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Racialisation in Malaysia: Multiracialism, multiculturalism, and the cultural politics of the possible

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This article focuses on racialisation as a signifying practice and cultural process that attributes difference in Malaysia. It attempts to think with and against the concept of racialisation with an aim to add to a clearer understanding of the cultural politics of 'race'. It focuses on the hierarchies of power and marginalisation, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion that are built into dominant discourses and modes of knowledge production about race, citizenship, and culture in Malaysia. This article aims to show how the political mobilisation of race as a remnant of colonial governmentality disciplines social processes through the notion of multiculturalism. For this reason, it sets up state-endorsed 'multiracialism' and a people-driven 'multiculturalism' as oppositional ways of thinking about race. It concludes by briefly identifying some key drivers for cultural transformation and speculating if these people-centred processes can offer a more imaginative racial horizon.

This article is an attempt to think with, through, and against the concept of racialisation with an aim to add to a clearer understanding of the cultural politics of 'race' in Malaysia. Its objective is to bring into view the processes of marginality and exclusion that arise from the ways in which race is a function of power and a primary marker in the institutionalisation of difference in Malaysia. The article's main aim is to advocate the salience of a cultural conception of society and to foreground a politics and criticism 'from below' that challenges the stabilities and fixities of authoritative discourses. Although some of the assertions made in the course of this article may resonate with some other findings on racialisation in the Malaysian context,[1] more

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1 For examples, see Sumit Mandal, 'Transethnic solidarities, racialisation and social equality', in *The state of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform*, ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 49–78; Daniel P.S. Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden and Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Race and multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia* (London: Routledge, 2009); Gerhard Hoffstaedter, *Modern Muslim identities: Negotiating religion and ethnicity in Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011); Frederik Holst, *Ethnicization and identity construction in Malaysia* (London: Routledge, 2012); and Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'Theorizing different forms of belonging in a cosmopolitan Malaysia', *Citizenship Studies* 18, 8 (2014): 791–806.

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can be done to engage with racialisation as a concept with which to view relations of domination and resistance and to understand the functioning of culture in Malaysian society. By 'functioning of culture', I refer to 'culture' as a political and administrative tool and resource in the racialisation process as well as a locus of contestation and to cultural policies, practices, and representations as therefore having the capacity to either intervene upon or legitimise the status quo, and in so doing to either perpetuate or redress issues of social inequality and injustice.

I hope that approaching racialisation as a signifier of the cultural inscription of meaning and difference in Malaysia will yield useful insights into the polarising tendencies of 'national' and other state-endorsed discourses, which efface not only prior histories and forms of local governance, but also contemporary on-the-ground processes of identification and meaning-making. As importantly, 'since racial inequality begins with racialization',[2] I hope this article serves the struggle to obliterate such notions as unequal rights, privileges, and prospects in any trajectory of race as it continues to unfold in Malaysia.

Racialisation is a particularly useful way to help us conceptualise the meanings, and effects, of race worked into public policy and discourse in Malaysia. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racialisation as 'the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or group'.[3] What this makes clear is that the idea of race that is operative in the concept of racialisation is not an ontological category but a social construction that has acquired meaning 'through a linkage between structure and signification'.[4] As historian Robin Kelley has put it: 'race was never just a matter about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look'.[5] Kelley's point here is that the problem lies not in the fact of blackness or whiteness, but in what it *means* to be black or white. That is to say, racialisation as a signifying system cannot be understood outside of the social relationships, practices, and discourses that produce it. As a cultural process that cannot then be de-linked from the wider social structure and political order, Herbert Gans elaborates that racialisation is 'a socially agreed upon construction with a number of participants, with the most important being the racialisers and the racialised. Others include the individuals, organisations, agencies and institutions that help bring about and benefit economically and otherwise from racialization'.[6]

In considering racialisation as a phenomenon whose meaning-making processes derive from wider cultural relations, discourses, and ideologies, we are reminded that race is not a category in and of itself, but the historically specific outcome of a set of social practices and motivations. Articulating his critique specifically in terms of the history of enslavement, oppression, and discrimination in the United States' signifying system of race, Alexander Weheliye asserts that racialisation constitutes 'ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions,

2 Herbert J. Gans, 'Racialization and racialization research', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, 3 (2017): 352.

3 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 111.

4 Ibid., p. 124.

5 See Christine Herbes-Sommers, 'The difference between us: Episode 1', in *Race: The power of an illusion*, 3-part video series, California Newsreel and Independent Television Service (ITVS), 2003.

6 Gans, 'Racialization and racialization research', p. 343.

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discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artefacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west'.[7] Again, racialisation is seen as a process that, in the US context, not only produces race for the maintenance of hierarchical distinctions between citizens, as it does in Malaysia, but also as a system of differentiation that derives its knowledge from an oppositional, Manichaean, framework — in terms of white/black, master/slave, human/non-human. Though a global phenomenon, the discourse of racialisation is shaped by local conditions and particularities as a situated practice of articulating difference. Racialisation thus takes on different configurations to serve different purposes in different settings.

What can then be discerned from this is that as a signifying system of differentiation, racialisation does not have essential meaning, but is the process by which historical, ideological, economic, and political contexts and discourses determine what it means to be labelled or recognised as a certain 'race'; in turn, what meaning or content is assigned to a certain racial category can be reinforced and/or subverted by the process through which race comes to acquire definition and importance. Thus, as racialisation is shaped and produced by context and ideological processes, its meaning and purpose can vary over time and between societies, and is also subject to challenge by competing ideas within society. As Omi and Winant put it, racialisation can be 'formed, transformed, destroyed and reformed' by political struggle.[8] An emphasis on this approach to racialisation compels the questions — What is at stake and who is empowered when race is invoked? What drives the racialising dynamic at any given moment? What form(s) does this dynamic take at those junctures? What valorised form(s) can 'race' take? I suggest that by offering a more informed analysis of the conditions under which, as well as the purposes for which, race is mobilised, the concept of racialisation can enable a more productive way to think about race.

I am aware that racialisation as a social process intersects with other systems of differentiation such as gender, class, sexuality, and religion, including Islamisation as the case is in Malaysia. While these various lines of differentiation overlap and contribute to how everyday social relations and hierarchies of discrimination are constituted, I am more concerned in this article to direct attention to the production of racial meaning and to highlight the cultural inequalities and disparities created by state-led racialising practices and procedures. Its main aim is to show how racialisation as a fundamental differentiating and boundary-making practice has shaped representations of cultural being and belonging in Malaysia. Toward this end, it will identify and analyse state language, discourses, strategies, and practices including national and cultural policies, government slogans, campaigns, and official attitudes to 'race' and the 'race relations' framework. It does so with a view to offering a critique that will facilitate an understanding of how and where, and why, racialisation functions as a signifying practice of attributing difference and how its corollary of racism can be interpreted and understood in the Malaysian context.

7 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3.

8 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial formation in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.

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I am also very interested in this article to show how racialisation operates under the aegis of state multiculturalism. I suggest that there is a fundamental relationship between racialisation and multiculturalism and that this connection needs to be unpacked more fully. This is necessary because the form of multiculturalism endorsed by the state purports to be celebratory of racial differences in the name of the development and preservation of an inclusive national culture and identity, but on closer inspection is little more than a policy of racialisation that differentiates in absolutist terms between race categories, and then uses those differences to pit communities against one another. In other words, state-driven multiculturalism is, in effect, antithetical to national cohesion. The linking of racialisation with multiculturalism thus foregrounds the contradictory ways in which the state works to achieve 'national unity' but also reproduces the very conditions for discrimination and exclusion to thrive. Indeed, the logic of racialisation that operates in state multiculturalism[9] vis-à-vis its definition of national culture and identity, as will be examined later, regulates or disciplines difference and masks prevailing power differentials and hierarchies to shore up the broader politics of racial governmentality and its legitimisation of social inequality and disparity in Malaysia. For this reason, I distinguish between 'multiracialism', a term which I suggest better captures the dominant model and discourse of the governance of social diversity through the processes of hierarchised racialisation in Malaysia, and a 'multiculturalism from below', which encapsulates lived experiences and practices of meaning-making on the ground that cut across state-mandated racial categories.

In making a distinction between 'race' and 'culture', which as I argue can be seen to operate in the discourses of state multiracialism and a more fluid grassroots multiculturalism, respectively, I recognise that the concept and discourse of 'culture' also risks taking on the same bounded meaning that 'race' does as a normative category in Malaysia. Though it is not premised on genetics and biology, the idea of culture (as well as its correlate of 'ethnicity') can also be appropriated by coercive power structures as a tool or strategy to fix or regulate social identities and processes. My argument, however, is that people-directed processes of racial or cultural signification are potentially constitutive of a 'decentred' complex of meaning, such as that posited in my own suggested corrective to, as well as advocacy of, *Bangsa Malaysia* as a socially explanatory concept.

Multiculturalism as differential racism

Racialisation as a tool of governmentality has its empirical starting point in Malaysia's late-colonial development as a plural society. As the template for social management, colonial-era racialisation left deep ramifications for the postcolonial state and resulted in the production of multiple hierarchies — cultural, economic, political, and epistemic — based on four main ascribed race categories. All of the nation's

9 In using a term such as 'state multiculturalism' I am aware that the 'state' is not a single-voiced or monolithic entity. Not only are there differences between the federal and state governments, there are also internal contestations within the central state (for example, between ministries and politicians) or between and within the three branches of government (legislative, executive, judiciary). However, this term serves as a useful shorthand for the dominant discourse of multiculturalism, rooted in state power, which has driven the Malaysian state's post-Independence nation-building project.

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cultural heterogeneities are corralled and contained in the foundational 'MCIO' classificatory grid. Indeed, one's 'raced' identity as a 'Malay', 'Chinese', 'Indian' or 'Other' (MCIO) is inherited or assigned at birth and recorded on one's birth certificate, and, from the age of 12, also on the national identity card, which Malaysians are required by law to carry with them every time they leave the house. The race category ascribed to individuals on their identity card cannot be changed, a clear indication that the state demands conformity to and validation of its categories. The MCIO grid, in naming only the three main ethnic groups of peninsular Malaysia, flattens not only the complexity of the indeterminate and ambivalent identifications that exist within these groups, but also the presence of the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) as well as the smaller ethnic communities of the peninsula. What is even more disconcerting about the exclusionary language of state sovereignty is that the category of 'Other' is the state's convenient shorthand for the nation's myriad indigenous groups, including the 'Orang Asli' (aboriginals of peninsular Malaysia) and the peoples of East Malaysia.

As I'd suggested earlier, Malaysia's official discourse of multiculturalism implicitly utilises differential racism and racialisation to manage social diversity. But multiculturalism itself is something of a floating signifier as it absorbs or takes on distinctive meanings in the contexts where it operates, whether as government policy or as social practice. It is in recognising that it does not have an agreed-upon meaning and can take various forms that Tariq Modood asserts that multiculturalism 'cannot consist of a single template (hence the "multi")'.[10] Part of this complexity also is that multiculturalism can be used for diverse, even contradictory, political and social ends. In Malaysia, for example, as I argue, multiculturalism as a policy of social cohesion can be deployed to position minority ethnicities as 'different' and subordinate in the nation. It would not be incorrect to say that whatever its form or purpose, multiculturalism derives its specific meaning not only from context but also from how that context treats the idea of difference. As Ralph Grillo elaborates, 'what exists [of multiculturalism] is a series of variations on a general theme' that 'may be said to fall along a spectrum, depending on how much difference is tolerated, where and when'.[11]

It is precisely because multiculturalism has no fixed or specific meaning that it becomes useful to clarify the discourses and practices mobilised in its name in Malaysia so that a more nuanced and localised meaning of multiculturalism, and a critique of the form of racialisation within its deployment, can be more clearly elaborated. Elucidating the Malaysian model of multiculturalism, and its conditions as well as consequences, will also help us better envisage the nature of a cultural politics of the possible. But before doing so, and to highlight the particularities of the Malaysian context, it might be useful to sketch what is espoused by multiculturalism in a few countries where it serves as a national policy or social cohesion discourse.

In the United States, for example, multiculturalism signifies across a range of meanings, from a narrow sense that it targets the elimination of discrimination and prejudice experienced by people of colour, such as African Americans, Asian

10 Tariq Modood, 'Multiculturalism and integration: Struggling with confusions' (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2011), p. 4.

11 Ralph Grillo, *Living with difference: Essays on transnationalism and multiculturalism* (n.p.: B & RG Books of Lewes, 2015), Kindle.

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Americans, and Latino/Hispanic Americans, to a broader sense that it aspires for the protection of all minority groups. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s with its strong concerns with race and social justice exerted an important influence on the multiculturalism debates that ensued, both in the United States and abroad.

In Britain, in contrast, the process began following the influx of labour immigrants and refugees after the Second World War. The need for public policy in Britain to be responsive to the changes introduced into society by the growing population of non-white immigrants (from the West Indies, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) was articulated in 1966, when then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins proposed an approach to social integration that was aimed 'not [as] a flattening process of assimilation, but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.[12] This often-quoted speech delivered by Jenkins can be said to signal the moment of the beginning of 'British multiculturalism'. Jenkins' 'liberal-progressive' approach was criticised by anti-racist groups and critics for encouraging separateness within society through the creation of communities who lived in 'ghettos' and could not or did not want to integrate.[13] The debate between 'integration' and 'assimilation' that informed the early discourse of multiculturalism in the United Kingdom has evolved, and from the late 1980s especially has become an internally contested concept across the political spectrum. If multiculturalism emphasised 'colour' in the 1950s and 1960s, 'it had mutated to "race" in the 1960s–1980s, "ethnicity" in the 1990s, and "religion" in the present period'.[14]

Malaysia's genealogy as a cultural formation, as well as its experience of race and social relations, differs from the national contexts mentioned above in important ways. Unlike Western nation-states, where the 'conceptual logics' undergirding their engagements with multiculturalism were largely the outcome of the racial struggles of the 1960s and 1970s,[15] the idea of 'Malaysia', even long before the colonial-sponsored influx of economic immigrants from India and China, mainly between 1870 and 1930, was already constituted of a network of transregional histories and geographies of the fluid imaginary known as the 'Malay world'. The 'locals' who were known as or who called themselves 'Malay' did not initially see themselves as members of a common 'race' or as a single, bounded community.[16] Even with the consolidation of the colonial demarcations of race and racial difference toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, for those who called themselves 'Malay', their membership of this community was fluid, and thus displayed divergences from colonial iterations of race as a category with settled 'content' and immutable boundaries.[17]

12 Roy Jenkins, 'Address by the Home Secretary to the Institute', *Race* 8, 3 (1967): 215–21.

13 See, for example, Bhiku Parekh, *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

14 Ceri Peach, 'Muslims in the UK', in *Muslim Britain: Communities under pressure*, ed. Tahir Abbas (London: Zed, 2005), p. 18.

15 Raka Shome, 'Mapping the limits of multiculturalism in the context of globalization', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 145.

16 See Anthony Milner, *The invention of politics in colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

17 Sandra Khor Manickam, 'Common ground: Race and the colonial universe in British Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 3 (2009): 595.

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It is important that we take this entangled genealogy into account for it demonstrates that Malaysia as a socially diverse imaginary predates its coming into existence as a postcolonial nation-state in 1957. This is to be contrasted with the Western nation and its prior conception of itself and its national culture as temporally stable, homogeneous, and racially coherent, mandating multiculturalism as a government policy as a response to the changing cultural dynamics introduced into society by immigration. What is significant here then is that multiculturalism as a political project in Malaysia is anachronistic given the nation's socio-historical contexts.

In fact, as this article argues, Malaysia's state-sponsored multiracialism, which formalises cultural diversity through differential racism and negative difference, works to obfuscate the significance to social life of what Homi Bhabha describes as 'a form of ethical neighborliness […] that encompassed the presence of "otherness" as a practice of everyday life and language […] grounded in a very real sense of "co-existence"'.[18] Drawing from Bhabha's theorising of community and citizenship based on an ethic of solidarity with others, my argument here is that the officialisation of diversity through MCIO multiracialism serves to erase not only the history of 'others' in national constructions, but also practices of 'neighbourliness' in everyday solidarity, sociality, and 'imagined community' in Malaysia that have been negotiating 'ethically' with difference across time, space, diaspora, and generation.

What this also brings into view is that postcolonial Malay(si)a had inherited from the colonial state and its 'investigative modalities'[19] its propensity for regulating social diversity by imposing order and control grounded in British administrative scholar J.S. Furnivall's 'plural society' paradigm.[20] Furnivall had conceived the term 'plural society' as a way to describe the racially segmented composition of Southeast Asian colonies such as Burma and Indonesia as well as Malaya. He defined plural society as a social organisation in which 'two or more elements or social orders […] 'liv[e] side by side but separately within the same political unit'.[21] His thesis was that as each race held on to its own religion, language, and way of life, a plural society was an inherently unstable social formation as it was prone by default to racial conflict. As it was in a constant state of imminent violence, such a society, as Furnivall put it, was only 'kept alive, as it were, by artificial respiration, by pressure exercised mechanically from outside and above'.[22] For Furnivall, then, conflict, though inevitable, was forestalled only by state control. That is to say, integration was neither organic nor voluntary but imposed by the colonial power.

Notably, Furnivall's delineation of 'British Malaya' as a tenuous formation with no common social will or shared set of values other than its component units' economic interests and interdependence — meeting only in the marketplace — was

18 Homi Bhabha and John Comaroff, 'Speaking of postcoloniality in the continuous present: A conversation', in *Relocating postcolonialism*, ed. David Theor Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 23.

19 Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British rule in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

20 See Robert Hefner, *The politics of multiculturalism: Pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

21 J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice: A comparative study of colonial Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p. 304.

22 Ibid., p. 8.

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predicated on a segmented colonial economy and workforce designed to meet the administrative and capitalist imperatives of an industrialising Britain. As importantly, the idea of Southeast Asian societies as internally 'atomised' entities lacking a common social life, as Furnivall observed in his writings, was mediated by the colonialist conception of race.[23] Thus, rather than being viewed uncritically as a ready narrative of colonial society, plural society and its precarious social order should be construed as the direct outcome of the very structures put in place by colonialism.

The category of 'race' had been introduced both as an organising principle and technique of imposed representation, and the economic utility of the colonial project of social classification and capitalist production was reflected in its division of labour along racial lines, with the local population mainly confined to agriculture and fishing, while a substantial number of the Chinese and Indian immigrants who arrived because of British labour policies were channelled to the tin mines and rubber plantations, respectively.[24] It was this colonialist conception of social life as a medley of isolated units rather than as a cohesive whole that went on to provide the framework for the nationalist imagination. Pointing to the significant disjuncture between the postcolonial 'national' imaginary and the colonialist 'economic' imaginary, Thomas Williamson, citing Furnivall, observes that 'plural societies' had 'the structure of a factory, organised for production, rather than that of a State, organised for the life of its members'.[25]

What is noteworthy then is that not only was the fundamental incommensurability between plural society as a racially divided social order and the viability of this framework for national cohesion not resolved by the postcolonial nation-state when it came into existence in 1957, the 'multiracial' UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance administration[26] saw fit to institutionalise what Walter Mignolo calls the 'coloniality of power'[27] built into the plural society paradigm of racial separation and its associated systems of hierarchy and cultural knowledge production. The colonialist subversion of diversity, perpetuated by the racialised identity politics of the postcolonial era, was recreated in the very structures of domination and oppression that nationalism was intended to destroy.

23 See also Lee Hock Guan, 'Furnivall's plural society and Leach's political systems of Highland Burma', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 24, 1 (2009): 38.

24 See Charles Hirschman, 'The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology', *Sociological Forum* 1, 2 (1986): 330–61.

25 Thomas Williamson, 'Incorporating a Malaysian nation', *Cultural Anthropology* 17, 3 (2002): 405.

26 The Alliance coalition that was formed as part of Malaya's negotiations for Independence was composed of conservative, elite-led, ethnically defined political parties. Its coming into power after Independence suppressed other, more progressive, narratives of community-making for the nation. In what was known as the 'bargain' for Independence, the leaders of the MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) agreed to limit their communities' political aspirations in exchange for citizenship. UMNO (United Malays National Organization) in turn secured Malay 'special rights' provisions in the Constitution (related to the position of the Malay rulers or Sultans, civil service appointments, and policies for land, language and religion) that mandated Malay political dominance. For a fuller discussion, see Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian politics* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), pp. 178–80.

27 Walter D. Mignolo, 'Introduction: Coloniality of power and decolonial thinking', *Cultural Studies* 21, 2–3 (2007): 155–67.

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Thus, Malaysia's pluralist racial framework allows for minority ethnic groups to be perceived in terms that are conflictual or threatening to the interests of the dominant community. Inevitably, then, the racial paranoia and sustained othering endemic to the pluralist paradigm is projected on the ethnic Chinese who become the targets of political scapegoating and bear the brunt of other forms of antipathy in times of economic strife. The institutionalisation of difference as an integral component of the racialisation process operative in multiracialism began in earnest in the wake of the 13 May 1969 riots, which broke out in Kuala Lumpur in the aftermath of the 1969 general election, when opposition parties made unprecedented gains at the expense of the ruling Alliance coalition. The unrest left hundreds dead and forced the resignation of the nation's first prime minister.[28] The state has persistently attributed the cause of the riots to the pluralist trope of racial difference and incompatibility. Activist accounts of the riots, based on recently declassified documents, have contested official records by tracing the roots of the mob violence to the political machinations to unseat the prime minister and seize state power by an emergent Malay-centric capitalist class within UMNO[29] (the dominant party in the governing coalition). Although the revisionist narrative laid bare the 'hidden hands' of UMNO as the catalyst that ignited the riots, effectively dispelling the pluralist myth of the riots being 'a spontaneous outburst of racial violence',[30] mainstream academic and public discourse as well as the state continues to characterise the events of 13 May 1969 as 'race riots'.

The pluralist susceptibility to anarchy inscribed into the nationalist framework, buttressed by invocations of the raced violence and hysteria of 'May 13', provided an increasingly determined 'redistributive' capitalist state the opportunity it needed to intervene in the economic life of the nation. Although its avowed aim was to narrow the opportunity gaps that existed across racial lines through 'wealth redistribution' and to eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function, the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 put in place widespread affirmative action plans that favoured ethnic Malays by advancing the notion of the 'indigenous Malaysian' or *Bumiputera* (Malay for 'sons of the soil'). In galvanising indigeneity on such a pervasive scale, the NEP also became a programme for normalising the place and value of indigeneity in the nation's social and cultural as well as economic life. Indeed, the consolidation of the 'Bumiputera' construct in post-1971 policy-making and state discourse in areas as discrepant as education (including public university admissions), employment, enterprise development, housing, and the electoral

28 Malaysian literature, particularly the novel in English, has repeatedly returned to this moment of trauma in the national consciousness to narrate the inner, subjective lives, motivations, and experiences of the people in ways that challenge the racial determinism built into institutionalised accounts of the riots. In so doing, literature's empathetic acts of meaning-making illuminate official history's untold stories, uncovering for the reader a more complex truth about social life. For examples, see Lloyd Fernando, *Green is the colour* (Singapore: Landmark, 1993); Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, *Joss and gold* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001); Preeta Samarasan, *Evening is the whole day* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008); and Hanna Alkaf, *The weight of our sky* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).

29 See Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified documents on the Malaysian riots of 1969* (Kuala Lumpur: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007).

30 Ibid., p. 3.

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system, highlights the view that 'indigenous' is not a prior identity category, but a power articulation that arises from particular historical moments to interpellate a group of people in terms of the 'symbolic capital'[31] or privilege they wield over other groups. 'May 13' constituted one particularly charged and defining moment for 'addressing' the nation in the name of race. Since then, the 'Bumiputera' trope has been invoked not only as a cultural and economic resource, but also as a practice of identification to leverage advantage over other raced groups. As ethnic Malays are the privileged group by virtue of their Bumiputera identity (which also, on a nominal level, includes other groups such the Orang Asli and indigenous groups in East Malaysia), the Constitutional guarantees accorded to their 'special position' are based on assumptions that it is the Malays, as Bumiputera, and in tacit contradistinction to Chinese and Indian 'immigrants' as 'racial outsiders' whose cultural origins are represented as lying outside the national sphere, who are the nation's autochthonous racial community. The idea of an 'indigenous race', as well as its corollary notion of who are to be positioned as cultural insiders and who are the outsiders, is a strategy that validates the practices of othering endemic to racialisation to consolidate numerical and cultural dominance aimed at entrenching political power and expanding legitimacy. Negatively racialised communities are thus positioned inside yet outside, visible yet unseen, as I will elaborate later. Such a distribution of power not just through general political and economic exclusion, but specifically through the notion of indigeneity/non-indigeneity, opens up questions concerning cultural citizenship or the right to cultural belonging in the national order. Gans' argument that racialisation must be understood as a 'distinctive' form of exclusion on account of its 'potential for harsher, and sometimes permanent mistreatment than other forms of othering' is worth recalling here.[32]

Indeed, the pluralist racial imagination is underpinned by the thinking that cultural loyalty is defined by an affinity and orientation to the 'original', and not the present, homeland. By binding minority ethnic communities to their purported cultural origins in their ancestral homelands (the 'Indian' to India, the 'Chinese' to China, and so on), as if nothing fundamentally cultural has changed about these communities and their systems of identification in the past hundred years and more, state-sponsored conceptions of national culture systematically exclude minority racialised communities from the culturally and epistemologically privileged national order whilst simultaneously recognising them as legal citizens of the state. Indeed, a national-ised discourse of cultural belonging that is based on an essentialist understanding of race and diaspora, with its prescribed focus on 'point of origin', fails to include groups whose identities and affinities are forged in the space between and beyond racial demarcations in the cultural recourse and idea of the nation. This racialised conception of the nation/al that also plays to mainstream perceptions of the cultural separateness or a lack of allegiance to Malaysia of non-Malay ethnic communities thus unravels as false and illusory the guarantee of multicultural

31 Pierre Bourdieu, 'Symbolic capital and social classes', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 13, 2 (2013): 292–302; Alice M. Nah, 'Negotiating indigenous "race"/place in postcolonial peninsular Malaysia', *Geografiska Annaler B* 88, 3 (2006): 294.

32 Gans, 'Racialization and racialization research', p. 351.

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inclusivity touted in mottos and slogans of governmentality such as 'Bangsa Malaysia', '1Malaysia', and, very recently, 'Keluarga Malaysia'. I will return to this point shortly.

Bumiputera preferential treatment policies in the form of quotas and other allocations and concessions designed to increase equity ownership and corporate power along racialised horizontal lines rather than socioeconomic need have also fostered a culture of corruption through rent-seeking and patronage in the nation's political economy.[33] More pertinently, the continuance from 1971 until today, through various guises under successive national economic plans, of affirmative action policies that racialise inequalities so as to continue to benefit an already racially empowered community will only end up exacerbating negative difference (stereotyping, exclusion, and discrimination) through the self-legitimising and self-perpetuating logic of race.

In keeping with the same logic of race-based empowerment and preferential treatment, then prime minister Najib Razak, serving concurrently as finance minister, launched in 2013 the 'Bumiputera Economic Empowerment' (BEE) policy, aimed at increasing Bumiputera participation in business and allocating more of the country's corporate wealth and resources in the hands of this community.[34] The BEE was widely regarded as a programme that was strategically oriented toward winning back the electoral vote. Three months prior to its announcement, the Barisan Nasional (BN) government had, for the first time during its long incumbency, lost the popular vote to the opposition coalition of Pakatan Harapan (Coalition of Hope) in the thirteenth general election of May 2013. At the press conference following the official announcement of the results, Najib instantly attributed BN's losses to the workings of a 'Chinese tsunami'. Such a stance, along with its accusatory idiom, was the Prime Minister's way of assigning blame to a particular community for destabilising the 'fragile' social order. He also warned that such polarising voting trends would be dangerous for the nation. The readiness and lack of self-reflexivity with which the electoral results were interpreted along racial lines is a measure of how political attitudes and hegemonic discourses persistently racialise social experience and performance. The irony also is that a government that had long and actively championed race-based policies should now caution the nation about the divisive dangers of race-based voting.

The NEP's latest iteration, the 'Shared Prosperity Vision 2030' (SPV2030), announced in 2019 by then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and continued by the administration of Muhyddin Yassin, presented itself as a new economic model that aimed to elevate the living standards of all Malaysians across race categories. Its underlying principle was economic growth through 'equitability of outcome', a goal that Muhyddin's government admitted had been elusive under the NEP's 'Bumiputera agenda' framework. Taking note of the incalculable losses and leakages created by race-driven development policies, SVP2030 outlined the need for a more inclusive, needs-based, economic approach. However, Janus-like, as every other

33 Edmund Terence Gomez and Johan Saravanamuttu, eds, *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative action, ethnic inequalities and social justice* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

34 Edmund Terence Gomez, Thirshalar Padmanathan, Norfayanti Kamaruddin, Sunil Bhalla and Fikri Fisal, *Minister of Finance Incorporated: Ownership and control of corporate Malaysia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6.

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national policy, it simultaneously contended that priority needed to be accorded to a 'Bumiputera outcome'.

In contrast to corresponding contexts of power and inequality elsewhere where preferential treatment is practised, such as the United States, where racial discrimination necessitated intervention through affirmative action for the protection of historically excluded groups such as the African Americans, the reverse applies in the case of the Malaysian project. Premised on fabricated lines of ontological difference and indigeneity, and fuelled by the agenda to bolster the economic prowess of the already advantaged political community, affirmative action in Malaysia has ended up creating new social inequities and economic inequalities, both within and between ethnic communities. It has also obscured deracialised solidarities and emergent identities in the nation's cultural sphere.

The disorder on the streets that 'May 13' was very decisively made to symbolise also provided the state with the rationale to racialise the cultural life of the nation through its introduction of the National Culture Policy (NCP) of 1971— in all respects the state's founding narrative of multiculturalism — in a growing climate of fear and insecurity over what the ruling elite perceived and projected as encroaching ethnic Chinese economic and political power. The NCP was the outcome of the deliberations of the National Cultural Congress that had convened in August 1971 and comprised a select group of intellectuals and arts practitioners invited to congregate at Universiti Malaya to put the nation's culture at the service of the state. The NCP was to be both a policy on arts practice and cultural identification. The call was also for the repudiation of 'Western' cultural intervention (which by virtue of nationalist claims that it was unrooted in the nation's traditions also included the English language, which had ramifications also for the construction of 'National Literature') and the adoption of a narrow, 'bounded' approach to the meaning of 'Malayness' itself in the quest to produce a collective identity grounded in national cultural purity.

The disavowal of Malaysia's historical and cultural diversities to pursue an instrumentalist vision of a distinctly national culture anchored in Malay ethnicity, albeit one too that was falsely homogenised, dehistoricised, and cleansed of its 'infinity of traces', is implicit in each of the three defining criteria that the NCP establishes as fundamental to the making of national culture.[35] Instead of engaging the aspirational role and the creative potential of the arts and the humanities to both explore and draw from the nation's existing cultural realities and to 'humanise' policy-oriented perspectives to nation-making, the NCP put forth prescriptions to institute a collective culture for the nation within a framework underpinned by the exclusionism and chauvinism endemic to racialisation. The absence of a consultative approach was ineluctable. As Sumit Mandal observes, 'the [NCP] synthesis was considered policy by ministerial dictate and its implementation rushed

35 The NCP's three main principles are that: Malaysian national culture be based on the indigenous (by which was meant 'Malay') culture; 'suitable elements' from non-Malay cultures may be picked and integrated into the national culture; and Islam is an important component in the construction of national culture. See Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 'National Culture Policy', 12 July 2019; https://www.pmo.gov.my/2019/07/national-culture-policy/.

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with the possible aim of avoiding consultation altogether because it was politically contentious'.[36]

Overt references to the NCP have slackened since the 1990s, given the introduction of other state discourses and ideologies of nationhood that, in a less intimidating, post-concession context in conjunction with the more open climate of economic globalisation, made it more strategic for the state to move away from the overbearing language of the NCP and make nominal attempts to include all of the nation's citizenry in its national unity and cohesion initiatives. Be that as it may, the NCP's continuing appeal as a central component of Malay hegemony and state power in constructions and discourses of national identity and culture is clearly evident in public debates and speeches that proclaim the 'special rights' and privileges of the dominant ethnic community.

A new racism

It is possible to infer from the foregoing discussion that 'Malaysian racism' as a discursive phenomenon is not based on notions of biological or phenotypical difference, of which one's skin colour (the first definitional criterion of race) is emblematic. Rather, it is based on the politicised meaning of race which in Malaysia is predicated on the notion of the primal right to resources. Thus, in the dominant discourse of racialisation that operates in Malaysia, skin colour is not in itself socially coded as threatening. The pluralist notion of the inevitability of incendiary violence if the status quo is not rigidly enforced, which the state unfailingly invokes by stoking fear and conjuring the bloody spectre of 'May 13', is a strategy to ensure that racial boundaries are maintained for the political advantage of the dominant ethnic community, for whom race is a resource as it stands to gain economically and politically from clear-cut and unambiguous racial categorisations. This essentialist form or discourse of racialisation that emphasises racial and cultural difference as fixed and unchanging is at variance with more productive takes on 'difference' that recognise it as socially constructed and therefore mutable. In contrast, the notion of essentialised difference results in the naturalisation not only of the notions of racial belonging and unbelonging but also of racist conduct. Étienne Balibar argues that such differential discourses of race are able to effectively conceal their hegemony by presenting racial separatism premised on fixed difference as necessary to prevent social discord.[37]

That is to say, the Malaysian context of racialisation manifests a form of racism that is not so much based on 'colour' or the notion of 'racial superiority' as it is on the idea of the inherent antagonisms or rivalries between groups. In other words, racialisation in Malaysia as a discursive practice operates not on the basis of the biological inferiority or superiority of certain groups or peoples but on the notion of 'racial supremacy' or 'racial primacy' (Ketuanan Melayu), that is, the rights of a certain group over others to resources and allotments. This discourse of racialisation, put

36 Sumit Mandal, 'The National Culture Policy and contestation over Malaysian identity', in *Globalization and national autonomy: The experience of Malaysia*, ed. Joan M. Nelson, Jacob Meerman and Abdul Rahman Haji Embong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Institute Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa, 2008), p. 279.

37 Étienne Balibar, 'Is there a "neo-racism"?', in *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 21–2.

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to such a political use, can be aligned with the 'race relations' framework, in which groups are racialised into separate and separable, and therefore manageable, units with competing interests. The Malaysian Race Relations Act, proposed in 2011, indeed serves as a useful illustration of the separatist thinking that sustains state-endorsed multiracialism. Its objectives, as set out by the then Home Minister, are 'to govern interaction between the races', to 'enforce harmony and tolerance' and 'regulate what people say and do'. Although the Race Relations Act was superseded by the National Harmony Act 2012, what is of significance here is the dominant attitude and response to ethnic diversity and difference. Again, as in other state discourses, the prescriptive pluralist logic of racial separatism that operates here implies that ethnic diversity is a 'problem' or a negative presence within the nation that needs to be resolved through the state's regulatory and managerial functions, this time aided by legislation, to avert conflicts over social allocations. The benevolence ascribed to 'tolerance' as a basis for multiracial co-existence also warrants unpacking. Furthermore, by emphasising race as 'a *central axis* of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception',[38] the 'race relations' trope results in the normalising of racial difference and, by obscuring other inequalities, props up the status quo by endorsing the notion that race is a cardinal marker of social difference in Malaysia. Indeed, Balibar's theorising of a 'new racism' that is not premised on biological essentialism but 'the insurmountability of cultural differences'[39] helps illuminate the Malaysian context of racialisation.

Investigative modalities of visibility and invisibility

Although I have argued that the discourse of racialisation in Malaysia does not attribute difference to the biological referent, the latter is never completely absent. The category of race, which by received definition is a visible phenomenon, means also that racial difference is visually, and therefore physically, recognisable. Indeed, the notion of racial difference being located in the sphere of visible signs of difference, and therefore as evidence of cultural otherness, does play a factor in the positioning of 'Chinese', 'Indian' and 'Other' categories in relation to the MCIO classificatory grid that undergirds multiracialism. The modes of visibility that function as the most obvious, 'natural' and 'objective' markers of difference — for example, those with this skin colour, who speak this language, worship this way, wear this style of dress or adornment, dance or sing or perform music this way — operate as racialised protocols and conventions for identification and recognition. Importantly, however, these distinguishing markers of identification can also become signifiers of disidentification and misrecognition that work to exclude communities from the cultural domain of Malaysian national life.

To provide one illustration of how invisibility operates as part of racialisation processes: during the heightened 'national culture' debates of the 1970s, the lion dance, recognisable as an iconic 'Chinese' cultural art form as it is especially associated with the Lunar New Year celebrations, was treated as a visible signifier of (multi)cultural excess and diasporic alterity that had to be tamed and domesticated

38 Omi and Winant, *Racial formation in the United States*, 2nd edn, pp. 61–2 (italics in original).
39 Balibar, 'Is there a "neo-racism"?', p. 21.

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to avoid fuelling racial tensions and resentments. It was thus relegated to the domain of cultural invisibility; banned from being performed in public from 1982 onwards, it was rendered materially out of sight. The then Minister of Home Affairs had also declared that the lion dance and its musical instruments such as the cymbals, drums, and firecrackers be replaced by a 'tiger dance' accompanied by the gong, flute, *tabla*, or *gamelan*; the tiger being a creature of the Malaysian jungle and therefore intrinsic to the dominant ethnic community's folklore and mythology, was set up in opposition to the 'foreign' lion, with its origins elsewhere and therefore outside of national culture. What made the ban doubly consternating to the Chinese community was that just a few years before, in 1974, a lion dance had been part of the welcoming ceremony for then prime minister Tun Razak upon his return from a historic meeting in China with Mao Zedong that marked new diplomatic relations between the two nation-states. So significant was this trip and the Chinese community's support behind Razak's Barisan Nasional's landslide electoral victory that year[40] that several political leaders and cultural organisations had begun talking of having the lion dance recognised as an official part of Malaysian national culture.[41]

It was only in the 1990s, a decade characterised by the rise of the discourses of economic globalisation and neoliberal multiculturalism, that the state, in moving to harness the power of the must-see 'spectacle' and 'performance' of racial difference to attract the global tourist gaze and foreign investment flows, lifted the ban and brought the 'lion' back into visibility.

However, it is important to note, as novelist Salman Rushdie reminds us in his writings on the emancipatory possibilities, but also precarities, of diaspora, that minority ethnic communities and their cultural practices can be 'visible but unseen'.[42] The point he makes here is that though present materially or physically in the social sphere, they are rendered invisible in the national imaginary. The optic-economies of race and differentiation — of racialised groups being visible-yet-unseen — and their role in the functioning of state power have, since 2004, also been at work in the state's tourism agenda. Foremost among these initiatives is the 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' series of global television and print advertisements launched by the Ministry of Tourism as part of its 'Visit Malaysia 2020' campaign. The corporeal grammar of racialisation embedded in the advertisements makes visible and representable — through publicly visible and distinguishable racial markers such as skin colour, facial features, and other non-phenotypical attributes such as speech patterns, modes of dress, jewellery, and behaviour patterns or activities — the 'race' of the four smiling young women in sarong kebaya ('Malay'), cheongsam ('Chinese'), saree ('Indian') and ceremonial headdress ('Other'). Emblematic of 'Malaysia, Truly Asia', the women are interpellated into assuming performative positions as 'Malays', 'Chinese', 'Indians', 'Iban', or 'Melanau' eating, dancing, and singing together — but also as racially and culturally distinct from one another. Their 'togetherness-in-apartness' — of being seen

40 Loh Kok Wah Francis, Phang Chung Nyap and Johan Saravanamuttu, *The Chinese community and Malaysia–China ties: Elite perspectives* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1981), pp. 27–33.

41 For further details, see Amarjit Kaur and Ian Metcalfe, eds, *The shaping of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and Sharon A. Carstens, *Histories, cultures, identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese worlds* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2005).

42 Salman Rushdie, *The satanic verses* (London: Vintage, 1988).

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together yet also as apart — is a fundamental tenet of Malaysian multiracialism. The meanings of race encoded in such economies of visibility mobilise the pluralist conception of society as groups 'living side by side but separately within the same political unit'.[43] The measurable, economic impetus behind this racialised ensemble clearly and unequivocally demarcates (and commodifies and packages) the bodies on display as 'Chinese' or 'Indian' or 'Malay'. These visible and readily recognisable iterations of race function discursively, conceptually, and epistemologically to prop up nationalist continuities and constancies and stabilise meaning about race and difference.

Furthermore, the particular 'mode of seeing' that the advertisements elicit, that is how and why we 'see' race as we do, positions the viewer in a certain relationship to hegemonic meaning by reinforcing preconceived notions of what each racial group looks like, and in doing so racial stereotypes and assumptions are effectively normalised. Minority ethnic communities are thus further racialised by being assigned already racialised characteristics. That is to say, any other way of 'seeing' race is rendered unimaginable. By fixing as 'fact' the dominant meanings of race, nation, and culture, such representations advance the disciplinary work of racialisation.

In short, multiracialism derives its conceptual salience from the outdated racial formation undergirded by the pluralist social trope of 'togetherness-in-apartness', which constructs cultures as closed, discrete, and separate entities unto themselves, locked in their own silos — untouched and unaltered by one another's difference. The modalities of visibility and invisibility embedded in such myths of race dismiss, deny, or disregard those uniquely local conjunctions of social life and experience in Malaysia that are there to be discerned as a series of deracialised solidarities and shared struggles.

Indeed, changes introduced into society by the historical reconstitution of identities have given rise to new identities 'in the becoming' and to the emergence of new affinities and loyalties. Thus the generational descendants of colonial-era Chinese and Indian immigrants, to different extents and in various ways, have come to interact culturally with each other and with the dominant culture and to also culturally identify as Malaysian (rather than as 'Chinese' or 'Indian', and so on). However, multiracial governmentality is still predicated on the pluralist conception of social groups as bound together by little other than their economic needs or marketplace exchange, or, to use Furnivall's idiom, by their 'mixing but not combining'.[44] Although such pluralist knowledge claims would have constituted a distorted or oversimplified description of precolonial and early colonial societies, whose cultural experience was constituted by contact, cosmopolitanism, and creolisation,[45] the plural society framework is an even greater failure of the imagination when carried over into postcolonial contexts and to account for the new and insistent realities that have developed in these contexts.

Practices of boundary-crossing in everyday life and in the realm of the arts — such as a Malay Odissi dancer, or an ethnic Indian in Malay court ensemble dancing the *joget gamelan*, or an ethnic Chinese speaking Tamil fluently or reciting poetry in

43 Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice*, p. 304.
44 Ibid., p. 304.
45 See, for instance, Sharmani Patricia Gabriel and Fernando Rosa, ed., *Cosmopolitan Asia: Littoral epistemologies of the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2015).

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Malay — would be acts of profound transgression for state multiracialism and its regulatory norms, for they, at an ocular level, subvert its racialising procedures. These people-driven 'ways of being seen', which by 'performing' race in active and dialogic ways can help shift conceptions of race in normative politics and pedagogical frameworks, are eschewed by the state and its conduits of knowledge production and transmission. Such images of representational undecidability, however, attest to the political possibilities that become newly imaginable if the conceptual role played by race as a dialogic construction is allowed to initiate new conversations about diaspora and indigeneity, race and nation.

As sites of cultural production and the performative interplay and negotiation between race as an expression of the people and race as an imposition on the people, a people-directed multiculturalism is also to be discerned in literature,[46] film,[47] the arts,[48] media and popular culture,[49] popular music,[50] everyday youth culture,[51] and social spaces and movements. Such sites of interaction are spaces with representative value as they epitomise the creativity and vibrancy of the cultural politics and positionalities that can emerge as a positive outcome of the enmeshing of the different forms of power that characterise state–society relations. They attest to the fact that though unrelenting, the state's racialising forces can never be definitive. They also have implications for politics as they are evidence of a new system of cultural signification coming into being.

It would be relevant in this context to recall *Bangsa Malaysia* ('Malaysian Race') announced by Mahathir in 1990, during his first term as prime minister from 1981–2003. Outlining the qualities that would constitute a reimagined basis for nationhood, Mahathir defined Bangsa Malaysia as a national identification project for all Malaysians, not merely through their legitimation by the law (that is, through normative citizenship) but through an emphasis on their common bonding experiences and shared conceptions of nationness — 'by being able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) and accept the Constitution'. The call was for the people to see themselves as 'Malaysian', rather than as 'Chinese' or 'Malay' or 'Indian' — that is, as belonging first to a larger racial-national body, one with the potential to supersede and displace the divisions and discord worked into MCIO race identities. Although Mahathir's administration did not go on to provide clear policy content and direction for Bangsa Malaysia, after decades of mobilising a national identity by looking to an ossified past to assert a language of racial separateness and indigeneity, which merely worked to institutionalise the

46 Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, 'Translating Bangsa Malaysia', *Critical Asian Studies* 43, 3 (2011): 349–72.

47 Adil Johan, *Cosmopolitan intimacies: Malay film music of the independent era* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018).

48 Adil Johan, 'Cosmopolitan intimacies in Malay performing arts and literature: An introduction', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 40, 4 (2019): 469–73.

49 Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'Kopitiam: Discursive cosmopolitan spaces and national identity in Malaysian culture and media', in *Everyday multiculturalism*, ed. Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 87–104.

50 Sumit Mandal, 'Indianness in Malaysia: Between racialized representations and the cultural politics of popular music', *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 22, 2 (2007): 46–67.

51 Anita Harris and Alan Han, '1Malaysia? Young people and everyday multiculturalism in multiracialized Malaysia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, 5 (2020): 816–34.

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notion of the cultural other within the national, the state appeared to have finally arrived at the brink of a future-oriented narrative for the nation, one that was ready to redefine its cultural aspirations for Malaysians.

This is not to say that Bangsa Malaysia, like the '1Malaysia, People First, Performance Now'[52] policy that succeeded it, was not underwritten by the state's more purposefully driven economic narrative. Indeed, it is undeniable that its primary motivation, as part of Mahathir's *Wawasan 2020* ('Vision 2020') project announced at the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991, was to propel Malaysia toward 'fully developed country' status. Be that as it may, as a narrative of social cohesion articulated by none other than the nation's head of state, Bangsa Malaysia held and still holds profound possibilities for other ways of constructing the national for it turns the very idea of race on its head by explicitly mobilising *bangsa* (race) as an inclusive, nation-forming experience. This is to be contrasted with 1Malaysia, and other state dictums and ideologies, which pivoted on the oft-repeated, banal idea of national unity and muhibbah ('harmony') being attainable through mutual trust and tolerance among the different races in the nation, without making any move to unsettle the prevalent race paradigm. Thus, while 1Malaysia can be construed as the more facile template for national cohesion for taking recourse to pre-constituted MCIO race identities, Bangsa Malaysia signified a new racial meaning for Malaysian identity, one envisioned, even at a rhetorical level, in constructivist terms for offering the possibility of a Malaysianness that transcended the prescriptive principles and norms of racialisation. It is possible to argue that his invocations of 1Malaysia provided new premier Najib Razak the requisite sloganeering to address the nation's long-standing racial fault line — and entice the electoral vote — while distancing himself from the radical transformative potential and implications of its Bangsa Malaysia policy antecedent. Indeed, well aware of the criticisms levelled at Mahathir by nationalist and pro-special rights groups who had charged that Bangsa Malaysia was not 'Malay enough' and violated the special provisions made for Bumiputeras in the NEP and their constitutionally protected special status as well as their entitlements under the racial dictate of 'Malay supremacy', Najib would have trod cautiously when devising an official concept to promote his administration's nation-building project.

Indeed, as a narrative of national community that summons race in non-quantitative, non-oppositional, and non-hierarchical ways — in terms of the inter-subjective, human experience of what Weheliye resonantly acknowledges as 'the flesh', an active constellation of lived experiences, emotions, hopes, dreams, desires, intuitions, and disseminated practices — rather than as an assemblage of quantifiable, objectified, and ossified — 'Malaysia, Truly Asia'— raced 'bodies', Bangsa Malaysia offers a discursive and epistemic intervention in the structural and conceptual rigidities of the MCIO paradigm. A space of 'fleshly surplus', Bangsa Malaysia repudiates multiracialism by splitting the racial and cultural boundaries so necessary for institutionally em*bodied* meanings of 'Malay', 'Chinese' and 'Indian' identities. This split-space of racial undecidability, the 'zone of occult instability where the people

52 1Malaysia (pronounced One Malaysia in English, Satu Malaysia in Malay) was introduced in 2009 during Najib Razak's premiership as 'a concept that encapsulates the very idea of unity in diversity, and […] the importance of national unity regardless of race, background, or religious belief' (1Malaysia website, now defunct).

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dwell',[53] is the realm of an ongoing, open-ended, and processual (as opposed to procedural) national culture in which absolute and hierarchised racial difference is invisibilised. By eluding the politics of polarity, this transformative process — akin to what Bhabha cogently describes as a 'national, antinationalist'[54] space — is also a new system of signification where equal membership in the cultural realm of the nation/al is made possible. This discursive, epistemic, and ideological terrain of unclassifiable, entangled difference calls up the multivocality of an 'actually existing multiculturalism'[55] as the complex sign of social life. The value of the explanatory meaning that derives from this way of articulating Bangsa Malaysia — that race is produced rather than an essence — is to shift the significatory possibilities of race so as to transform the dominant terms and naturalised assertions by which Malaysians are 'seen', recognised, and represented.

Although talk of Bangsa Malaysia as a public policy has faded into near obscurity and, for reasons of political expediency, was not resurrected by Mahathir himself during his second tenure as prime minister from 2018 to 2020 for a *Malaysia Baru* ('New Malaysia') that had voted him into power, its formulation in the rapidly globalising and more open climate of the early 1990s does suggest that the state was attuned to the kinds of social transitions and aspirations on the ground that necessitated a shift in policy from the old pluralist discourse to a new racial taxonomy for national identity.

Toward imaginative futures?

My main argument in this article has been that racialised modalities of visibility and difference in the national sphere render invisible the everyday entanglements of race that disrupt the neat categories of 'Malay', Chinese' and 'Indian' in the cultural sphere of the nation. Such cross-overs and solidarities signify transitions and transformations that pose a challenging corrective to the myths of race, nation, and culture persistently deployed by multiracialism. The racialised paradigm embedded in MCIO-multiculturalism, in concealing or erasing these transformations, works to reinforce existing cultural hierarchies and their exclusions and evasions, and preempts any need on the part of the state to redress its own racism. That is, the state seeks out distinguishing markers of difference in its racialised representations of Malaysianness and then uses these images to augment its discourses of social and cultural incompatibility. To put it differently, racial economies of visibility and invisibility serve to draw attention to the biological signifier of difference between communities rather than to their emergent cultural referent.

This lack of congruence between state multiculturalism, which I have argued is more aptly conceived as multiracialism, and everyday multiculturalism in the discursive terrain suggests two key points for reflection. One, that state multiculturalism as a racialised tool of governmentality based on the (m)other-ing tyranny of diaspora not

53 Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 168.
54 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Cultural diversity and cultural differences', *The post-colonial studies reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 209.
55 Carl-Ulrik Schierup, 'A European dilemma: Myrdal, the American creed, and EU Europe', Migration Papers no. 9, Danish Centre for Migration and Ethnic Studies (Esbjerg: South Jutland University Press, 1996).

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only effaces the deracialised contiguity of the practices and solidarities of social life but also elides their conceptual significance and relevance. And, second, it is imperative that the government pursues equality of citizenship and its corollary, the elimination of 'racial privilege', which in Malaysia goes by the intriguing concept of 'special rights' for citizen-subjects of Malay ethnicity, in its policies and discourses so as to begin to create the conditions that can be liberatory for an alternative construction of the national.

The Pakatan Harapan alliance, which defeated the sixty-year uninterrupted incumbency of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in the general election of May 2018, had heralded a renewed democracy and a reformist government, sparking explosive effects, including the hope for an equitable and inclusive nation for all Malaysians. However, that government collapsed in late February 2020, after just 22 months in power, after losing its majority in parliament due to a series of defections and backroom deals. Then new prime minister Muhyiddin, as president of Bersatu, had entered into a fragile alliance with UMNO and the Islamist party, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), along with a splinter group from PKR (People's Justice Party) and the GBS (Sarawak Party Alliance). Underpinned by Malay-Muslim dominance, the Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance) government appeared set to entrench 'Malay primacy' through policies that strengthened the racialised notion of Malay 'special rights' in Malaysia. Muhyiddin himself had once courted controversy by saying that he was 'Malay first' rather than 'Malaysian first'. It is not surprising that this stance endeared him to his party, Bersatu, the full name of which is Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia. The trope of indigeneity (*pribumi*) as the name of choice for a new political party is not only ill-advised, but also flies in the face of a social landscape that is desirous of moving away from racialised politics and the deleterious as well as iniquitous applications to which the concept of indigeneity has been put. The stresses and strains caused to the nation's economic life by a resurgent wave of Covid-19 had also provided the justification for the state to place the nation under an Emergency ordinance.[56] As I write this, the coronavirus pandemic looks to be improving in the country, with a decreasing number of daily infections, but the political terrain is still in flux and continues to be characterised by infighting, opportunism, and patronage politics. After seventeen months in power, Muhyiddin was forced to resign as prime minister in August 2021 amidst growing tensions within his ruling political coalition and after UMNO, the largest party in the coalition and a key ally, withdrew its support. The appointment of Ismail Sabri Yaakob, an UMNO vice-president who was deputy prime minister in Muhyiddin's government, as Malaysia's ninth prime minister essentially suggests a continuation of the previous administration.[57] It also spells the accession again to

56 On 12 Jan. 2021, the King exercised his powers under Clause (1) of Article 150 of the Federal Constitution to issue a Proclamation of Emergency throughout Malaysia from 11 Jan. 2021 to 1 Aug. 2021. Analysts believed that this was the result of a move by the prime minister to safeguard his embattled position as the measure meant that parliament and state assemblies would not sit, and there would be no elections. The Emergency Ordinance was revoked on 21 July 2021.

57 In his inaugural speech as prime minister on 22 Aug. 2021, Ismail Sabri introduced the policy of *Keluarga Malaysia* ('Malaysian Family') as an 'inclusive concept that cuts across religious, ethnic and racial boundaries and invites Malaysians to come together as a unified family' (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 'Keluarga Malaysia', https://www.pmo.gov.my/keluarga-malaysia-2/). Keluarga

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national power and leadership of the state's main 'racialiser' — UMNO, several of whose leaders are now also mired in corruption charges.

What will this new — 'Malay first' — government,[58] like its predecessor, one neither democratically mandated by the electorate nor endorsed in parliament, mean for Malaysia's institutional and governance reforms, some of which were already under way at the time of the fall of the 'people's government' of Pakatan Harapan? And, more importantly, what does it presage for Bangsa Malaysia, as a national metaphor, or fantasy, of deracialisation, or for any other narrative of imagined community unmarked by (multi)racialised governmentality? Indeed, the return to power of UMNO, the dominant constituent of the BN coalition and the longest-governing political party in the country, portends a renewed focus on racialisation in the state's power structures and discourses. At the time of writing, the new government has just launched, in late October 2021, the National Cultural Policy 2021 (or 'Daken 2021', an abbreviation for 'Dasar Kebudayaan Negara 2021') to boost its efforts to create a cultural sector that is in keeping with the principles of inclusivity and togetherness propounded in prime minister Ismail Sabri's Keluarga Malaysia concept.[59] The focus, however, is on the development of the cultural sector without an understanding of the connections between the cultural sector and wider society. Again also, the emphasis is on the economic benefits of 'culture' and not on the nation's cultural and creative sectors as a strategic resource for social cohesion. What is especially disturbing, however, is not only the prime minister's reference and recourse to 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' as a successful model for Malaysian multiculturalism but also his declaration that NCP 2021 is to be a continuation of NCP 1971, further revealing the new government's failure, or reluctance, to re-examine the relevance for the Malaysia of today a national policy that had already provoked heavy criticism for denying the complex cultural realities of fifty years ago.

Despite the failure of the state to articulate a secure foundation for the nation as well as the absence of a credible and representative political opposition, and irrespective of the language of economics that continues to be prioritised by the state as the binding or determining force of social life, possibilities for the willed unseeing of race as a marker of absolute or negative differentiation can never be excised from the nation's cultural imagination. Indeed, the cultural work performed by the general elections as a rite of participation in the public sphere attests to the agency of the Malaysian electorate. The rising constituency of youth groups and the energy and

Malaysia can rightly be dismissed as another state shibboleth (see also Sabri's role in the setting up of a 'Malay traders-only' mall, below).

58 In 2015, Ismail Sabri, then Minister of Rural and Regional Development, mooted setting up a 'Malay-only' electronics mall in Kuala Lumpur — with a target of '100% of Malay traders' — to rival the popular Plaza Low Yat, whose retailers are mostly ethnic Chinese. This idea and the establishment of 'Mara Digital Mall' by the 'Malay-empowerment' agency, MARA, followed an incident involving the theft of a mobile phone from a kiosk in Low Yat by an unemployed youth. When the storekeepers turned the youth, an ethnic Malay, over to the police, a group of young men carried out a politically-instigated attack on the store, hurling racist epithets. An economic and class issue, the 'Low Yat riots' were racialised as an attack on 'Malay supremacy'.

59 Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 'Teks Ucapan Pelancaran Dasar Kebudayaan Negara 2021 (Daken 2021)', 26 Oct, 2021; https://www.pmo.gov.my/2021/10/teks-ucapan-majlis-pelancaran-dasar-kebudayaan-negara-2021-daken-2021/.

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interrogative spirit of the informed and educated middle-class, especially in the urban centres, coupled with a strong social movement based on robust civil society engagements, exemplify the personal and collective practices, experiences, desires, imaginings, and resilience of people-directed processes that are important drivers of social change.

The Ubah ('Change') social movement galvanised for the general elections of 2013 had mainly comprised young, including middle-class ethnic Malay, voters who were propelled to action by the rallying cry for change and the vision of a new kind of government. A rousing catchphrase used in this campaign by the opposition coalition was *Ini Kalilah!*[60] ('This is the time!), signalling that the time had come to put an end to the racially polarising ways of the Barisan Nasional and to vote in a new and more inclusive government. The Bersih ('Clean') movement, initiated by opposition political parties and nongovernmental organisations in 2005 and later spearheaded by civil society leaders, inspired a series of street protests and rallies for 'clean and fair elections' from 2007 to 2016 based on a deracialised collective action. More recent developments that have taken place irrespective of the distinguishing marks of 'race' include the Undi18 ('Vote18') movement. Starting out as a student movement, Undi18 successfully advocated in 2019 for the amendment of Article 119 (1) of the Federal Constitution to lower the minimum voting age in Malaysia from 21 to 18 years old. The #Lawan ('Fight') protest of July 2021 was again spearheaded by young activists of various ethnicities who had come together to demand Muhyiddin's resignation as prime minister over his government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Driven by strategic and innovative thinking facilitated by social media platforms and a digitalised environment, these street-level initiatives and civil society configurations have emanated from shared spaces built on practices of 'neighbourliness' — solidarity, interconnectedness, and conviviality — across racial divides and boundaries, dismantling dominant knowledge claims and representations of Malaysian society.

Not only social movements, but also other conduits of dissemination and deracialisation in the cultural realms of experience and affect — literature, theatre, music, dance, art — articulate alternative narratives of cultural life and political living and in so doing participate in doing transformative political work. As important as the work of arts activists and practitioners in the struggle to open up spaces from which positions can be taken up to imagine society other than it is is the work of scholars of literature and the arts. The interpretation of texts is both an act of agency and an act of the imagination to read 'against the grain' and resist prescriptions and procedures, instrumentality and institutionalisation. Humanities knowledge, although (or, more precisely, because) it may advance an alternative or utopian conception of society, is profoundly grounded in social context, discourse, and struggle.

These on-the-ground processes, along with their affective dimensions, aspirational thinking, transgressive positionalities, 'neighbourly' negotiations, and forms of alternative knowledge production, constitute a field of force with the representative

60 This tagline also inspired the title of the 2018 film *Rise: Ini kalilah* (Saw Teong Hin, Nik Amir Mustapha and MS Prem Nath, WebTV Asia), which explores the lives of six individuals and the challenges they face in the lead up to the 'historic' 2018 elections.

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power to decentre old formations and imagine new interpretative codes and racial meanings. They are Bangsa Malaysia in praxis, themselves 'a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful'.[61]

61 Judith Butler, 'Endangered/endangering: Schematic racism and white paranoia', in *Reading Rodney King, reading urban uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 17.

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