense of belonging to the

Malay Muslim community and to the Malaysian nation-state. It would therefore be very interesting to examine in future research queer-identified Malays' own ideas (and, perhaps, their own reservations) about issues pertaining to governmental control and surveillance of their sexuality and private lives. It would also be interesting to find out specific strategies queer-identified Malays often use in dealing with stigmatization, discrimination, violence, and abuse as a result of being "different" from the norm. A comprehensive examination of the coping strategies employed by queer-identified Malays can provide a better understanding and further insights into the complexity of articulating a Malay identity marked by sexual difference in Muslim-majority Malaysia.

Notes

¹ See Ruzy Suliza Hashim's "Meniti Duri dan Ranjau: Pembikinan Gender dan Seksualiti dalam Konteks Dunia Melayu," and Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf's "From the Courts of Melaka to the Twin Towers of Petronas: Charting Masculinities in Malaysian Works" for their in-depth discussions of the construction of gender and sexuality in the context of "dunia Melayu" or "Malay world." For further reading on gender and sexuality in "dunia Melayu," see Shamsul Amri Baharuddin and Mohamad Fauzi's "Making Sense of Malay Sexuality: An Exploration" and Ahmad Shehu Abdussalam's "Gender and Sexuality: An Islamic Perspective."

² See Asrul Zamani's *The Malay Ideals* and Zeenath Kausar's *Social Ills: Causes and Remedies* for their extensive research on the prevailing social and moral decay in Malaysian Malay Muslim community.

³ See Asrul Zamani's *The Malay Ideals*, particularly for his assertion that iman, ("religious faith"), "taqwa" ("God consciousness"), and "ahlaq" ("good moral behaviour") are the constituent elements of a "true" Malay Muslim identity on pp. 348-353.

⁴ See Farish A. Noor's articles, entitled "Who's Afraid of Sodomy?," Malaysia's Shame," and "Politics, Power and the Violence of History," especially for his contention that "morality police" and "shariah enforcers" form a significant part of governmental regulatory measures to monitor and police Malay Muslims' public and private lives in present-day Malaysia.

⁵ For further reading on Islam in the Malay-dominated Malaysian politics, see, for instance, Joseph Chinyong Liow's article, entitled "Political Islam in Malaysia: Legitimacy, Hegemony and Resistance."

⁶ See also Globalgayz.com at <<http://www.globalgayz.com/>>, especially the section on "Gay Malaysia News & Reports" for media reports on a series of police raids that have been conducted and carried out on gay establishments in metropolitan centres such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

⁷ See Au Waipang's "Sodomy, Corruption and Malaysia's Penal Code," for his discussion of the criminalization of sodomy under Section 377 of the Malaysian Penal Code.

⁸ See Shariah Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997, especially on p. 17 for the types of punishments imposed on Malay Muslim men who pose as "women."

⁹ The English version of the fatwa on "Hukum Wanita Merupai Lelaki (Pengkid)" can be accessed via *e-fatwa*, the official Malaysian fatwa portal. For further reading on the reception of the fatwa, see "Dear Fatwa Council and Malaysians" on *The Nut Graph*, an independent Malaysian news website, where a number of Malay and non-Malay Malaysians have openly expressed their concerns online over the

implications that the “fatwa” on lesbianism may have on Malay women in particular, and non-Malay women in general. They argue that the “fatwa” discriminates against Malay Muslim women, particularly “pengkids” and “tomboys,” on the basis of their so-called “manly” appearance and mannerisms, as well as their sexual orientations. As these “concerned” Malay and non-Malay Malaysians collectively assert: “The views expressed by the council reflect a deeper discrimination against anyone who does not conform with what is considered “mainstream” and also anyone who does not fit into a stereotypical heterosexual relationship. Everyone has the right to form loving relationships with the person of their choice, regardless of their sex and the sex of their partner” (“Dear Fatwa Council and Malaysians”).

¹⁰ For further reading on queer Malaysian asylum seekers and refugees, see the articles, entitled “Two Malaysian Gay Men Granted Asylum in the UK” at <<http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2010/10/01/10349.two-malaysian-gays-granted-asylum-in-the-uk>> and “Malaysian Transsexual Given Refugee Status in Australia” at <<http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2010/05/04/9889.malaysian-transsexual-given-refugee-status-in-australia>>.

¹¹ See Khartini Slamah’s “The Struggle To Be Ourselves, Neither Men Nor Women: *Mak Nyahs* in Malaysia” and Teh Yik Khoon’s “Male to Female Transsexuals (*Mak Nyah*) in Malaysia,” and “Politics and Islam: Factors Determining Identity and the Status of Male-to-Female Transsexuals in Malaysia” for their comprehensive research on the actual lived conditions and everyday struggles of Malay “mak nyahs.”

¹² See Walter L. Williams’ “Islam and the Politics of Homophobia: The Persecution of Homosexuals in Islamic Malaysia compared to Secular China,” for his discussion of the legal implications and ramifications of being and becoming a homosexual in an Islamic nation-state such as Malaysia.

¹³ See PT Foundation (Yayasan PT) at <<http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/index.php>>.

¹⁴ See the contact details and profile pictures that many gay Malay men upload and publish on “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” website at <<http://gaymelayu.ning.com>> and “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu’s” Facebook webpage at <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=161593141989&ref=search#!/group.php?gid=161593141989&v=wall&ref=search>>. Some gay Malay men have also uploaded “amateur” or “homemade” erotic videos that can be easily accessed on <www.gaytube.com> and <www.xtube.com>.

¹⁵ See the forum discussion section on “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” at <<http://gaymelayu.ning.com>>, particularly in the ways in which many gay Malay men fully and unconditionally identify themselves as

“gay,” “top,” “bottom,” or “bisek” when communicating with other gay-identified indigenous men in the virtual sphere.

¹⁶ See Edie Mohamad’s open note for visitors and members of “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” at <http://gaymelayu.ning.com/profiles/profile/show?id=founder&>.

¹⁷ See Raihanah Mohd Mydin’s article, entitled “The Individual, the Community, the Creator: Malay Muslims’ Sense of Identity in Noordin Hassan’s *Children of this Land*, especially on pp. 7-8 for her discussion of Muslim’s concept of agency or “Islamic agency” that is vital to the construction of Malay Muslim identity.

¹⁸ See Osman Bakar’s “Political Islam in Post-Mahathir Era: Trends and Possibilities,” particularly for his contention that Malays’ sense of belonging to the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia is deeply and profoundly shaped by their attachment to Islam. For further reading on notions of belonging and attachment in present-day Malaysia, see Judith Nagata’s “What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society,” Vidhu Verma’s *Malaysia, State and Civil Society in Transition*, especially on p. 40, and Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, especially Chapter 5: “Experiencing Colonialism and the Making of *Bangsa Melayu*.”

¹⁹ See Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* for his detailed discussion of the two cultural domains, namely the “inner/spiritual” and “outer/material,” which have become intrinsic features of anticolonialisms in Asia and Africa.

²⁰ See Virginia Matheson Hooker’s article, “Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia,” especially on p. 15, for her analysis of the construction of state-endorsed notions of Malay identity and “*bangsa Melayu*” during Mahathir’s premiership.

²¹ In brief, the “Asian values” discourse emerged in the 1990s from the idea that common values shared between diverse ethnic and religious groups in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and China could be politically employed as a nationalist means to disidentify from the West. One of the discourses’ central assertions is that social and communitarian harmony can (only) be sought through one’s loyalty to the family, nation, and authority. Personal freedom, civil liberties, human (and sexual) rights are not only configured as western values, but are perceived as a threat to the disintegration of the kind of harmony and prosperity that these Asian countries seek to achieve. Yet, scholars have argued that “Asian values” discourses remain highly contested simply because of the vast cultural diversity of the people across Asia, which can never be encapsulated into a single universal “Asian value” paradigm.

This is not to mention the ways in which the values practiced and shared are not completely dissimilar to the West as evidenced in loyalty and respect to various forms of authorities that exist in *both* western and non-western societies. See, for instance, Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik's "Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices," for their discussion of "Asian values" discourses and their implications on Malaysian political culture and practice.

²² There is a growing body of research by scholars who have written extensively about same-sex sexuality (male same-sex sexuality in particular) in the Malay society and culture. Foremost among these scholars is Michael G. Peletz, who has written about the historical and cultural constructions of "pondan" and transgendered practices in the Malaysian Malay Muslim community. See, for instance, Peletz's book, entitled *Gender and Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times* for his discussion of "pondan," transgendered practices, and same-sex relations in Malaysia.

²³ See Michael Peletz's *Reason and Passion: Representations of Gender in a Malay Society*, especially on pp. 123-132 for his comprehensive study into the lives of "pondan" or effeminate indigenous men who are treated with tolerance and kindness in Negeri Sembilan.

²⁴ See Gerard Sullivan's "Variations on a Common Theme? Gay and Lesbian Identity and Community in Asia," especially on p. 254 where he explains that "transgender(ed) homosexuality," which involves cross-dressing and other transgendered forms of gender, is already inherent in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

²⁵ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of effeminacy in western medical discourse in "How to Bring Up Your Kids Gay."

²⁶ See William Spurlin's "Sissies and Sisters: Gender, Sexuality and the Possibilities of Coalitions," especially pp.82-83 for his analysis of "gender identity disorder in childhood" (GIDC) as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and its diverse implications on gender non-conforming children in western societies.

²⁷ See Robert Aldrich's *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, especially on pp. 195-198 for his discussion of the development of homosexuality in indigenous contexts during the period of colonial rule in Malaya.

²⁸ See Gerard Sullivan's "Variations on a Common Theme? Gay and Lesbian Identity and Community in Asia," especially p. 254 for his use of the term "egalitarian" type of homosexuality to describe "gay (and lesbian identity) and community that have become somewhat disconnected from heterosexual institutions and are establishing independent cultural patterns."

²⁹ See Dennis Altman's *Global Sex*. "Rupture or Continuity?: The Internationalisation of Gay Identities," Gerard Sullivan's "Variation on a Common Theme? Gay and Lesbian Identity and Community in Asia," and Gerard Sullivan and Peter Jackson's *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community* for their substantive research on the ways in which western notions of homosexuality have been brought into non-western contexts through recent economic and cultural trends in globalisation.

Chapter 6 Being “Queer” and “Malay”: Rethinking Queerness and the Politics of Queer Malay Identity in Malaysia and Beyond

That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its privileged assumptions “ought to be safeguarded not only for the purposes of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term.” The operations of queer critique, in other words, can neither be decided on in advance nor be depended on in the future. The reinvention of the term is contingent on its potential obsolescence, one necessarily at odds with any fortification of its critical reach in advance or any static notion of its presumed audience and participants.

David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, *What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?*

On December 15, 2010, Azwan Ismail, a 32 year old gay Malay man, posted an “It Gets Better in Malaysia” video on the popular video sharing website, YouTube. Inspired by Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” video project, where American LGBT adults convey encouraging messages via YouTube to LGBT teens in America who are struggling with bullying and intolerance, Azwan created his own version of the video to tell young queer Malaysians not to despair because life would get better.¹ The video was part of Seksualiti Merdeka’s video series, which featured queer-identified Malaysians who shared their actual lived experiences and everyday struggles of being “queer” in Malaysia. In brief, Seksualiti Merdeka (“Sexuality Independence”) is currently the organiser of an annual human rights festival on sexuality in Malaysia, which aims to empower Malaysians of all sexualities through series of talks, forums, workshops, art, theatre, music performances, interactive installations, and film screenings.² This annual human rights festival is jointly organised by local artists and individuals, as well as a number of non-governmental organisations, including the

Malaysian Council Bar, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), PT Foundation, United Nations, and Amnesty International. The video series are not merely a medium through which queer-identified Malaysians convey inspirational messages to young queer Malaysians who are facing discrimination, bullying, and harassment. These videos, in my view, also provide a much-needed platform for queer-identified Malaysians to take on queerness as a subject position by identifying themselves publicly as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “transgender.”

But there was a huge public outcry following the release of the video mainly because Azwan, a member of Malaysia’s Malay Muslim majority, openly admitted that he was “gay.” Azwan is now facing prosecution by the police and religious authorities, and has received numerous threats of violence and murder as a result of declaring his sexuality. To make matters worse, several Malay political leaders, who lambasted Azwan for insulting Islam, failed to speak against these violent threats which already put Azwan’s life in danger. The video has been removed from YouTube as Azwan fears for his safety. In a telephone interview with *The Associated Press*, Azwan explained that, “religious and cultural factors have defined our lives, telling us who we can be and who we can’t [...] My intention was not to insult Islam [...] I just wanted to represent gay Malays in this project. I hope these videos will help create a more open society and more discussion.”³ A few months have now passed since Azwan posted the video and there has been no news of his whereabouts. What has happened to Azwan? What will happen to Azwan when the local authorities have not taken any legal action against those who issued threats of violence and intimidation to him? What will happen to gay-identified Malay men in Malaysia when they are not adequately protected by the authorities from violent crimes which are motivated by hatred and prejudice based on

sexual difference? What will happen to gay-identified Malay men when the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) has pledged to impose more stringent laws and regulations to curb and eliminate sexual practices within the local gay community following Azwan's public admission of his sexuality? In what ways does this help illuminate Michel Foucault's contention that sexuality has been subjected to repressive disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms of the state historically?

The news of Azwan's ordeal has had such a profound effect on me, especially since I am now two months away from finishing my thesis. After spending almost four years writing about what it means to be "queer" *and* "Malay" in Malaysia, Azwan's predicament in 2010 has made me pause for a moment to take stock of where my thesis is going: I may have spent a great deal of time explaining how queer Malays constructed a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity, but there still remains the question whether queer Malays will ever be able to identify themselves openly as "queer" *and* "Malay" within the borders of Malaysia. And while I have written at great length about the challenges of asserting and inhabiting a queer narrative of Malayness, I'm still uncertain whether queer Malays will ever be able to overcome these challenges and live a peaceful and fulfilling life without fear of violence and discrimination. It is already hard being queer in Malaysia, but being public about it is even harder. Is being "queer," then, enough for queer Malays to resist the hegemonic impulses of culture and religion which continue to govern and constrain their lives? Is being "queer" enough for queer Malays to resist the ideological structures which continue to inhibit the proliferation of queerness in the modern, Muslim-majority Malaysian nation-state? What I have learned from Azwan (and also from other gay-identified indigenous men by listening to their own personal experiences) is that being "queer" is and, probably,

will never be enough for queer Malays to assert their identities and mark their difference in present-day Malaysia. This is mainly because Islam and Malay culture, as Azwan points out and as I have discussed throughout this study, have such a pervasive influence on what it means to be “Malay.” But this does not necessarily mean that queer Malays cease to fight for their rights and freedom in asserting notions of difference by identifying and repositioning themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” within the local social landscape. This is because being “queer,” as Michael Warner asserts, is itself a constant struggle simply because one’s life is *always already* implicated by various issues (e.g. the pervasiveness religion and culture, bullying, intolerance, violence, and intimidation) that arise as a result of being different from the norm. More importantly, being “queer” means that one *must* always deal with these issues and try to find ways to overcome them through/in the course of one’s life as “queer.” As Warner notes:

“[e]very person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is intricated with gender, with the family, with notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health and care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. *Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences*” (“Queer Planet” 6; emphasis added).

Rather than conceding that being “queer” is never enough for queer Malays to effect significant changes in their lives, I would like to bring together important strands of my thesis and take them a bit further in this chapter by reflecting on the possibilities *and* limitations of “queerness” (as sexuality, as a mode of critique, and as a political strategy) in the context of queer Malay identity-formation. Such a reflection, I believe,

is crucial in thinking about the future directions for research on queerness and the politics of queer Malay identity in modern-day Malaysia and beyond.

But before I proceed further, let me summarize briefly what has been accomplished so far in my research on queer Malays and their self-identities. My analysis of queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature and culture has allowed me to accomplish one of the central aims of this study, which is to create an opening for rethinking pedagogical narratives of Malayness. Notions of being “Malay” in Malaysia cannot be officially defined in terms of Malay culture and religion simply because queer-identified Malays whom I discussed in my thesis also identified themselves as “Malay” by organizing their lives and identities around same-sex sexuality. Such nuanced *and* “queer” ways of being “Malay” redefine and radically reshape pedagogical conceptions of Malayness, which designate Malays as Muslims who *must* fulfil cultural and religious expectations related to gender and sexuality. My research on queer Malays and their own visions of Malayness has also enabled me to fill an important gap in the study of Malay identity construction. Malay studies scholars such as Anthony Milner, Joel S. Kahn, Leonard Andaya, and Shamsul Amri Baharuddin have placed far too much emphasis on Islam, “adat” (“indigenous customs and traditions”), social class, and geographical spatialization in examining the formation of Malayness. My research, however, shows that queer sexualities have become an essential component of ethnicity for some (if not many) Malays, particularly queer-identifying Malay men and women. This illuminates the idea that Malay identity is complex because it is made up of a *multitude* of components that include ethnic Malays’ diverse sexualities, *in addition to* culture, religion, class, and place. The findings of my research have enabled me to fill up the lacunae in the literature on local

forms of queerness. Existing research on queer identities and cultures in modern-day Malaysia has not devoted sufficient attention to analyzing how queer-identified Malays specifically construct their own sexual identities, nor has it investigated how these identities are used as a means for queer-identified Malays to subvert and undermine official connotations of queerness with western cultural influences. Queer-identified Malays whom I examined in my thesis formulated their own notions of being “queer” by selectively reappropriating *both* local *and* western forms of queer identities and queer cultures. More importantly, queer-identified Malays also open up the possibility of creating their own sexual identities which are marked by hybridity. This is especially true when notions of being “queer” for many queer-identified Malays are not only mediated by a multitude of factors pertaining to subjectivity, but are influenced by western forms of queerness which have been brought into the local social landscape via colonialism and, most recently, globalisation. Such findings are important for two reasons. First, they show that queerness in present-day Malaysia cannot be officially equated with western cultural influences, and second, they open up new lines of inquiry in the research on queer identities in non-western contexts such as in Malaysia by encouraging future scholars to delve more deeply into queer-identified Malays’ diverse *and* unique ways of being “queer.”⁴

It is, however, important to emphasize that “queerness” in Malaysia does not merely constitute local formations of queer identities, but can also function as a mode of critique and even a political strategy. In the Introduction to *Social Text* 84-85, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz argue that there is an urgent need to reassess the political utility of “queer” which emerged into public consciousness in the 1990s. These scholars suggest that

queer critique now needs to be rethought in relation to current “historical emergencies” which include:

[T]he triumph of neoliberalism and the collapse of the welfare state; the Bush administration’s infinite “war on terrorism” and the acute militarization of state violence; the escalation of U.S. empire building and the clash of religious fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and patriotisms; the devolution of civil society and the erosion of civil rights; the pathologizing of immigrant communities as “terrorist” and racialized populations as “criminal”; the shifting forms of citizenship and migration in a putatively “postidentity” and “postracial” age; the politics of intimacy and the liberal recoding of freedom as secularization, domesticity, and marriage; and the return to “moral values” and “family values” as a prophylactic against political debate, economic redistribution, and cultural dissent (2).

In order to maintain its intellectual and political relevance, queer studies in the present, as Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz contend further, must take into consideration “the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the politics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gender hierarchies” (1). Although the U.S. is frequently cited in Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz’s discussion of recent historical emergencies and global crises, I would like to argue that current events which occur in non-western locales (i.e. Azwan’s ordeal) must also be taken into account when reevaluating the political usability of “queer.” This is because Azwan’s predicament demonstrates that “queerness,” which is understood by many western queer theorists as a challenge to all forms of normativity, may not be sufficient to resist strongly enforced ethnic and religious normativities which continually shape and constrict the lives of many queer-identified Malays within Malaysian territory. In what ways then do the events surrounding the release of Azwan’s “It Gets Better” video demonstrate that the term “queer” *fails* to live up to its

political promise and premise to subvert regimes of sexual, racial, and religious normalization in non-western, Muslim-majority nation-states such as Malaysia? How can western queer scholars take stock of this *failure* to reexamine the very usability of “queer” as a political strategy for challenging normalizing mechanisms and ideologies in *both* western *and* non-western cultures and societies?

The point here is that it is important to (re)consider the possibilities *and* limitations of “queerness” in non-western settings. This is especially noted by Judith Butler in *Critically Queer* where she rightly points out that the term “queer,” which is marked by a predominantly white movement, has not yet fully addressed the ways in which ““queer” plays – or *fails to play* –within [the] non-white communities” (20; emphasis added). Michael Warner also shares a similar view when he notes that queer movement has long been dominated by middle-class white male activists of the U.S. Warner stresses the importance of forging a queer movement which brings together “differently sexualized and differently politicized people” (“Queer Planet” 11) who would address various issues concerning queerness and queer lives *both* locally *and* globally. Other scholars, such as William Spurlin, have demonstrated that queer studies, which is characterized by its Euro-American origins and traditions, has shown scant interest historically in the formation and articulation of same-sex desires, practices, and identities outside the Euro-American domains. Spurlin explains that “queer studies, perhaps most highly developed in the United States, historically has shown little sustained interest in cross-cultural variations of expression and representation of same-sex desire; homosexualities in non-western cultures have been, until very recently, imagined through the imperialist gaze of Euro-American queer identity politics, appropriated through the economics of the West, or, at worst, ignored altogether”

(*Imperialism* 17). I agree with Spurlin mainly because queer studies can *only* operate as an “engaged” mode of critique if it engages more critically with queer representations across *multiple* locations. What are the possible new meanings of “queer” as it crosses various geographical locations and cultural sites? In what ways do these new meanings provide a better comprehension of “queerness,” which cannot be fully contained by queerness as felt and practiced in the West? How does paying specific attention to “queerness” outside western metropolitan axes help western queer scholars reexamine and transform “queer” as a viable mode of inquiry? What discussions by Butler, Spurlin, and Warner on “queerness” demonstrate is that emphasis must also be placed on the specificities and particularities of “queerness” in non-western contexts as a way of rethinking the usability of queer outside the western domains. In other words, if western queer theorists wish to sustain queer studies’ intellectual and political currency, they need to be more attentive to the events including the historical emergencies and crises which affect queer lives in non-western locales, rather than being *too* anchored in issues and concerns facing queer communities in the West. One way of addressing these lacunae is by exploring the possibilities *and* limitations of “queerness” in the context of queer Malay identity-formation.

On The Limits and Possibilities of Queerness in Local Contexts

One of the major themes that emerge from my analysis of queer Malay identity construction is the various ways in which queer-identified Malays in Malaysia redefine and rearticulate official versions of Malayness. I began this study by demonstrating that the politics of Malaysian Malay identity is a dynamic process which is fraught with the tension between “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” notions of Malayness. I argued that such a tension creates an opening for the formulation of Malay identities

marked by sexual difference. This is vividly illustrated by the very fact that notions of being “Malay” are not only configured by the state and those who are part of the elite governing bodies and local authorities, but also constructed by the general Malay populace, which includes, rather than excludes, queer-identifying Malay men and women. It is correct to say that Malay identity is dynamic and continually in transition on the basis that it is shaped *both* by official versions of Malayness *and* by the actual lived experiences of Malays in their everyday lives, including being “queer” *and* “Malay” amongst some Malays, which shapes what it means to be “Malay” in Malaysia. The dynamic and contingent nature of Malay identity creation also demonstrates that discursive conceptions of Malay identity are social inventions precisely because there will always be identities that do not fit. This is especially true when notions of being “Malay,” as subjectively felt and experienced by many Malays *and* queer Malays within national borders, do not always cohere with the legal definition of Malayness which designates “Malay” as a person who habitually speaks Malay, professes the Muslim religion, and conforms to Malay customs. Queer-identified Malay men and women, whom I’ve discussed in this study, constructed their own visions of Malay identity through same-sex sexuality while simultaneously sustaining their ethnic and religious heritages. Such “queer” visions of Malayness do not fit the culturally authoritative definition of Malay identity simply because same-sex sexuality has never been legally regarded as a defining marker of Malay ethnicity.

The point here is not to suggest that there needs to be an exclusive Malay identity for queer-identified Malays, but rather to expose the *unsuitability* and *instability* inherent in official conceptualisations of Malayness. This, I believe, opens up a space for “queer” in indigenous contexts where queerness can be used as a critical tool to

interrogate discursive formations of Malay identity, which are sustained and stabilized by the state through normative markers of Malay ethnicity. Diana Fuss, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and other queer theorists have cogently demonstrated that identity is neither fixed nor given, and that the very stability of identity is continually destabilized and disrupted by queer sexuality and other axes of subjective identification. Diana Fuss, for instance, maintains that identities are intrinsically unstable. Fuss, following Sedgwick, contends further that identities are inflected by multiple forms of identification and that any attempts to fix or render identities as coherent, totalised, and self-evident will *fail* because identifications have the capacity to multiply and diversify. As Fuss points out:

The astonishing capacity of identifications to reverse and disguise themselves, to multiply and contravene one another, to disappear and reappear years later renders identity profoundly unstable and perpetually open to radical change. Identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable (*Identification 2*).

The same holds true for queer-identified Malays who prevent official designations of Malayness from ever achieving a sense of stability and solidity. This can be seen in the process of queer Malay identity creation, where many queer-identified Malays continue to refigure and transform dominant narratives of Malay ethnicity by incorporating queerness, *alongside* legal markers of Malayness, into their own visions and versions of being “Malay” in Malaysia. Philip Brian Harper, on the other hand, asserts that fixed identities are constantly decentered by a *multitude* of subjectivizing factors which inflect upon and/or intersect one another. In “Gay Male Identities, Personal Privacy, and Relations of Public Exchange: Notes on Directions for Queer Critique,” Harper

calls for a challenge to “identic fixity” by arguing that sexual orientation should not be conceived as a primary identificatory marker of sexual identity simply because sexual identity is inflected by the pressure of various factors pertaining to subjectivity (26). What is notable here is that Harper calls fixed identities into question by suggesting that fixed identities are constantly being shaped and reshaped by multiple axes of social positioning. Although Harper does not address Malay identity directly, I find that his challenge to “identic fixity” can be used to substantiate my argument that official versions of Malayness are neither fixed nor given (the same holds true for any stable notion of queerness). This is precisely true when the state-sanctioned notions of Malay identity cannot attain and secure a sense of solidity and fixity through normative markers of Malay ethnicity, given that such notions are constantly molded by *multiple* variables including age, class, gender, *and* sexuality. The fact that state-endorsed notions of Malay identity are constantly inflected by diverse factors pertaining to subjectivity reinforces the central claim of my study that Malay identity is dynamic and, therefore, cannot be rigidly defined in distinctly ethnic and religious terms.

It is, however, pertinent to point out that by problematizing the notion of “identic fixity,” Harper not only calls fixed identities into question, but envisions queerness as a form of resistance to all forms of fixity and normativity with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, socio-cultural norms and practices, *and* sexuality. Many queer-identified Malays, whom I’ve discussed in this project, do not merely incorporate queerness into their identities as a way of being “queer” *and* “Malay.” This is because queerness is also taken up by queer-identified Malays as a way of being in the dominant Malay Muslim community, which valorises normative notions of Malay identity and heteronormative cultural and religious practices. It is accurate to say that queerness in

the context of queer Malay identity-formation should not be narrowly understood as constituting sexual identities or sexual practices alone, but can be employed as a tool for examining how ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual normativities are constantly “queered” (used here as a verb; that is, resisted and subverted) by queer-identified Malays. What makes it more interesting is that queerness can also be utilised as an instrument for analysing the ways in which non-queer identified Malays living in Malaysia construct their own ethnic identities using non-normative markers of Malayness. For instance, I discussed in Chapter 1 how Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah pointed out that many highly-educated Malays in Malaysia invented an urban sense of Malayness through alternative identificatory markers such as “attachment to a leader or patriarch and/or a tradition of egalitarianism and democracy” (5-6; qtd. in Khoo 27). This urban notion of Malay identity, in my view, is *always already* “queer” (i.e. transgressive) in the sense that being “Malay” for many highly educated Malays challenge official and historical designations of Malay ethnicity, which are produced and sustained through ethnic and religious normativities. The very creation of a characteristically “queer” urban Malay identity raises two important research questions: How can such creation provide further insights into the ways in which many Malays in Malaysia (*both* queer-identified *and* non-queer identified indigenous people) all contribute to the process and project of “queering” (used here as a verb; that is, challenging and transforming) normative formulations of Malayness by forging new Malay identities characterized by non-normative, non-typical identificatory markers? In what ways does the production of “queer” Malay identities (including those which are marked by urbanity and those characterized by queer sexuality) help demonstrate that “queerness” in non-western locales such as Malaysia stand as a challenge to the regimes of ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual normalization through which many

queer-identifying *and* non-queer identifying Malays are integrated into the modern Malaysian nation-state?

Another major theme that has emerged from my analysis of queer Malay identity construction is that many queer-identified Malays constructed their own narratives of Malayness *and* queerness. I demonstrated that queer-identified Malays in contemporary Malaysian literature and culture created new ways of being “Malay” by, for instance, reconciling their sexuality with their religious, ethnic, and cultural heritages. I also demonstrated that notions of being “queer” in indigenous contexts are produced through a hybridising process where local and western forms of queerness are selectively reappropriated and recontextualised by many queer-identifying Malay men and women. These new forms of Malayness *and* queerness challenge the dominant normative understandings of Malay ethnicity *and* queer sexuality in present-day Malaysia. For example, Malay ethnic identity cannot always be understood in relation to Islam, Malay language, and Malay customs simply because queer-identified Malays’ notions of being “Malay” are defined in terms of same-sex sexuality and desires, *in addition to* Malay religion and culture. Queer sexuality in non-western indigenous contexts such as in Malaysia, on the other hand, cannot be officially conflated with western cultural influences. This is mainly because queer-identified Malays selectively replicate *both* local *and* western forms of queerness in identifying and repositioning themselves as “queer” in relation to others within and even beyond Malaysia’s national territorial boundaries. It is, however, imperative to note that there are various ramifications of asserting and inhabiting narratives of Malayness which are marked by queerness. Malay “mak nyahs,” for example, can be charged under Section 21 of the Minor Offences Act 1955 and Section 28 of the Shariah Criminal Offences (Federal

Territories) Act 1997 for cross-dressing. Lesbian Malay women, on the other hand, are liable to prosecution and imprisonment under Section 26 of the Shariah Criminal Offences Enactment for engaging in “musahaqah” (“female same-sex sexual relation”).

My point here is that queer-identified Malays cannot adequately protect themselves from being prosecuted for constructing and asserting a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity in the Muslim-majority Malaysian nation-state, especially when queer sexualities *and* the lives of queer-identified Malay men and women remain subject to local juridical control and containment. This, in my view, amplifies Michel Foucault’s assertion that sexuality has been regulated by various disciplinary mechanisms and apparatuses of the state historically. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, Foucault maintains that these repressive disciplinary mechanisms and apparatuses function as a medium through which the state exercises its power to contain women’s sexed bodies, to monitor children’s sexuality, to regulate biological reproduction, and to normalize a variety of sexual behaviours, particularly those characterized by perversity and deviance (104-105). Foucault contends further that the state exerts powerful and consistent control over people’s sexuality in a top-down fashion, where people’s bodies and desires are constituted by a multitude of ideological discourses (e.g. legal, religion, medical, psychological) and repressive discursive practices of the state (e.g. prohibition, censorship). This reinforces the idea that sexuality is embedded in, and circumscribed by, complex relations of power. As Foucault writes:

The power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels. From top to bottom, in its over-all decisions and its capillary interventions alike, whatever the devices or institutions on which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner; it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to family, from prince to father, from the tribunal to the small change of

everyday punishments, from agencies of social domination to the structures that constitute the subject himself, one finds a general form of power, varying in scale alone. *This form is the law of transgression and punishment, with its interplay of licit and illicit* (84-85; emphasis added).

Although Foucault focuses primarily on the historical production of western discourses on sexuality, I find that his discussion of the complex relationship between power and sex can be used to examine the ways in which queer sexualities are constantly being regulated by the Malay state elites via repressive mechanisms of discipline, surveillance, and punishment. If the state, as Foucault asserts, exerts top-down control over people's sexuality in western societies, the same can be said of non-western states such as Malaysia that enforce a top-down hierarchical monitoring and regulation of indigenous people's sexualities. This is clearly evidenced in the imposition of strict Shariah law (Islamic law) on *both* queer-identified *and* non-queer identified Malay Muslims in Malaysia. The state religious authorities throughout Malaysia are invested with power and authority to enact Islamic laws and reinforce disciplinary mechanisms to regulate, control, and police queer-identifying *and* non-queer identifying Malays' sexed bodies and desires, and to punish those who transgress these laws.⁵ Such laws and repressive mechanisms (as evidenced in the enforcement of religious rulings ("fatwas") prohibiting transsexualism and lesbianism, and the ongoing religious police crackdown on premarital sex among unmarried heterosexual Muslim couples and same-sex sexual practices), are grounded in and, organized around, the "interplay of the licit and illicit" (Foucault 85); that is, the permissible ("halal") and impermissible ("haram") forms of sex as inscribed in Islam. Liwat" ("male same-sex sexual erotic relations") and "musahaqah" ("female same-sex erotic relations") as discussed in Chapter 5, as well as "zina" ("adultery and premarital sex"), "khalwat" ("close proximity between unmarried male and female") and "sumbang mahram" ("incest") are

all punishable under Shariah laws in Malaysia.⁶ This is because heterosexual marriage *and* conjugal relations have been officially sanctioned as a legal and religiously lawful means of sexual gratification among Malay Muslims. Lesbianism, cross-dressing, and sex change operations, on the other hand, are all prohibited by the “fatwas” issued by Malaysia’s National Fatwa Council on the grounds that Malay Muslims *must* actualise their “fitrah” (“natural and innate human disposition”) by adhering strictly to cultural and religious norms pertaining to gender and sexuality.

But I would like to argue very strongly that it is wrong to assume the Malay state elites have ultimate control over ethnic Malays’ sex and sexuality. This is because ethnic Malays (*both* queer-identified *and* non-queer identified Malays) cannot be reduced to mere objects of Shariah law, who are incapable of resisting enforced regulation and containment of their sexualities by the Malay state elites. In other words, although the Malay state elites (via the state religious authorities) exert their power and control over Malays’ sexed bodies and desires, some (if not many) Malays continue to challenge and undermine state power in a variety of ways, using their own individual strategies of resistance. Azwan Ali, for instance, creates his own “It Gets Better” video and uses it to subvert the Islamic law prohibiting same-sex sexuality. In the video, Azwan identifies himself openly and honestly as a gay man. Such a public expression of sexuality can be perceived as Azwan’s own strategy for contravening the law that not only criminalizes male same-sex sexuality, but suppresses the potentials of forging and inhabiting male same-sex sexual identities locally. Gay-identified Malays in diaspora (whom I shall discuss shortly) also devise their own method for challenging the power of the state over their sexed bodies and desires. This is particularly notable in the case of gay-identified Malay men in diaspora who adopt migration as a viable way of escaping the

law that restrains them from living (and even denies their basic human rights to live) an openly gay life in Malaysia. Interestingly, some gay-identified Malay men, especially those who have migrated to the U.S. and other advanced nations in the West that recognize and protect the rights of their gay-identified citizens, formulate their own notions of being “gay” *and* “Malay” in the diaspora. I will demonstrate later that gay-identified Malay men in diaspora radically reshape dominant narratives of Malayness that remain predicated on Malays’ strong religious, ethnic, and communal affiliation by specifically creating their own sense of “gay” *and* “Malay” through their strong attachment to the gay community and gay activism in the U.S. and in other countries of residence. The various strategies gay-identified Malay men use to challenge, resist, and even evade the imposition of Shariah law on their lives and sexuality corroborates Foucault’s contention that power (particularly in the form of the law that dictates sex) has been and continues to be resisted in different ways at different times across *multiple* locations. As Foucault notes:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power... [The existence of power relations] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations (95-96; emphases added)

Foucault’s concept of the plurality of resistances is most evidenced in the ways in which many queer identified Malays whom I’ve mentioned in this study developed

their own individual strategies to resist the laws and regulations pertaining to queer sexuality. Many gay Malay men in the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu,” for instance, continue to assert and inhabit gay male identities online and utilize the internet to form and organize same-sex erotic practices as a way of defying the laws forbidding male same-sex sexuality. Many Malay “mak nyahs,” on the other hand, continue to cross-dress on a daily basis while others undergo sex reassignment surgery regardless of the “fatwas” proscribing cross-dressing and sex change operations. This buttresses the point made earlier that the Malay state elites (via the state religious authorities) do not have complete control over queer Malays’ sexuality mainly because many queer-identified Malay men and women do not adhere strictly to Islamic laws pertaining to sexuality, particularly same-sex sexuality and same-sex erotic practices. Many queer-identified Malay men and women continue to resist, undermine, and transgress these laws in multiple and varied ways (i.e. cross-dressing, queer identification and articulation online), thereby suggesting that queer Malays are able to exercise their agency and erotic autonomy to create radical notions of self and identity which challenge ethnic, religious, gender, *and* sexual normativities. However, the decision made by the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) to impose tougher sanctions against same-sex sexual practices following Azwan Ismail’s public admission of his sexuality can be seen as a major obstacle to queerness and the politics of queer Malay identity in Malaysia. This is because JAKIM’s decision will certainly have significant and, perhaps, serious effects on the lives of many queer-identified Malays. For instance, queer-identified Malays’ public and private lives will be placed under stringent police surveillance and any attempt at resisting the law against same-sex sexuality will most certainly be dealt with harshly. To complicate matters, queer-identified Malays may not be able to undermine fully

repressive governmental sanctions against same-sex sexuality, especially when “no one,” as the former Malaysian Inspector-General of Polic, Tan Sri Musa Hassan maintains, “is above the law” in Malaysia.⁷ How does this draconian measure to maintain law and order within Malaysia’s national boundaries call into question Foucault’s concept of power and resistance, particularly people’s resistance to the imposition of the state’s power over sex? More importantly, how does this call into question the very usability of “queer” as a political strategy for subverting the state repressive regimes of same-sex sexual regulation and control in non-western states such as Malaysia?

While my study has argued that new narratives of Malayness are produced through queer-identified Malays’ strategic renegotiations of ethnicity, religion, and culture, I would like to take this argument a little further by pointing out that queer-identified Malays’ own notions of ethnicity are also configured through a complex realignment of identities and desires. Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, Charles Klein, Cindy Patton, Don Kulick, Jillana Enteen, and others have argued that queer-identified men and women often engage in multiple realignments of sex, gender, sexuality, identity, and desire in formulating their notions of self-identity. Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton, for example, contend that these multiple realignments occur when queer-identified men and women move between various physical and ideological sites. As Sánchez-Eppler and Patton assert:

“[B]eing” gay, homosexual, lesbian, joto, internacional, totillera, like that, battyman, bakla, katoi, butch, et cetera, entails answering or not answering to those terms and the desires they purport to index, in a given place, for a given duration. When a practitioner of “homosexual acts,” or a body that carries any of queering marks moves between officially designated spaces – nation, region, metropole, neighbourhood, or even culture, gender, religion,

disease – *intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire* take place (3; emphasis added).

Such intricate realignments of identity are evidenced in the contexts of queer Malay identity construction, especially when queer-identified Malays move between various designated spaces such as culture, religion, gender, and sexuality as they identify and resituate themselves as “queer Malay” in Malaysia. For example, some queer-identified Malays may realign themselves more closely with received notions of Malayness while other queer-identified Malays may identify themselves more strongly in terms of their sexuality, gender, and/or class. It is pertinent to emphasize that queer-identified Malays’ realignments of identities and desires are constantly implicated and inflected by hegemonic impulses of culture and religion. Queer-identifying Malay men and women who adhere to dominant narratives of Malay ethnicity probably do so to conform to religious and cultural expectations of being Malay men and women within the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community. Roslan, Ramli, and Rokiah, whom I mentioned in regard to Ismail Baba’s ethnographic study, complied with social and familial expectations of marriage not just because heterosexual marriage is expected of Malay men and women, but because marriage is key to being “Malay” in the Malay Muslim community. More importantly, queer-identified Malays who conform to discursive conceptions of Malay identity probably do so because of their strong ethnic, religious, and communal affiliations. This corroborates Michael G. Peletz’s assertion that a Malay sense of identity is defined by, and grounded in, social relationships and institutions (e.g. family, community, culture, religion) to which one belongs (*Reason and Passion* 204). Peletz’s view of Malay identity helps explain why kinship and communal affiliations, *in addition to* ethnic and religious attachments, continue to exert a profound influence over many ethnic Malays *and* queer Malays’

notions of self-identification and sense of belonging. Such strong ethnic and religious attachments are clearly exhibited by many members of the local gay social networking website, “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu” (hereafter cited as *KWGM*). Based on my analysis of selected online forum discussion “threads,” I found that many Malay gay men in *KWGM* allied themselves firmly with received notions of Malay identity. In the online forum discussion thread on “Kawin Sesama Lelaki, Sanggupkah Anda Lakukan...Jika Undang2 Mengizinkan...” (“Same-sex Marriages: Are You Willing To Do It If The Law Permits?”), many *KWGM* members disapproved of same-sex marriage by claiming that they were Muslims who must abide by “hukum Allah” (God’s law). For example, a *KWGM* member who identified himself online as “Alan” put God and his religion above anything else including his sexuality. Another *KWGM* member who referred to himself online as “Jackie,” claimed that gay Malay men must accept the fact that they were born Muslims and, therefore, must observe and comply with “rukun Islam” (“Pillars of Islam”). Malay Muslims in Malaysia, like Muslims the world over, show their obeisance and reverence to Allah (SWT) by carrying out their obligatory religious duties as inscribed in the five pillars of Islam. What is especially prominent here is that some gay-identified Malay men, particularly those in the gay Malay online community such as *KWGM*, identify strongly with their Islamic identity. But what if queer-identified Malays realign themselves more closely with queerness and use it as a strategy for being in *and* going against the Malay Muslim community and the Muslim-majority Malaysian nation-state? Azwan Ismail, whom I have mentioned earlier, is a case in point.

Azwan identifies himself publicly as a gay Malay man by defining his identity in terms of male same-sex sexuality. By claiming that “Saya Gay, Saya Okay,” Azwan not only

advances the notion that it is okay to be gay in Malaysia, but spreads awareness and empowers other gay-identified Malays to liberate themselves by asserting their gayness with pride and making their presence felt in the public sphere. This sense of awareness and empowerment is indeed crucial for gay-identified Malay men as well as other queer-identified Malays to challenge the imposition of the state's power over their lives, their sexed bodies, and desires.⁸ Unfortunately, Azwan's public self-identification as a gay man has been fiercely criticized by many Malaysians, most of whom are individuals from the Malay Muslim community and the local Muslim organisations. The Minister from the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom, for example, mentioned that local officials might take "appropriate action to prevent [homosexuality] from spreading because it would hurt Islam's image" following the release of Azwan's video. The Perak Mufti, Datuk Hairussani Zakaria, on the other hand, asserted that Azwan should have not declared publicly his sexuality because "it derided his own dignity (as Malay and Muslim) and Islam in general" (notes added).⁹ The centrality of religion in Jamil Khir Baharom and Hairussani Zakaria's response to Azwan's sexuality and homosexuality in particular, amplifies one of my central assertions throughout this thesis that gayness, in particular, and queerness, in general, continue to be juridically conflated with being "un-Malay" and "un-Islamic" in Malaysia. This enables us to reconsider the notion of "intricate realignments of identity" which Sánchez-Eppler and Patton contend with regard to queer-identified people's movements between various official designated spaces (i.e. culture, religion, gender). That is, although queer-identified Malays can ally themselves more intimately with queerness, this always comes with a cost, given that queerness remains subject to social and legal sanctions in Muslim-majority Malaysia. Azwan's predicament also compels a rethinking of the political usability of "queer," particularly the ways in

which queerness has been conceived by many western queer scholars as a mode of “resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, “Queer Planet” 16). This is especially true when queer-identified Malays cannot dismantle fully long held ethnic and religious normativities by simply taking on identities marked by sexual difference. Although queer Malays can identify themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay,” queer Malays will always remain at risk for legal consequences because being “queer” *and* “Malay” do not cohere with normative notions of Malayness. This raises some pertinent questions that need to be addressed with regard to queerness and the politics of queer Malay identity in Malaysia: how can intricate realignments of identities and desires protect queer-identified Malays from prosecution by the police and state religious authorities? More importantly, how can queer-identified Malays protect themselves from the threats of violence issued by individuals who condemn same-sex sexuality in the name of religion by clinging more tightly to their sexual identities and by forging a strong attachment to the local queer community? In what ways can queerness be conveyed as a strategy of resistance against and, a mode of liberation from, normalizing regimes of the Malaysian nation-state which continue to constrict queer-identified Malays’ lives and the very articulation of queer Malay identity?

My analysis of queer Malay identity construction has also demonstrated that queer Malay identities are configured through the process of hybridization under conditions of globalisation. By using theories of globalisation, I argued that notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay” are hybrid *and* heterogeneous formations which are *queerly* born out of transnational and transcultural interactions between local and western queer identities and queer cultures. These interactions are fostered and facilitated by various instruments of globalisation such as international travel and the internet. The internet,

for instance, has enabled many queer-identified Malays (gay-identified members of *KWGM* in particular) to formulate and inhabit visible and assertive gay male identities in the virtual sphere. These male same-sex sexual identities (e.g. “Geiboi/Gayboy,” “Str8,” “Anak Ikan,” and “Gay Tahfiz”) are assembled through a complex interaction of various components such as age, class, ethnicity, religion, as well as the local and western expressions of gayness. I also demonstrated how the internet has enabled Malay gay men in *KWGM* to construct an “exclusive” and “inclusive” vision of “gay Melayu” identity – a gay male identity which is not only used to address gay Malaysian Malay men, but also gay Malay men from different parts of the world, as well as non-Malay Malaysian and non-Malay non-Malaysian gay men who seek to affiliate with Malay members in *KWGM*. Such an exclusive/inclusive vision of “gay Malay” identity amplifies Anthony Milner’s contention on the “civilizational” characteristic of Malayness. Milner argues that this characteristic provides a useful means of comprehending the high degree of flexibility and adaptability encountered in the use of categories such as “Malay” and “Malayness” (230). This is because the concept of “civilization,” as Milner points out, “has the advantage of communicating a dynamism that the terms “(Malay) ethnicity” and “(Malay) race” do not readily convey” (242; notes added). Such dynamism is clearly evidenced in the ways in which “gay Melayu” identity cannot be adequately expressed through Malay ethnicity/race simply because “gay Melayu” identity accommodates Malay *and* non-Malay gay men from diverse cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, religious, political, and geographical backgrounds. It is possible to say that gay Malay men in the diaspora (*in addition to* non-Malay Malaysian and non-Malay non-Malaysian gay men), may be able to assert “gay Melayu” identity and take it on as a subject position without necessarily identifying themselves as “Melayu” as conflated with ethnic Malays living in Malaysia. This, I

believe, opens up a space for “queer” in non-western settings such as Malaysia where queerness can be used as a way of understanding *multiple* constructions of Malayness across national borders and territorial boundaries. In his article, entitled “Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies,” David L. Eng cogently points out that queerness *and* diaspora, when taken together, can be utilised as an instrument for analysing the constructions of Asian American identity within and beyond the borders of United States. Eng maintains that queerness *and* diaspora can be usefully employed in Asian American studies to further examine Asian American racial formations across multiple axes of difference and its numerous local and global manifestations (39). Queerness *and* diaspora, as Eng posits further, can also function as a mode of inquiry for assessing the configurations of new Asian American identities under current conditions of transnational flows of global capital, immigration, and labor.¹⁰ I find that Eng’s discussion of queerness *and* diaspora provides a means for evaluating how new forms of Malay identity are produced beyond Malaysian borders. Many gay-identified Malay members of *KWGM*, particularly those living in the diaspora, redefine culturally authoritative conceptions of Malaysian Malay identity by formulating a narrative of Malayness that is *both* queer *and* diasporic. KoolMalay, a gay-identified member of *KWGM* who currently lives in San Francisco, California is a good case in point.

In responding to the online forum discussion “thread” on “Kawin Sesama Lelaki, Sanggupkah Anda Lakukan...Jika Undang2 Mengizinkan...” (“Same-sex Marriages: Are You Willing to Do It If the Law Permits?”), KoolMalay wrote:

I live in the United States & would like to correct the statement on gay marriage here because not all 50 states in the US recognize gay marriage! In fact, only a few states (including in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa,

and Vermont, marriages for same sex couples are legal and currently performed. In New Hampshire, same-sex marriages will begin on January 1, 2010.) While I fully support the gay marriage, an [sic] American & live in California, sad enough the gay marriage is still illegal here! On the good news, unlike in Malaysia, we have the separation of church & state where the laws are build upon human rights, not religion. As a result, many gay men & women (like my life partner & I) will continue to fight for our basic human rights, equality & justice for all! (KoolMalay, “Kawin Sesama Lelaki,” December 14, 2009)

What is worth noting here is that KoolMalay’s own notion of Malay identity reinforces Eng’s contention that “there are (indeed) possible new meanings of race as it crosses through various national borders and locales” (“Over Here” 38). I say this because dominant ideas about race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic identity are constantly being reconfigured as a result of transnational labor migration processes. KoolMalay, who probably migrated to the United States from Malaysia in search of better employment opportunities, has not only created a new form of ethnic identification, but also developed a new sense of home and belonging. What it means to be “Malay” in America for KoolMalay is strongly defined in terms of his sexuality and his close attachment to the American gay community *and* gay rights movement (hence the use of the word “kool” (“cool”) that reinforces KoolMalay’s self-evident sense of “Americanness” and accentuates further his radical difference from Malays living in Malaysia). It is not wrong to say that KoolMalay’s own sense of ethnic identity radically redefines normative notions of Malayness, which are predicated on strong ethnic, religious, and communal affiliation, as well as heterosexuality and heteronormativity. However, I would like to point out that gayness and everyday lived experiences of being “gay” in the diaspora do not always figure prominently in process of self-identification among diasporic gay Malay men. This is because some gay Malay

men living outside the borders of Malaysia establish their self-identities by realigning themselves firmly with discursive conceptions of Malayness. This holds true for Pjoe, another gay-identified member of *KWGM* who lives abroad. In responding to the online discussion “thread” on “aku keliru” (“I’m confused”), Pjoe urged Salman, a fellow member who posted the “thread,” to consider seriously the implications of coming out as “gay.” As Pjoe wrote:

Tetapi ingat, hidup ini penuh dengan pilihan, dan setiap pilihan kita ada korban dan ganjarannya. Bagi saya, kerana tidak mahu hidup dengan kepuraaan korbannya ialah berjauhan dengan keluarga, sahabat dan tanahair (Pjoe, “Kawin Sesama Lelaki” June 30, 2008).

[But remember, life is full of choices, and every single choice we make has its sacrifices and rewards. Because I don’t want to live in denial, I have to make the sacrifice to be away from my family, my friends, and my homeland.] (translation mine).

Pjoe’s concluding line resonates with Gayatri Gopinath, Lawrence M. La Fountain-Stokes, and Timothy J. Randazzo’s assertions that many queer men and women in diaspora were compelled to live outside their home country in order to escape from oppression based on sexual difference, and to seek freedom and better opportunities elsewhere. Gayatri Gopinath, for example, maintains that many queer men and women are compelled to leave the “third-world” site of gender and sexual oppression in order to come out into the more liberated West (“Nostalgia” 304). This is particularly prominent in the case of many diasporic South Asian queer subjects who view their “home” as “a place to be left behind, to be escaped in order to be engaged into another, more liberatory space” (Gopinath, *Impossible Desires* 14). While I concur with Gopinath’s view on why many “Third World” queer men and women have been driven away from their home countries, I would like to argue that Pjoe still retains a deep

emotional connection to his family and to his homeland, despite having to move to another country where he can live openly and honestly as a gay man. One tentative explanation for this is that Pjoe probably considers himself as “anak perantau di negeri orang” (“a migrant in a foreign country”) who asserts his cultural identity more strongly for various reasons, including as a mark of differentiation from the host society or as a way of resisting pressures to assimilate into the host culture.¹¹ This is precisely true when the word “Malay” helps distinguish Pjoe from the people of the host country simply because the word carries along with it local *particularities* and *specificities* such as language, cultural and religious traditions of those who have come to regard and think of themselves as members belonging to the Malaysian Malay community. By doing so, one is constantly reminded to cling more tenaciously to one’s Malayness and to preserve “the ways of Malay” (“cara Melayu”) as one settles into a new country and culture.

Pjoe’s notion of diasporic gay male subjectivity also calls into question Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz’s notion of queer diaspora which “emerges as a critical site providing new ways of contesting traditional family and kinship structures – of reorganizing national and transnational communities based *not* on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments” (7; emphasis added). Obviously, Pjoe contradicts this notion of “queer diaspora” by defining what it means to be a diasporic queer subject in terms of “keluarga” (“filiation”) and “tanahair” (“origin”). This is probably due to the fact that Pjoe (and, perhaps, other Malaysian Malays who have settled in a country of residence) feels a strong sense of emotional attachment to his family and to his country in particular. Many Malaysian Malays living in diaspora whom I know

often express an ardent love for their country (and even harbour a strong desire to return home) through the Malay proverb (“peribahasa”) that goes:

Hujan emas di negeri orang, hujan batu di negeri sendiri, lebih baik di negeri sendiri.

[It rains gold in other countries, it rains stone in our country; our own country is still the best.] (translation mine)

This proverb, which figures prominently in the Malay culture and in the lives of many Malays, instils loyalty and affection for the homeland (i.e. Malaysia) by simply reminding Malays living in Malaysia and elsewhere that their country (despite all its flaws) is a better place to live than any other country. Another possible explanation is that Pjoe must have spent his formative years living within the borders of Malaysia and, therefore, has developed feelings of love and affection towards his own country over time. More importantly, Pjoe must have been “taught” to show his devotion to, and to take pride in, his homeland. I use the word “taught” because both Malay and non-Malay Malaysians were taught at a very young age to be proud of our country. I recall attending history classes, where my classmates and I not only learned that our country was blessed with natural wealth and resources, but were taught to show our gratitude to our forefathers who had fought for our independence from “penjajah” (“colonial rulers”) particularly the British colonizers. Furthermore, we were also taught to show great respect for our national leaders and national symbols, including ‘Bendera Malaysia” (“Malaysia’ national flag) and “Lagu Negaraku” (“Malaysia’s national anthem”). I can still remember how my friends (all of whom are Malay and non-Malay Malaysians) and I routinely showed our respect to “Bendera Malaysia” and pledged our allegiance to the country and to our King by singing “Lagu Negaraku.” As the song goes:

Negaraku, tanah darahku
 Rakyat hidup, bersatu dan maju
 Rahmat bahagia, tuhan kurniakan
 Raja kita, selamat bertakhta
 Rahmat bahagia, tuhan kurniakan
 Raja kita, selamat bertakhta. (“Lagu Kebangsaan”)

[My country, my native land
 The people living united and progressive
 May God bestow blessings and happiness
 May our King have a successful reign
 May God bestow blessings and happiness
 May our King have a successful reign.] (trans. DiPiazza 69)

The lyrics of the song have not only “fixed” in our minds the idea that Malaysia is our “birthplace” (“tanah tumpahnya darahku”), but have constantly reminded us that we must always be proud of “our country” (“negaraku”) because it *is* a stable, progressive, harmonious, and peaceful nation. The song lyrics may have also created a deep sense of national pride, as well as a sense of cultural longing and belonging in Pjoe and in the hearts of many Malaysians who left Malaysia and live in diaspora. This is probably true when Pjoe expresses a deep sense of cultural longing to identify with his homeland, to the extent that he clings more to his ethnic *and* national identities, rather than liberates his sexual identity in his country of settlement. But it is important to emphasize that national anthem, such as this one, is very much an invention because it is tied to the idea of an imagined community. Benedict Anderson, for instance, posits that the nation is an imagined community because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.”(6) Furthermore, the nation, as Anderson asserts further, is “imagined as a *community*, because regardless of the actual inequality

and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (7) Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community can be applied to understanding Malaysia’s national anthem as an invention. This is because the national anthem is created based on the idea that Malaysians of all backgrounds (regardless whether some have never met each other before) are imagined as a “united” and “progressive” community, living together in a “peaceful” and “harmonious” nation.” I would like to argue very strongly that the national anthem is an imagined creation of the state simply because it cannot foster unity among, and instill a sense of pride in, *all* Malaysians. This is due to the fact that there is always a mismatch between what is idealised in the narrative of the national anthem (and the unity and pride it is supposed to instill) and the actual material conditions in the country (e.g. Malaysians’ own experiences of being the nation’s citizenry, the structure of governance and power). The rise in emigration out of Malaysia is indicative of this mismatch, where thousands of Malaysians migrated to different parts of the world for various reasons, including the attempt to escape from authoritarian and repressive structure of power and governance within the country. KoolMalay and, perhaps, other gay-identified men in diaspora have adopted migration as a feasible means of evading the law that prohibits them from living an openly gay life in the Muslim-majority Malaysia. Some (if not many) Malaysian who left Malaysia and settled in their country of residence claimed that they did not feel a strong sense of pride in their homeland. In an article, entitled “Stem the Tide of Migration Overseas,” a Malaysian writer who identifies himself online as “bapakmiki” contends that more than 300,000 Malaysians migrated to countries such as Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, U.S., and Canada in 2008 alone. Many Malaysians left their homeland because they have lost faith in Malaysia’s political leaders who have failed to resolve

issues pertaining to race and religion, which have become deeply embedded in the multiethnic and multireligious Malaysian society. Some Malaysians who have emigrated to live and work abroad, as “bapakmiki” notes, claim that they feel “unwanted, unneeded, and unloved” by their own country, because they “have felt excluded from the mainstream way of life.”¹² This is largely attributed to the fact that the Malay-dominated government continues to favour the Malays over the Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic minority groups in Malaysia. KoolMalay, however, reinforces Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz’s concept of queer diaspora. This is especially true when KoolMalay specifically constructs a diasporic gay Malay identity based on a deep sense of belonging to the western gay community and to the U.S., which he has already regarded as his “home.” My whole point here is that, while queer diaspora does open up a space for challenging traditional kinship and familial structures, it would be more useful to view queer diaspora, particularly in the context of diasporic gay Malay identity-formation, as a site of *contradiction* and *contradistinction*. This is because there are various ways in which gay-identified Malay men living abroad identify themselves as “gay” *and* “Malay”: some diasporic gay Malay men may retain Malaysia’s dominant notions of Malayness while others refigure these notions by creating new ways of being “Malay” in diaspora which cannot be conflated with being “Malay” in Malaysia. This illuminates what Gopinath, following Stuart Hall, describes as “the *contradictions of sameness and difference* [which] characterize competing definitions of diasporic (queer) subjectivity” (*Impossible Desires* 5; emphasis added). With this in mind, I would like to suggest that queer diaspora can be identified as a possible direction for further research on queer Malay identities on the basis that queerness *and* diaspora provide new ways of thinking about “queer Malayness” and its diverse manifestations in *multiple* locations and settings. What does it mean to be

“queer” *and* “Malay” in Brunei, Singapore, and other countries of the Malay Archipelago? What does it mean to be “queer” *and* “Malay” in diasporic Malay communities in Sri Lanka and South Africa? In what ways do queer-identified Malays living beyond national territorial boundaries add further tension to the politics of Malaysian Malay identity creation? Alternatively, how can queer-identified Malays in the diaspora reinforce *or* challenge the fixity of the official designations of Malayness by formulating a diasporic queer Malay identity? More importantly, how do queer-identified Malays who live outside the borders of Malaysia adhere to *or* radically reconfigure notions of “home,” “belonging,” and “citizenship”? In what ways does this call into question dominant narratives of nationalism, nationhood, and the nation as inscribed in Malaysia?

Writing about the process of identity construction among queer-identified Malays has, I hope, broadened and deepen one’s understanding of the complexities of being “queer” *and* “Malay” since “Malayness” continues to be configured through ethnic and religious terms, rather than through queer sexualities and desires. Writing about queer-identified Malays’ lived experiences and actual struggles in identifying and repositioning themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay,” on the other hand, has, I hope, engendered a better comprehension of the ramifications and complexities surrounding the formulation and articulation of a sexually dissident narrative of Malayness, particularly when “queerness” remains legally and religiously prohibited in modern-day Malaysia. The ways in which being “queer” is officially equated with being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” have a deep resonance with my own struggles in identifying and realigning myself in relation to others and to the world. This is particularly true of the difficulties I personally experience in identifying myself as a sexually liberal,

university-educated, and secular middle class man in my Bidayuh ethnic community, which, like the Malay Muslim community, places immense emphasis on cultural, religious, and communal values, *in addition to* heteronormativity in formulating a culturally authoritative notion of “Bidayuh” identity. I have been called “nama jak Bidayuh” (“Bidayuh *only* in/by name”) and “Bidayuh murtad” (“no longer a Bidayuh”) for failing to adhere to and exemplify dominant conceptions of Bidayuh-ness simply because social class, sexuality, and educational background are important components in the process of my own ethnic self-identification. The same can be said of how same-sex sexuality, *along with* other factors pertaining to subjectivity, play a significant role in the process of self-assertion and self-inscription among many “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgendered” Malays. What is interesting is that these queer-identified Malay men and women continue to assert and establish identities marked by sexual difference, regardless of the ways in which they are constantly perceived to be “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” by the dominant Malay Muslim community. Rather than conflating queer-identified Malays with being “un-Malay” and “un-Islamic” on the basis that same-sex sexuality and desire are intimately linked to “a world not Malay and not Islamic” (Ruzy and Nor Faridah 225), I have attempted to demonstrate in this thesis how queer-identified Malays rupture such a conflation by creating new and more nuanced ways of being “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer.” Many self-identified “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgendered” Malays as represented in the media and genres I examined constructed their identities based on same-sex desires and practices while simultaneously reasserting their cultural and religious heritages. Such nuanced ways of being “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer” disrupt the so-called “unique” and, at times, irreversible, equation between Malay and Muslim simply because to be “Malay,” as understood and experienced by many queer-identified Malays, cannot always be

defined as Muslims who must adhere to normative expectations of gender and sexuality. But I must admit that there remain many pertinent questions in relation to queerness and the process of queer Malay identity construction, which have not been fully explored in this study. This is *not* because these questions are unimportant or irrelevant, but because my project focused primarily on the various ways in which queer-identified Malays constructed their identities and the implications of asserting these identities in present-day Malaysia. I believe that these questions can be addressed more comprehensively in future studies on the queer Malays using qualitative research methods such as interviews (i.e. in-depth or focus-group types), questionnaires (i.e. open-ended or unrestricted types), surveys (i.e. telephone or online), and even seminars and workshops. Some of these questions include: In what ways does the formulation and expression of new and more nuanced ways of being “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer” help to resolve queer-identified Malays’ struggles to reclaim social and political legitimacy in a world which remains heteronormative and, at times, homophobic? In what ways can the reassertions of ethnic, religious, and same-sex sexual identities help dissolve queer-identified Malays’ struggles to identify and resituate themselves as “queer” *and* “Malay” in the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community, in particular, and in Muslim-majority Malaysia, in general? In what ways can queer-identified Malays deconstruct and eliminate the stigma and social shame attached to same-sex sexualities, desires, and practices by self-identifying as “Malay,” “Muslim,” *and* “queer,” considering that many queer-identified Malays are often blamed for bringing shame and disgrace to “bangsa Melayu” and “umat Islam” as a result of engaging in the very sins of “kaum Lut/kaum Sodom”? It would be interesting to hear what queer-identified Malays have to say about their own experiences of being “queer” *and* “Malay,” particularly the various strategies that

queer-identified Malays employ in dealing with feelings of guilt and shame as a result of being “different,” and in resolving the tensions and conflicts which emanate from inhabiting and asserting a sexually dissident notion of Malay identity.

One of the possible directions for future research on queer Malay identities which I have identified in this chapter is the formation of queer Malayness in multiple sites and locations. I have demonstrated how queerness *and* diaspora, when taken together, can be used as a viable lens for exploring and examining the creation of queer Malay identities in various social, cultural, political, and geographical settings. This, in my view, may provide new and interesting insights into the ways in which Malay identity is continually shaped by the actual lived experiences of queer-identified Malays living beyond the national borders of Malaysia. I would also like to suggest that more research needs to address how the internet can serve as a pivotal site for queer Malay identity creation. This is especially salient in the case of many queer-identified Malays (queer-identified Malay youths in particular) who configure multiple and fluid notions of being “queer” *and* “Malay” through various online communication tools and social software such as instant messaging, chatrooms, internet forums, blogs, social networking services, and video sharing websites. For instance, many young gay Malay men openly declare their sexuality online by posting their relationship statuses and photos of their lovers/partners on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking websites. Moreover, some gay Malay men have also published their homemade erotic videos on gay video sharing websites such as Gaytube and XTube, while others write their personal reflections of being “gay” on Blogger, WordPress, and other online blog publishing services, regardless of the possibility of arrest if discovered or found out. What I find most interesting is that many young gay Malay men in “Komuniti Web

Gay Melayu” and “Komuniti Web Gay Melayu’s” Facebook webpage have a strong tendency to use western nicknames and attach these nicknames to their birth names as a way of addressing themselves when communicating with others online. This, in my view, could be an interesting area for further research into the construction of young gay Malay men’s notions of being “Malay” in an increasingly globalized world, where everyday lives continue to be affected by the global flow of information, knowledge, and culture. The internet, then, is indeed a powerful tool, which not only provides a wealth of valuable information about the formation of queer Malay identities in the virtual sphere, but offers advantageous opportunities for queer-identified Malays to gain more visibility and presence online.

With this in mind, it is possible to say that the events surrounding Azwan Ismail’s public admission of his sexuality does not necessarily signal an end to queerness and queer lives in non-western indigenous contexts. These events, I believe, mark an important juncture in the politics of queer Malay identity construction, where queer-identified Malays in Malaysia and beyond *must* now find new ways and alternative mediums through which to assert “queerness” (as a sexual identity, a strategy of resistance, and a mode of liberation) in challenging the state’s mechanisms of control and surveillance over queer sexualities and in disrupting all forms of fixity and normativity pertaining to race, ethnicity, religion, culture, identity, subjectivity, gender, and sexuality. I hope that my thesis has laid the groundwork for future research into this exciting and challenging task.

Notes

¹ See Dan Savage's "It Gets Better Project" website at <<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>>. Daniel Keenan Savage is an American author, editor, and journalist who started the "It Gets Better" video project as a response to Billy Lucas' suicide – a 15 year old high school freshman who took his own life as a result of homophobic bullying. The project encourages LGBT adults and the general public to create and post positive and inspiring video messages on YouTube as a way of telling LGBT teens that life will get better after bullying in high school.

² See Seksualiti Merdeka's website at <<http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/>>.

³ See the article, entitled "An Interview: Malaysian Gay Man Get Threats," which was taken from *The Associated Press* at <http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/2010122/ap_on_re_as/as_malaysia_gay_confession> .

⁴ I say this because there is already a growing body of work by scholars who have investigated specific and complex productions of gay male identity outside the western (i.e. Euro-American) domain. Foremost among these scholars are Dennis Altman, Gerard Sullivan, Peter Jackson, Tom Boellstroff, and William Leap.

⁵ Each of the thirteen states in Malaysia has its own religious council ("Majlis Agama Islam"), which is headed by a "mufti" ("the chief religious official"). Under the provision of Malaysia's Shariah law, all "muftis" are vested with the authority and responsibility to issue "fatwas" ("religious rulings") on matters concerning the lives of Muslims in their respective states. As Helen Ting writes, "the state religious authorities have been endowed with wider-ranging power over their respective Muslim communities. Section 36(1) of the 1993 Administration of Islamic Law (Federal Territories Acts) provides the *mufti*, the top state religious official, the sole authority to amend, modify or revoke fatwa issued either by him or any previous *fatwa*. More significantly, in some of the states, the *fatwa* of the *mufti* was rendered automatically binding and legally enforceable on the people, contrary to the traditionally advisory nature of a fatwa in Muslim societies. This power, given under the provisions of Syariah Criminal Offences Act/Enactment, effectively rendered the *mufti* a legislator parallel to the state assembly..." (84-85). For instance, the Mufti of Perak has recently issued a fatwa banning the Indonesian "poco poco" dance on the basis that it carries with it elements of Christianity and soul worshipping which are considered "haram" in Islam See the article on "Perak to adhere to fatwa banning "Poco-Poco" dance at <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/3/30/nation/20110330213627&sec=nation>>

Because of the decentralised nature of Islamic administration in Malaysia, state religious authorities have the power to enact and administer different Islamic laws which govern both the public and private lives of Muslims living in these states. The Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997, which I've referred to in this study, applies only to the offences committed by Muslims who reside in the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan. The *hudud*-based Syariah Criminal Code (II) Enactment 1993, on the other hand, applies only to Muslims in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. Muslims in a state that has long been governed by the Malay opposition party PAS (Partai Islam Se-Malaysia), are liable to death penalty, stoning to death, amputation of the limbs, and/or whipping if found guilty for theft, adultery, fornication, drinking, and apostasy under this Syariah law (Hassan 133).

⁶ For more discussion of the terms “liwat,” “mushaqah,” “zina,” “khalwat,” and “sumbang mahram,” see the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 document at <http://www.mylawyer.com.my/pdf/Syariah_Criminal_Offences_Federal_Territories_Act.pdf>, especially pp. 15-17.

⁷ See the article, entitled “IGP: No Compromise on Graft,” on *Malaysia Today*'s website at <<http://mt.m2day.org/2008/content/view/5210/>>. for the discussion of Tan Sri Musa Hassan's contention that that no one in Malaysia is above the law and this includes some of his officers who must be punished according to law for their involvement in corruption and abuse of power.

⁸ I genuinely believe that this sense of self-awareness and self-empowerment is necessary for queer-identified Malays to make radical changes in their lives. This begins by embracing one's sexual identity and taking it a bit further by having the courage to identify publicly as “queer.” Azwan has certainly paved the way for queer-identified Malay *and* non-Malay Malaysians to do so through his video project which is the first step in defying juridical, cultural, and religious sanctions against queer sexuality locally. But the major obstacle to challenging these sanctions and enacting significant changes in the lives of queer indigenous people lies in the fact that not *all* queer-identified Malays responded positively to Azwan's “heroic” attempt at advancing the notion that it is okay to be gay in Malaysia. Some of my self-identified gay Malay friends have expressed strong concerns about how Azwan's public admission of his sexuality may affect their own lives. My gay Malay friends claimed that Azwan should have not disclosed his sexual identity and encouraged others to follow suit simply because “ini Malaysia bukan America” (“this is Malaysia not America”). Many gay Malay men believed that as Malays *and* Malaysians, they must uphold cultural and religious values and beliefs that permeate and shape the

Malay community, in particular, and the Malaysian society, in general. This explains why many Malay gay men (including my gay Malay friends) agreed that it would be best to stay low key and keep their sexuality hidden, rather than getting into trouble with the law.

⁹ See the article, entitled “Gay man fears for his life after exposing his sexuality on the Net,” on *The Star* newspaper website at <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/12/23/nation/7670758&sec=nation>>.

¹⁰ See David L. Eng’s article, entitled “Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies,” especially on p.33 for his discussion of the ways in which the process of Asian American identity-formation is constantly inflected and affected by the recent global capital flows and the movements of migrant workers.

¹¹ The term “anak perantau” reminds me of the song “Anak Dagang” (“trader” or “migrant”) sung by the late Malaysian Malay singer and songwriter, Dato’ Sudirman Haji Arshad, which not only captures the emotion of what it feels like being away from home, but explains the importance of guarding one’s tradition and cultural identity abroad. As the song goes: “Anak dagang di rantau orang, biar pandai membawa diri/ Jaga tutur kata, jaga cermat peribahasa/ Selalu berbudi tinggi, biar merendah/ Kata orang jangan di bantah, fikir dahulu sebelum berkata” [Migrants in foreign countries, carry yourself well/ Watch what you say, watch your manners/ Always be kind, be humble/ Don’t disagree with others, think carefully before you speak] (translation mine). It would be interesting to find out what Pjoe and other gay Malay men in diaspora have to say about their notions of self and identity. This is simply because I believe that only Pjoe and gay Malay men who have moved across national borders and settled in foreign countries can explain how they specifically construct their identities through/based on the actual lived experiences of being “queer” *and* “Malay” abroad. It would be fascinating to see the similarities *and* differences between the experiences of being “queer” *and* “Malay” within and outside of Malaysia’s territorial boundaries. Such commonalities and dissonances may provide useful insights into the complexity of queer Malay identity-formation.

¹² See bapakmiki’s article on *The Borneo Post*’s website at <<http://www.theborneopost.com/?p=3158>>. for his discussion of the sense of affection for one’s country, particularly among Malaysians who have emigrated to foreign countries.

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