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# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SOMEWHERE BETWEEN PANTUN AND PANTOUM&lt;br&gt;<em>The Malay World Enters the Francophone Imagination</em></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ISLAND AND ARCHIPELAGO IN THE POETRY OF MUHAMMAD HAJI SALLEH AND EDOUARD GLISSANT</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF THE POSTCOLONIAL WORLD&lt;br&gt;<em>Contemporary Malay Mantera and René Depestre’s Poème mystère vaudou</em></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining Voodoo, <em>Adat</em> and <em>Mantera</em></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postcolonial Literary Recreations: the Poème mystère vaudou and the Mantera</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Animism is a Humanism</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>COMING FULL CIRCLE&lt;br&gt;<em>Frantz Fanon and the Encounter Between Caribbean and Nusantara</em></td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Romantic Exception</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysian Créolité in <em>Sepet</em></td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From Exotification to Relation: the Malaysia/Algeria connection</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EPILOGUE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>BIBLIOGRAPHY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Introduction

Arguably the most significant intervention of postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies has been to reveal the ways in which the historical narratives and cultural production of regions formerly under the domination of imperial Europe have been (mis-)shaped by their experience as colonial subjects. The editors of *The Empire Writes Back*, one of the first major attempts at a comprehensive introduction to postcolonial theory, use the term postcolonial to cover “all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day… because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.”¹ Beyond their distinctive regional characteristics and concerns, the book argues, all postcolonial literatures “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of their imperial center” (2). There is much truth to this statement, but one can take exception to such a generalization by noting that not every

aspect of “the form” of each postcolonial society is shaped equally, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, by the experience of colonialism.

This thesis questions the applicability of this claim over the entire post/colonial world through a comparative reading of postcolonial cultural production from the Francophone Caribbean and the Malay Nusantara. While there is in my view substantial evidence that the shared experience of colonization places the Francophone Caribbean and the Malay Nusantara in a kind of imaginative sympathy, I find the description of postcolonial literatures’ modus operandi given in *The Empire Writes Back* deficient. My comparative reading corroborates the first half of the statement; the European colonial powers played a leading role in the economic and political problems or asymmetries confronting the contemporary Francophone Caribbean and Malay Nusantara, and the cultural production of these regions naturally responds to these issues by analyzing policies introduced in the colonial period which have since had so decisive an influence on developments in these regions. Given the relative lack of historical contact between the French/Francophone and Malay worlds, the shared experience of European colonialism helps to explain the intriguing similarities between not only their content but their forms, tone and modes of expression. However, because a single phrase like “European colonialism” obscures the fact that the British and French colonized regions with an extremely

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2 I use ‘Nusantara’ to refer to what anglophone area specialists too casually call the “Malay world,” “Malay Peninsula” or “Malay archipelago.” My thesis will engage critically the terminological confusion created by the Anglophone use of “world,” and the notions of unity and wholeness it connotes; I will argue that “archipelagic” identity is a more apposite term. Avoiding “Malay world,” I opt to use Nusantara to assert that the choice of the Malay writer to write in his ‘native’ Malay tongue affirms his/her sense of membership within a transnational Malay community that transcends the boundaries of the Southeast Asian nation-states of Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. A more extensive etymology of the term ‘Nusantara’ and overview of Nusantara geography will be provided in Chapter 2.
diverse range of pre-colonial cultures, and went on to take divergent approaches in their colonial administration of these regions, so too must the superficial similarities between the postcolonial literatures studied here be interrogated.

The Malay poetry of the postcolonial Malaysian writer and intellectual Muhammad Haji Salleh shows that postcolonial identity does not necessarily assert itself by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, while the Martiniquan poet, novelist and theorist Edouard Glissant’s meditations on Caribbean and European “archipelization” also seek to surpass such a dialectical confrontation by de-centering postcolonial theory from the polarized perspectives of the imperial colonizer and the colonized. When similar strategies are deployed by postcolonial writers from the Francophone Caribbean and the Nusantara, for instance the emphasis on magico-religious traditions of voodoo and Malay adat in defiance of European notions of religious faith and piety, the objectives and repercussions of these writers’ work will vary considerably owing to the differences in both the pre- and postcolonial characters of the two regions.

Chapter 1 outlines the initial, untidy stages of the encounter between the Francophone and Malay imaginative landscapes from a historical and literary perspective in order to illustrate how unlikely the Francophone Caribbean and the Malay Nusantara are as bedfellows. The European colonial powers that left the most significant impact on the current sociopolitical and economic complexion of the countries of the Nusantara were not the French but the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in Singapore and Malaysia (then a single entity known as Malaya) as well as Brunei and Borneo. Yet the enigmas of Malay
culture and subjecthood—exotically tropical yet (ambiguously) Muslim—have piqued the interest of French and Francophone writers and artists since the 18th century proponents of French Orientalism cast their net across the globe in search of new and fantastic stories to tell. The economic, technological and cultural disparity between the Francophone and Malay lifestyles at this time gives the impression in these early appearances of the Nusantara in Francophone literature of an unbridgeable chasm; the undeniably Western gaze locking the Nusantara in objectification. In the postcolonial 21st century however, the unexpected and thought-provoking appearance of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) Yasmin Ahmad’s film *Sepet* (2004) announces an unprecedented horizontality in Francophone-Malay interaction.

Language as an instrument of imperial domination is a key site of discursive intervention. By installing a standard version of the metropolitan language, English or French, the colonial regimes marginalized native languages in their own homelands, leading to their adulteration or to the biased view of indigenous idioms as symptoms of a more primitive and insular mentality. Edouard Glissant expresses the linguistic situation of the colonial French Caribbean in his groundbreaking study of Caribbean identity in *Le discours antillais* (1981): “The official language, French, is not the people’s language. This is why we, the elite, speak it so correctly.” A feature common to postcolonial writing, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, is that the “language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant

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European culture” (8). This description seems especially pertinent with regards to their relationship of Francophone Caribbean artists, intellectuals and theorists with the French language.

This assumes, however, that power derives from a single source: the colonizer’s language and, by implication, the colonizer’s culture. Fighting back against the colonial power presupposes that language as a common frame of reference is necessary for the process of “writing back” to occur. A common textual strategy in postcolonial literature is to rip apart, attack and re-appropriate the colonizer’s language as an act of rebellion, but writing or producing in Malay represents an alternative postcolonial strategy that seeks to reclaim a Malay ontology by rejecting altogether the discursive fiats imposed by the English language. In Chapter 4, I discuss the suggestion implicit in the film Sepet that the Malay subject can only explain the concept of colonialism in English to a certain extent, but there is a point where the English language fails and the protagonist Orked has to resort to hand gestures and Malays word for the colonizer (penjajah) and colonized (dijajah).

Whereas the Southeast Asian countries of the Malay Nusantara all broke free or were released from colonial empires, the continued designation of Guadeloupe and Martinique as départements d’Outre-mer of the French state, which accords them a constitutional status identical to that of the metropolitan départements of Paris or Val-de-Marne, gives added edge to the tension between postcolonial nation and imperial-colonial power. Some of the most important Francophone Caribbean intellectuals to be discussed in this thesis—Aimé Césaire,
Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant—wrote not after postcolonial independence but from within the grip and embrace of the colonial state and language. Their work troubles the split between colonial power and colonial subject—and, by implication, between colonial ideology and postcolonial ideology—in light of the ostensible resolution of this dichotomy within a shared system of cultural values that transcends racial and religious lines. Glissant points out that for black Caribbeans in particular, the desire to assert their difference from the assumptions of the imperial center co-existed and conflicted with another underlying desire to prove that they too are worthy inheritors of the same French literary and cultural tradition emanating from the metropole: the much contested but emotionally resonant ideology of French Republicanism.

Francophone Caribbean art in its initial stages attempted to reject the colonial past as a determining factor of postcolonial Caribbean identity, a predictable response to the emotional and psychological scarring left by the remembrance of slavery’s atrocities and the annihilation of the indigenous Carib populations. In the footsteps of later theorists like Edouard Glissant, however, *The Empire Writes Back* argues that the racial melting pot of the Caribbean offers “unique possibilities for cross-cultural creativity and philosophy unavailable to monocultural societies, or to those which aspire to monoculturalism” (151). Nonetheless, without disputing the fact that the polydialectical condition of the Caribbean has yielded some of the most complex theories on the use and function of language in postcolonial societies, Malay Nusantara literature problematizes the depreciatory connotations of the term “monoculturalism.” By focusing on the
Malay poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh and Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, I attempt to demonstrate the differences between the political consequences of this literary assertion of monoculturalism in the Malay versus, for instance, the South Asian/Indian context.

In addition to contemporary South Asian literature in English, there also exists a considerable body of postcolonial literature in the vernacular languages of the subcontinent which exerts a contrary pull on the ongoing debate over the possibilities of recovering indigenous aesthetic and literary models in an age of heterogeneous and hybrid influences. When we think of societies that aspire to monoculturalism, the ones that come quickest to mind are often cultures that Glissant deems atavistic; that is to say, societies in which “the community takes shape around a Genesis, a creation story in which there is uninterrupted lineage from father to son, with no illegitimacy.” The opposite of these would be composite cultures like those of the Caribbean, which acknowledge their geneses in the clash of multiple and sometimes contradictory atavistic cultures. Nusantara literature reconciles or at least grays this atavistic/composite binary, for while it acknowledges the historically composite constitution of Malay culture, contemporary cultural production in the Malay language has been criticized for focusing too narrowly on Malayness at the expense of multicultural national identities.

Compared to other regions of the world that fell under European colonialism, the South Asian subcontinent’s text-based rather than oral culture

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helped its vernacular literary canons hold their ground against the advance of European languages like English and French. Oral traditions were perceived by the colonial powers as occupying a lower rung on the developmental ladder toward written language; consequently, the long history of written literature and literary scholarship in Sanskrit and Tamil emphasized India’s singularity and value even under the sway of British rule. India is cited in *The Empire Writes Back* as an example of a country where ancient literary traditions form an atypically prominent element of the postcolonial national culture, and indeed where conventions of literary scholarship in the Sanskrit and Tamil languages are sophisticated enough to convincingly contest the hegemony of European tools of analysis. Although the argument that a single theoretical base underlies all South Asian/Indian literature “shares the weaknesses of other national models for decolonizing cultures,” namely the temptation to assert a single thread of filiation to a mythic ‘Indian’ past and disparage the discontinuity represented by British colonialism, the strength of a written literary and theoretical culture in the subcontinent is “so extensive and so rich” (120) that its audacity in confronting accepted tenets of postcolonial criticism of traditional influences is not at all unmerited.

Artists and intellectuals who choose to produce in native or indigenous languages as opposed to the hegemonic European languages of English and French are often trying to assert the paucity of imported critical and generic models in explaining the features of thought and expression distinctive to the indigenous language in question. These circumstances are partially present in the
Introduction

The case of the Malay language in countries that currently make up the historical Nusantara, especially Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. The Malaysian poet and intellectual Muhammad Haji Salleh’s decision to start writing in Malay even though his earliest poetic influences came from his English colonial education echoes the career of the contemporary Indian poet R. Parthasarathy who writes in Tamil, the oldest of the Dravidian languages. Malay had both an oral and written culture before the Dutch and British arrived, but Nusantara writers and thinkers still suffer the dual anxieties that the tradition of Malay literature may be too shallow and the Malay language too inadequate to compete with English (or even Mandarin in the case of Singapore) in economic and political domains.

The aspiration toward monoculturalism for Malays in the Nusantara cannot find reassurance in a history as vast and venerable as India’s, nor is it as easily possible or desirable for Malays to portray their culture as having an uninterrupted ancient lineage. The populations of contemporary South Asia, regardless of caste and religion-based differences and even linguistic differences, evoke a sense of belonging to and pride in a communal Indian civilization whose antiquity and significance are universally acknowledged. In contrast to this self-assurance, positive assertions concerning Malay culture are made with the awareness both of the extent of colonial influence and, perhaps more urgently, against the perceived encroachment of the immigrant Chinese and Indian

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5 Whereas Chinese and Indian classical literatures have textual histories spanning millennia, Malay written literature did not emerge until the Malays consolidated the Jawi script, which adapted the Arabic alphabet for writing the Malay language. The oldest extant artifact with Jawi writing on it is the Terengganu Inscription Stone (Batu Bersurat Terengganu), believed to have been inscribed in 1303, which proclaims Islam as the state religion of Terengganu. Malay written literature is therefore not only far more recent than Indian literatures but also heavily indebted to the Islamic religious tradition brought over to the Nusantara by itinerant Arab Muslim traders and missionaries.
minorities who have the twofold advantage of laying claim to civilizational cultures that occupy a greater space in world history and of enjoying material and political success in the contemporary Nusantara. Literary and political analysts tend to conflate their sympathy for what they regard as uneven treatment of Chinese and Indian minorities in the Nusantara with a willed neglect of the fact that in Southeast Asia today, China and India have immense influence as regional hegemons who threaten economic domination and even recolonization of smaller countries like Vietnam, Singapore or Cambodia. As Chinese and Indian authors from Singapore or Malaysia tout their work as part of the cultural production of global Chinese and Indian diasporas accordingly, the stress on developing Malay national literatures that reference the broader transnational community of the Nusantara is perhaps a response in kind.

By choosing to write in Malay, these artists and intellectuals are sometimes thought to be conducting a futile resistance against modernity and the exigencies of academic criticism, which enables or at least facilitates the journalistic and commercial recognition by Western societies of the literatures of smaller countries. Not only do they condemn themselves to insularity by writing or producing in a language that is less global than English or French, so the critique goes, but Malay Nusantara writers and filmmakers also purposefully ignore the multicultural composition of the Nusantara today in imposing the linguistic and cultural precedence of the Malays over those of other ethnic groups. Indeed, in her survey of the modern Malay novel, Malay studies scholar Virginia Matheson Hooker contends that a postcolonial reading of contemporary Malay literature
“risks obscuring their particularities of style, and could mute the expression of confident Malayness which is an essential element in most of them,”⁶ and ought therefore to be avoided.

If Hooker’s analysis were true, however, I doubt that there would be as much affinity between the Malay and Francophone Caribbean artistic and intellectual imagination as there is. As Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate, the cultural production of the Francophone Caribbean and the Malay Nusantara show some significant and fascinating similarities in the way they reflect upon the salutary instability of creolized identities as well as the unique relationships between past and present that once-colonized regions have to negotiate. The island and the archipelago figure importantly in the postcolonial imagination of both Francophone Caribbean and Malay artists as symbols of an openness and changeability that the density of the continental imagination lacks.

Along with India/South Asia, and especially in Francophone postcolonial theory, the Caribbean is often described as the crucible of the postcolonial condition in general and of the most challenging advances in postcolonial theory in particular; Glissant asserts for instance that the collision and change occurring between the world’s cultures is anticipated in the compacted, high intensity syncretism observable in the Caribbean. In studying contemporary Malay literature and film in the Nusantara, it is important not to dismiss or condescend to the cultural and political work that this postcolonial culture can do simply because it is more resistant to ready notions of créolité and hybridity.

As this thesis shall explore, the Nusantara represents a singular integration of tensions inherent in both the South Asian and Caribbean cases that are paradigmatic in Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial studies respectively by insisting on its priority in the land it deems its own and at the same time acknowledging and celebrating itself as a culture created by the earlier meeting and melding of Indian and Islamic civilizations and cultures. In other words, its resistance to celebrating a hybridizing coexistence with the ever-present and pressing Chinese culture does not lead to a xenophobic celebration of cultural purity, but rather to an embrace of an earlier and by now unthreatening encounter of indigenous Malay, Indic and Islamic cultures that is nostalgically idealized as proof that alternative modalities of interracial and interreligious coexistence, uninhibited by the tensions wrought by colonial policies, were once possible in the Nusantara.

Even though the celebration of postcolonial hybridity that infuses much of contemporary Francophone Caribbean theory today judges “monocultural” or “monolinguual” resistance as inadequate, I am interested in this thesis in exploring how closely Malay cultural production bears out the descriptions and predictions presented by Caribbean artists and intellectuals with a scholarly view to sharpening the analytical tools of postcolonial theory as well as a personal commitment to increasing the visibility of Malay literature on the world stage.
I. Somewhere Between Pantun and Pantoum
The Malay World Enters the Francophone Imagination

The first appearance of the pantun in French literature occurs in the notes to Victor Hugo’s *Les Orientales* (1828), a collection of poems ostensibly dealing with the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire set in an invented Oriental paradise, where the author includes a French translation of a “pantoum ou chant malai, d’une délicieuse originalité”\(^7\) by his friend, the eminent Orientalist Ernest Fouinet. With Charles Baudelaire’s “Harmonie du soir” from the *Fleurs du Mal*, the pantoum, a poetic form of interlocking repeated lines, cemented its place in Western literature. The fragility of the pantun in its francophone scene of reception and its inability to resist its transformation into the pseudo-French invention of the pantoum at the deft hands of poets like Hugo, Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine is symptomatic of the impressionistic conceit of the Malay world in the Francophone imagination, where certain symbols—the *keris*,\(^8\) the Indonesian art of shadow play known as

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\(^8\) The Malay *keris* or *kris* (this latter orthography is preferred in the West) is a generic Malay designation for a dagger. The *keris* is famous for its distinctive undulating blade, although many have straight blades as well. Beyond their use as weapons, *keris* are also believed by Malays to possess spiritual powers or to be vessels of spirits both bad and evil. Legend alleges that some *keris* will stand upright if their real names
wayang kulit\(^9\) or the fiery, jagged silhouette of the Javanese skyline\(^{10}\)—acquire exceptional currency as symbols of Malayness above and beyond the minutiae of empirical facts collected about the Malay countries and people by French explorers in the region. Weaving between a synopsis of the French-Malay historical encounter and a literary analysis of Henri Fauconnier’s Prix Goncourt-prizewinner *Malaisie* (1830), this chapter explores the asymmetries and tensions that have marked this cultural exchange since its tentative beginnings in Renaissance Europe and its crystallization in the 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century as European imperialism shifted into high gear and assumed the administrative shape and form which would come to define the region’s geopolitical landscape and play directly into the postcolonial responses I examine in subsequent chapters.

Richard Winstedt, an English colonial administrator in British Malaya who pioneered Malay studies as an academic discipline and, by pushing for the consolidation of foundational texts in the Malay oral heritage into written volumes, effectively catalyzed the canonization of a ‘Malay literature,’ opined that “no one can estimate the mental scope of the Malay without an understanding of the pantun, the love verse and lampoon of the Indonesian

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\(^{10}\) Notably Aimé Césaire’s proclamation “Moi qui krakatoa” that opens his poem “Corps perdu” in Aimé Césaire, *La Poésie* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 228.
The integrality of the pantun to Malay culture was self-evident enough to have left an impression on Ernest Fouinet, but although the pantoum’s Malay origins were common knowledge among the French poets who took it up, their acknowledgment of the intricacies of the Malay cultural context that produced this poetic form was summary at best and absent at worst.

Regrettably, as this situation is from the comparatist’s perspective, it is in keeping with Victor Hugo’s ultimately superficial, if appreciative, nod to the pantun in his 1829 manuscript. Georges Voisset, a scholar of Malay and Caribbean studies in the 21st century who has undertaken translations of traditional Malay pantuns into French, laments the fact that the popularity of the “the French misunderstanding called pantoum” 12 has inhibited rather than facilitated an interest in the original Malay pantun among Francophone audiences and writers for a number of reasons including the pitfalls of translation and the relatively little attention paid to the development of the relationship between Francophone and Malay worlds. Although their historical interactions or correspondences did not go completely undocumented, records of French expeditions in the region were sporadic and unsystematic, yielding the impression of an encounter almost chimerical in nature. In tracing the evolution of the Malay world in French literature, the paradigm shift that occurred between Hugo’s glancing contact with the pantun and the more probing approaches of

Fauconnier and Voisset in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century is an intriguing one, revealing the complexity of the relationship between pantun and pantoum.

The renaming of the pantun as “pantoum” results from a series of orthographical corruptions (pantun $\rightarrow$ pantoun $\rightarrow$ pantoum) and mirrors the circumstances of the pantun’s import into the French language and the consequent reconfiguration of the genre’s original criteria to reflect Western principles of literariness. The French pantoum is the offspring of the pantun and the villanelle, retaining the former’s allusiveness and symbolism and the latter’s obsessively repetitive, cyclical effect. A standard French pantoum is composed of a series of quatrains, wherein the second and fourth lines of each stanza are repeated as the first and third lines of the next. In the final stanza, the first and third lines are the second and fourth of the penultimate, the second line is the third line of the first stanza and the fourth line is the first line of the poem. The challenge of this form is to evoke different meanings—by changing punctuation and by punning or recontextualization—each time a line is repeated even though the words themselves remain unchanged.\textsuperscript{13} The most telling aspect of definitions of the pantoum is their emphasis on the genre’s formal traits, such that a pantoum’s authenticity is judged on the basis of its adherence to the prescribed meter and abab rhyme scheme.

In contrast, explanations of the Malay pantun usually begin with and emphasize the poem’s underlying principle and imagery. The pantun aspires to encompass in its brevity the cartography and cosmology of the Malay world.

According to Muhammad Haji Salleh, one of Malaysia’s most eminent bilingual writers and a National Poet Laureate, the earliest pantun took the form of the couplet. Two is the minimum number of lines necessary for the basic idea of the pantun, namely the Malay belief that the world has two dimensions: the natural world and one’s own human world, with the former acting as an illuminative mirror for the latter. This split is reflected in the two complementary but discrete lines of the couplet. An example of the pantun couplet (*pantun dua kerat*) is:

Dahulu parang sekarang besi  
Dahulu sayang sekarang benci  
As knife is now lead  
So love is now hate

As the pantun’s form and practitioners matured, the couplet’s brevity proved a limitation to the possibilities of light satire, multiplicity of meaning and the play of metaphor and sound. For this reason, the pantun quatrain (*pantun empat kerat*) became the preferred and perfected form among Malays. In this quatrain form, the first two lines called the *pembayang* describe some phenomenon found in the natural world while the poem’s core commentary is communicated in its last two lines. Having two lines with which to lay out the introductory metaphor allows the poet to tease the reader/listener by drawing out the description and leaving the direction of the metaphor uncertain.14

Dissecting the pantun simply as a poetic form, as one might the Petrarchan sonnet or English ballad, stops short of penetrating the significance of the pantun in Malay cultural practice. The pantun is considered quintessentially Malay not simply as a form consigned to the rarefied realm of the literary but one that is

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closely integrated into communal rituals of courtship and nuptial ceremonies. Malay cultural values are policed and maintained through an unwritten code of rules of speech. Except among good friends, Malay speakers use the first-person pronoun ‘I’ with relatively little frequency in daily conversation. This has become less true especially among the youth in cosmopolitan Singapore and the more urban areas of Malaysia, but even then their utterance of the pronoun “Aku” is a self-conscious defiance of the boundaries of what is considered acceptable speech. The preferred style of Malay discourse, shaped by the language of the royal court and the aristocratic class, emphasizes restraint and refinement. In any social interaction where an age difference exists among participants, the younger person usually refers to him- or herself by name as a sign of deference in lieu of using the first-person pronoun. The form of the pantun mirrors this linguistic predilection for indirectness, as illustrated by the following pantun:

Hilang dadu di dalam dadih,  
Dadih bercampur minyak lada.  
Hilang malu kerana kasih,  
Rindu hati bercampur gila.  

Within the curds the dice are lost,  
Sweet curds with oil of pepper fixed.  
Fond love my sense of shame has lost,  
For love was e’er with madness mixed.  

According to Asmah (1992: 179), the first two lines represent the phatic communication, the nonreferential use of language intended to create a mood of sociability rather than to communicate information. However, most practicing

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poets insist on a stricter relationship between the two halves of the pantun, claiming that the pembayang serves more than an ornamental function and in fact symbolically anticipates the pantun’s actual message. Although the first image in and of itself may not specifically allude to a condition of romantic relationship, in the context of the poem as a whole it is quite obvious that the anonymous author is comparing a love that has been mingled with ‘madness’ to the tainting of sweet curds by the addition of spicy oil. The dice (dadu), possibly chosen for the consonance of dadu and dadih, is also evocative of the gamble one takes on love and the unpredictability of when and with whom we fall in love. This logic of euphemism is suppressed or understated in the Francophone pantoum which, since the work of its earliest practitioners like Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, has tended to emphasize the rhythm of repetition and refrain over the form’s semantic operations.

Fauconnier writes, “All poetry is untranslatable, but in the translation of a pantun it is not merely the rhythm, the rhyme and the assonances that are lost. It is the play on words, the equivocations, the tenuous allusions, that constitute their special charm for the Malays.”¹⁶ More specifically, the contrast between the delicate equivocations of the pantun and its structural formality reflects the aforementioned Malay predilection for indirectness and impersonality in their language behavior. Voisset’s work translating Malay pantuns into French leads him to ask whether pantun is poetry. Without an awareness of how embedded various pantun have come to be in quotidian Malay speech, this question seems

¹⁶ The Soul of Malaya, 82.
ridiculous. Yet Fauconnier poses a virtually identical question in *Malaisie*, though his formulation is more specific than Voisset’s.

Lescale, the French protagonist of *Malaisie*, is filled with bewilderment as he listens to an apparently nonsensical conversation between two Malay men on the subject of a girl whom one of the men suspects is merely leading him on.

Osman, with downcast eyes, but with assurance: “Where do the leeches come from?”
And he sighs.
Mat shakes his head reflectively: “The hook is broken.”
Osman protests: “Would a lamp be lit?”
And Mat answers with a cruel laugh: “The sugar-cane on the opposite bank is very sweet…”  

This Malay dialogue, Lescale realizes, is unintelligible without prior knowledge of the pantun in which the sugar-cane of the opposite bank symbolizes trickery or delusion. The men use these metaphors without any consciousness of being metaphorical; these phrases are as ordinary and natural to them as figures of speech like “falling in love” would be to an English speaker. Lescale also describes their conversation, full of these poetic images drawn from pantuns that make up the repository of Malay cultural references, as a “game of leap-frog between the concrete and the abstract in which the players constantly change places, and our anxiety to translate clearly, breaking the impulse of ideas,

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17 *The Soul of Malaya*, 125.
18 See the second note of Appendix 1.
produces merely a flat sense of verbal acrobatics.” In its most ritualized form, this back-and-forth between two or more participants resembles a kind of debate in poetry. This practice is known as berbalas pantun, or the reciprocal presentation of pantun, and usually forms part of the performed display of emotion during a courtship as it is considered bad form for lovers to give explicit voice to their affection for one another. Representatives of the bride and groom exchange pantuns expressing the attractions of one party or the coy hesitation of the other, and the ability to craft a pantun spontaneously and cleverly remains a prized asset. Reflecting on the implications of such literary sophistication in the dialogue of a “still primitive people,” Lescale is prompted to ask: “can one speak of literature when a form of expression has become instinctive?”

In questioning if the pantun is poetry Voisset’s purpose is not to belittle the ingenuity and poetic sensibility of the Malays, but instead to highlight the cultural specificity of the coordinates by which “literature” is defined. Voisset proposes that one of the reasons for the vast divergence between pantun and pantoum lies in the absence of an equivalent poetic tradition in French, such as the Russian chastushka, that may have helped to contextualize the pantun as an artifact of a folkloric and oral culture. The rapid growth of literacy among Malays has been a relatively recent phenomenon; the pantun as an initially oral poetic form was the shared property of the collective instead of being copyrighted to an individual author, not unlike old English folk ballads. Traditional pantuns as a shared source of cultural wealth are in a sense exclusively accessible to those who have

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19 The Soul of Malaya, 82.
20 The Soul of Malaya, 126.
been educated or nourished by a close acquaintance with the traditional Malay culture that inspired them. Already the more ‘individualist’ European cultural practice of ascribing each pantoum to its author reveals a vitally different understanding of art, culture and the relationships between individual and community, as well as human community and natural world. Even before Hugo popularized and perverted the pantun, however, the history of French misunderstanding of Malay conventions of expression in speech and writing dated back to 1719, when a rare instance of diplomatic correspondence between France and the Malay world occurred.

Sultan Abdul Jalil Riayat Shah of Johor, overthrown and driven from his throne in 1717 by a young Sumatran prince, was forced to flee to Terengganu on the eastern coast of present-day Malaysia. The Dutch having refused his request for military assistance, the Sultan seized the opportunity afforded by the temporary stopover at Terengganu of a French ship bound for China to convey a plea for help to Louis XV of France. The ship’s commander Pedro-Villamont Gardin suggested that Louis XV might be prevailed upon to provide friendship, arms and ammunition to the troubled Sultan in exchange for trading privileges and the right to colonial settlements in the lands under the Sultan's rule. Gardin agreed to bear the Sultan’s letter to Louis XV on his return voyage, expecting no doubt that certain honor would accrue to his own person if he could secure the king's audience, but the point of interest in this story is the liberties taken in the French version of the Sultan’s letter that Louis XV ultimately received, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris alongside a copy of the Malay original.
The Malay letter opens with a lengthy and embellished declaration of its provenance:

This letter of honest and sincere love and purity, which will last as long as the firmament with the sun are revolving and the moon is lighting up this blessed world, comes from Sultan Abdul Jalil Syah Riayat, the Shadow of God on Earth who holds reign over the lands of Johor and Pahang…

Gardin’s French translation, in contrast, does away entirely with this preamble in favor of the directly straightforward

Au Glorieux Magnanime et Illustre Roy Louis Quinze de France de Navarre.

Je Sultan Abdul Jalill Shaa, Roy de Johore Pauhaung et Tranggano…

(Kratz, 1979: 57).

With typical Malay reticence toward giving explicit voice to the seriousness of his predicament, the Sultan makes oblique mention of his “pains [kesakitan]” without further elaboration, but Gardin’s French version reads: “… mes derniers malheurs occasionné par la rebellion de partie de mes sujets et la perfidie de ceux

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22 It is unclear why Gardin added Tranggano (Terengganu) to the list of regions under the Sultan’s domain, when this was clearly not the case in the Malay script. Extrapolating from Kratz’s discussion, it seems possible that Gardin wanted to portray the Sultan, however besieged at the moment, as a ruler of considerable stature to make him seem worthier of Louis XV’s consideration.

23 Translation mine. Kratz translates the Malay word “kesakitan” as “troubles”.
que je croiois mes amis...mutins rebels qui continuent à me troubler” (Kratz, 1979: 57). Admittedly, some discrepancy is to be expected in light of the fact that the letter was translated several times: by a Chinese from Malay into Portuguese, by a Scotsman from Portuguese into English and by a Frenchman from English into French. However, even the cumulative effect of multiple translations inadequately accounts for the introduction of qualifiers and phrases completely absent from the Malay original. Returning to the dilemma Voisset describes in his translation of pantun into French, the fate of Sultan Abdul Jalil’s letter upon its consignment to the obligatory distortions of translation is a precursor of the misunderstanding of Malay cultural conventions symptomized by the pantun/pantoum debate. In spite of Gardin’s efforts the letter must have failed to impress Louis XV, for he passed on the Sultan’s offer without much thought. Indeed, the interest and import of this letter is to be found in the irregularities of its translation rather than its role in any diplomatic interaction of historical significance between the two kings.

Whatever their outcome, the encounter and ensuing cultural exchange between the French and Malay worlds that focus primarily on official correspondence between the French and Malay rulers are less productive than the scraps of information about the Malay world and peoples that trickled back to France were drawn mostly from the colorful accounts of travelers and seekers of the exotic. E.S. de Klerck, who reproduced a letter signed by Louis Philippe of France and his Foreign Minister Guizot in January 1843 expressing the French

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24 I reproduce exactly the French orthography Kratz records.
king’s desire for closer diplomatic relations between France and what was then the Kingdom of Aceh in northern Sumatra, deemed the letter a curiosity void of any real political importance, a description that could just as easily apply to the letter Sultan Abdul Jalil wrote to Louix XV a century earlier. Corroborating Klerck’s view, Anthony Reid (1973) opines that the “long-term French contribution to the colonial history of the Malay Archipelago was more important in the shadow than in the substance” owing to the fact that while the British and Dutch played up the threat of French intervention to justify further expansion at the height of the European New Imperialism of the 19th century, French ventures in the region were of a decidedly more modest bent, taking the form of religious or cultural organizations like the French Catholic Mission in Malaya.25

However, the relative diffidence of the French colonial presence in the Nusantara did not impede lasting contact between the Francophone and Malay worlds, which flourished unexpectedly and prolifically in the field of literature. Analogous to Egypt’s figuration for a long time in French literature as the epitome of the exotic Oriental land, the use of Malayan settings in popular novels of the 19th century utopian tradition testifies to the inspiring effect of this imaginary horizon and secured the image of the Malay world as a site of seductive ambiguity. Among others, Paul Adam’s epistolary novel *Lettres de Malaisie* (1898), a lesser-known member of the genre that included H.G. Wells’

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25 The totality of present-day Malaysia and Singapore, which did not become discrete nation-states in either the material or imaginative domains until the advent of British colonialism which had different commercial interests in the island port of Singapore than in the Malay peninsula; the latter is much richer in natural resources such as tin, rubber, sugar and palm oil.
The War of the Worlds (1898) and Cabet’s Voyage en Icarie (1842), narrates a Spanish diplomat’s discovery of a Socialist commune founded by French disciples of Fourier, Saint-Simon and Proudhon in the heart of Borneo. Some years later, Francis de Croisset’s La dame de Malacca (1937) recounts an unlikely romance that develops between Audrey, the wife of a Major in the British army, and a Malay Sultan named Selim.

The popularity of the Malay world in the literary production of French Orientalism is possibly an outcome of its ability to attract and sustain the interest of some of the period’s most intrepid and renowned explorers, including the Parmentier brothers, Jean and Raoul, of Dieppe, France. The period of the European Renaissance from the 15th to the 17th centuries witnessed many great voyages of exploration and discovery, and while credit is mostly due to the Portuguese and the Spanish for bringing Europe its initial knowledge about Southeast Asia during this period, the Parmentiers’ decision to set out for Sumatra on what Jean deemed his most ambitious voyage almost certainly captured the popular imagination of the French, as did his claim that he was the first Frenchman to attempt to reach such distant shores. The brothers frequently traveled together, but Jean Parmentier in particular had acquired a reputation as a master navigator and cartographer following a number of voyages to the coasts of Brazil, North America and West Africa. Sponsored by the legendary French shipowner Jean Ango, the ostensible purpose of the Parmentiers’ voyage, apart from the obvious satisfaction of exploring newly discovered land and seas, was to break the Portuguese monopoly of the Indian Ocean spice trade. On October 22,
1529, the ship sighted the coast of Sumatra and they sailed on until November 8 when it finally dropped anchor at the port of Tiku in West Sumatra.

As a trading venture the Parmentier expedition was a complete failure. The traders failed to purchase spices in the quantity they envisioned, but perhaps more importantly for the romantic legacy of the voyage, it was barely a month before some of the men who had spent time ashore became sick and died of the fever, including both Parmentier brothers. Though the two ships and most of the men returned successfully to Dieppe, their pitiful bounty discouraged any further French voyages to Southeast Asia in the near future. This first contact between France and the Malay world, historian Anthony Reid writes sardonically, “was characteristic of all that followed, as much by the boldness of its conception as by the pathos of its outcome.”26 For all that the voyage failed to accomplish, however, it did impress upon the French imagination the extraordinary perils that attended the Malay world, as the expedition was quite unanimously hailed as the longest and most hazardous of all the journeys undertaken by the well-travelled Parmentiers. Its legacy was also bolstered by the posthumous publication of Jean Parmentier’s poetry by the Parmentiers’ chief pilot Pierre Crignon in addition to poems Crignon himself composed in memory of the deceased captains. The poem *Au temps que humains*, supposedly written by Crignon after his return from Sumatra, depicts the voyage as a lesson about human pride and fallibility.

Crignon also kept a reasonably detailed travel log for the duration of the expedition in which he described the French sailors’ interactions with the native

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Sumatrans, accreting to the stories provided by prior Portuguese and Spanish accounts. In his typically cinematographic style, Crignon writes that the Sumatrans are “clever and shrewd in trade and in business,”27 and seemingly quick to anger, evidenced by an incident soon after the French landing in Tiku where a riot almost erupted following a communicative breakdown between the French and the Sumatrans as each group held hostages from the other. Crignon’s account is one of numerous sources for the stereotype of the Malay character as being prone to amok, a psychopathological state of murderous frenzy owing to uncontrollable rage (from which the English phrase ‘running amok’ derives). The protagonist of Fauconnier’s Malaisie, a French planter named Lescale, reflects on the flesh-and-blood Malays he encounters in Malaya: “I did not know what to make of this people… I always regretted the Malays of my imagination, as depicted in our stories of adventure. The wild pirates that infest the narrows of the Sunda islands… And I had found only these little placid and polite men.”28

The pantun as motif in Malaisie merits close analysis because of its centrality to the novel’s narrative and to Lescale’s (and Fauconnier’s) objective of discovering, to quote the title of the novel’s English translation, the “soul of Malaya.” While stereotypes of the childlike native and the sensual Oriental woman make an appearance, Fauconnier’s novel is elevated above the fray of so-called exotic literature by dint of his sensitivity to the subtleties of the Malay people and culture which are investigated in part by way of the pantun. In some

sense, Lescale’s constant reference to the Malays and the Malay soul as “little” belies his preoccupation with reconciling the two essentialized features of Malayness, sensitivity and violence, embodied in his Malay servant Smail. The literary space of the Malays and the inscrutability of the pantun has a more than ornamental role in Fauconnier’s novel as it relates directly to Lescale’s horrified perplexity in the final chapter when he realizes that his hitherto placid Smail has been thrown into such emotional turmoil by the failure of his romantic suit that he has fallen into amok and is on the verge of a killing spree. Smail, Lescale thinks to himself, “can it be possible? That shy lad, so fond of poetry.”

Poetry as Lescale conceives of it is the privilege of a highly cultivated sensibility and intelligence. Fauconnier juxtaposes Lescale’s and Smail’s reception of the pantun to underscore the interrelatedness of literature and culture. The scene where the two Malay plantation laborers, Smail and his brother Ngah, share a book of pantuns with the French overseers Rolain and Lescale effectively captures the elegance and universal appeal of the pantun as well as the invisible barrier of impenetrability that one encounters, frequently if not inevitably, in instances of cultural exchange. The novel’s narrator Lescale admires Rolain for the latter’s profound understanding of the Malay temperament, demonstrated through Rolain’s explication of a number of pantuns that Lescale initially finds completely indecipherable. Rolain’s attraction to the pantun is based on the pantun’s ability to express sophisticated emotions and metaphysical themes with economy and beauty, but in spite of his ability to tease out the meanings of the

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29 Probably a French mis-transliteration of the Arab “Ismail,” a common name among Malays.
pantuns in the book, the contrived nature of his reading is implied by Smail and Ngah’s preference for the erotic poems. The acutely sensual relationship between the poet and his surroundings which gives rise to the pantun is an element missing from Rolain’s interaction with this Malay environment; for all his familiarity with the Malay language and his ability to parse a pantun using the Western tools of literary analysis, Rolain never composes a pantun spontaneously the way Malays do in both quotidian speech and communal rituals.

The Frenchmen’s—particularly Rolain’s—familiarity with and appreciation of the pantun implies their greater sympathy with the Malay mind and soul, especially in contrast to the British colonizers symbolized by the figure of an Admiral Le Roque, a District Officer who professes to have been himself “French… some centuries ago, in the time when the French were polite.”

Unlike Le Roque, whose attitude toward the Malays bears the cynical wariness and brusque impatience of the colonial administrator who can spare neither time nor resources to mollify the natives by any means but strict coercion, Lescale and Rolain view themselves as intermediaries bridging the gap between Malay and European points of view. Rolain jumps to the defense even of the stereotypical Malay vice of idleness, arguing that if they were not lazy, “they would not be so merry, vivacious, lewd, fantastic and arcadian.”

This exchange between Le Roque and the Frenchmen calls attention to two interconnected characteristics of the Malay in the Francophone literary imagination. Firstly, the perceived idleness of the Malays has a deeper level of

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31 The Soul of Malaya, 141.
32 The Soul of Malaya, 143.
significance for the British overseer, who feels the pressure of maintaining social order to justify the expenses of colonial administration and the emotional investment of the British public in their imperial conquest. The Frenchmen on the other hand, in spite of their occupation as plantation owners in Malaya, could still distance themselves from their fundamentally commercial but not directly colonial interests much more easily. As previously mentioned, the terms of French/Francophone engagement with the Malay world are unique due to the absence of any prolonged or successful French colonial enterprise in the region. In his article about French fiction set in the Malay world, Pierre Labrousse writes:

La geste civilisatrice n'étant plus une référence nécessaire côté française, les auteurs étaient naturellement inclinés à compenser par un débridement de la fantaisie ce que l’expérience ne leur avait pas permis.  

Relative French unconcern with implementing their *mission civilisatrice* and with furthering political or commercial interests in the Malay world permitted French authors like Fauconnier to fantasize the Malay world in a manner that British and Dutch authors could less easily do in good faith due to the thorny political realities of their colonial involvement in Malaya and Indonesia respectively. To put it differently, the concerns of Fauconnier’s protagonists are metaphysical rather than material, which colors their observation with certain prejudices and necessary illusions. When the points of comparison are restricted

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to the French and Malay, as in the scene where Rolain, Lescale, Smail and Ngah are poring over the book of pantuns, the differences between the two viewpoints are recognized quite candidly. “We use our senses,” Rolain says, “but only to serve our logic and our intuition.” 34 This, he suggests, distinguishes the more civilized Frenchman from the Malay who is driven solely by sensual desires and instincts. However, the Englishman’s arrival and the distinctiveness of his colonial mentality seem to catalyze the Frenchmen into a defensive identification with the Malays and a refusal to be lumped under the same category of ‘European’ as the British and the Dutch. The French purpose in Malaya is spiritual and therefore superior to the British imperial vocation. Rolain’s patently idealized description of the Europeans as “accursed races” 35 and his concurrent glorification of the Malays and their milieu as Edenic is but one illustration of this implied fact and reinforces further the aura of mystery and romance surrounding portrayals of the Malay world in French literature.

Although French presence in the Malay Archipelago dates as far back as the Parmentier expedition in 1529 it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century, culminating in Fauconnier’s novel, that a corpus of French literature about the Malay world began to coalesce, owing in part to the substantial number of Frenchmen who flocked to Malaya to take advantage of the opportunity represented by the rapid development of the region’s rubber-tapping and hevea industry at this time. 36 Although the earliest recorded instances of Francophone-

34 The Soul of Malaya, 83.
35 The Soul of Malaya, 143.
36 When the rubber boom began in the second half of the 19th century, Brazil among the countries of the Amazon basin was the main producer of rubber from the tapped sap of Hevea brasiliensis, the rubber
Malay interactions predate the works I explore in this chapter, it is quite felicitous for the purposes of my project that the Malay world begins to figure more prominently in French and Francophone literature at the precise time that it was starting to take on salient features of its current character. The same industrial expansion that attracted Frenchmen in greater quantities than ever before to Malaya also occasioned the need for more hands on deck in the plantations, a problem the British colonial administration solved by encouraging the immigration of significant populations of Chinese and Indian laborers. The advent of these populations altered the socioeconomic makeup of Malaya dramatically and sparked off the Malays’ growing sense of displacement from a domain they perceived to be theirs by birthright, an issue that continues to fuel Malay nationalism in contemporary Malaysia and to a lesser extent Singapore. By the time Fauconnier wrote *Malaisie*, Indian and Chinese characters and the interracial relationships—or lack thereof, as the case may be—in plantation life play a part in the author’s exploration of the “soul” of Malaya, namely its people. While it is with the Malay mind and spirit that *Malaisie* most profoundly engages, Fauconnier’s text does reflect the multicultural composition that Malaya was maturing into at the turn of the century.

Evidently, no single definition of the historical and political borders of the Malay world could uniformly appease all who have any vested interest in such a tree. In 1877, a year after English rubber expert Henry Wickham smuggled rubber seeds out of Brazil and back to London, the first rubber plant arrived in the Malay States (modern-day Peninsular Malaysia). The Malay States quickly supplanted Brazil as the lowest-cost producer of rubber as rubber could be collected all year round in the former. Better living and sanitary conditions, as well as the support of the British and Dutch colonial authorities in the development of the rubber industry, made Malaya even more of a draw.
definition. European constructions of the Malay world rooted in the asymmetry of the colonial encounter are bound to differ from the Malays' own self-representations, but even within the European conception of the Malay world, representation of this geographical region and its peoples varies subtly corresponding to the locus of colonial control. For instance, the ‘East Indies’ is one of the region’s appellations whose colonial origins are glaringly apparent; the beginning of comprehensive European scholarship on the Malay world is consistent with the height of Anglo-Dutch rivalry epitomized in the corporate competition between the British East India Company and its Dutch rival, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), both of which exerted powerful influences on the colonial policies of their respective countries from the 17th to 19th centuries. In view of this, it is quite commendable that the totality of the Malay world has been preserved with greater integrity within the French and by extension Francophone imagination relative to other European literatures, a difference that maps perhaps onto political versus literary motives. Texts in the English language written about the Malay are understandably biased toward the customs and politics of the Malay populations in the British colonies of modern-day Singapore and Malaysia, while Dutch texts are much more exclusively preoccupied with those of the Indonesian archipelago.

The slight challenge the French had been able to pose to British hegemony in Southeast Asia was decisively removed following the British capture of Ile-de-France (Mauritius), which had been a French base, in December 1810. The individuals who had arrived in Sumatra and other parts of the Malay world on
one of the numerous French naval expeditions and who chose to remain behind were left to their own devices when the French colonial enterprise extricated itself from these lands, without any significant financial or political support from the government in the metropole. These “flotsam of the wreck of empire” lived the lives of “renegades or adventurers” (Reid, 1973) and the strange tales that trickled back to France of these daring few contributed no doubt to the image of the Malay world as a mysterious and ‘Other’ locality. In contrast to the minutiae collated by the British and Dutch colonizers on the subjects of Malay customs, languages and political organization, the Malay world—referred to as l’insulinde in the tradition of French scholarship—has a demonstrable fluidity and exoticism in the French imagination that is simultaneously problematic (because of the elision of serious political and socioeconomic problems in the process of literary exotification) and potentially fruitful (because historical pride and self-interest proved smaller stumbling blocks for the French than they have been for the Dutch or British).

The universalist attitude towards postcolonialism discussed in the Introduction, which begins from the premise that the experience of European colonialism creates a subjecthood in common among peoples of otherwise far-flung and dissimilar cultural backgrounds, further complicates this introduction to the history of the Malay world in the Francophone imagination and takes it a crucial step closer to the comparisons I undertake in the chapters that follow between the Malay and Franco-Caribbean literatures. However fraught and uncertain, the relationship between the traditional Malay form of the pantun and
the pseudo-French invention of the pantoum contains the kernel of the poetic ideal of the *tout-monde* proposed by the Martiniquan poet, literary critic and theorist, Edouard Glissant.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the project of Georges Voisset to translate a body of Malay pantuns into French. A professor of Comparative and French literature at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, Voisset’s oeuvre suggests that he is well-placed to interrogate translatability and the function(s) of translation. His reflections on translation provide a gateway into an examination of how the terms of the French-Malay encounter are altered by the expansion and transformation of French into the Francophone. Voisset insists that translation is not a matter simply of translating a language into another language, but of one world into another. As Frantz Fanon writes, “Un homme qui possède le langage possède par contrecoup le monde exprimé et impliqué par ce langage.”

What differences should we then expect to exist between rendering ‘Malayness’ into ‘Frenchness’ and ‘Malaysian-ness’ into ‘Francophone-ness’? Might the features of the Malay pantun that struggled to find a conceptual foothold in the mentality of the French Romantic poets find a readier audience in the Francophone Caribbean subject for whom oral traditions continue to play a major part in his or her identity formation and cultural heritage?

Significantly, Voisset critiques Fauconnier for including “only two translations” (Voisset, 2010:6) of the five complete pantuns featured in *Malaisie*. Voisset probably sees this as a missed opportunity, as he makes elsewhere a

passionate argument in favor of the pantun as a poetic form that lends itself most generously to the Glissantian concept of a global but anti-universal, truly creole sensibility. For Voisset, a pantun, “by virtue of its absolute duality between ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ is also deeply rooted in your own lieu, any lieu in the world, any earthly lieu” (Voisset, 2010: 5). On the other hand, I personally found Fauconnier’s suppression of the impetus to translate and betray (to rehash the traduttore-traditore cliché) suggestive and eloquent in its own way.

Whereas Voisset questions how and to what extent Malayness may be made intelligible to the Francophone world, especially taking it into consideration that Francophone poets have been the springboard for the globalization of the pantoum, Fauconnier willfully inserts fragments of pantun in their original Malay, a language the majority of his French readers (and even readers of the English translation) was unlikely to be familiar with. In a rather postmodern move, the epigraph to Malaisie is written in Malay as well and left untranslated, though I will do him the (dis)service of translating it for the purposes of explication:

Pantun sahaya pantun Kelam
Kalau ta’tahu jangan di-sindir.\(^{38}\)

My pantun is an obscure one
Don’t mock what you don’t comprehend.

By warning his prospective reader against passing judgment on characters, phenomena and an environment s/he might not fully understand in a language that s/he almost certainly could not have possibly known or easily found translations of, Fauconnier makes either an ironic statement about the

\(^{38}\) The Soul of Malaya, iv.
unattainability of true translation or a heartfelt one about the value of expressing certain things—in this case, the soul of Malaya—in their own native tongue.

The different directions taken by Fauconnier and Voisset exemplify one of the major tensions I grapple with in subsequent chapters, specifically the possibility of postcolonial theories like Glissant’s notions of créolité and pensée archipélique to carve a new space for the reception of the original pantun in a novel Francophone context. Before embarking on this train of thought, however, it is worth at the close of this chapter to concede that the pantun/pantoum binary glosses over the evolution of the pantun itself even within its original Malayophone context. Most native speakers of Malay do have some acquaintance with traditional pantuns, though the number of such pantuns as common knowledge is ever-dwindling. Contemporary Malay writers and poets have also subverted or satirized the pantun’s indirectness; Salleh ben Joned’s risqué and mischievous pantuns in his poetry collection, Poems Sacred and Profane, have garnered an audience among the younger and for the most part English-educated urban youth generally disenchanted by the allegedly backward situation of Malay language and culture.

It ought to be emphasized however that the liberties taken by Malay poets with the ancient form of the pantun are motivated by desires and concerns different from those of Baudelaire or Verlaine in their proliferation of the pantoum genre. Salleh ben Joned and Muhammad Haji Salleh’s irreverent refashioning of the pantun is a self-reflexive act, a contemplation on the changes

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39 Called quite simply Sajak-Sajak Salleh (Salleh’s Poems) in its Malay title.
wrought on the Malay psyche and modes of expression by the vagaries of modernity. It is also an attempt to foreground the contemporaneity and adaptability of an authentically Malay form even to entirely new perspectives and lifestyles from those out of which it originated. As Muhammad Haji Salleh explains:

“As a student of literature, I worked out projects to retrieve the important achievements of my people – I collected and am still collecting pantuns throughout the archipelago, [I] sought out traditional concepts in life and literature, transcribed some old and rare texts. These I think, humbly, are also acts of post-colonialism.”

The innovations of Malay poets with respect to the pantun are steeped in and anchored by an awareness of the form’s cultural history and significance, and while this does not automatically invalidate Voisset’s claim that the pantun is—or, more accurately, can be—deeply rooted in “any earthly lieu” it does serve as a reminder of different and sometimes contradictory motivations across postcolonial cultures.

Voisset excitedly quotes Salleh Yaapar’s description of the relationship between pantun and pantoum using a traditional Malay proverb, “*jatuh ke laut, menjadi pulau*”; “thrown into the sea, becomes an island.” In his comparative study of the two poetic genres, Yaapar argues that the substantial divergence between the pantun and the pantoum is positive, enriching and in fact obligatory.

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41 Salleh Yaapar, http://pantun.usm.my/makalah4-4.asp (accessed on November 16, 2010). All quotations from this article are of my own translation.
Because the life experiences and ways of thinking of the French poets who elaborated the pantoum form differed so radically from those of their Malay contemporaries, only equally noticeable differences in their literary modes of expression could do justice to the reality of the situation. The image of the seed blossoming into an island is truly a beautiful one and uncannily appropriate to Voisset’s Glissantian framework of the archipélique, and yet the pantun that Yaapar (and Voisset after him) cites is incomplete. In its entirety it reads: “Kalau asal benih yang baik, jatuh ke laut menjadi pulau/jatuh ke darat menjadi gunung.” A good seed thrown into the sea becomes an island; thrown onto the ground becomes a mountain.

The latter half of the pantun that Yaapar and Glissant omits emphasizes the local and grounded, which jostles in contemporary discourse to hold its ground, so to speak, against the seductions of the global and mobile. It is the continued importance of the native land to an understanding of cultural forms like the pantun that Fauconnier’s Malaisie, for all its Orientalist lapses, does a remarkable job of invoking. Chapter 2 replicates Voisset’s enthusiasm in exploring the archipelagic through a comparative analysis of Malay and Franco-Caribbean literature, but the mountain as the alter-ego of Glissant’s archipelagic island-identity remains persistently in the shadows and will be given due attention in the final two chapters of this thesis.
II. Island and Archipelago in the Poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh and Edouard Glissant

Malays call the Malay Archipelago ‘Nusantara,’ a word composed of the Sanskrit root words ‘nusa’ (islands) and ‘antara’ (between). The Malay Archipelago’s self-definition as the “islands between” or “between islands” insists quite literally on the impossibility of a fixed identity for this interstitial oceanic space. To demand “between what exactly?” would be to reconstruct barriers of differentiation that come naturally to a Eurocentrically continental epistemology of the world and to undermine the openness of the “islands between”/“between islands” to a whole host of potential polarities including, historically, India, China, the Middle East and Arab world, Australasia and so on. Filtering Edouard Glissant’s “archipelagic sensibility” through Muhammad's Malay perspective, this chapter analyzes the points of convergence and divergence in these poet-intellectuals’ discourses on island and
archipelagic space and identity from their respective geographic, literary and linguistic frames of reference.

The archipelago is a fitting heuristic tool to analyze the situation of the Nusantara and Caribbean because it merges the seemingly contradictory notions of the insularity of the island and the association of the ensemble, reflecting the word’s curious etymological history. ‘Archipelago’ derives from the Greek Αιγαίων πελάγεως, which translates literally to ‘Aegean Sea,’ standing in figuratively for any large body of water studded with many islands. This definition of the archipelago focuses on the essential completeness of the body of water, a backdrop against which the pattern of islands is in a sense secondary. Contrastingly, the word in contemporary usage commonly refers to a group or chain of islands, a definition which emphasizes the discontinuity between one island and the next: though linked in the discourse of geography, which constructs a represented “whole,” each island is actually distinct and possibly self-sufficient.

In his poetry anthology entitled Beyond the Archipelago (1995), Malaysian National Poet Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh delves into the ways in which Malayness is influenced or shaped by the archipelagic character of the Malay world. Of his works, Beyond the Archipelago represents one of the poet’s most concerted engagements with the process of identity formation of the island poet, or more accurately the archipelago poet, poised at the junction of linguistic and cultural crosscurrents. In light of this, my deconstruction of the term Nusantara has potentially fertile evocations in conjunction with Glissant’s concept of
archipelagic sensibility (la pensée archipélique), a square in the quiltwork of ideas he elaborated over the course of his prolific career as an essayist.

The unifying hypothesis throughout Glissant’s work is a chaos theory of culture. According to this theory, the world is today characterized by such continuous, quick and arbitrary cultural encounters that any systematic explanation inevitably lacks the ability to encompass and predict the cumulative result of these encounters in the long run. Just as the butterfly effect describes the possibility that the flap of a butterfly’s wings in China can in the right circumstances initiate an accelerating cascade of effects that accumulate over large distances to set off a tornado in Texas, so too are systems of culture in the world vulnerable to paroxysms set off by imperceptible causes in ways unaccounted for by a static center/periphery binary. The hegemonic ideology of the nation-state, which since the surge of European nationalism in the 19th century has been considered the basic building block of the global order, has always been problematic for countries that were essentially forced to function as national units practically overnight regardless of the elaborate relationships negotiated between different ethno-cultural groups in a given territory prior to the colonial moment. It has also grown unacceptable to conceptions like Glissant’s, which refuse to acknowledge the efficacity and desirability of national borders,


43 Marked by the momentous unifications of Germany and Italy in 1871.
the ability and, in some measure, responsibility, attributed to them to halt the butterfly-wing effects of events occurring outside the national frontier.

In one of many Southeast Asian responses to this inadequacy of national boundaries as markers of alleged wholeness and barriers to border-crossing influences, regional literary associations have emerged devoted to the sustenance and development of literature in specific languages, implying a similar consolidation of cultural islets within the geopolitical region. Initiatives like the Mastera, an award for literature written in regional variants of the Malay language and produced by authors from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei (with Singapore expressing interest early this year in joining the association) or the Mekong Literature Award, which recognizes the achievements of writers from the Indochinese region of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, indicate at least a partially enthusiastic acceptance of the existence of various historical trajectories whose differences cannot be elided by the borders of nation-states or merely the economic and political logics of a Southeast Asian bloc, always in danger of neglecting a transnational cultural logic operating in a different register. The simulated totality of modern Southeast Asia is, like Europe, “archipelizing,” allowing the latent logic of the Nusantara to return to the fore.

Glissant inspired a paradigm shift in Francophone and especially Caribbean thought through his emphasis on relational identities vis-à-vis the illusory sense of ontological stability created by unifying and totalizing ideologies. In the early stages both of its literature and its politics, a docile Francophone Caribbean elite strived to emulate the Enlightenment-inflected republican and
humanist cultural values emanating from the metropolitan France. However, the fortuitous encounter between Aimé Césaire and the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor in the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1935 marked a pivotal point in the evolution of Francophone Caribbean consciousness, which tentatively began to recover its African ancestry and rehabilitate the image of Africa from that of the Dark Continent, as it figured in the racial discourse of the mission civilisatrice, to Mother Africa. As the inability of French values and political ideologies to fulfill their promises of equality, fraternity and liberty across racial lines became increasingly evident, leading for instance to Césaire’s famous letter of resignation from the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) in 1956, the embrace of an alternative originary source in the ancient cultures of Africa was ardent and immediate. “Oh friendly light/Oh fresh source of light,” 44 exclaims Césaire in his epic poem in a pointed inversion of the association in racist discourse between Africa and darkness.

Despite its initial headiness, Negritude was quickly discredited as an “antiracist racism” 45 that merely reinforced the stultifying Manicheanism of colonial discourse. The momentum of decolonization among the formerly European colonies after the Second World War further underscored the need for a national consciousness and culture that “take into account the historicizing of men” because “every culture is first and foremost national… the problems for which Richard Wright or Langston Hughes had to be on the alert were fundamentally different from those faced by Léopold Senghor or Jomo

44 Aimé Césaire, Notebook of a Return to the Native Land (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 34.
Since the return to an African native land proved to be as unfeasible as earlier attempts to fully assimilate into a whitewashed Frenchness, the Francophone Caribbean was left to flounder momentarily in an intellectual and cultural vacuum.

The créolité of the Caribbean subject had the tendency to appear, especially in the Antillean isles of Guadeloupe and Martinique which have remained French protectorates to the present day, as a suspension of identity itself. To acknowledge créolité as the defining element of Caribbean identity meant exhuming alternative historiographies and cultural influences, which underscored the Other-ness of the Francophone Caribbean from the French nation instead of facilitating its full integration. In the same vein as the Rastas’ self-declared membership in the Ethiopian Rastafarian mystique, the solutions proposed by earlier Caribbean thinkers like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon to the problem of Caribbean rootlessness were the essentialism of Negritude and the absolute utopianism of the Third World revolution. Glissant’s *pensée archipélique* is, in response, an ideology of errantry (*errance*), and the unpredictable (*l’imprévisible*). It is an ideology that is fundamentally non-aggressive even as it slices with razor-sharp candor through the delusions of prior ideologies like the ones enumerated above.

Both Césaire and Glissant were born in Martinique in the Antilles, an archipelago the latter famously described as “arched with an anguished desire to negate itself.”47 The very etymology of the Antilles designates the islands as a site

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47 *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 15.
rich in mythological significance; the French ‘Antilles’ derived from the Spanish ‘Antillia,’ a word that originated before the European conquest of the New World, Antillia being one of those mysterious lands that figured consistently in medieval cartography but with curious disparities in shape and exact location. At times Antillia would be drawn as an archipelago, other times as a continuous land mass of greater or lesser extent, and its position oscillated between the parentheses of India and the Canary Islands, although the maverick Robert Fuson declared to unanimous dissent in 1988 that Antillia was actually Taiwan. The accidental discovery of the Caribbean islands by European explorers on a quest for India and their careless denomination as the ‘West Indies’ is a preoccupation and source of angst for Francophone Caribbean writers compelled to view their native land unfavorably as “que des paliers, des escales, des marchepieds, en un mot des ersatz des terres continentales promises” (Chehab, 2008).48

Césaire’s epic poem Cahier d’un retour au pays natal deserves mention here not only as a fundamental text of French Caribbean literature but also because Césaire and Glissant embody two major and divergent poetic directions within this literature with respect to their respective visions of island identity and the relationship between land and water. Césaire’s self-professedly Péléen49 sensibility expresses itself in the Cahier’s militant poetics, affirming the island space as home

48 “nothing but stages, ports of call, steps, in brief the ersatz of the continental promised land.”

49 Césaire has been described as a “poète peléen” in reference to the volcanic and explosive quality of his poetry and his own observation that Martiniquans are “un people péléen,” their sensibility definitively shaped by their filiation with the looming shadow of the active Mount Pélé in Martinique. Césaire’s poetry is modeled on the volcano’s expulsion of pent-up energy and fire, a destructive force that is ultimately also regenerative.
and the foundation for the assertion of difference in the face of colonial incorporation. Even the images of the prostrate and wretched island that open the poem are redeemed by the heroic struggle of the poet-prophet persona who is reunited with his island and poised for an irruption into modernity. The ambiguities of Caribbean identity and history are resolved by the persona’s willing of himself into rebirth, breaking through the “vitelline membrane”\textsuperscript{50} of the great seas that separate him from himself. Part of the appeal of the Negritude movement for black Caribbeans was its symbolic linking of Antillean “islands crumbs/ islands unformed/ Islands cheap paper shredded upon the water”\textsuperscript{51} to the reassuring solidity of the African continent depicted as the cradle of Caribbean culture and society.

Though we do not know whether Muhammad Haji Salleh was familiar with the work of these Caribbean thinkers, his poetry manages to blend the explicitly political engagement that characterizes Césaire’s work with the preference for open-endedness and purposeful indeterminacy expressed in Glissant’s idea of a poétique de la Relation, a poetics premised on the principle of errantry. Glissant elucidates such a poetic ideal by drawing on examples from great lyrical epics like the Aeneid and the Iliad as well as African fables that tell of the creation of new civilizations following sea voyages of heroic scale. While poetical statements can of course be political, and indeed frequently are, Glissant was strongly critical of the pressure exerted upon Francophone Caribbean poets and writers during the post-war anticolonial ferment to espouse a specific

\textsuperscript{50} Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, 24.
\textsuperscript{51} Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, 51.
political agenda. The bondage of the poetic act to a statement of anticolonial revolution thrusts the Caribbean poet into the role of spokesperson, an entity charged with the task of representation, with or without his consent. Glissant’s notion of antillanité (Caribbeanness) has political implications in terms of, for instance, his analysis of the linguistic situation in the Caribbean, but as a theory it transcends the binaries sustained by an anticolonial poetics.

Similarities in the poetic concerns of Muhammad and Glissant are born of their shared awareness of the influence of history and especially cultural geography, particularly island geography with its natural motifs of flux and salutary instability, on one’s consciousness and attitude toward alterity. J. Michael Dash, Professor of French and Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University (NYU), argues persuasively that opacity and alterity are the systole and diastole of Glissant’s envisioned chaos-monde because the chaotic quality of the encounter between the world’s cultures does not preclude the need for each culture to retain its irreducible singularity.

Muhammad’s representation of bodies of water and the constant movement of the beach frontier in his poetry shows a much greater affinity with Glissant than with Césaire even though the latter is, in his own way, equally concerned with island identity. The ocean, Muhammad writes in the poem islanders, is “the soul’s ditch/ surrounding the self [lautan ialah parit jiwa/di sekililing diri].” Soul and self are not synonymous, nor are they necessarily contiguous. He implies instead that while the bodily ‘self’ (diri) of the islander is

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definable, the islander’s ‘soul’ (jiwa) casts its net much further, encompassing the vast uncertainty of the ocean. The metaphysical extension of the jiwa leaves it open to unexpected, intuitive and dispersed sympathies even as his corporeality demarcates his physical world within narrower horizons. Its yearning projection toward “l’ambigu, le fragile [et] le dérivé” of the sea is characteristic of archipelagic thought in contrast to the centripetal thrust of a Fanonial nationalism. Yet, Glissant argues, to give in to this diffusiveness is not to abrogate self-control or the option of self-determination. Instead,

> c’est accorder à ce qui du monde s’est diffuse en archipels précisément, ces sortes de diversités dans l’étendue, qui pourtant rallient des rives et marient des horizons. Nous nous apercevons de ce qu’il y avait de continental, d’épais et qui pesait sur nous…

Though the island condition requires the presence of both land and sea, Muhammad privileges the latter for its connotations of mobility and possibility. He writes that the ocean “frees me from the density of land/ and fences of the farm” (BTA, 49). The “shores” of the poet’s mind, a metaphor for the local, grounded conditions that shape his consciousness and ways of thinking, are presented as somehow static:

> without the rising tides
> in the shores of my mind
> i am no islander.

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55 ada cantik yang tidak termungkin oleh daratan.
The circular, surging movement of the tides is an obligatory element in island identity, an idea put forth also by Glissant and most memorably in Barbadian writer Kamau Brathwaite’s coinage of the term “tidalectics.” This image of a rhythm that ebbs and flows emphasizes the repetitive and circular over the linear and teleological. As though echoing Glissant, Muhammad thus argues that an island can have no boundary that is not also a porous and writhing threshold between the conflicting but complementary elements of land and sea. The word for ‘rising’ in the poem’s Malay version, ‘pasang,’ can also be translated as the verb ‘to join’ or ‘to fix together;’ the coming into being of the islander thus occurs at the moment where ocean washes up against the shifting sand and engages it in the timeless rhythm of the tides, destabilizing the firmness of the ground underfoot.

In other poems the persona accords greater credence to the allure of land, of the allegiances and connections one forms spontaneously in a fixed place that one has learned to call home. The speaker in no eternity mentions “the fields [ladang],” the house [rumah] and “a lover’s face [wajah kekasih]” (BTA, 171) as potential reasons for him to stay. Ultimately however, the siren call of the sea and the errant voyage proves irresistible, and the persona declares obliquely that

if there’s love
the sound of water at the hull
will dissolve it to longing.\footnote{56 jikalau ada kasih
bunyi air haluan
akan mencairkannya jadi rindu. (BTA, 170).}

According to Glissant, the \textit{pensée archipélique} or archipelagic mode of thinking is so applicable to the contemporary Caribbean moment because “elle consent à la pratique du détour, qui n’est pas fuite ni renoncement.” Muhammad evokes in my view a similar sentiment in \textit{no eternity}, in which the necessity of departure is portrayed neither as escape from conditions of misery or deprivation (for the beach is described as “fair [\textit{indah}]”) nor a temporary sojourn to a predetermined destination. It is simply that

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
    beyond the border
    is the country of difference.
    ready to be renewed
    or made different,
    there’s no eternity to it.\footnote{57 di sebarang sempadan
    ialah negeri kelainan.
    setia diperbarukan
    atau dilainkan,
    tiada sediakala padanya (BTA, 170).}
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

The sound of the rippling waves stirs in the islander the intimation or reminder of Otherness beyond the shore’s edge, and this simple, instinctive awareness and openness toward alterity that is the heart of a truly creole sensibility impels him to leave.

This curiosity in and guileless pursuit of the Other is the basis of the second precept of Glissant’s poetics of Relation—errantry. Not, he is careful to
qualify, the nomadism of an Aeneas or Odysseus that smuggles in the impulses of territorial expansion beneath the costume of heroic adventure. In such a model the errantry is rooted paradoxically in the idea of empire, “centre et périphéries s’équivalent. Les conquérants sont la racine mouvante et éphémère de leurs peuples” (Glissant, 1990:26). In contrast, no eternity describes a search for the Other that is the most beneficial form of uprooting.

Muhammad explores this idea of errantry further through his modern adaptation of the life and experiences of Si Tenggang, the legendary prodigal son in Malay myth. Highly ambitious and anxious to escape his narrow tribal existence in a family of fishermen, Si Tenggang convinces a ship’s captain to take him on board as a deck hand, promising his parents that he will return to his native village when he has become wealthy and made a name for himself. An exceptional sailor, Si Tenggang eventually inherits the ship and the captaincy upon the original captain’s death, and his fame earns him an audience with the king who bequeaths to Si Tenggang his daughter’s hand in marriage. When Tenggang finally returns to his native port on the course of his travels, his reluctance to acknowledge his poor, illiterate and shabbily-dressed parents in the presence of his royal wife drives his despairing mother to plead God for retribution upon her unfilial son. Thunder, lightning and ferocious winds immediately appear, rendering the sea – the source of Tenggang’s wealth and reputation – ultimately the source of his destruction. After the roiling sea destroys Si Tenggang’s ship and all his possessions, he and the others of his party are turned to stone.
Malay tradition holds that the moral lesson of this tale is evidently the importance of showing loyalty, respect and gratitude to one's parents and place of birth, but in his retelling Muhammad chooses to emphasize the danger of errantry, an element of the familiar story that is usually understated in its original context but which has special resonance for contemporary Malays like Muhammad himself who are compelled by changed circumstances to invent new ways of navigating the relationship between opacity and alterity. Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim quoted the story of Si Tenggang in his opening speech at the International Seminar on Indigenous People in Kuala Lumpur in 1993, saying that the legend “underlines our culture’s abhorrence for those who would deny their identity for whatever reason.” Muhammad’s depiction of Tenggang’s fate is much more complex because the criteria of Malay identity is itself highly complex in an age of unavoidable cultural contact and exchange.

By leaving his natal home, Si Tenggang alienates himself from his native people and culture. In the poem si tenggang’s homecoming, Muhammad depicts the story of Si Tenggang from the protagonist’s point of view, which allows him to defend Tenggang against the criticisms that are leveled against him by the folk.

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58 In Glissantian terminology, ‘opacity’ is a complicated notion based on the fundamental unknowability of the other and the rejection of the presumption that we can ever truly understand another. An example of opacity is the subaltern’s so-called ‘inability’ to speak and self-represent. Glissant claims that it is possible to advocate such opacity as an active strategy of resistance, instead of being seen (as per Gayatri Spivak) as a defect. By proclaiming “We demand for all the right to opacity” (Poétique de la Relation, p. 309), Glissant insists that the engagement of Caribbean intellectuals with unraveling the intertwined strands of their hybrid identity in no way diminishes the coherence of this identity. The Creole language is another form of opacity, as a language that conceals meaning while outwardly proclaiming its various meanings and root languages. Knowing, for example, that the West African languages of Ewe and Fon are especially strong influences on the syntactical structure of Haitian Creole isn’t necessarily sufficient to unlock the Creole’s obliqueness.

tale’s original tone and narrative development. Whereas the original emphasizes the material reasons for Tenggang’s desire to leave his home, suggesting that covetousness for worldly goods is at the heart of his dissatisfaction with his lot in life, Muhammad’s Tenggang declares at the outset of the poem that “the physical journey that I traverse/ is a journey of the soul \[jarak jasmani yang kutempuh ini/ adalah perjalanan jiwa\]” (BTA, 196-7). He leaves to force himself to acquire “a stranger’s experience \[ilmu pendatang\]” and become “one who has learnt to see, think/ and choose between/ the changing actualities \[yang belajar melihat, berfikir/ dan memilih di antara kenyataan/ yang selalu berubah\].”

One of the persistent images of the Malay in colonial representations and the Malay imagination is that of the \textit{orang laut}, literally ‘sea people.’ A more realistic explanation for the looming figure of the sailor and sea voyager in the Malay literary imagination would cite the vitality of ports as conduits of the Nusantara’s central importance in the Indian spice trade, which increased the value of capable sailors in the eyes of the great kingdoms at the time like the Malaccan and Johor sultanates who would frequently hire sailors (misrepresented in colonial literature as pirates) to repel actual pirates, direct traders to their respective employers’ ports and generally maintain the dominance of their ports in the area. Yet there exists also a more romantic view dating back as early as the 5\textsuperscript{th} century. In 1920, stone carvings were found in Palembang in southern Sumatra which stated, “In the year of \textit{Saka} 605, on the eleventh day of \textit{Waisakha}
month, the King used a boat to look for magic.” The mysteriousness of this quest is a repeated motif in Malay stories of sea journeys, whose destinations, objectives and outcomes usually retain an aura of the unpredictable which is also one of their strongest attractions.

The aspect of the Si Tenggang story that is a narrative of the prodigal’s “retour au pays natal,” so to speak, recalls the previous mention of the tone and intent of Césaire’s epic poem Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, which is affirmative of a new and modern Caribbean island identity. The abundance of phallic symbols and the virility of the poetic voice also characterize the persona as an epic hero, leading his people to a Promised Land. Tellingly, the beach as threshold of sea and land is a lieu of adulteration and waste in the Cahier. The beach is the dumping ground of garbage from both the shanty-towns and the sea itself,

For the street opens onto the beach, and the beach alone cannot satisfy the sea’s foaming rage.

A blight this beach as well, with its piles of rotting muck, its furtive rumps relieving themselves, and the sand is black, funereal, you’ve never seen a sand so black, and the scum glides over it yelping…

(Notebook, 11)

Glissant and Muhammad on the other hand unanimously value the beach as the inconclusive border of the island space. The contrast between land and ocean are reconciled in the ambiguous and constantly shifting nature of the beach, and the

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60 George Coedes, The Indianized States of Southeast Asia (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), 241-252.
furrows wrought by the sea’s incessant suckling of the sand are a natural illustration of the interdependent and mutually transformative modus operandi of cross-cultural contact today.

A comparison of the following extracts from Glissant’s *Le sel noir* (1960) and Muhammad’s poem *islanders* reveals these writers’ shared images of the beach as the site of the poet’s birth and the salt of the sea as his primal nourishment.

ce sage marin… Il revient, enfant, dans le premier jour. Il voit la naissance, avec l’écume de la mer, le cri originel! L’histoire, ouverte, qui attend. C’est la première suée de sel, offerte au peuple, sur la plage.⁶¹

i am an islander
having no choice of land,
for the first drip of blood
is the salt water that
dashes on the threshold…

*(BTA, 49)*

Glissant’s (and Muhammad’s) departure from Césaire concerning the beach as a part of island identity is symptomatic of the larger cleavage that exists between their respective perceptions of the relationship between the island and its surroundings. Césaire primarily considers the island space as a single unit, and highlights the sense of inferiority that plagues the island consciousness as a result

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of its diminution. His objective is the affirmation of the island space in opposition to the continental space that defines Europe or even Africa:

L’île, par ses dimensions réduites en face du continent, possède un côté paradisiaque en même temps qu'elle est le symbole de la déréliction.62

Just as Negritude is seen as the necessary stepping stone to the more sophisticated theories of créolité that developed later, Césaire’s gesture is perhaps a necessary preface to Glissant’s subsequent emendations in his theory of the archipelagic. Glissant inscribes the Martiniquan island within the larger Caribbean archipelago, and the Caribbean archipelago within a larger New World identity, preempting and resisting the impulse to ‘root’ Martiniquan-ness within the borders of Martinique (or in the distant parent of Mother Africa) instead of conceiving it in terms of the relationship between Martinique and the other cultures of the world.

A major difference between the artistic and political aims of Muhammad and Glissant arises from their understanding of the effect of European colonization on the postcolonial situation in their various countries. Glissant’s concept of creolization asserts that historical circumstances preclude from the outset the possibility of recovering traditional affiliations or any sort of pre-colonial culture in the Caribbean. Attempting to forge a contemporary postcolonial Caribbean identity by going backwards to retrace imaginary origins and lines of ancestry is analogous to creating a myth of genesis that can only ever be illusory and false. Excessively privileging the link between contemporary Caribbean identity and Africa instead of acknowledging Africa as one influence

among many in the process of creolization is also futile because it visualizes an image of “Africa” ossified in a very specific historical moment, namely the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade.

For Muhammad Haji Salleh on the other hand, the excavation of Malay folklore and literary tropes has proven a rewarding and integral part of his maturation as a Malay/sian poet. Muhammad inherits his archipelagic sensibility from a literary and cultural tradition that speaks of the Malay world as archipelago in the very self-definition it gives itself: Nusantara. The Sulalat al-Salatin (also known in colloquial Malay as the Sejarah Melayu and in English as the Malay Annals), \(^{63}\) originally an oral account of a genealogy of the Malay kings and their customs that has since become a definitive text in the study of Malay history and literature, is a main fount of inspiration for the section of Beyond the Archipelago entitled “Poems from the Sejarah Melayu.” The rationale for conceiving a unified and archipelagic geography of the Malay world, in defiance of the national boundaries cemented during the colonial period between Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, is explicated in the Malays’ sense of their history as contained within this foundational text. Muhammad begins the section with his rewriting of the Annals’ prologue and the injunction to:

\[
\text{write us our history,} \\
\text{of the malays and all their islands,}
\]

\(^{63}\) The official titles of the “Malay Annals” or Sejarah Melayu were given to the text, a cornerstone text of Malay classical literature written in an intriguing style halfway between historiography and literature, by John Leyden in 1821 and Abdullah Abdulkadir in 1841 respectively. Leyden’s English translation was published with an introduction by Sir Stamford Raffles, the colonial administrator who had played a significant role in the Malay world. Dubbed the ‘Father of modern Singapore,’ Raffles declared the foundation of Singapore on February 6, 1819, the date that control over the island was officially handed over to the East India Company.
take us back to soaring siguntang,
to samudera, across the waters,
to the javanese in the southeast, the
buginese on the sea’s belly

Anthropological, geographical and historical surveys have demonstrated that the
unity of the pre-colonial Nusantara can be systematically explained in terms of
the commercial and religious currents sweeping the region at various times, but
for the majority of Malays the term Nusantara has an intuitive significance as the
reference for an imagined community that shares commonalities of language and
cuisine among other things. More importantly, there is a common fount of adat, a
set of beliefs and customs that predate and transcend myriad religious or class-
based schisms, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Glissant’s archipelagic logic of the Caribbean is on the contrary highly
theoretical and expressed in an often difficult and conceptual vocabulary
requiring a healthy dose of neologisms to ensure precision. Because of the
linguistic, socioeconomic and political disparities that exist between different
Caribbean countries—the French départements of Martinique and Guadeloupe
grapple with a very different relationship to metropolitan France than Jamaica
does with England, and there are obvious cultural differences between the
Dominican Republic and Haiti within the single island of Hispaniola—more
effort needs to be invested in the articulation of a ‘Caribbean’ identity in order for
it to be more than an imaginative leap at best or reductive homogenization at worst.

In light of the affinities enumerated above between the poetical philosophies of Muhammad and Glissant, the incongruity of their background and circumstances gives pause for thought. The Francophone Caribbean has a commanding presence on the stage of modern world history; the first and only successful slave revolt in world history culminated in the independence of Haiti in 1804, and the works of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire are canonical texts in a range of academic disciplines including postcolonial, African-American and critical race studies. In contrast, the relative invisibility of Malay writers beyond the Malay reading public both stems from and plays back into a preoccupation with the recovery of a diminished Malay identity within the Nusantara that risks appearing indigenist or nativist at the expense of a more cosmopolitan and embracing outlook like Glissant’s.

A potential way Muhammad’s poetry risks being misunderstood as a defiance of the Glissantian poetics of Relation is the fact that Muhammad has publicly discussed his conscious decision to relinquish English, the “colonial language” in favor of using the Malay “national language” as his literary medium, recalling the similar if far more publicized example of Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, who stopped writing in English and reverted to his native Kikuyu language. In addition, whereas Glissant writes that a true poetics of Relation obliges “non pas seulement connaissance particulière, appétit, souffrance et jouissance d’un people particulier” (Glissant, 1990:20), Muhammad describes his directorship of the
Institute of the Malay World and Civilization as a period during which his “whole life was directed towards defining the Malay—searching out his epistemology, his sense of beauty and poetics.” It was a good time to find and define an identity, he says, because “the whole world, broken down by post-colonialism, was also looking for it. Suddenly my own search confluence (sic) into a bigger and more universal concern.”

Toward the fulfillment of this objective Muhammad excavated the proverbs (peribahasa), pantuns and the aforementioned Sulalat al-Salatin). This preoccupation with rediscovering or recreating a transnational Malay community through his literary production strives toward a Malay ‘totality’ of the Nusantara which risks playing into the discourse of Malay nationalism and bumiputera rights especially rife in his own country of Malaysia. Widespread as this postcolonial search for identity may be, Muhammad’s search for Malayness stops short of positing the Nusantara condition as emblematic of the contemporary moment the way Glissant does with the Caribbean.

As previously mentioned, the Nusantara in Muhammad’s poetry is a personal, tangible and distinctive archipelago. In comparison, May Chehab argues that the image of the archipelago in Glissant’s poetic imaginary is of a mythic and not merely biographic scale. The literary ideal of the Caribbean as “New World Mediterranean” attempts to metaphorically “ground” the archipelago in its hemispheric context by reappropriating the founding myth from

which the project of European imperialism derived its legitimacy. A conception of Caribbean créolité that, instead of paling in comparison to the purity of white and Christian Frenchness, far surpassed it in creative and commercial possibilities, looked for self-validation to the historical example of the Mediterranean. Since Hölderlin’s revisionist Hellenism, the image of the Archipelago has been invested with the symbolic value of the ancient culture of the Hellenic islands. If powerful civilizations and great monotheistic religions were born in and around the Mediterranean basin, Glissant argues, this has to do with the ability of the Aegean to inspire “la pensée de l’homme vers une pensée de l’Un et de l’unité” (Glissant 1996:14). In such passages, Glissant points to and endorses the geodeterminism of French historian Fernand Braudel.

Braudel’s *The Mediterranean* adopts a multidisciplinary approach toward the resolution of one of the thorniest historiographical problems, namely the reconciliation of external influences with local identities and is a point of reference for both Glissant and O.W. Wolters in their descriptions of the maritime geography of the Caribbean and Southeast Asia respectively. Glissant’s claim that the Aegean conduces a way of thinking that tends toward synthesis rather than syncretism is shored up to an extent by Mediterranean geography; it is structurally a closed basin, with only the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits at one end and Gibraltar at the other (now supplemented by the man-made Suez

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68 I follow the distinction made by Michael Pye, who describes ‘synthesis’ as the resolution in a static entity of the dynamic processes implied by ‘syncretism.’ Given that Pye’s discussion is contextualized within a comparative study of religions, a salient implication of the distinction he makes is the fact that a religion which considers itself to have “synthesized” exogenous elements (the Catholic Church being the most popular example) subsequently tends to claim that it is a “pure” religion, as opposed to other religious systems which are less intent on systematizing their syncretic influences.
Canal) providing the narrowest of exits into a larger ocean. Unlike the diffusion of the Caribbean islands, the Italian Peninsula's centrality to the Mediterranean helped to concentrate a regional unity especially at the height of the Roman Empire’s dominance.

Glissant’s proposition of archipelagic sensibility has the latent objective of dethroning the Hellenic archipelago from its “piédestal humaniste et romantique.”69 He insists that the Caribbean sea exemplifies the present moment in being “une mer ouverte, une mer qui diffracte, là où la Méditerranée est une mer qui concentre.”70 As in the Caribbean case, the sea provides an obvious geographical framework for discussing possibilities of region-wide historical themes in the Nusantara. A quick cartographical comparison reveals however that the Southeast Asian seas more closely resemble a Mediterranean formed by the China Sea, the Gulf of Siam and the Java Sea, through which the high and sustained movement of maritime communications between the peoples on and near the shores of the Southeast Asian seas fostered economic unity as early as the 3rd century AD, than it does the more dispersed Caribbean.

O.W. Wolters offers the image of “the single ocean” as a significant fact of Southeast Asian historical geography, claiming indeed that the “Indianized states of Southeast Asia,” has long been a “conventional definition in the region’s historiography”71 but he also cautions against making too facile an analogy between Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean. Braudel’s depiction of the

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69 Chehab, p. 43.
71 O.W. Wolters, History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999), 46.
Mediterranean speculates that its unity was created by the movement of people over sea routes which led eventually to urban-based trade, whereas maritime communications in the Southeast Asian seas did not contribute as much to the evolution of permanent and sizeable urban polities in the same way. In contrast to the Italian Peninsula as the operative cultural center of the Hellenic Mediterranean, Southeast Asia remained in Wolters’ view much more polycentric.

Muhammad’s stylistic comparability with Glissant belies the closer affinity of his politics to a Césairean stance. Glissant’s and Muhammad’s divergent uses of the image of the archipelago impacts in turn their perception of the kind of totality the archipelago represents. Glissant (1996) declared on behalf of the Caribbean that “[on] peut exister comme identité sans exister comme force,” while Muhammad’s ideas of Malayness bears the traces of the kind of pan-Malay aspirations voiced by proponents of Malay nationalism like former Malaysian Premier Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, aspirations that revert to a theory of identité-racine at odds with the identité-rhizome (Glissant, 1997:213) that Glissant contends is a more accurate portrayal of archipelagic identity.

As mentioned earlier, the Nusantara lags behind the Caribbean in terms of its coming into postcolonial consciousness, so perhaps it is in some sense unsurprising that even the more multilingual and cosmopolitan of contemporary Malay writers like Muhammad find it impossible to completely drop the search for Malayness or resist the pressures, borne of the exigencies of national identity formation, to choose one language over another. The archipelago as a central
trope in Glissant’s poetical ideals of inter-relation and diffracted universality is inextricable from the creole language as the quintessential symbol of the global creolization and *chaos-monde* Glissant describes. Relation between different cultures, if it is to comprehend all participant cultures on equal terms, must be spoken multilingually.

By the 19th century, the English and French languages had became globalized as part of the global exportation of these cultures through the European new imperialism. This self-propagating propensity is observable even in other European languages like Russian or Italian, whose countries had refrained from or been less successful in colonial enterprises. But “[quant] aux langues non occidentales,” Glissant continues, "le quetchoua ou le kiswahili, ou l’indi ou le chinois, elles sont endogènes et non proliférantes ; leurs poétiques ne suggèrent pas encore une implication à ce mouvement des histoires du monde.” He would almost certainly have included Malay in this list of endogenous languages, for in spite of the general acknowledgment of the huge debt Malay owes to Sanskrit and Arabic among other languages, official vexation over the perceived erosion of the integrity of the Malay language remains an issue of current interest in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Much of Muhammad’s poetry is reflective, personal and marked by his own experience of living in multiple countries and learning multiple languages. An important parallel between him and Césaire, however, is his commitment to the social role he sees himself occupying as a Malaysian National Laureate and a

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72 *Poétique de la Relation*, 35.
custodian of sorts of the Malay language whose eminence in the Nusantara has been eroded over time. “For writers in the Malay language in Singapore and Indonesia, writing was an important nationalistic act; one wrote on behalf of others, of ideas of nation, urbanism and a socialist future (…) While I admired the [literary] experiments of the British, I learnt of the social meaning of literature from people like Masuri SN [a Singaporean author who was a pioneering figure in modern Malay poetry] and, later in Malaysia, from Usman Awang, Baha Zain and Samad Ismail.”

Muhammad’s nomination as National Literary Laureate sounds a bittersweet note in his artistic ambition of “rowing down two rivers” or reconciling the two literary traditions (English and Malay) he claims as his own. One of the criteria of eligibility for the National Laureate Malaysia, a professedly multicultural country, is that the works of art under consideration must be written in Bahasa Melayu, the national language and the language of course of the ethnic Malay majority. Although the sincerity of Muhammad’s commitment to (re)discovering Malay literary traditions and restoring their pride of place, the incentives for writers of the requirement that an author write in Bahasa Melayu to be considered for national laureateship as a factor in Muhammad’s decision to discontinue poetry in English and to channel his creative energy through the Malay language instead, even though he undertakes translations of almost all his Malay poetry into English.

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A century after the zenith of nationalism and imperialism, Glissant argues that “l’Europe s’archipelise.” The contemporary moment bears witness to the subversion of national boundaries by the emergence of “des îles qui sont en relation les unes avec les autres.” Examples of these îles include the Basque country, Catalonia, Breton, Corsica and Alsace, all of which are officially part of the French state but which retain rich and individual cultural heritages of their own. The development of these cultural islands is required to foster genuine European unity and community, even if it is to the detriment of the notion of nation and existing national frontiers. Muhammad’s reintegration of the Nusantara in his poetic vision is similarly accomplished by recourse to historical but also imaginative sympathies between the Malay populations occupying the now discrete nation-states of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei. However, the predominance of the Nusantara as the definitive archipelago in Muhammad’s literary vision does have a retroactive quality that in my view fails to adequately address.

Glissant clarifies that his insistence on multilingualism does not mean that a poet must write in more than one language, but rather that regardless of the language(s) chosen, the poetic consciousness must always be cognizant and aware of the multiplicity of the world’s languages. Muhammad professes to live in a “giddy and swirling world of languages” (MA Quayum, 2006:9), having studied Malay, Arabic, English, French, Dutch, German and a smattering of Japanese throughout his life, but he significantly fails to mention any familiarity

with the languages and dialects of the minority populations within his own native Malaysia or the rest of the Nusantara. The archipelagic imaginary of Muhammad reveals an odd disjuncture between the Nusantara’s past and present. In retrieving stories from Malay mythology and the great classical texts of Malay literature in search of a unified Nusantara Malayness, Muhammad glosses over recent scholarship into the *kacukan* or mixed racial heritage of some of the most celebrated Malay heroes as well as the composite, virtually creole, character of the Malay language. At the same time, in his embodiment of contemporary Nusantara identity he is curiously insensible to the complexities of imposing a single language, Malay, on the multicultural and multilingual Malaysian population which includes Malays as well as large minority communities of Indian, Chinese, Arabian and European descent.

Like the slippage between pantoum and pantun highlighted in Chapter 1, the tension between the Nusantara’s geographical archipelity and Glissant’s theoretical formulation of a *pensée archipélique* is a problematic but potentially productive one to untangle. The challenge for Malay writers today is to recover a self-empowering Nusantara identity without falling into the trap of a nativist or folkloric nostalgia that has no bearing on contemporary realities in which the Nusantara is merely an *île* among others in the archipelization of Southeast Asia.
III. The Re-Enchantment of the Postcolonial World
The Contemporary Mantera and René Depestre’s Poème mystère vaudou

There are spaces globally recognized as sacred. Three million Muslims flock annually to Mecca in pilgrimage, while Bodhgaya in the Indian state of Bihar attracts Buddhists from all over the world who come to visit and meditate at the Mahabodhi temple where the Buddha is said to have attained Nirvana. Virtually any landscape however, can be sacred when viewed from the perspective of what Mircea Eliade dubs ‘religious man,’ that is to say the ‘man of all pre-modern societies’ for whom objects of nature like stones, trees or water bodies can be imbued with spiritual meaning. Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley argue that postcolonial writing enacts the way in which land and landscapes, as a result of colonial or imperial appropriation of physical land and material resources, “may be viewed as now sacred, now desacralized, now resacralized.”

During the colonial period, urban expansion, the dramatic changes in topography wrought by the construction of modern railway and communication

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systems during the colonial period and questions of rural-urban migration all had a considerable impact on traditional lifestyles and beliefs, both in relation to sacred places and to customs and habits concerning the religious and the enchanted more generally. In addition, the displacement of the supra-human figures of the oral storyteller and the shaman from sacred and profane landscapes preoccupies postcolonial authors as a symptom of the elision of religiosity and the imposition of the coldly rational and materialist telos of colonial modernity.

Even though postcolonial fiction as a whole is an arena in which writers from these regions investigate the interplay between religion, geography and ecology, the word as magic and sacrosanct finds its fullest reinvigoration in postcolonial poetry of the Caribbean and the Nusantara, positing itself as counterpoint to the prosaic nature of the ‘historical’ account.

In their excavation and reclamation of pre-colonial pasts, postcolonial poets frequently seek out local customs and practices of the unfamiliar, unmodern and occasionally occult variety, all of which exert an understandably strong appeal for an anti-Western position predicated on the belief that Western realism in narrative and Western rationalism more generally have produced representations of the colonized that alienate the postcolonial subject from his native land, myths and god(s). The eminent German sociologist Max Weber declared in a lecture entitled *Science as Vocation* (1918) that:

> The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the
transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.

The disenchantment Weber describes is the eclipsing of a magical and moral universe by the processes associated with modernity including secularization, bureaucratization and the rise of capitalism. Because scientific rationalism disparages religious thought as superstition, the publicly shared and axiomatic beliefs that constituted religion no longer function to create a society’s cognitive unity.

Responses to Weber’s charge of disenchantment range from optimism to skepticism, rejection and even despair. Weber paints a gloomy picture of global modernity as we know it, but the nuances of his rationalization thesis leave some room for alternatives since, as he argues in The Protestant Ethic (1905), the flip side of modernity’s capitalist bureaucracy is a “polytheism” of value-fragmentation and relativism. So-called ‘superstitious’ practices everywhere persist in opposition to the imperialism of formal-rational logics and processes even when these latter are bolstered by institutions of power. Homogeneity and heterogeneity are indivisible either in theoretical discussion or in the phenomena of everyday social life; the homogenizing effects of global modernity themselves invite the reassertion of polycentric variety such that it becomes impossible to speak definitively of an entire cosmography as being either enchanted or disenchanted. Nonetheless, the enduring influence of Weber’s thought—and of the scientific and economic rationalities he described—bears witness to the seemingly universal consent garnered by his description of a world increasingly denuded of
magic and the sublime. Arguably, the colonial subject incorporated forcibly into global modernity feels Weberian disenchantment in greater profundity and with more than a little resentment because of the model’s Eurocentrism. Resisting the technocratic disenchantment represented by the West is a matter of heightened urgency because the colonized world is, in and through colonial discourse, automatically disqualified from the world-mastery to which the process of rationalization aspires.

Postcolonial writers are not the first or only critics of the Weberian notion that the disenchantment of the world lies at the very heart of modernity, but attempts at re-enchantment assume diverse guises according to their provenance. Joshua Landy and Michael Saler’s *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* exemplifies a Western attempt to counter modern disenchantment without veering toward nihilistic critiques of science or backsliding into atavism. But by insisting on strictly secular strategies, most of the essays in this compilation return tortuously to the underwhelming conclusion that modern science supplants the role of magic and mystery in generating the marvelous. In his review of the book, Peter Cahn states that even when the evidence for re-enchantment is thorough and convincing, “the standard for persuasion is low. Re-enchantment as the volume uses it seems to include anything more emotional than Spock in ‘Star Trek.’” 78

Unlike the authors in Landy and Saler’s compilation, the yearning for re-enchantment expressed by Haitian poet Rene Depestre and the handful of Malay

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poets discussed in this section emerge from an emotional rather than simply intellectual crisis. Depestre, like the Indonesian Malay poet Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, seeks to articulate a new humanism by revitalizing a past that lies beyond the reach of mainstream discursive practices and intellectual habits that “favor monolithic ensembles over ‘in-between’ spaces” (Gruzinski 2002). Homi Bhabha, one of the founding figures of contemporary postcolonial theory, similarly argues that the postcolonial world can best combat the hegemonic impulses of colonialism by valorizing spaces of mixing, hybridity and ambiguity, among which he situates ritual.

Malay *adat* and Haitian voodoo are important postcolonial strategies for re-enchantment. Postcolonial insofar as they imply a shift in perspective away from the metropole as center and offer tools for comparing the formerly colonized’s oppositional cultural politics on their own terms, these strategies go beyond simply rejecting scientific determinism. Indeed, voodoo and *adat* represent cornerstones of major debates in postcolonial countries over the issue of neocolonialism, that is to say the persistence of colonial systems and mentalities in an allegedly postcolonial time and place.

**Defining Voodoo, Adat and Mantera**

Voodoo and *adat* defy a typically Western rational understanding of reality, which insists on a tidy and impermeable boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. In effect if not in essence, *adat* in the Nusantara is synonymous with voodoo in Haiti. The amorphous nature of voodoo troubles
academic discourse on the subject, which is split between those who regard voodoo as a unified totality and those who characterize it rather as a fairly tenuous agglomeration of rituals of varying provenance.79

Though often described as a syncretic alliance between the Catholicism imposed upon the African slaves by the white masters on their mission civilisatrice, and these slaves’ own African rites originating mostly from the precolonial kingdom of Dahomey, popular representations of voodoo in both film and literary media often reduce it to an evil power akin to black magic. On the other hand, the caution with which contemporary anthropologists portray voodoo as a benign blending of Christian and African religious cultures understates the violence of this forced contact and the clandestine, fugitive existence that voodoo was driven to lead under the keen eye of the plantation owner. As a means of subterranean communication, voodoo became a vehicle through which the deepest and most dangerous ambitions of the slaves found a voice. The seizures of loa possession or the trance-like state of transcendence sheltered those who dared to speak of liberty and victory against the white colonizer.

Throughout its existence, voodoo has also been based on the intuitive rapport between participants and natural rhythms of life, death and reproduction. Voodoo is a kind of ancestor worship in which the living ritually invoke and address the dead souls of ancestral spirits, local saints and other people (collectively known as loa or mystères) who were once human and with whom it is

79 Implied in this discursive set-up is the idea that rituals, whether in Catholicism or voodoo, only constitute a religious system when there is a system of belief associated with them. The performance of the ritual gestures toward and depends upon a larger belief system and its narratives. The Catholic priest’s offer of sacramental wine is most meaningful when understood in terms of the story of the last supper, in which bread and wine figuratively represent the body and blood of Christ.
thus possible to maintain ties. Another aspect of voodoo’s emphasis on the natural rhythms of life and death concerns the engagement of the practitioner’s senses through acoustic and kinetic performance, a vital component of voodoo worship. Voodoo theology is by nature more fluid than its Catholic counterpart, and perhaps more importantly, prior belief in or rational knowledge of voodoo theology is not a necessary condition for belonging to this ritual system. Traditionalism interacts with a progressive, prophetic impulse and the facts of individual experience become expressive of larger, more universal possibilities without necessarily being homogenized into a universal prescription of religion’s function in society.

Doctrinal fluidity is likewise characteristic of *adat*. Judith Nagata describes *adat* (an etymologically Arabic term) as the “residue” (Nagata, 1986:42) of local practices and customary laws native to the Malays since pre-Islamic and perhaps even pre-Indic times and is heavily informed by animistic beliefs in the relationship between external reality and man’s spiritual state. Like “voodoo,” the term *adat* is extremely broad and inclusive in its reach, covering everything from traditional holistic medicine to the pseudo-science of geomancy. Frequently misconstrued as black magic, most of the rituals encompassed under these appellations in fact regulate the most quotidian of activities. Especially in coastal areas (*pesisir*) furthest removed from the reach of centralized government and where rituals related to water, the sea, and fishing remain relevant to the fishing lifestyle of these populations, rites like Puja Pantai (beach worship), Tarian

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80 In Islamic law, *adat* also means “local custom or tradition” as opposed to the *Shariah* law, which would apply to all the faithful everywhere.
Lukah (Lukah\textsuperscript{81} dance) and Mandi Berminyak (Oil Bath) are still performed despite running counter to orthodox Islamic beliefs propagated by the central governments of Malaysia and Indonesia.

The figure of the bomoh (also known variously as ‘pawang’, ‘dukun’ or ‘Orang Pintar’ in different Malay dialects) is a close Malay equivalent of the Haitian houngan. Both bomoh and houngan correspond to the shaman—who tends to be portrayed negatively compared to the more respectable priest or Imam of the Christian and Islamic faiths—that exists in all religious pre-modern societies of the kind Eliade outlines. These persons serve as spiritual leaders, healers, diviners and repositories of the collective wisdom of their community. In addition, the bomoh is the personification of the magical Word; even when s/he is not the composer of the mantera, the magical incantations and charms that accompany adat rituals, s/he is still instrumental as their speaker, channeling the symbolic and magical energy of the word to the material realm.

Present in virtually all the islands of the Nusantara, the mantera recalls the oldest artistic manipulation and usage of the Malay language itself. Manera are an ineluctable part of adat rituals, serving to create an atmosphere conducive to the physical and psychological strength of the presiding priests and participants. Anthropological studies of coastal Malay populations in northern Sumatra found that regardless of the introduction of modern technology, the belief of these fishermen and farmers that progress in the material world was impossible without

\textsuperscript{81} A basket-like contraption made of cane used to catch fish. When used as a verb (melukah) the word also refers to the accidental or purposeful exposure of the private parts by sitting carelessly or improperly tying the sarong.
the consent and favor of the spirits of land, air and sea led them to maintain the habit of chanting mantera.

The word mantera itself is fraught with terminological difficulties, not least because of the taboo in the predominantly Muslim Malay societies of the present-day Nusantara against frank discussions about the animistic worldview with which mantera continues rightly to be associated. The British colonial officials who took an interest in the language and culture of the Malays were often the first to articulate notions of Malay culture or literature and as such, their Sir Stamford Raffles’ pronouncement in his introduction to Leyden’s *Malay Annals* that “in these islands… the commencement of authentic history was only to be dated from the introduction of Mahometanism” had the authority of truth. The depiction of mantera as black magic encumbers attempts to offer a sociological perspective on mantera, its practice and its practitioners today.

‘Mantera’ derives etymologically from the Sanskrit ‘mantra,’ ‘manir’ or ‘matar,’ which in turn refers to that part of each Veda which comprises the hymns (as distinguished from Brahmanas, or theological portions); a passage of the Vedas, a holy text; a formula sacred to any particular deity; a mystical verse, a magical formula; an incantation, a charm, spell, philter, secret consultation, consorting together, spiritual instruction.

(Plattes 1960:1071)

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The origin of the mantera in sacred Hindu texts affirms its potency as magical formula. In Hindu tradition, the mantera is regarded as a kind of divine revelation; by this logic, the content of a mantera cannot be altered, nor can it be taught indiscriminately to others as its misuse may have potentially disastrous consequences. This inaccessibility of the ancient Hindu mantra has contributed to the mystification of the Malay mantera as black magic, facilitated undoubtedly by the Islamization of politics in the Nusantara and the relegation of Hinduism to an aberrant element in the shaping of contemporary Malay/Muslim identity.

A mantera supposedly has the power to enhance sexual prowess and physical beauty, silence enemies and tame nature. In the tradition of folk healing, a key subset of *adat*, the *bomoh*-healer leads the chanting of mantera for healing and survival, commanding malignant spirits to leave the body of the victim as well as fortifying the healer’s confidence and spiritual power. Language in the mantera, which involves symbol, ritual, music, and tones, is poetic in that it surpasses a purely significative function. However, it also goes beyond poetry and literature because the invocation of the supernatural realm cannot be done with impunity: it is a realm that has to be supplicated and placated to ensure the well-being of the human world.

While mantera continue to be composed for practical application in traditional Malay folk-healing purposes, the focus in this chapter is on mantera as an art form, composed by poets with specifically literary intent. The poets I cite use the mantera to evoke an ongoing ritual practice in which the Word enacts a direct and powerful effect upon the material world, but their mantera are
distinguishable from those used in rituals by their consignment to the printed page as well as the new preoccupations and motives of their authors. By drawing on these archaic practices, Caribbean and Nusantara poets remind their readers of religion’s social origin as a node of communal solidarity and elucidate the functions of language in identity formation by foregrounding the sacralization of the word as magical incantation.

*The Politics of Adat and Voodoo*

Studying voodoo from a postcolonial perspective prompts us to consider “the place of the fatal in the midst of the banal, and vice versa; and when to entertain the swollen signifiers of sensationalism as a perfectly proper expression of difference” (Gelder, 2000). Voodoo and *adat* incur controversy because they occupy an ambiguous space between formalized religion and customs pejoratively labeled ‘primitive.’ They disrupt historical narratives as well as postcolonial narratives of nationhood in which religion is implicated as an element of identity: in Haiti, the role of voodoo in the decisive period of anticolonial resistance in the late 18th century underscores the gravity and efficacy of voodoo beliefs in modern existence, in contradiction to their sensationalized representations in popular media; in the Nusantara, *adat* gives fricative tension to the slippage between ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ categories in political discourses (an issue Chapter 4 explores in greater detail). By their hybrid, willfully unsystematic natures, voodoo and *adat* insist on localized specificity. Regardless of the origins of the various ideological and cultural influences that comprise their existing
shapes and forms, it is the unique permutation of these influences within the Caribbean and Nusantara milieus that makes voodoo and *adat* more effective as postcolonial strategies than the universalizing tendencies of world religions.

The range of depictions of voodoo in popular media gets to the heart of one of the major difficulties faced by postcolonial studies, namely the negotiation of difference at the point where skepticism and fascination come into contact. Countless anthropological and scientific studies have concluded that the efficacy of voodoo afflictions or enchantments depends heavily on the intended target’s own pre-existing belief in voodoo superstitions and that ‘voodoo’ or psychosomatic death is most frequently triggered by a subject’s extreme fear in the expectation of supernatural consequences for their transgression of social taboos. Yet this concert of modern scientific explanations has not deposed voodoo as the popular religion of postcolonial Haiti, an integral element both in daily social life and the construction of a Haitian narrative of its national history, which accords a catalytic role to the voodoo ceremony of Bois Caïman.

Official historical accounts of the Haitian Revolution describe this ceremony organized by a resistance fighter and *houngan* (voodoo priest) named Dutty Boukman on August 14, 1791 at Bois Caïman in the northern mountains of the island. At this ceremony, a woman possessed by the *loas* or voodoo spirits slit the throat of a pig and distributed the blood to all present at the meeting. Drinking the blood, the participants swore to kill all the whites on the island, precipitating a massive upsurge of rebellion on August 22 where blacks in the North set plantations on fire and killed the white settlers they came across. The
Revolution, according to Haitian national mythology, owed its genesis to the ceremony of Bois Caïman.\textsuperscript{84}

The element of proferation in René Depestre’s poem \textit{Un Arc-en-ciel pour l’Occident chrétien} (1967) recalls the belief of many Haitians in voodoo’s spirit of revolt and the possibility of bringing about complete revolution through faith and willpower. In the collective memory, and especially for the poet, the language of voodoo is exalted as “l’explosion poétique de l’inconscient [qui] allait trouver ses voies, occultant alors les réalités sordides de l’oppression.”\textsuperscript{85} As Depestre argued, the misery, poverty and oppression that plagued Haiti two centuries after its bitter fight for independence assured that voodoo continued to nourish the poetic expression and sustain the collective aspirations of the Haitian people. \textit{Un Arc-en-ciel pour l’occident chrétien} is an exercise in magical realism that mines the tradition of Haitian voodoo to invigorate his poetry with the transcendent qualities of this mythic heritage, but voodoo also looms large in this volume as the locus of the symbiosis that Depestre effects between poetry and revolution.\textsuperscript{86}

In contrast to the celebration of voodoo in Haiti, comparable attempts to reclaim adat as a defining element of Malayness have been much less successful in the Nusantara. A collection of essays on the subject of mantera compiled by Rogayah Hamid and Mariyam Salim feels the need to state on its back cover that the book does not intend to teach or guide its readers to make use of mantera for

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\item\textsuperscript{84} See C. L. R. James, \textit{The Black Jacobins} (New York: Random House, 1963).
\item\textsuperscript{86} Joan Dayan, “René Depestre and the Symbiosis of Poetry and Revolution,” \textit{Modern Language Studies} 10:1 (1979-80), 75-81.
\end{itemize}
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the purposes of casting love spells, treating illnesses or exorcism.\textsuperscript{87} It is, its editors assert, no more than factual material intended for researches interested in the role of mantera in the thinking and culture of Malay society. This downplays the fact that mantera are inevitably part of a struggle over diverse definitions of postcolonial Malayness as Muslim, pre-Islamic or some amalgamation of the two. That a compilation of conference papers might seem to necessitate such a disclaimer is indicative also of the attitude of many Malays today who have been educated in a Western and/or secularist tradition that distrusts irrationalism and the supernatural.

Haiti’s President Francois ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier (1957-1971) chose, in a sharp departure from the 1930s-40s when voodoo altars were burned, to co-opt the houngans instead and exploit their role in the local communities to extend his control over the Haitian population. Although the manipulation of voodoo’s popularity at election time had its precedents, Papa Doc’s innovation was to establish a much more substantial and lasting relationship between his regime and voodoo by styling himself as an houngan and affecting the measured movements, hushed tone of voice and staring gaze associated with a person close to the voodoo spirits. Stories circulated of bizarre rites taking place in the presidential palace. Papa Doc also made frequent references to voodoo in his speeches and deliberately fashioned himself in the image of Baron Samedi, the voodoo loa of death, by donning the coat tails and top hat in which the Baron is usually depicted. The visibility of voodoo in Haitian history and politics versus

the marginalization of *adat* in the Nusantara will prove important in my final analysis of Depestre’s voodoo poetry, which I argue is colored by the poet’s inability to reclaim voodoo as means of re-enchantment without being weighed down or distended by the subtexts opened up by voodoo’s attendant political and historical connotations.

Like the intrinsic connection between voodoo and revolution, the modern resurgence of the mantera form was spearheaded by poets who observed or lived through times of revolutionary fervor in the Malay archipelago. A charge made against the first postcolonial Malay authors in the 1950s was that they lacked sophistication and craft; that their writing was much closer to orality than to something the Western scholar would deem worthy of the name ‘literature.’ Even classical manuscripts of Malay literature, including the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Tale of Hang Tuah) were transmitted in the Malay language as readings or oral recitations known as *syair* in such a way that they were primarily preserved in “musical and melancholic recreations.”

In the 1940s, Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar adapted existing versions of oral ritual mantera into a form appropriate for the concerns of the modern poet, a form Sutardji Calzoum Bachri would later push to the extremes of its possibilities. Among Malaysian writers, Moechta Awang and Usman Awang also contributed to the reclaiming and refashioning of the mantera into its current, postcolonial literary guise.

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The importance of the bomoh in adat and the houngan in voodoo, as well as their hierarchy in relation to official religious authorities such as the Catholic priest or the Islamic imam, accentuate the tension between official state-sanctioned religions and the interstitial resistances to cultural purity or autonomy. Any elements that do not correspond to the strict hegemonic definition of a Malay Islam proposed by the state are equally vulnerable to official censure as being a slur on the dignity of Malays, Islam or both.⁸⁹ Dissent cast in religious terms have historically proven to be effective agents of political upheaval and change; the Islamified states of the Nusantara, by reserving the exclusive right to identify alternative religious discourses as ‘subversive,’ attempt to stifle this possibility of religion-based dissent by discrediting them as threats to communal harmony.⁹⁰

Voodoo and adat have in common a syncretic quality that has allowed them to persist as cultural substrata in their respective societies despite concerted efforts from official and religious quarters to displace them. The conflation of African and Catholic symbols, for instance, is a well-documented example of voodoo’s syncretism. As a way to appease the European authorities who were attempting to impose Catholicism on the African slaves brought over to the New World under the banner of the mission civilisatrice, African slaves in Haiti syncretized the loa, or voodoo gods, with Roman Catholic saints such that Catholic iconology is

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⁸⁹ Legal and political initiatives to cleanse Malay culture in the Nusantara of what are defined as pre-Islamic accretions of folk animism and Hindu-based practices extend also to curbing the introduction and proliferation of Shi’ite teachings. The dependence of Malay unity on a shared Islamic culture requires a priori a homogenous Islamic culture, and Shi’a Muslims in the Nusantara have been persecuted not because they are not Muslim, but because their variance from the Sunni Malay Muslim majority is seen as weakening the coherence of the Muslim community as a whole.

still frequently used in representations of loas on voodoo altars: Papa Legba is alternately St. Peter or St. Lazarus, while Ayizan is St. Clare. This process of syncretization works in the opposite direction as well, with a number of Catholic saints including St. Philomena, St. John the Baptist and St. Jude having been consecrated as loa in their own right. Malay folk-healers have likewise modified indigenous mantera or jampi-jampi (spells) to include Quranic verses and references to Allah and the Muslim prophets where they had previously invoked the gods and heroes of Hindu mythology.

Before the intervention of Sutardji, in whose work the contemporary literary mantera achieves its highest restitution and refinement, and other postcolonial Malay poets, the term mantera had largely fallen out of mainstream use by Malay speakers. Influenced by a combination of government policies and Islamic censure, Malays resorted to terms like jampi (spell) or serapah (imprecation, curse) instead to refer to verse forms that essentially derive from the archaic form of the mantera. Islam admits the existence of supernatural beings and there is a tradition of Sufi healing based on the intervention of supernatural forces in which the idiom of cure can involve trance and possession, yet whenever mantera is used in the symbolic context of this folk healing practice it is neutralized as ‘holy verses’ or ‘prayers.’

Sutardji was pejoratively nicknamed the “bottle poet” in the early years of his career because he would precede dramatic readings by downing generous amounts of beer, arguing that his drunken intoxication was an instrumental step in evoking the spirituality of his poetry. After he turned toward Sufism following
a trip to Baghdad in 1989, critics such as Abdul Hadi sought to prove that Sutardji’s earlier poetry already bore traces of Sufi spirituality beneath the overt tones of skepticism and nihilism. This attempt to assimilate and rehabilitate a text against the author’s express intent (as stated in his Poetic Credo of 1973) within a recognizably Islamic tradition points clearly to the consequence of religion in postcolonial Malay identity as well as the automatic politicization of cultural forms of production that engage seriously with voodoo and adat.

**Postcolonial Literary Recreations: the poème mystère vaudou and the manera**

Approaching voodoo and *adat* from a literary rather than anthropological perspective highlights the disjunction between poetic and political developments in the postcolonial Caribbean and Nusantara. Of particular interest in this comparative reading of René Depestre’s *Un arc-en-ciel pour l’Occident chrétien* and the manera poetry of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (with a few works by other Malay poets included for good measure) is the way that these postcolonial thinkers use the motifs of voodoo and *adat* to interrogate the relationship between past and present in the historical narratives of races and nations.

In response to the penetration of European literature into these societies during the colonial period and the validation of these imported forms over the allegedly primitive literature produced by local writers whether in native or colonial languages, Malay and Caribbean writers sought to undo the effects of empire by reclaiming and revaluing traditional literature—in both cases primarily oral—as a source of identity. The similarities between the voodoo-inspired poetry
of Haitian poet René Depestre and contemporary mantera by such Malay poets as Sutardji Calzoum Bachri and Moechtar Awang exemplify the desire that animates many postcolonial authors to find local, indigenous and thus “natural” modes of expression.

Although a rich tradition of oral literature is not a heritage unique to these cultures, the relatively recent emergence of their canonical written literatures in these two cultures carves out an important and considerable space for orality and oral magic. Unlike the great monotheistic faiths of the people of the book, voodoo and adat are systems of belief without writings or official texts to patrol their boundaries and codify their rituals. This quality is simultaneously damning—leading to their characterization in mass media and academic discourse alike as symptoms of primitive and backward thinking—and empowering in that there is a sense of flexibility and limitlessness to the scope of their influence.

Adherents of voodoo and adat beliefs have had to justify themselves repeatedly and fervently in response to critics who depict these practices as having essentially immoral or malevolent intentions. Since the 1990s, however, Malay artists and filmmakers have demonstrated greater interest in recovering adat as part of Malay identity. Responding to the simultaneous pull of resurgent forms of Islam in the Nusantara as well as the memory of colonial deprecation of Malay cultural traditions, the reclamation of adat is at once “a postcolonial or anti-imperialist strategy and a subversion of more restrictive notions of Islamic
Through its emphases on sensuality and the body, *adat* comes into conflict with Islamic principles of ritual purity and abstention from sensual excess. Although critical perspectives on voodoo and *adat* are necessary to analyze their relationship with present social and economic realities in the postcolonial Nusantara and Caribbean, Depestre and Sutardji opt to underplay this factor in favor of taking the ritual significance of voodoo and *adat* seriously, mining the symbolic currency that these traditions continue to hold in the popular imagination. These postcolonial literary recreations of voodoo and *adat* propose an alternate universe in which debates over their conceptual definitions—are they religions? Pseudo-religions? Mere hocus-pocus?—are dismissed as irrelevant in light of the power of mantera and voodoo poetry to capture the instinctive affinity that Malays and Haitians feel toward their physical environment and the spiritual personalities of their *bomohs* and *houngans* in spite of the intellectual mystification and discursive manipulations carried out as part of colonial strategies of psychological domination.

The voodoo mythology in Depestre's *poème mystère vaudou* illustrates the sympathy between literature and magico-religion as realms of the symbolic. Depestre writes in “La cantate à sept voix,” the fourth section of the anthology, “our *loas* walk tonight/In the blood of a poet... Tonight our *loas* sail/through the veins of a poet!” (*Un arc-en-ciel*, 171-185). Likewise, the role of the *bomoh* as a repository of age-old understandings of Malay cosmology cosmology speaks to the aspirations of a number of postcolonial Malay poets. In his *Kredo Puisi*

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(Credo of Poetry), contemporary Indonesian poet Sutardji Calzoum Bachri declares: “In the beginning was the Word. And the first word was the mantera. To write poetry is therefore to return the Word to the mantera.” The mantera poet, imitating the role of the bomoh, speaks commandingly, relying on repetition and other rhythmic qualities of the form to create a mood of possibility and supernaturalism.

While the rediscovery of a pre-colonial past is a conventional postcolonial strategy, not all poets envision ‘return’ as a chronological return to early practices. Some imagine it as a process of retrieval, in the here and now, of the potential of oral utterance that is obscured by the privilege accorded to forms derived from written texts. Although there are formal and thematic characteristics associated with the mantera as a poetic genre, Sutardji in his Credo applies the generic description “mantera” to all his poetry in order to highlight the magical power of the ‘mantric.’ His use of erratic and fanciful typography further endows each word with the weight of an aural and visual phenomenon. In describing the mantera’s liberation of the word from the burden of meaning, Sutardji purposefully uses the metaphor of colonial domination (penjajahan), denouncing the ‘colonialisms’ of meaning, morality and grammar.

For Sutardji and other Malay writers who espouse a similar credo, the rituality of mantera is well-suited to their intention of dissociating the word from the shackles of logical reasoning and so-called modern knowledge perceived to be at least partly a colonial imposition. They seek to restore the magic of literature.

by turning away from the literary in the sense of the written, returning the word to oral and aural poetic functions and situations of reception. Mantera in its modern or postcolonial guise is a poetry that affects, even in written form, the features and spontaneity of the orally performed. A mantera can have good or bad intentions; whichever the case, it is pregnant with rhyme and rhythm and bears the strength of prayer and spiritual energy. The dissidence of adopting and reclaiming a form so roundly denounced by any number of authorities—governmental, colonial and religious—naturally also appeals to the inherently rebellious character of postcolonialism.

In terms of diction, mantera is distinguishable from other Malay poetic forms like the pantun by the fact that it is more liberal, more accommodating. I noted in Chapter 1 the pride of place accorded to the pantun as a key to understanding the Malay psyche and cosmology, but the formal strictness of the pantun is felt by some modern poets as inhibiting, whereas the liberality of the mantera and its traditional functions offer new avenues for postcolonial literature. For instance, mantera do not require all its constituent words or phrases to make straightforward sense. Whereas rhyme is the superlative feature of other forms of traditional Malay poetry, most notably the pantun, assonance and alliteration play more significant roles in the mantera. Alliteration, especially of hard consonants like ‘p,’ ‘d’ and ‘t’ has an explosive effect while the timber of assonant repetition in the mantera is thought to kindle the magical power of the word. Sutardji’s poetry is marked by a high frequency of repetition as well as the inclusion of nonsense or “no-sense” words (Teeuw, 1979):
oku okau okosong orindu okalian obolon orisau oKau O...
ome you oempty onostalgia oalloyou operation oanxiety oYou O...

(‗O‘, 1970)

In the lines above taken from his poem entitled simply ‘O’, Sutardji adds an ‘o’ to the beginning of each word to produce the same vibrating resonance that the ‘Om’ does in Hindu mantra and imitates the experience of the mystical or sacred syllable. Bookending the poem with the same note gives it a sense of unity disrupted by the fretfulness of the poem’s content.

Though repetition and plays on the aural quality of language are admittedly common features in modern Western literary movements too, they should still be considered in light of Sutardji’s decreed orientation towards charms and oral magic. Literary critics analyzing voodoo chants or the Malay mantera have resorted to comparisons with the surrealist movement in poetry to describe the highly symbolic and purposefully nonrational quality of these forms. Such comparisons may be necessary to orient a reader unfamiliar with voodoo and adat, but ought also to give way to deeper understandings of the rituals and beliefs that favor such imagery in the mantera and voodoo charm.

The poetics of incantation feature heavily in both Depestre and Sutardji. Depestre’s Un arc-en-ciel pour l’occident chrétien features many elements of the ancient charm and chant of oral pre-poetry and reveals the integrality of voodoo cosmology to his literary worldview. Words uttered in incantation by the houngan or voodoo priest in the voodoo ceremony have the power to create or suspend life.
When it is used to say or name, the word is seized by the energy of potential transformation.

*Naming the World*

Poet and sorcerer are synonymous by virtue of the fact that poet’s act of naming things simultaneously creates their reality. Among traditional mantera, one variant names the ingredients or instruments used in a ritual:

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Eggs of the House-Lizard, Eggs of the Grass-Lizard,
Make a two with Eggs of the Tortoise.
I plant this pole thus in the mid-stream
(That) Wind and Tempest may come to naught. 93
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The principle behind this mantera is the power of naming and of bringing the magical power of these substances into effect through the act of ‘speaking’ them. Speaking the names of things is to invoke them into being. Given that the postcolonial subject was historically denied participation in the act of naming his or her individual, cultural and national identity, it is no surprise that the act of self-definition is a constant priority in the contemporary mantera and Depestre’s *poème mystère vaudou*.

The section on Baron-La-Croix in Depestre’s poem begins with the persona’s self-identification, which we see also in a mantera by postcolonial Indonesian poet and a contemporary of Sutardji’s, Chairil Anwar. The poet is always identified with natural presences, transcending his/her own bodily limits.

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and uniting the destructive and creative forces of nature with the poet’s own power of speech.

Baron-La-Croix
I am Baron-La-Croix
The dog baying at death
In your garden it's me
I am the black butterfly
Flying around the table

A Tale for Dien Tamaela
I am Pattiradjawane
Foam of the sea.
The sea is my blood.

(…)
I am Pattiradjawane, guarding the nutmeg groves.
I am fire on the shore.

Chairil Anwar

The intention of and the effect produced in both poems by the poets’ opening assertion of selfhood are similar. They name themselves by identifying their presence in the surrounding natural elements, thus fashioning the landscape through their eyes and via the act of speech. The poet declares him or herself an agent of divine punishment and both poems conclude with the threat or promise of retribution should their authority be challenged or otherwise offended:

Baron-La-Croix
Un mot de trop et je change
Vos petites vies du Sud
En autant de petites croix
Forgées dans le fer de mon âme.

A Tale for Dien Tamaela
But take care not to make me angry
I'll kill the nut trees, stiffen the maidens
I'll bring down the gods!

Chairil Anwar
However, there are strategic differences in the way the personae of these poems are represented. Pattirawadjane sprawls across the universe of the poem, conjuring up with her invocations of the sea, the shore and the nutmeg groves an image of landscape proportions. By remaining within the realm of the symbolic, Pattiradjawane empowers herself with apparently untrammeled expansiveness. On the other hand, while the speaking voice in Baron-La-Croix seems more insidious because he penetrates the sacred and private realm of the domestic, the allusion to the South and the precision of the poet throughout in detailing the life of the white family from Alabama fixes this poem within a specific ideoscape, intellectualizing the spiritual and emotional appeal of the voodoo chant. Depestre maintains a humorous—if sinister and sharply sarcastic—tone in portraying the attitude of the voodoo gods toward the White characters throughout *Un arc-en-ciel*; nonetheless, the oppositional binary set up between White and Black in the poem makes clear reference to an identifiable age in Black and/or Haitian history in a way that the comparatively insular and self-sufficient worlds of the mantera do not. This difference will ultimately prove important in terms of the final goal of re-enchantment to which the forms of the mantera and voodoo poem are outwardly directed.

*Spirit Possession*

Joan Dayan, a leading scholar and translator of René Depestre’s oeuvre, comments that Depestre’s voodoo poem is at times “a litany of fury very much like automatic utterance” (*Un arc-en-ciel*, 48), hinting at the parallels between the
voodoo priest’s surrender to spirit possession and the poet’s surrender to poetic inspiration. The appurtenance of the voodoo chant and the mantera to the domains of ritual and human-divine communion places the phenomenon of spirit possession squarely at the center of these genres. Spirit possession, though present in the Christian tradition, is a much more essential and normalized ritual in voodoo and adat. “To understand that the self must leave if the loa is to enter, is to understand that one cannot be man and god at once” (Un arc-en-ciel, 52).

Similarly, the reverence of Malays for the bomoh has less to do with the latter’s capacities as teacher or religious leader (as in the case of the Muslim imam) than with the belief in the bomoh’s ability as a healer combining ancient, widely accessible knowledge of the medicinal qualities of specific herbs with a more elusive sense of cosmic harmony with nature. The persona in Moechtar Awang’s Tok Bageh, however assured of his own talent, resounds with reference to greater powers at work within him.

aku akan bangkit I shall rise
dengan semangat halilintar with the soul of lightning
aku akan meraung dengan I shall gallop with
semangat guruh the soul of thunder
akulah penjaga I am the protector
segenap hutan of each forest
akulah penyembuh setiap penyakit I am the healer of all diseases

Moechtar Awang (1981)

94 Automatic utterance is a key feature of Surrealist poetry to which the contemporary Malay mantera, as previously mentioned, evinces a more than superficial affiliation.
95 This is what Christ was, i.e. the reconciled duality of man and God. A voodoo understanding of the relationship between self as ego and loa is thus the rejection of Catholicism.
Though ‘soul’ is the standard English translation for the Malay *semangat*, a vital concept in Malay folk healing practices and adat in general, *semangat* is a spiritual essence that can be found even in objects that we are not accustomed to thinking of as having souls, including rocks, caves and blades of grass. Malay farmers speak colloquially of *semangat padi*, the notion that the soul of the rice grain determines the productivity of a given crop. The poet-*bomoh* in Moechtar’s poem, though he declares himself the “healer of all diseases,” acknowledges that his power is borrowed from the greater forces of thunder and lightning. The *hougan*-poet persona in *Un arc-en-ciel* is also the site of intricate interplay between the *je* of the poet and the multiple *je* of the succession of voodoo gods, a transfer of identity that dramatizes within the constraints of the written form the ritual of *loa* possession that habitually occurs in voodoo ceremonies. The *hougan*-poet is possessed not only by the various *loas* but by symbolic language that seems to have life and momentum of its own and that is charged with the spiritual and cultural values of his people.

Spirit possession is also figuratively a very useful motif in mantera and the *poème mystère vaudou* as postcolonial forms because the submergence of the ego during possession allows the emergence of repressed or forgotten memories. In the hysteria of possession, the possessed earns the license to challenge otherwise severe cultural ‘taboos,’ which may in reality be mere mirrors of the agendas of certain political groups. One such taboo that mantera and voodoo chant transgress is that of sexuality and so-called profane language. A verse in *Azaka-*
Médé, one of the poems grouped under the “Epiphany des dieux vaudou,” reads:

I say Oh! me Azaka *conilleur*  
*Conillons* with all our gods  
In the wild grass of the Whites  
*Conillons* with our sufferings  
*Conillons* with our fury  
Like Dessalines at Vertières  
We are a race of *conilleurs*  
Oh *conillons* until we’re out of brath  
*Conillons* with dazzled veins *conillons* (…)

*Un arc-en-ciel*, 141

The repetition of the neologism “*coniller*” and its derivatives, alternately at the beginnings and ends of lines, gives rise to a sense of the poet’s headiness produced by a combination of bitterness and pride in being a “race of *conilleurs.*” The majority of voodoo gods to whom Depestre gives voice in the section entitled “Epiphany des dieux vaudou” are generally portrayed as wholeheartedly sexual beings who are raucous, insolent but also a lot of fun, which Dayan’s explication of *coniller* also calls attention to. She explains: “A ‘*conillièr* garene’ is a wild rabbit; the neologism “*Coniller*” would certainly allude to the expression ‘to fuck like rabbits.’ Also a play on sound with the French verb *cogner* which means to drive in, to bump against or to thump” (*Un arc-en-ciel*, 249). The rarefied nature of mantera also permits the use of otherwise taboo language (an especially acute prohibition in the Malay frame of mind in which delicacy and respect are deeply
ingrained social laws) usually to do with sexuality. Voodoo and Malay *adat* both demonstrate an acceptance toward eroticism lacking in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures privileged to some extent in the postcolonial societies of Haiti and the Nusantara.

Despite the official institution of Islam as part of a quintessential Malay identity, the poetry of resacralization in the Nusantara turns necessarily to Malay cultural traditions with more immediate and direct relation to the nature itself, an attribute that seems to produce in correlation a world view more receptive to and appreciative of sensuality. In order to reconcile Islam’s emphasis on spiritual and physical purity with the “earthier” character of Malay *adat*, the merest hint of sexualized speech or behavior among Malays tends to be ascribed by Nusantara scholars, journalists and social scientists in general to the intrusion of Western influences during the colonial period. Because Nusantara Malay identity has been discursively shaped into a Malay-Muslim one, the hyphen standing in for an indissoluble and indestructible bridge between race and religion, it is in the interest of Malays to make the West a scapegoat for practices deemed unsavory by Islamic standards, even though many of these practices are related to or derive quite directly from indigenous Malay attitudes toward the body, its appropriate forms of expression and its relationship with the world. The candid acknowledgement of sensuality and sexual desire in ritual practices of *adat* complements the association of *adat* with the “local, mundane, tangible, and private” (Khoo, 2006). This asserts a unique postcolonial Nusantara identity
shaped by local forces and environments and frees the Malay subject from Islam’s universalizing claims to a telos of humankind.

**Animism is a Humanism**

Humanism in Western intellectual history is usually associated with the Italian renaissance and is so named because it encompasses a variety of perspectives in philosophy and social science that in some way or another affirm the project of philosophical anthropology; that is to say, they insist on the possibility of a universally human nature. Of key importance is the fact that this particular humanist tradition is a predominantly secular one in which the realm of the religious or otherwise supernatural is rejected as a basis of morality and decision-making. Depestre and Sutardji, on the other hand, contend that a picture of human nature is incomplete if due recognition is not paid to the value of spirituality as an integral aspect of humanity. Their pursuit of indigenous traditions and cultural forms works not only counters colonialism’s attempts to falsify and disconnect, but in fact takes the basic principles of these pre-colonial traditions as originary sources of a new and hybrid humanism that allows for greater individual variance by not privileging one type of epistemology over another.

In contrast to its Western counterpart, this humanism grants ample room for a pronounced emphasis on the spiritual if not supernatural. The strategy embodied by the mantera and the *poème mystère vaudou* may be characterized as a neo-animistic re-enchantment. This has some parallels in the Western literary
tradition with the re-sacralization of Nature as part of a postmodern ecological spirituality. Andrea Nightingale’s essay in *The Re-Enchantment of the World* discusses Henry David Thoreau and his retreat to a shed in the woods as an illustration of finding the sublime in communion with nature. According to Thoreau’s Transcendental beliefs, human thoughts have a deeply spiritual correspondence with Nature, but this is based rather on personal intuition than on religious doctrine. Voodoo and mantera poetry, on the other hand, envision a more comprehensive and communal reconfiguration of religious and ethical sensibility via nature: nature is not the outward sign of a single individual’s inward spirit, but the raw material to be harnessed to the well-being of the community by means of oral magic.

An animistic point of view proposes that by immersing the sensuous body in the sensual world, people come to know and find themselves. For postcolonial societies like the Nusantara and Caribbean, struggling to define their identity using borrowed terminology and in relation to artificial (in the sense of constructed) ideologies of nationhood, race and religion, the cyclical rhythms of the tangible world appear as a universal truth reassuringly void of political agenda. Anthropologists who visited Bali in the 1920s and 30s described it as the ‘Island of Gods and Demons’ (Picard, 1996: 32-33), while William Seabrook christened Haiti ‘The Magic Island’ in his book of the same name. In both the Malay and Caribbean imagination, the material and mystical worlds remain closely integrated into daily life through ritual forms of music and dance, folk
medicine and the power of oral magic that has its Western counterpoint in the mystification of the Word.

However, the different ways in which voodoo and adat are deployed in the poems discussed reveal different ways of navigating the tension between local inheritances and global ideoscapes. Discourses of hybridity are staple fodder in postcolonial discourses, but the comparison between representations of voodoo and adat can helpfully crystallize critical differences in the conceptions and consequences of hybridity in the Caribbean vis-à-vis the Nusantara. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are multicultural societies in pragmatic and bureaucratic senses; in other words, the officialization of plurality plays up racial differences instead of smoothing them over and distinct racial classifications are maintained for the expediencies of social and political administration. Contrast this to Haiti, which took more or less the completely inverse route: in the wake of Haiti’s shocking victory against the Napoleonic army and Jean-Jacques Dessalines’ proclamation of the independent black republic of Haiti in 1804, blackness was installed as the defining category of Haitian national identity. Henceforth, regardless of their shade or ethnic heritage, all Haitians “would be known as blacks and referred to only by the generic word black.”

Adat and the ancient oral charm of the mantera, on the other hand, promote a new humanism by unveiling the syncretism of Malayness instead of subsuming it within a transhistorical homogeneity, revising the notion of a universal culture that approaches the Glissantian notion of Relation.

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Dayan believes that the song of the voodoo gods is a principal element for both a lyrical and humane poetry because “Voodoo being profoundly animistic, you feel the intense beauty that it contains. Our poets have only to pronounce ‘open sesame’ and the cavern will open to millions” 97 (Un arc-en-ciel, 8). Depestre’s deliberate orientation of his text toward “l’occident Chrétien” is revealing, however, of an objective that is less all-embracing than Dayan’s description might suggest.

Jean Price-Mars asserts that “Voodoo is a religion because the initiated believe in the existence of spiritual beings who live partly in close contact with men, whose activities they control (...) Voodoo is a religion because out of the chaos of legends and distorted fables we can extract a theology” (Un arc-en-ciel, 7). But this process of ‘extraction’ is a colonial and colonizing practice, a technique derived from the religions of the book, and goes against the spirit of voodoo.

Bernadette Cailler states that the reader of Un arc-en-ciel “voit plus avec qu’à travers les yeux [des dieux vaudous]” (Cailler, 1979:57) a fate that the mantera manages more successfully to evade not only because, as Cailler suggests, the written form cannot do justice to the theatrics of the authentic voodoo ceremony, but because Depestre’s aforementioned orientation toward “l’Occident chrétien” compels him to enact the resacralization of postcolonial Haiti in the eyes of a specifically Christian European audience and his encyclopedic treatment of the voodoo pantheon in the poem reflects an epistemology that operates differently from voodoo tradition.

Un arc-en-ciel is much more explicitly political than any of the mantera in that he introduces the ‘white family from Alabama’ as the Other against whom the loa (or the poetic personae possessed by the loa) pit their magic. The celebrated adaptability of voodoo proves capacious enough in Depestre’s poème mystère vaudou to embrace the rhetoric and praxis of revolutionary Marxism, but this comes at the expense of the trans-ideological humanism envisioned by Sutardji or Chairil Anwar. If Islam is to the pre-Islamic Malay worldview a form of cultural colonization analogous to the imposition of Catholicism in Haiti—albeit one that has been taken on by most Malays as a genuine identity—then the restraint shown with regards to the politicization and “theologization” of literary mantera by Malay poets raises interesting points of comparison between their work and Depestre’s.

Unlike A Tale for Dien Tamaela, in which the audience to whom the persona addresses herself is not identified with a specific social, geopolitical or national group and the world of the poem is suggestively distinct from the material world, the voodoo figures in Un arc-en-ciel shift from the act of self-assertion and self-glorification in the first section entitled “Epiphanies of the Voodoo Gods” to paying homage to eminent figures in Haitian and black history, including Makandal, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Patrice Lumumba in the section “Les sept piliers de l’innocence”. As Dayan notes in her extensive introduction to Un arc-en-ciel, the Marxist dimension is at least as imperative to an understanding of the poem as the voodoo dimension. Depestre has the loa evoking these historical personages in order to attribute to the latter a mythic dimension that elevates
them almost to the status of sainthood, which points once again to the poem’s profoundly political motif.

Cailler argues furthermore that Depestre’s ultimate goal is less the depiction of voodoo ritual and imagination than the manipulation of the mythic substrata with a deliberately didactic purpose (1979:49). This purpose is to effect if not a reconciliation then at least a ceasefire between Haitian subjectivity and its former enemy, the form of the European colonizer, along with the white, Christian Western society that implicitly consented to the crime of colonialism by the self-serving and hypocritical values it espoused. The section “Romancero d’une petite lampe” which concludes Un arc-en-ciel ends on a mixed note of resentment and acceptance that recalls the unifying or universalist impulse of earlier ideologies like Negritude. The persona proclaims:

Occident chrétien mon frère terrible  
Mon signe de croix le voici :  
Au nom de la révolte  
Et de la justice  
Et de la tendresse  
Ainsi soit-il!

(Un arc-en-ciel, 236)

While the politics of Un arc-en-ciel offer penetrative insight to the time of the poem’s composition, the sections that have fascinated later critics and readers of the poem are overwhelmingly the ones in which the voodoo world view is most prominent, namely the “Prelude” and the “Epiphanies des dieux vaudous;” not coincidentally, these are also the sections that are most faithful to the concept of a
“poème mystère vaudou” that Depestre self-professedly envisages. However, the playfulness and scope of these sections, especially “Epiphanies,” is compromised by the final unifying stance of the Romancero, which closes off an understanding of voodoo on its own terms by resorting to the universal but at the same time narrow symbolism of the cross at the end instead of the more seductive image of the rainbow we find in the opening lines, connecting heaven to earth and “dramatically [embodying] the interdependence of the earthly and eternal.”

Another Caribbean postcolonial luminary, Aimé Césaire, similarly opined that “[at] the same time that Depestre endeavors to engage himself in the voices of ‘the national [Antillean] poetry’ Depestre chooses to render his inspiration prisoner of the ready-made forms which rise up again very typically from the cosmopolitanism of international rhetoric” (Césaire, 1956: 6).

Though Chairil and other Indonesian poets also recovered the ancient mantera form at a time when anticolonial sentiment was rife and the spirit of rebellion robust, explicit references to the real-life historical events or personages is largely absent from the contemporary mantera, in direct contrast to the welding together of voodoo and revolution in Haitian national mythology. The contemporary mantera works as a vehicle for the re-sacralization of the native land by re-viewing the landscape, defined for so long in colonial or otherwise foreign terms, through the bomoh’s eyes – this gaze can see without the mediation of colonial and Islamic discourses. The bomoh, in comparison to the priest, sees a counter-landscape operating on an entirely different logic from the economic

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98 *Un arc-en-ciel*, 40.
pragmatism or streamlined multiculturalism governing political and social life in the contemporary Nusantara nation-states of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. In other words, the bomoh and the mantera poetry imitative of the bomoh’s spell-casting literally re-enchant the colonial land.

Malay nationalist discourses in Malaysia and Indonesia today classify their populations into indigenous/non-indigenous categories. These categories are expressed as bumiputra/non-bumiputra in Malaysia and pribumi/non-pribumi in Indonesia, but the variance in terms belies the same notion. Both sets of terms are Sanskrit in origin; the former, “bumiputra”, translates literally to “sons of the earth” (bumi=earth or land, putra=son). Because “bumiputra” status confers certain social, economic and political privileges on those who are deemed to belong to this category of indigenous people, the mechanics of definition are keenly scrutinized and contested.

In an earlier section of this chapter titled “The Politics of Adat and Voodoo,” I mentioned adat as a source of tension owing to the fact that in Malaysia and Indonesia, the religious category of ‘Muslim’ overlaps but never totally coincides with the racial category of the Malay within the ambiguous political category of bumiputera/pribumi. The first flush of excitement felt by postcolonial Malay writers rediscovering the poetic potential of the mantera has been quickly tempered by backlash from critics who view this move as a transgressive and counterproductive approach to establishing a modern Malay literature where ‘Malay’ weds ethnic and Islamic categories. Predictably, much of this body of

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99 These will be explained more thoroughly in Chapter 4.
criticism focuses on the un-Islamic—and by implication, un-Malay—character of the mantera. Yet the recuperation of adat as a vector of postcolonial Malay identity is an initiative that is growing apace, and the preoccupation of contemporary literary mantera with the tangible and sensual suggestively echoes the equally tactile image implied by the phrase “sons of the earth.”

Vitally, one of the strengths of the new mantera—its relative indifference to a dialectical confrontation with Western frames of reference and symbolic libraries—stems from a more general elision of colonialism’s role in shaping contemporary Malay epistemology in the Nusantara. Although the mantera avoids in this manner the criticism leveled against Depestre’s poem as being excessively conditioned by his disaffection toward the Christian West, the corollary of this buoyancy is that the Malay’s analysis of his/her position at the crossroads of race, religion, national culture and other miscellaneous threads of postcolonial identity assume as transhistorical ‘facts’ what are in reality ideological constructs. The historical amnesia resulting from this has significant repercussions for how Malays in the Nusantara perceive and portray difference and plurality today.
IV. Coming Full Circle
Frantz Fanon and the Encounter Between Caribbean and Nusantara

References to Malay landscapes and culture pop up in the work of Francophone Caribbean writers with what I initially considered surprising frequency, but as previously described, the exploratory voyages of the European Renaissance introduced the Malay world into the Francophone imagination by way of Orientalist and Romantic French literature and established the Malay world as one of many sources Francophone authors mined for creative inspiration. A tenuous literary bridge was in this way established between two cultures that did not otherwise interact in tangible, quantifiable ways by the criteria of the time. This literary relationship has been for the most part uni-directional, but Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad’s deployment of Frantz Fanon in her internationally-acclaimed film Sepet (2004) represents a rare instance in which it is the Francophone Caribbean world that is the object of Nusantara scrutiny.

As postcolonial theory would lead us to expect, Yasmin and Fanon shared many similar concerns about the future of the nation after the trauma of colonialism. How can the large and especially smaller nations created in the wake
of retreating colonialism address the problem of their economic dependency? Who is entitled to lead the postcolonial nation given the compromised position of the elite schooled in the colonial tongue and shaped in the colonial frame of mind? How can racial and religious divisions be transcended when the creation of the nation was predicated upon the alleged truth of such categories? Despite the shared relevance of these questions to both thinkers, however, the responses of each are site-specific, re-enacting the persistent binary between local and global.

This chapter will invoke and analyze a debate over Yasmin’s use of Fanon in *Sepet*, which begins with criticisms directed at the filmmaker by Adeline Koh and Frieda Ekotto. Their critique is based on the film’s decontextualization and misrepresentation of Fanon’s French Caribbean/Martiniquan background and its influence on his thought. Specifically, they focus their critique on the fact that the female protagonist Orked identifies Fanon as a “black Algerian,” a description that if taken literally is wrong and at any rate obscures the complexity of Fanon’s engagement with the racial hierarchy instituted by French colonialism. As they trace Fanon’s relevance to contemporary Malaysia, Koh and Ekotto define “relevance” in a way that is, from my point of view, too narrow, and downplays Yasmin’s agency in the intertextual reference she makes to Fanon in *Sepet*. While I acknowledge Koh and Ekotto’s arguments, I also expand upon their essay by incorporating the Glissantian concepts of Relation, archipelization and

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100 In addition to their collaborative article on Frantz Fanon in *Sepet*, Adeline Koh and Frieda Ekotto also co-edited a volume of essays on the international Third Cinema movement. The Malaysian Koh is an Assistant Professor of Literature at Richard Stockton College, working primarily in the fields of postcolonial studies and comparative Asian and African studies, while the Cameroonian Ekotto is a Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, who has written extensively on 20th century narratives and theater, feminist discourses and narratives of Francophone women writers.
creolization raised in preceding chapters. In particular, I argue that there may be advantages accruing from the misreading of Fanon in *Sepet* (intentional or not) even though the lack of explanation of the Francophone colonial context in what is after all a film, not an essay, seems in Koh and Ekotto’s view to render the “application of Fanon to the Malaysian context… necessarily superficial.”

One of the questions Koh and Ekotto pose in their article relates to the applicability of Fanon’s work to “the Anglophone subject—colonized under a different ‘type’ of colonization than the Francophone subject” (Koh and Ekotto, 2010: 121), but by framing it in this way, the authors lose sight of the fact that the Malay subject in British Malaya is not and did not become Anglophone in the way that the black Martiniquan is, was or became Francophone. Furthermore, the difference between the French and British modes of colonialism does not eliminate the possibility that the postcolonial power relationships and forms of domination faced by Francophone Caribbeans and Malays may be somehow comparable, as my comparative analyses in chapters 2 and 3 propose. As Glissant points out, Caribbean artists and intellectuals have inspired and even assumed leading roles in the revolutions of other people, an achievement that required them to adapt themselves and their ideologies to foreign exigencies. Césaire’s intellectual influence in African decolonization and the contributions of Marcus Garvey in the United States, George Padmore in Ghana and Fanon in Algeria illustrate the diverse attempts of Caribbeans to both transcend the

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101 Adeline Koh & Frieda Ekotto, “Frantz Fanon in Malaysia: Reconfiguring the Ideological Landscape of Negritude in *Sepet*” in Magali Compan & Katarzyna Pieprzak, eds. *Land and Landscape in Francographic Literature* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), 133.

102 Trinidadian by birth, Padmore rose to subsequent fame as a leading Pan-Africanist.
narrowness and vulnerability of their geopolitical condition and to inscribe the importance of the Caribbean as a source of intellectual inspiration for the postcolonial world through their revolutionary praxis.

While each locality experiences Eurocolonialism somewhat differently, and English and French colonialisms differ in many details, it may be that Caribbean postcolonial thinking retains such general applicability and relevance because Eurocolonialism shared certain features: a desire to dominate and control other peoples and their resources; an accompanying dehumanization or at least imposed subordination; and the basing of these on theories of civilizational and racial superiority. Moreover, as formerly colonized regions gradually came to the realization that nominal national independence did very little to unseat the racism and economic dependency introduced by colonialism, this sense of ongoing double subjectivity—self-governing on one hand but defined through political and economic relationships with the former metropole on the other—seemed perhaps best signified by the official departmentalization of Francophone Caribbean regions, marking its peoples as inhabitants neither of colonies nor independent countries.

As the outline of the relationship between pantun and pantoum in Chapter 1 establishes, the charge of superficiality is not automatically negative. That Hugo’s minor orthographical modification of ‘pantun’ unwittingly produced an altogether different but thriving poetic creature in the Western ‘pantoum’ testifies to Glissant’s identification of the scale and unpredictability of the butterfly effect at work in cultural exchange. The alleged misinterpretation of Fanon in Sepet
does not therefore preclude the possibility that a new kind of consciousness may
be kindled among the film’s Malaysian and indeed global audience, analogous in
effect if not in substance, to the one Fanon wrought among his fellow
Francophone Caribbeans.

The Romantic Exception

Briefly, *Sepet* is the story of the romance that blooms between Orked, a
middle-class Malay-Muslim girl, and Ah Loong a.k.a Jason, a Chinese boy from
a working class family who sells pirated DVDs for a living and struggles to
extricate himself from a Chinese gang he joined before the film begins. Their
interracial love plays out against a backdrop of characteristically postcolonial
concerns including race, religion and the complications of hybrid identities,
occaisioning a candid portrayal of multiracial plurality all too rare in Malaysian
films. The film’s title is a Malay term that describes the condition of possessing
single eyelids or, used pejoratively, slit-eyed. Like many anthroposcopic
descriptions, the word *sepet* can never be fully neutral; it describes outward
appearance while always claiming insight into internal character. The *sepet*
person, in the Malaysian context invariably Chinese, is associated with not just
inscrutability but also dishonesty: you cannot read his eyes. *Sepet*-ness is used in
this way to define the racial Other.

I sympathize with Koh and Ekotto’s frustration with the film’s ultimate
inability to conclusively transcend the racial stereotypes it evokes within the
compass of the central romantic relationship between Jason and Orked,
especially in juxtaposition to the freshness of the other relationships explored in
the film, but one senses Yasmin’s unabashed sentimentality at work in the
portrayal of this romance as being somehow otherworldly, loosened from the
pressures and influences shaping other instances of cultural contact in Malaysia.

Jason and Orked’s love is not without adversity and heartache; Orked ends
their relationship when she finds out that Jason has betrayed her trust by hiding
his loveless but unresolved relationship with a Chinese girl whose elder brother
heads the Chinese gang of which Jason is a reluctant member. When the girl
reveals that she is pregnant, Jason decides to marry her and raise the child,
prompted both by his own conscience and her brother’s threats of reprisal should
Jason refuse to assume responsibility, a decision that effectively puts an end to
the possibility of rekindling his relationship with Orked in the future. Yet, as
Yasmin herself indicated in a post on her blog, Malaysian critics repeatedly took
issue with the fact that Orked’s and Jason’s parents supported their children’s
interracial, interreligious relationship, a filmic fact they deemed extremely
unrealistic. More religiously conservative critics were also concerned that Orked,
whom the film depicts her as a practicing and pious Muslim, had not attempted
to convert Jason to Islam or even broach the topic of religion. Although the film’s
protagonists suffer real pain as part of their romance, Yasmin shows that the
causes of this pain are universally human weaknesses like Jason’s irresolution in
his relationship with his Chinese compatriots Orked’s naivete toward the
difficulties of Jason’s situation, not the obvious differences of race and religion.

held to be insurmountable sources of strife in postcolonial Malaysia. Interracial love may not be idealized, but it is defiantly normalized in opposition to the criticism that interracial relationships are built on the fantasy and fetishization of stereotypes, as appears to be the case in Fanon’s *Peau noir, masques blancs*. As the irreverent Singaporean Malay poet Alfian Sa’at writes in his review of *Sepet*: “The point that *Sepet* makes is that quite often, inter-racial relationships happen precisely because of an inverse scenario: what the two leads are interested in is each other’s subjectivity. If the skin is a garment, then like all genuine and frantic lovers, they are more interested in what lies beneath.”

In contrast to the neo-realist cinematography and pacing, the depiction of Jason and Orked’s relationship borrows the techniques of melodrama from their initial encounter at the outdoor market where Jason peddles his illegal VCDs. As their eyes meet and lock, the soundtrack is drained of diegetic sound, time stands still, the camera’s unsubtle shot-reverse shot zooms in on Jason’s undeniably sepet eyes and there is no doubt of the expression contained therein: it is love at first sight. Later, in one of the film’s concluding scenes, Orked calls Jason from her cell phone en route to the airport to catch her flight to the UK. Chronologically, this follows a scene in which we witness Jason in a motorcycle accident and the screen cuts to a shot of Jason’s phone ringing just out of reach of his bloodied and motionless corpse. Suddenly, the connection is made and Orked is able to tell Jason she loves him before she leaves Ipoh, but in light of the scene that came before, the audience is left to wonder if the voice on the other end was Jason’s or

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if—implausibly though not impossibly—Yasmin intends a tragic conceit to show that the strength of their love crosses not merely racial and religious lines but the line between material and metaphysical as well.

Because her fellow Malay girls watch Hollywood films and sigh after boyish heartthrobs like Leonardo DiCaprio, Orked’s attraction to men of Chinese and Japanese descent comes across as a symptom of her idiosyncrasy, which is also figured as a possibility for other Malay women. She professes to be a fan of John Woo films and her favorite actor is Takeshi Kaneshiro, a Japanese-Taiwanese star who shot to fame in the critically-acclaimed Wong Kar Wai film *Chungking Express* (1994) and was dubbed “the Asian film industry’s Johnny Depp” by Time Magazine in a nod to Kaneshiro’s versatility and good looks. Jason, in turn, tells Orked of a Malay girl he had once admired from afar as a young boy but never had the courage to approach or ask her name. When Orked jokes that she is merely a substitute for this girl he knew a long time ago, Jason responds that the Malay girl “was destiny’s way of preparing me for Orked.” Similarly, *Sepet* implies that Orked’s love for Jason was prophesied by her preference for East Asian physical features. The complicity of destiny [to which Jason refers in Mandarin as *yuan fen*] in their love story underlines once again its exception from the rule.

The pertinence of postcolonialism and postcolonial theory in the film is evidenced by the narrative suspension effected to give Orked a chance to summarize Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* when her best friend Lin

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picks the book up randomly from among Orked’s collection. Yasmin could easily have chosen to have the issues of interracial dating and intercultural plurality discussed within a strictly local frame of reference, which she did to critical acclaim in the advertisements she produced as part of the Malaysian Independence Day celebrations in 2008\(^{106}\) as well as in *Gubra* and *Mukhsin*, the other two films in the Orked trilogy. Since she did not, the deliberate and reflexive insertion of Fanon in *Sepet* calls attention to itself. However, the moment in the film where Fanon is directly referenced is ironically the point where the essence of Fanonian analysis is least accurately explicated, which gives Koh and Ekotto grounds for claiming that Yasmin’s particular interpretation of Fanon limits his relevance to the Malaysian context.

Notable scholars of Malay studies ranging from Virginia Matheson Hooker to Ismail Talib remark the absence of the Nusantara from much of Anglophone postcolonial studies and vice-versa. Hooker alleges that the distinctiveness of the Malaysian Malay experience as expressed through its contemporary literature is in fact incomprehensible by a postcolonial framework, while Ismail Talib conversely favors a greater acquaintance between the two. The bipolarity of their views is a conspicuous hint that the introduction of a postcolonial optic into the discourse of Malay identity will have rewardingly unpredictable effects, the *imprévisibilité* of genuine creolization that Glissant celebrates. In evaluating the application of Fanon in *Sepet*, Koh and Ekotto are unduly unforgiving of the eager but bumbling quality that attends many a new and original encounters. As

\(^{106}\) One of the most popular advertisements in this series is a brief clip entitled “Percintaan Tan Hong Ming [The Love of Tan Hong Ming]” available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UehSIIOQi2I.
she summarizes *The Wretched of the Earth* as being “basically… about the psychological effect the *penjajah* [colonizer] has on the *dijajah* [colonized],” Orked feigns a menacing tone of voice and accompanies her explanation by punching her right fist into her other palm. The campy, jokey nature of her explanation emphasizes the foreignness of such an idea for Lin and for most Malaysians, a novel point of view that requires humor to defuse or diffract its strangeness.

Like Koh and Ekotto, I was skeptical about the choice of *The Wretched of the Earth* over *Black Skin, White Masks* to make an appearance in the film, as the latter text seemed at first viewing more apposite to the film’s central narrative and themes of racial stereotypes, the racialization of desire and the relationship of the formerly-colonized to the colonizer’s language. In the chapter entitled “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” for instance, Fanon declares his attempt to determine “to what extent authentic love remains impossible as long as this feeling of inferiority or this Adlerian107 exaltation… has not been purged.”108 This question clearly troubles the Jason/Orked romance, as revealed by Jason’s self-conscious adoption of a Western name for Orked’s benefit. When his friend asks what is wrong with his given name (Ah Loong), Jason responds with charming and realistic honesty: “It’s not so cool lah.”109

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107 A reference to the theories of the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler. In the context of Fanon’s discussion of the woman of color, he implies by Adlerian exaltation an affection or sexual preference premised upon antiblack racism, “lactification” (the desire to whiten oneself) and white male love.


109 In Malaysia (and Singapore), English has been inflected with the words and tonal qualities of the various local languages like Malay, a smattering of Chinese dialects and a bit of Tamil, consequently developing into colloquial creole/pidgin forms of English. “Lah” is often tacked on to the end of phrases or sentences and, while void of any meaning unto itself, can be tonally inflected in a variety of ways to affect the emotion the speaker intends to convey.
The relationship between Orked’s best friend Lin and her boyfriend, both Malays, also illustrates the psychopathology Fanon elucidates in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as the film implies that Lin is attracted to him for his fair complexion (by Malay standards) and sharp features, traits commonly associated with whiteness, making the attraction cross-racial in some sense. The superficiality of the emotional connection between Lin and her boyfriend even though they are both of Malay Muslim backgrounds underscores the film’s message that whether two people are so in sync that they are practically one (as in the case of Jason and Orked) or emotionally so distant that they hardly know one another hinges on many variables besides race and religion. Lin’s boyfriend, unnamed in the film, shows an undue amount of interest in and antipathy toward Orked and Jason’s relationship. In one of their many quarrels, he accuses Orked of being “just one of those stupid Malay girls who think they are too good for their own race. Hanging around Hard Rock lah, Nouveau¹¹⁰ lah, *cari Mat Salleh¹¹¹ konon* [looking for a white man].” Although he knows full well that Orked’s boyfriend is Chinese and in fact makes a point of mocking Jason’s *sepet* eyes, he fails to realize the inconsistency of this particular slight with his ensuing claim that Orked seeks out Caucasian men – the unconscious implication is both that her own people are not good enough for Orked and that she inappropriately wants to love across racial borders. Orked’s sharp reply provokes a heated debate between the two on the subject of interracial marriage.

¹¹⁰ Presumably a favorite haunt of Caucasian tourists and expatriates, like the Hard Rock Café.
¹¹¹ A phrase used to describe Caucasians, with a slight pejorative overtone.
ORKED

One, I tak pernah pergi club, OK. Two, aku tak cari Mat Salleh, aku tak suka Mat Salleh, awek kau yang suka Mat Salleh. Kau sedar, kau tu Mat Salleh celup. Muka cam Mat Salleh, tapi English tak pass.

[One, I don’t go to clubs. Two, I don’t fancy white meat, your girlfriend does. You know what you are? A substitute white man who failed his English exam.]

(…)

For generations, Malay men have been marrying outside their race… Takda hal je, alright je. Sekarang aku nak buat, semua bising. Apa hal?

[It was cool, it was alright. Now a woman wants to do it, everybody’s flapping. What’s up with that?]

BOY

Oh, so it’s all about balas dendam [taking revenge] eh.

The assumption made by Lin’s boyfriend that Orked cannot be motivated to date a Chinese boy except out of bitterness or to seek vengeance highlights the Malay man’s dual sense of insecurity with respect to the cultural and historical superiority of the former white European colonizers and the present-day socioeconomic ascendancy of the Chinese. Orked refutes the boy’s provocations by pointing out the gender bias in racial discourse as well as his lack of awareness of the pathologies lurking beneath the surface of his own relationship with Lin. She calls him a Mat Salleh celup, an offensive way of referring to Malays, or any non-Whites for that matter, who try to pass themselves off as Caucasian in
behavior and speech, ultimately falling prey to the ersatz assimilation Fanon derided in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Even though Lin’s boyfriend bears some visibly Caucasian traits, highly prized in Malaysian standards of beauty, Orked says that he can never be anything but a poor substitute for Leonardo DiCaprio, the actual object of Lin’s desire. Ironically, the insult *Mat Salleh celup* is often used against Malays who are more fluent in English than in their native Malay tongue, as this is taken to be a sign of snobbery, but the boy’s mastery of English is decidedly lacking. This relates to yet another topic to which Fanon devotes an entire chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*, namely the engagement of the colonized with the language of the colonizer. Unlike Jason and Orked, who are both multilingual and effortlessly code-switch throughout the film in speech, mannerisms and dress, Lin’s boyfriend comes across as blinkered by his uncritical smugness in being a part of Malay hegemony.

In more than one instance *Sepet* seems to contend that Orked’s preference for Chinese and Japanese men is outside ideology and that race-consciousness is perfectly acceptable when it becomes an element in love rather than hate. Orked questions at one point, “who cares if that someone likes that other someone because of their race? It’s when they hate them, that’s the problem;” significantly, this enters into dialogue with Fanon’s opposite assertion in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* that “an individual who loves Blacks is as ‘sick’ as someone who abhors them.”\(^{112}\) We cannot know whether Yasmin intended it to

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\(^{112}\) *Black Skin, White Masks*, xii.
do so, but the intertextuality is striking. Problematic as racialized desire may be, Koh and Ekotto exaggerate the equivalence between the pathology of the black/white interracial relationship and the Malay/Chinese pairing in *Sepet*; although colonial racism is responsible for the friction between the Malay and Chinese communities in Malaysia today, these communities still confront each other on a plane of relative equality wherein the political and cultural advantages accruing to the dominant Malays are counterbalanced by the economic advantage of the Chinese. This is decidedly distinct from the ‘adoration’ of blacks by whites which brings to mind the uncomfortable tropes of infantilization.

Yasmin’s cinematic oeuvre is committed to presenting the political and economic implications of Malaysia’s multiculturalism as realistically as possible, but romance and love seem to transcend all worldly systems, including Fanon’s. In order to understand Yasmin’s engagement with Fanon’s legacy, concerns and theories, we have to look to the parts of the film outside of the love plot, where the intertextuality between *Sepet* and Fanon’s writings yield unpredictable and therefore more fascinating points of comparison.

**Malaysian Créolité in *Sepet***

The composition of Jason and Orked’s families are extremely interesting; while they ostensibly abide by official racial categories (Orked’s family is Malay, Jason’s Chinese) these categories are steadily broken down over the course of the film by the revelation of quirks unique to each family member. Yasmin uses Jason’s family in particular to stage arguments and conversations that reveal the
beauty and the tribulations of cross-cultural societies such as postcolonial Malaysia. The film opens with a scene of Jason reading a Mandarin translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “The Judge” aloud to his mother. She is wearing the baju kebaya, a Malay traditional dress, disclosing her Peranakan heritage. The term ‘Peranakan’ (literally ‘descendants’) designates populations of Chinese descent in the Nusantara who have been settled there for a considerable amount of time, usually for more than five generations,\(^\text{113}\) and who have been steeped in the local Malay-dominated culture. In Malaysian racial discourse, the Peranakan Chinese community has become shorthand for the dynamism and interpenetration of cultural and racial boundaries. As Alfian Sa’at writes in his review of Sepet, Yasmin makes the point that racial categories are “descriptive, not prescriptive, and even when they describe they are woefully inadequate. When you have a Peranakan in the cast, you know that’s always a big Up Yours to strict Chinese/Malay classifications.”\(^\text{114}\)

The fluidity of ethnic identity thus established, a conversation ensues between Jason and his mother about the poem in which Jason converses in Cantonese while she responds in Malay, highlighting the weakness of strict linguistic boundaries as well. If “[a] man who possesses a language possesses as

\(^{113}\) Although the word ‘peranakan’ itself can be merged with qualifying descriptions to describe other communities including the Jawi Peranakans (descendants of intermarriages between Muslim South Indians and local women) or the Chitty Melaka (descendants of intermarriages between Hindu South Indians and local women), it is generally assumed that ‘Peranakan’ in general refers to the substantial Peranakan Chinese community, descendants of Chinese traders who settled in Malacca and the coastal areas of Java and Sumatra as early as the 14th century. Sometime during the 19th century, Chinese merchants also began to frequent the increasingly bustling commercial ports of Penang and Singapore and started a Peranakan community there as well.

an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language,” then Jason’s mother ought to be considered as Malay as any of Orked’s family. The persona of “The Judge,” a parent, says: “I alone have a right to blame and punish, for he only may chastise who loves.” Jason urges his mother to guess where the writer of the poem is from, and when he informs her it was not a Chinese but a Bengali poet she expresses surprise, before remarking musingly that emotions and cultural mores can transcend linguistic differences. The absence of a translating medium between them is notable yet totally natural; each understands what the other says, but opts to speak in the language they are respectively most fluent in.

Immediately following this scene is one in which we are introduced to the female protagonist Orked. She is dressed in the telekung (a garment worn by Malay Muslim ladies for the daily prayers) and is reciting the Qur’an in Arabic. She closes the Qur’an and goes over to the closet to replace the book on its shelf, and as she opens the closet door the camera allows us a glimpse of the posters of Takeshi Kaneshiro, a Japanese-Taiwanese actor, plastered liberally all over the closet’s interior. To add to the contrast between Orked’s glaringly conservative Muslim prayer garb and the images of the star she ‘idolizes,’ a woman’s voice calls her in Malay to come down to dinner and Orked responds in English that she will be down soon.

Regardless of their common Chinese ethnicity, the different cultural backgrounds of Jason’s parents serve as a major source of tension. Jason’s mother

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115 Black Skin, White Masks, 2.
likes old Malay films and music but can only listen to her Malay records when his father is not home because he hates all Malay songs. Since his father’s recent motorcycle accident has left him house-bound, his mother can no longer listen to the music she prefers, so “whenever they fight,” Jason tells Orked, “my mother always asks him to get knocked down by a lorry so that she can listen to her P. Ramlee songs.” The assemblage of the family around the dinner table suggests an image of unity that contrasts ironically with the different languages each member speaks. Amid this polyglot cacophony the transition from conversation to argument is almost imperceptible, dimming the utopic aspect of hybridity by showing the double-edged nature of such a mélange within the family unit. Jason’s brother has married a woman who, despite also being Chinese, is regarded as an outsider by her parents-in-law because she is Singaporean. From her usage of Mandarin instead of the Cantonese dialect spoken by Jason’s family to her parenting methods, any points of difference or disagreement between her and Jason’s family are inevitably attributed to this Singapore/Malaysia divide, with hardly any attention paid to generational and socioeconomic gaps. These scenes are nuanced and understated in their exploration of difference and Otherness in a way that other scenes, more obviously climactic in that they revolve around the central romantic plot, do not quite manage.

Though Yasmin Ahmad was not the first Malaysian filmmaker to use dialogue that actually reflected the Malaysian vernacular, which incorporates words and syntactical constructions from English, Malay, and various Chinese dialects, the popular success and controversy that Sepet generated drew attention
also to the film’s refusal to stick solely to pure or proper Malay between characters despite the official designation of Malay as the national language (Bahasa Malaysia). Alongside names like Teck Tan, James Lee and Amir Muhammad, Yasmin Ahmad was one of a handful of independent Malaysian filmmakers who came of age artistically speaking in the 1990s when former Premier Mahathir Muhammad’s vision of a united and multicultural Malaysian identity was simultaneously gaining greater ground and showing its cracks. As the awareness of a hybrid Malaysian identity seeped into every aspect of daily life and social interaction, the persistence of institutionalized racial and religious segregation in governance and economic policy triggered a greater sense of marginalization and discontent expressed in many of these new independent films of the 1990s, particularly films by non-Malay filmmakers or which targeted a primarily non-Malay audience.

From Malaysian independence in 1957 until well into the 1990s, the overwhelming majority of Malaysian films gave the misleading impression that Malaysia was an ethnically homogenous nation.\(^\text{117}\) This situation is fostered, knowingly or otherwise, by the National Film Development Corp of Malaysia (FINAS), established in the 1980s to regulate and promote the growth of the film industry. With state backing, however, FINAS has been accused of using the twin weapons of censorship and funding control to ensure that Malay-centric films are the easiest to produce and screen, as the FINAS Act of 1981 states that

\(^{117}\) Malays currently make up 50.4% of the population, while other bumiputra (e.g. the orang asli of the Borneo territories, some ethnic Thais and indigenized Muslim immigrants) make up an additional 11%. Minority groups include those of Chinese descent, roughly 23.7% of the population, while 7.1% are of Indian descent. There is also a very small community of Eurasians descended from interracial unions between British, Dutch and Portuguese colonists and local Malays.
films permitted to represent Malaysia at international exhibitions and festivals must be made by Malaysians in the Malay language. Films whose predominant language is other than the official language of Bahasa Malaysia, merely a euphemism for the Malay language, are not considered ‘Malaysian’ films and are therefore ineligible for state-funded loans and schemes channeled through FINAS. In addition, such films are disqualified from the Skim Wajib Tayang (Compulsory Screening Scheme) set up to warrant local films a minimum of one week’s screening time in Malaysian cinemas, allowing them to compete with the heftier budgets of productions streaming in from abroad.

FINAS’ measures derive from the National Culture Policy promulgated in 1971, which proposed that the Malay culture form the core of a national Malaysian culture and identity, around which the languages and customs of non-Malays would be selectively incorporated. A strident Malay identity was part and parcel of a perceived patriotism which relied on the notion of culture as static, homogeneous, exclusionary and therefore preservable. Even when the institutional basis of the 1971 policy was eroded under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad, who argued in favor of a properly multicultural ‘Malaysian’ instead of Malay national identity, the mainstream film community continued to privilege films that were Malay-centric in their representations of Malaysian history and culture. In these films, directed by Malays and featuring almost exclusively Malay characters and dialogue in a bizarre disavowal of existing multiculturalism, ethnic heterogeneity was likely to be acknowledged, if at all,
through the crassest of stereotypes—the Chinese are represented by greedy and opportunistic businessmen, while Indians are always the comedic relief.

The dearth of non-Malay characters and storylines is criticized as being unreflective of Malaysian ethnic and religious diversity, but this critical angle begs the question. A more subterranean and hence more pernicious effect of this state of affairs is the assumption that Malayness simply and self-explanatorily exists. In reality, “Malay-Malayness has been constructed by a colonial historiography and subsequently adopted uncritically by most historians in the postcolonial Nusantara, both Malays and non-Malays.” By avoiding the representation of difference and proceeding from the idea that there is a normative and self-contained Malay culture, Malaysian films of this kind facilitate the pretermission of two deeply contentious policies which have had formative influences on the conceptualization of Malay identity today, namely bumiputra laws and the Islamic resurgence in the Nusantara, which have developed in tandem since the postwar period.

Yasmin’s choice of *The Wretched of the Earth* over *Black Skin, White Masks*, which seems peculiar if we concentrate on the love story, clicks into place if we shift our focal point toward issues that the film allows itself to depict with a more hardboiled touch. True love, Yasmin argues, is meant to be felt; analysis and over-intellectualization culminating in cynicism is one of the most serious errors that audiences can commit with respect to appreciating the Jason/Orked

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relationship. Malaysian national culture and national consciousness, on the other hand, are real and critical problems that Fanon can be instrumental in elucidating.

**Bumiputra Policy**

Chapter 3 provided a summary definition of bumiputra as “sons of the earth,” or indigenous inhabitants of the land. The perennial issue of bumiputra policy in Malaysia reliably generates a good deal of ink and diatribe but the divisiveness of this issue eclipses the origins of the very concept of Malay autochthony in the administrative needs of British colonialism. Coined in its modern political guise by the first Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in recognition of the “special position” accorded to Malays in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, the term ‘bumiputra’ and its current definitions fluctuate in public use among different institutions, government departments and agencies. The Malaysian Higher Education Ministry defined bumiputra as follows:

1. Peninsular Malaysia
   - "If one of the parents is Muslim Malay as stated in Article 160 (2) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus the child is considered as a Bumiputra"

2. Sabah
   - "If one of the parents is a Muslim Malay or indigenous native of Sabah as stated in Article 160A (6)(a) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus his child is considered as a Bumiputra"
3. Sarawak

- "If both of the parents are indigenous natives of Sarawak as stated in Article 160A (6)(b) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus their child is considered as a Bumiputra"

Analyzing 16th and 17th century sources, Anthony Reid contends that the category of ‘Malay’ was fluid and subjective, in fact “exceptionally open to new recruits from any background.”

In contrast, the aspiration toward scientific precision discernible in the abovementioned constitutional definitions of bumiputra echoes but reverses the obsessively meticulous blood-drop arithmetic of racial métissage and hierarchy in the French Caribbean.

This parallel is no coincidence, as the mathematical calculations of racial mixture in the Caribbean and bumiputra law in Malaysia are perfect examples of colonialism as a “determining force” still at work in the structuring of identity today. Koh and Ekotto opine, based on the development of the central romantic plot, that Yasmin does not do enough to call attention to the role the experience of colonialism plays in structuring the postcolonial subject. However, in a casual conversation between Orked’s mother and Kak Yam (the family’s Malay maid), Yasmin quite pointedly has Kak Yam lament the fact that Orked’s score of 5 A’s in the national examinations has won her a scholarship to further her university education.

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120 The assimilation disparate ethnic groups under the banner of Malayness is the inverse of the process of racial categorization in Martinique, where an entire vocabulary was created to account for varying degrees of whiteness. For instance, the offspring of a white man and a black woman was a mulâtre, while the offspring of a black man and a mulâtresse (the feminine of mulâtre) would be termed a câpre. More examples may be found at http://espace-caraibes.kazeo.com/Culture-et-traditions/Les-origines-multiraciales-martiniquaises,a251108.html (accessed on March 25, 2011).
studies in the UK, even though Jason’s superior score of 7 A’s earns him nothing that will allow him to give up his illegal work selling pirated DVDs. The juxtaposition between Orked’s and Jason’s families may be read as an indictment of the way socioeconomic status and bumiputra policy interact to give the Orkeds of the world undue advantage over the Jases in Malaysia.

Fanon’s harsh critique of the flaccid bourgeois class that materializes in formerly colonized countries has clear resonances with the notion of the “bumigeois,” a term of recent coinage that combines the Malay word “bumiputra” with “bourgeoisie” to refer to members of the Malay bourgeoisie with kampong or rural roots. The bourgeois in colonized societies reap the benefits of the European bourgeoisie without ever having displayed the impulse to “production, invention, creation, or work” that allowed the bourgeoisie to rise to power in the developed economies of Europe.

Bumiputra policy is so controversial not only because it is selective in its conferral of privileges, but because the ideological category of the bumiputra is so ill-defined. There are minority voices clamoring to have bumiputra privilege abolished altogether, but there are also other minorities that contest bumiputra policy from the perspective of trying to make a case for their inclusion in the category of bumiputra so that they too might benefit from the shortcut to the politically privileged bourgeois status. As part of their policy of divide and rule, the British elevated the Malays to the status of bumiputra in contrast to other ethnic groups of immigrant ancestry, chiefly from China and India. In so doing

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121 The Wretched of the Earth, 98.
they placated the Malay rulers whom they had stripped of any practical sovereignty and purchased the loyalty of the Malay community at large, who zealously sought and received clerical positions in the colonial administration. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the British simultaneously compensated the Malay kings for the abrogation of their worldly power by accentuating their status as religious leaders, paving the way for the top-down conflation between Islam and Malayness current in public discourse.

Public discourse tends to conflate bumiputra and Malay, and though both these categories are manipulable and mutable, they are not necessarily contiguous. The elaboration of bumiputra ideology over time included under its umbrella of indigene populations the orang asli (‘aboriginal people’ or ‘natural people’) of Sabah and Sarawak.

Traditionally animists, the nominal conversion of most orang asli to Islam is less relevant to their obtaining bumiputra status than the fact that they are regarded as the earliest inhabitants of the Nusantara, even though the definition of bumiputra on Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) specifies that someone is only considered bumiputra if s/he has at least one parent of Muslim Malay descent. The granting of bumiputra status to the orang asli regardless of their lack of Islamic cultural heritage is based on the logic that the length of their settlement in the Nusantara merits special recognition. As a result, the denial of bumiputra status to descendants of Chinese migrants who have lived in present-day Malaysia for centuries (including the Peranakan Chinese, who are culturally much closer to Malays than the aboriginal populations of Sabah or Sarawak)
makes little sense if recent migrants of South Asian or Arab descent are accepted quite easily as bumiputra by dint of their Muslim faith. Evidently, length of stay is not the only criterion, as recent Islamic migrants from the islands of Indonesia have been acknowledged as bumiputra as well. The racism of bumiputra ideology relies on a complex and constantly shifting matrix of discrimination involving biology, religion, language and history, and by explicitly calling attention to bumiputra policy at work in Sepet Yasmin Ahmad clearly engages the role of colonial history in shaping postcolonial subjectivity in Malaysia, rebutting Koh and Ekotto’s claim.

Following Britain’s humiliating incompetence in defending Malaya from the Japanese attack during World War II, growing support for decolonization in the Southeast Asian colonies combined with the empire’s post-war economic exhaustion combined to weaken the argument for continued British colonial presence in the region. Starting in the late 1940s and into the late 1950s, rebellion broke out against the British in the Malayan colonies, fought principally by the poorer working-class ethnic Chinese, supported by some ethnic Malays and Indians. The British declared this the Emergency; the latter stages of this war overlapped with the period of decolonization and the British regained some semblance of control only slowly and with a great deal of trouble. Britain withdrew in relative ignominy in 1957, the year of Malayan independence, leaving the ruling Malays in a precarious position. Political power in the early and uncertain days of independence rested in Malay hands, but the very slim numerical majority that Malays had over other ethnic groups by this point
required the symbolic currency of bumiputra status to justify the institutional hegemony of Malay culture and language and the gearing of government policies toward redressing the position of economic disadvantage in which most Malays found themselves in relation to successful and prosperous minorities, particularly the Chinese.

By the time of Sepet’s release in 2004, state-initiated ethnocentrism and the institutionalization of bumiputra policies—similar to American affirmative action policies, taking the form of myriad subsidies, preference in government housing purchases and greater availability of government funding to bumiputra-owned companies—had produced a mushrooming discourse about constitutional definitions of Malayness.

*The Rise of Political Islam in Malaysia*

In the Nusantara, the search for the essence of Malay national identity, which peaked in urgency following the breakdown of the colonial order in a blaze of anti-colonial and/or decolonization fires worldwide, coexisted with an ever-increasing insistence on the Islamic element of Malay society. There are intriguing but hitherto largely unremarked parallels between the Malay/Muslim tension and the similar dilemma Fanon identified between the continental aspirations of Negritude and the pressing need for national consciousnesses that alone would serve as authentic bases of a new postcolonial national culture. Tension between Malayness and Muslimness exists owing to Islam’s inherent transnationalism and the global religious community of the ummah; in its view, to
belong to this or that nation is a necessary localization, but one whose claims on identity are secondary to the primacy of the Islamic faith as contained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Similarly, black Caribbeans struggled in articulating a new identity for themselves to assert their membership in a global community of African descent, through which they reclaimed the dignity denied them by the bitter hypocrisy of French racism, without losing sight of the exceptionality and localization of the Caribbean experience.

Upon the release and subsequent international success of *Sepet*, a forum on the film was organized by the Ministry of Information and aired in Malaysia on national television. Controversy over the film’s frank depiction of, among other things, a married couple’s affectionate interaction with each other led to the denunciation of Yasmin as a “corrupter of culture.” One scene which aroused a great deal of criticism saw actors Ida Nerina and Harith Iskandar dancing with each other wearing only their sarongs. This was deemed distasteful, counter to Malay cultural values of diffidence and sexual modesty. Such lines of criticism have been countered by a new generation of Malay artists and intellectuals who reassert *adat* as a defining factor in Malay identity, meriting equal stature and influence as Islam. The rewriting of mantera by poets like Sutardji (see Chapter 3) seeks to uncover the disjunctive splits in temporality experienced by the Malay national subject who seeks legitimacy in a cultural past that is increasingly being expunged from definitions of the Islamified cultural present, a strategy enthusiastically embraced by independent Malaysian cinema in the last couple of decades.
Yasmin’s defiant insistence on portraying Malay characters in ways she knows will be regarded as “un-Islamic” by the popular masses is tied to her criticism of the government policy of hyper-Islamicized Malay identity that rejects the heritage of adat. Her Malay characters are Muslim without being judgmental of the actions and beliefs outside Islam, an indirect criticism of the political expedience behind the false symbiosis in much of the Nusantara between the categories of ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim,’ a policy which guarantees social privileges and political rights that certain interest groups are understandably loath to renounce. For many non-Malays in Singapore and Malaysia, Yasmin’s selflessness and fearlessness in criticizing the same policies of bumiputra privilege of which she was herself a potential beneficiary showed a laudatory humanism, even if this idealism seemed at times to veer perilously close to a rose-tinted utopianism. That the liberality of her outlook is not shared by the majority of Malays is proven by the forum’s title: “Sepet dan Gubra Mencemar Budaya [Sepet and Gubra Contaminate Our Culture].” The audience was invited at the end to participate in an SMS poll indicating their opinion on the forum’s titular assertion, and 59% voted in agreement.

From Exotification to Relation: The Malaysia/Algeria Connection

Orked casually describes Fanon to Lin as a “black Algerian.” Koh and Ekotto ascribes this biographical blunder to Fanon’s “adoption of Algerian

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122 Gubra, the sequel to Sepet, takes place a few years after the events of the first film. Important issues raised in Gubra revolve around Orked’s unhappy marriage to a much older Malay man who repeatedly cheats on her as well as a trenchant examination of religious tensions through the character of the neighborhood muezzin (an Islamic religious official who performs the call to prayer), whose show of charity and friendship toward two prostitutes incited considerable discomfort and anger among devout Muslims who watched the film.
nationality towards the end of his life” (Koh & Ekotto, 2010:132), a half-hearted correction that is no more accurate or helpful than Orked’s original claim. At a basic level, what is meant by “Algerian nationality” is unclear simply because Fanon died before Algerian independence and thus before the existence of an Algerian citizenship. If they mean by Algerian nationality Fanon’s identification with the Algerian struggle for independence as the emblem of anticolonialism, then in my view Koh and Ekotto ought to have interrogated further the complications and consequences of such an identification given the re-examination of Fanon’s role in recent historiography of the Algerian war. Although accounts of Fanon’s increasing commitment to the Algerian revolution on the side of the National Liberation Front (FLN) inevitably mention his abandonment, rejection or renunciation of French citizenship, the impossibility of its replacement by Algerian citizenship is one of the most embittered and interesting aspects of Fanon’s extreme leap of faith in his embrace of Glissantian Relation.

It is possible and potentially truer to Fanon’s intellectual vision to read Fanon’s choice as an example of a horizontal postcolonial encounter in the vein of Glissantian “Relation;” indeed, Glissant praises Fanon in Le discours antillais as being the “le seul à être véritablement passé à l’acte, à travers son adhésion à la cause algérienne.”123 Fanon’s engagement in the Algerian war of independence is for Glissant the most significant instance of the latter’s concept of détour, the dialectical complement to Aimé Césaire’s famous retour. This Glissantian detour

involves a shift in focus away from the dream of origins, where there remains only the anguish of loss and irrecoverable distance, to a *point d'intrication* or entanglement where ancestry, cultures and languages have converged.

Fanon was a complex, contradictory and multifaceted figure. He was at once a highly-educated member of the French elite and a believer in the primacy of the rural peasantry, a lucidly objective psychoanalyst and psychiatrist and passionate freedom fighter, a black Martiniquan intellectual who achieved self-sacrifice so absolute that he fought the Algerian war of independence until his battle with leukemia compelled him to seek treatment at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where he was admitted under the name Ibrahim Fanon. While Koh and Ekotto can legitimately criticize Orked’s description of Fanon as a “black Algerian” for eliding the specificity of his Martiniquan background, it is also worth noting that Fanon’s own gamut of experiences in Martinique, France and finally Algeria led him to a point in his life where he self-identified as an Algerian in spirit. His choice to integrate himself into the Algerian cause and Yasmin’s choice to depict him as she does (it is difficult to believe that this depiction is mere carelessness on the part of an otherwise meticulous and sensitive director) create an intertextual relationship that goes beyond the simple convergence/divergence methodology Koh and Ekotto adopt in their critique.

The imaginative sympathy Fanon felt for Algeria in the throes of revolution functioned in some way as a therapeutic antidote to the dialectical relationship between Martinique and France and its occlusion of change. Fanon’s biographers
concur that the psychological alienation he expresses so eloquently in *Black Skin, White Masks* was elicited not in his native Martinique, where he was lulled into a sense of self-assurance as a member of the educated middle-class elite, but by the explosion of this delusion that transpired when he left Martinique for metropolitan France and felt the effects of racial stigmatization for the first time. The discovery that the color of his skin precluded him from being accepted as fully French in spite of his colonial French education and his embrace of professedly French cultural values was painful because it undermined both the hypocrisy of the French colonizers and the equally dismal moral condition of the non-white bourgeoisie in the ‘old colonies’ of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion which chose, in contrast to other colonial areas, the path of assimilation over national independence. A biting irony that Fanon would scathingly critique in his first book was the inclusion of colonized elites from the French Caribbean colonies in the colonial administrative units sent to the African and Asian colonies from the 1900s onwards.

Koh & Ekotto claim that Fanon’s self-declared alliance with the Algerian cause was an “overt political choice” which revealed not only his respect for the temerity of Algerians in resisting the French by armed combat but also his preference “to be ‘Arab’ rather than ‘black’ — ‘Arabs’ being lower on the French racial hierarchy than black Africans and black Antilles people” (132). This argument is disputable and misconstrues completely the nature of the political statement Fanon is making. His alliance with the Algerians is a declaration of solidarity among the diverse peoples whom colonialism has taught to
discriminate against one another. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts his surprise that “every time there was a rebellion, the military authorities sent only the colored soldiers to the front line. It is the “peoples of color” who annihilated the attempts at liberation by other “peoples of color.”¹²⁴ Fanon’s allegiance to the Algerian cause has nothing to do with being ‘Arab,’ which in colonial discourse suffers from the same artificiality as any other racial category like ‘Malay’ insofar as it is determined from a colonial point of view, and everything to do with his vision of a world-system in which Third World nations would enjoy an even playing field.

Richard Philcox, who has produced acclaimed English translations of Fanon’s work, argues that Fanon’s hopeful and ambitious prophecy was based not on “a ‘metaphysical principle’ of cultural authenticity or geopolitical exceptionalism… but on the political and ethical principles of independence and security.”¹²⁵ Fanon endorsed a type of postcolonial consciousness based on the dual emergence of national sovereignty and international solidarity,¹²⁶ and it is perhaps her agreement with such an ideal that Yasmin points to by emphasizing the Algerian element of Fanon and his work.

Koh and Ekotto allege that, in Yasmin’s film, “Fanon’s work is romanticized as an exotic figure from faraway which makes the application of his work to the world of contemporary Malaysia rootless, and ultimately ineffective” (Koh & Ekotto, 2010:136). To respond to this allegation, it is useful to probe the significance of Algeria not in terms of Fanon’s biography alone, but in terms of

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¹²⁴ *Black Skin, White Masks*, 83.
¹²⁵ *The Wretched of the Earth*, xxvi.
¹²⁶ Ibid.
its function as a link in the chain of relation between Fanon’s work and the postcolonial Malaysian context.

Orientalism did not acquire its unflattering connotations overnight. Until the work of Edward Said (at least in the anglophone discipline of English studies), the biases and distortions of Orientalist discourse went largely uncriticized and were taken, for lack of contrasting voices, as truth. It similarly took time for the exotification of Malay cultural symbols and Nusantara landscape that marks representations of Malaynes in francophone literature to be remarked upon and critically analyzed. In the same vein, Fanon’s appearance in Sepet is very new, as is the insinuation of foundational texts of postcolonial theory into the syllabi of universities in the Nusantara more generally.

Edward Said and subsequent scholars of Orientalism demonstrated that exotification of the Other becomes fully meaningful as a mirror of some image the subject has of himself. Descriptions of the sensual excesses of Egypt and the Middle East in the accounts of French Orientalists like Gustave Flaubert formed a constellation of false assumptions about Arabo-Islamic peoples and their flawed mentality and culture which implicitly justified Western imperialism in the region. As the Caribbean (referred to in Malay as kepulauan Karibia, literally “Caribbean islands”) is more or less nonexistent in Malay public or private discourse, to cite and site Fanon as a “black Martiniquan” makes absolutely no sense for a Malaysian audience insofar as it summons up no immediate image or frame of reference that would be interesting or capable of generating further reflection among the film’s target audience.
Algeria, in contrast, has a certain degree of traction in Malaysian, particularly Malay, consciousness because the Muslim majorities in both countries secure their participation in the global *ummah*. The latent subtext of Malaysian Islam in *Sepet* may be more important than Koh and Ekotto allow in terms of the connotations and associative images conjured by the mention of Algeria. Fanon’s Algerian connection, however ill-defined within the film, roots him and his work in contemporary Malaysia in a way Koh and Ekotto overlook because their critique focuses on race without adequately problematizing the intertwining of race and religion in the case of the postcolonial Malay. A key debate that Yasmin advances by calling Fanon a “black Algerian,” in itself a striking and dissonant term given the demographic complexion of Algeria, is the politics of national identity. Recent historiography of the Algerian revolution and war of independence has, by integrating voices previously silenced, shed new light on the mixed responses of Algerians themselves to Fanon’s legacy as a vanguard intellectual and fighter on the Algerian front. The tension between the religiously neutral Third World universalism Fanon was fighting for and the strong current of Islamic fervor that undergirded peasant rebellion against the infidel French is resonant in present-day Malaysia and with Yasmin’s personal investigation of the points of intersection and departure between her optimistic vision of a sincerely multicultural Malaysia and her membership as a Muslim to another universal community of the Muslim *ummah*. 
From the spectrum of Francophone Caribbean and Nusantara postcolonial texts—poetic, filmic, and theoretical—explored in this thesis, it is evident that Nusantara and Caribbean thinkers have potentially much to learn from one another not only because of their mutual postcoloniality but more importantly because of the differences in how race, religion and language, paramount concerns in postcolonial theory, are negotiated in these two regions.

The world is no longer what it was when the rubber plantations and mysterious jungles of modern-day Malaysia perturbed Henri Fauconnier’s *Malaisie* in 1931, or when the geographical distance between the Nusantara and the Caribbean had not yet been shrunk by the progression of European imperialism. With the decentralization and, in Glissantian terms, “archipélation” of the world, it is possible to hope that cultural exchange can once again occur between geographically distinct regions of the world as between equals. The subjects of the former empire defy the history and impact of Empire not just by “writing back” to the imperial center but by writing to one another, dissolving the
divisions and hierarchies that the colonial powers attempted to erect in service of their own purposes of profit and glory.

As outlined in my introduction, my hope is that this thesis contributes to a critical re-evaluation of a) the terms by which categories of postcolonial strategies and subjecthood are defined; and b) the possibility of integrating postcolonial theory into Nusantara area studies and vice-versa. These aims are separate but irrevocably linked. I explained in my Introduction that one of the greatest attractions of contemporary Caribbean postcolonial theory is its celebration of hybridity and concomitant rejection of the impulse toward cultural purity and monoculturalism which sustained European imperialism to its ruinous end. However, one of the problems of giving the Caribbean case its paradigmatic standing in contemporary postcolonial theory is that the present societies of the Caribbean (and the Black Atlantic in general) were founded on the exceptional experience of modern slavery to which non-slave societies find it difficult to relate. And yet Chapter 4 in particular demonstrates that the dislocation of Caribbean theory from its local and Francophone milieus and its introduction into a dialogue with Malay culture can be productive in ways unpredictable and as yet not fully explored.

When Nusantara texts like Muhammad Haji Salleh’s poetry, Sutardji’s mantera and Yasmin Ahmad’s film are read alongside and in discussion with theories from the Francophone Caribbean that have achieved universal purchase, the promise of a symbiotic relationship emerges: analysis of the former texts benefit from the rigor of a lucid theoretical framework, while the latter theories
can be nuanced and strengthened by an understanding of Nusantara hybridity and its distinctive melding of mono- and multiculturalism. Unlike the Caribbean example, pre-colonial history does record a time when the different races of the present-day Nusantara already co-existed and commingled without the burden of contemporary neuroses. The contemporary mantera’s reclaiming of adat and the Indic influences of the sacred Hindu texts gestures, for example, to a truly composite culture in the Glissantian sense of the word.

Through the family dynamics illustrated in Sepet, as well as the film’s narrative detours through the controversial racial identities of legendary Malay heroes and the history of Malaysian cinema, Yasmin interrogates the prevalent ontology of Malayness. If Fanon’s fundamental contribution to postcolonial studies was his deconstruction of the colonized psyche and his call to the colonized to claim his/her own ontology, then Sepet is very much a response to this call insofar as it challenges not only interracial boundaries but self-reflexively analyzes the different texts from which postcolonial Malays in Malaysia today cull their sense of genealogy, history and culture.

Contrary to Koh and Ekotto’s analysis, my approach in Chapter 4 (and to a lesser extent in the earlier chapters) seeks to emulate a Glissantian poetics of Relation which enables, indeed facilitates, more dynamic and fruitful readings. In response to Koh and Ekotto’s insistence that greater attention to be paid to Fanon’s Martiniquan specificity, my reading invites—without denying the influence of Martinique’s historical and geographical realities on Fanonian thought—a more decentralized intertextuality. By reading around Yasmin’s use
of Fanon and pursuing surprising parallels or moments of deviation and disagreement, I have attempted to seek out uncharted avenues toward another stage in the evolution of postcolonial theory.

Koh and Ekotto’s insistence that the filmic omission of Fanon’s Martiniquan roots be seen as a deficit is interesting in light of the Glissantian intervention that permissively validates errance and détour as complements to the local awareness of the retour. That the Martiniquan condition has been capable of producing thinkers as seemingly antithetical as Fanon, a pioneering theorist of nationalism and national liberation, and Edouard Glissant, an icon of a creolized post-nationalism, opens up promising parallels with Malay Muslim identity in contemporary Malaysia striving likewise to reconcile localized and universalizing demands.

Developments in postcolonial theory have seen the idea of rootedness and root identity set aside in favor of more inclusive and hybrid notions of identité-racine and the importance of routes as a complement to roots. If Victor Hugo and the French Romantic poets did a disservice to the pantun, that “perfect mirror of the Malay world as a whole, and of the Malay soul (Daillie 1988:3),” by transforming it into the now global poetic form of the pantoum, perhaps Yasmin’s unmeditated misreading of Fanon will nonetheless fill in some way the void left in postcolonial Malaysian and Nusantara Malay identity by the deafening silence of scholars of Malay history, culture and literature on the issue of the colonial past and its influence on Malay historiography. As knowledge of postcolonial theory in the Nusantara matures, Glissant’s ideas of antillanité and
Relation, which go beyond the boundaries of individual Caribbean nations to locate Martiniquan culture within a Caribbean context and Caribbean culture in turn within a dynamic, creolizing and transnationally American context, are ripe for discovery.
Appendix

1. The original Malay pantun included in the notes to Victor Hugo’s *Les Orientales*, by way of Ernest Fouinet:

Kupu-kupu terbang melintang
Terbang di laut di hujung karang
Hati di dalam menaruh bimbang
Dari dahulu sampai sekarang

Les papillons jouent à l'entour sur leurs ailes ;
Ils volent vers la mer, près de la chaîne des rochers.
Mon cœur s'est senti malade dans ma poitrine,
Depuis mes premiers jours jusqu'à l'heure présente.

Terbang di laut di hujung karang
Burung nasur terbang ke Bandan
Dari dahulu sampai sekarang
Banyak muda sudah kupandang

Ils volent vers la mer, près de la chaîne de rochers…
Le vautour dirige son essor vers Bandam ;
Depuis mes premiers jours jusqu'à l'heure présente,
J'ai admiré bien des jeunes gens ;

Burung nasur terbang ke Bandan
Bulunya lagi jatuh ke Patani
Banyak muda sudah kupandang
Tiada sama mudaku ini

Le vautour dirige son essor vers Bandam,…
Et laisse tomber de ses plumes à Patani.
J'ai admiré bien des jeunes gens ;
Mais nul n'est à comparer à l'objet de mon choix.

Bulunya jatuh ke Patani
Dua puluh anak merpati
Tiada sama mudaku ini
Sungguh pandai memujuk hati

Il laisse tomber de ses plumes à Patani.
Voici deux jeunes pigeons !
Aucun jeune homme ne peut se comparer à celui de mon choix,
Habile comme il l'est à toucher le cœur.
2. Pantun of the Sugar-cane

Manis sungguh tebu seberang
Dari akar sampai ke pucuk;
Manis sungguh mulut orang,
Kena tipu dalam pujuk.

The sugarcane on yonder shore
From root to crown is passing sweet.
How honeyed are the words that
pour
From lips which coax but plan deceit.

(Hamilton, 1941:60)
Bibliography


