

**Abstracting the Nation in Kee Thuan Chye's
1984—*Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*:
National Allegory or Modernist Theater?**

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian dramatist Kee Thuan Chye's plays disrupt the dominant narrative constructed by the Malaysian state of the nation as a Malay-centric, monocultural, monolingual society. Working with modernist dramaturgical devices, the plays work to denaturalize and demystify raced and classed ideologies that normalize social divisions and Malaysian real-politik and to argue for the reconstruction of a just Malaysian society.

KEY WORDS

national allegory
dramaturgy
Bumiputra

alienation
nation



I first became aware of Kee Thuan Chye as a dramatist in 1985 when I spent a year as a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and took the opportunity to visit Malaysia. I was privileged to view a video-tape of the performance of his play *1984—Here and Now* which had been performed on July 1985 at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, I have been studying his work, composed of early plays and three major dramas written over a ten-year period: *1984—Here and Now*; *The Big Purge*, performed at the Essex University Theatre, England, in May 1988; and another published play, *We Could **** You Mr. Birch*, first performed at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur in June 1994. Kee, in his position of section editor of the *New Straits Times* literary page, is also one of the most prominent English-language journalists in Malaysia. Many of his newspaper pieces, reviews of plays and art exhibitions, and interviews with Malaysian literati have been published in the collection *Just In So Many Words* (1992).

According to Fredric Jameson, literature from the Third World, unlike First-World literature which presumably possesses a different aesthetic value, always operates also as national allegory.¹ That is, representations from Third World locations are historicized and politicized productions that constitute the form-specific genre of national allegory, which by definition is both static and potentially statist. However, Kee's politically engaged, evolving oeuvre needs to be read not simply as a manifestation of local, national literature—as national allegories—but also as provocative instances of postcolonial productions that are critical of twentieth-century nationalist ideologies of race, ethnicity, people, official languages, and official cultures. His

modernist dramaturgy insists on breaking the representationist illusion of the realist theater and thus counters the tendency to allegorical correspondence through its presentation of performance as social-political action.

Two of these plays, *1984—Here and Now* and *The Big Purge*, seize upon modernist techniques of staging in order to disrupt dominant narratives of nation-building. Influenced chiefly by Brechtian strategies of alienation, both plays are deliberately structured to convey the awareness of being performances rather than realistic or naturalistic representations.² The plays participate in the concept of revolutionary "epic theater": "a form of drama and dramatic production intended to provoke spectators into a heightened social and political consciousness" (Klaus et al 783). Thus, like Bertolt Brecht's dramas, the plays are not plotted as elaborate realistic dramas but depend on short scenes, creating an episodic effect. They also deploy those dramaturgical devices now popularly associated with modernist theater: "a variety of nonrealistic staging devices used by the radical German producer Erwin Piscator—posters, slide projections, motion pictures, stylized sets, and garish lighting effects" (Klaus et al 783). Like Brecht, Kee possesses a strong political consciousness; both *1984—Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* foreground a satirical and polemical critique of characters working inside anti-democratic state-apparatuses who appropriate cultural discourses in order to establish an oppressive domination against minority claims to human rights and justice.

The Singapore drama critic, Robert Yeo, places Kee, born in 1954, in "the second phase of postcolonial, independent playwriting in English in Malaysia" ("Introduction" 7). Kee's early plays showed him clearly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, and under the thrall of Western dramatists, not only Brecht but also Samuel Beckett, Luigi Pirandello, and Harold Pinter. According to Kee, moving from the relatively isolated island of Penang to the federal capital, Kuala Lumpur, in 1979, he "saw more sharply the contradictions" that divide multiracial; multicultural Malaysian society, especially in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 race riots that resulted in Malay domi-

nance: contradictions rising from racial politics, social polarization, the marginalization of immigrant races, Malay literary chauvinism, and a state-imposed Malay national cultural policy (Kee "Digging Into the Diaphragm," 32).³ Given Malaysia's repressive political climate, Kee's first two plays are indubitably candid in their criticism of an autocratic deployment of race, class, religions, and gender ideologies to demonize, oppress, impoverish, and aggrandize different segments of Malaysian society. Describing Kee's first two plays as didactic and savage political satire, Yeo however finds such "absolute candour" self-defeating, and praises Kee's third play, *We Could **** You Mr. Birch*, as a step in the direction of a more complex and compromising medium, in which we find the staging not of one but many truths (Yeo 14).

Kee's first staged play in Kuala Lumpur had astonished the Malaysian elite as well as external observers of Malaysian society, and played to packed houses, a rare phenomenon in Malaysia. What surprised the audience was the content of the play. Reviewers repeatedly reported on its explicit political content, dazzled, it would seem, more by the play's foolhardiness and courage than its theatrical achievement. Comments on the play's "serious provocation," of course, need to be contextualized in the history of the state construction of "sensitive" subjects, a euphemism for topics that can be seen to fall under the government's ban on subjects likely to raise friction between the dominant Malay community (forming at present about 60% of the population) and the 50 or more minorities in Malaysia, of whom the ethnic Chinese are the largest in number. Maureen Ten in a review for *New Sunday Times* noted, "Thuan Chye has presented a play which normally would have transformed itself into something else by severe self-censorship. It is rare here to come across matters we discuss every day expressed in art" (Ten 93). Kee himself was conscious of the constraints and the necessary negotiations that the play enacted, between an engagement with socio-political race, class, and gender ideologies that crucially interpellate individuals as Malaysian subjects, and what is permitted as public discourse in Malaysian real-politik: "I had to walk a narrow tightrope between depicting a

society as it is and that it could or would be in a totalitarian State. I am writing about things that move me—racism, unequal opportunities, backwardness, our closing ourselves up, about curbs to freedom of speech and expression” (cited in Ten 95).

In short, *1984—Here and Now* was unanimously received not simply as a play but as a performance, a crucial distinction in which the traditional fictivity of drama—its representational character—is abrogated for performativity—its presentational transgressivity between the boundaries of the imaginary and social reality, or lived experience. Rehman Rashid, for example, observed that it was “a play in which [the cast] are not characters living a myth, so much as themselves living an alternative reality” (Rashid 112); and the director, Krishen Jit, noted, “It was startling to come across a written work which masks nothing. The net is cast widely, embracing a total complex of political and social issues. There is no fictional device. The script does not skirt around the issues of our day” (cited in Manavalan 142).

While not denying the play's achievement of contemporaneity in suturing dramaturgical technique and socio-political text, I wish to focus on the play as theatrical subject or meta-theatre. I aim to revise the usual evaluation of *1984—Here and Now* as “an Orwellian vision of Malaysia's future” (Jit 387). Its formal and aesthetic features, I argue, are constituted by a local and national ideological superstructure and contribute to the formation of an original postcolonial political imaginary distinct from Orwell's class-critique of post-World-War II Britain. I include the second play, *The Big Purge*, in this analysis, to examine the trajectory of local, national, and postcolonial performance praxis in Kee's oeuvre.

Both *1984—Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* are situated outside the tradition of nineteenth-century naturalistic or realistic drama, which Thomas R. Whitaker has described as “a poetic imitation of action in the form of action, mediated by the ‘histrionic sensibility’ and asking of us a sense of history and a passionate interest in social implications” (Whitaker 143). In fact, with *1984—Here and Now*, Kee explicitly announces the play as a re-representation of a fiction,

George Orwell's novel *1984*. That is, the play is imagined as an adaptation of a novel which is itself a representation of a dystopic invention, an imagined future of a Britain ravaged by totalitarianism in the central figure of Big Brother. In using the form of the "adaptation," Kee was modeling his work on Brecht's brilliant "adaptations," as in *The Threepenny Opera*, adapted from John Gay's *The Beggar Opera*, for example; and like Brecht's "adaptations," *1984—Here and Now*'s overt didacticism openly challenges the spectators to change their existing social order. The declared "adaptation" triply distances the play from social reality, the lived everyday experience of Malaysian society. Through this brilliant strategy of the pseudo-adaptation, the play appropriates the Orwellian tropes of Big Brother, Double-Speak, state surveillance, torture, and other narrative nodes to layer, as in a palimpsest, a fiction from which to perform its criticism of Malaysian real-politik that could not have been performed otherwise.⁴

Countering and subverting the triple distancing from Malaysian lived reality, the play stages a dissonance between its overt textual literariness (the linguistic signs of the Orwell adaptation) and its theatrical signs. This dissonance is perhaps most clearly seen in the moment of performance, but it is also concretized in the numerous stage directions that direct the pacing of scenes, order of appearance of characters and actions, and interweaving of separate and collapsed stage spectacles—what theatre semioticians call the *didascalía* (Saltz 270). To understand the full force of the play as socio-political criticism, therefore, we need to turn to the semiotics of theatre and not merely to the language of the literary text, to decode the moment-to-moment aspects of the performative text.

A similar strategy structures Kee's second play, *The Big Purge*, which is framed within the performance of a puppet play, manipulated by an actor playing an actor playing the role of the *dalang* or puppeteer. The *dalang* thence performs all the parts of the puppets that represent five major state functionaries, The Prime Minister, Minister without Portfolio, Minister of Information, Minister of Education, and Minister of Home Affairs. Interwoven with this elaborate multiply distanced re-re-representation of Malaysian politics is a second drama

in a more realistic tradition, the stories of five Malaysian characters from the three major ethnic communities, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, that draw upon the everyday oppressive racial tensions of Malaysian everyday life.

Unlike Orwell's fiction, the play, *1984—Here and Now*, was performed in 1985, in a present time congruent with a Malaysian audience's sense of the political world. While the characters of the Proles are fictively identified with the Marxist class of proletariat or the ruled class who comes to consciousness in opposition to the ruling class in Orwell's novel, Kee's Proles are performed in the geo-spatial territory of post-1969. (The May 13th riots of 1969 marks the historical water-shed, with the formation of a *Bumiputra* or 'Sons-of-the Soil' class of Malays that is constitutionally awarded special privileges over the rest of the Malaysian citizenry.) Through the mimicry of costume, gesture, movement, and voice, the Proles correspond to ethnic Chinese Malaysians, just as the Party Members of the ruling class correspond to the dominant Malays. Even as the dystopic and "futuristic" character of Orwell's fiction is apparently reproduced, the play also contains counter elements of historical "social realism."

The play is composed of nineteen scenes, covering a plot chronology of about a few weeks. But the time of the play ruptures into the time of the performance, insisting on the blurring between fictivity and reality, between representation or acting and presentation or living. The intermission, between scene 11 and 12, therefore, also functions as a significant part of the performance. During this "intermission," actors, passing out leaflets, mingle among the audience. The leaflets urge the audience to participate in the performance and thus, suggestively, in the real-politik performance of the nation:

If you are moved to contribute to an event, stand up—express yourself, leave your seat, shout if you will, the platform is yours . . . Your act of participation will matter. It may only be a symbolic gesture of commitment, but it is a first step. In you lies the seed of positive change. (51)

That moment of transgression of the boundary between play-time and real-politik time fictionalizes, enacts, and suggests a way out of the separation between theatre and social reality. As the leaflets/playwright notes, audience participation is needed to transform the performance from "theatre" to the "real" (51), symbolizing the hope for social transformation of Malaysians, from passive spectatorial individuals to a resisting collective community. The break (intermission) in the middle prepares for the play's conclusion, when Wiran, the Party member who defies and rejects Big Brother's tyranny, "mov[es] along the aisle" in order to evade the police, and appeals to the audience,

Stand up for your freedom, for racial equality and integration, for humanity and justice, for truth, for a nation capable of greatness . . . If you believe in all of these, say yes! . . . Unite! Stand up and say yes! (88)

Strung between these two eruptions of the acting/play-time into the social/psychic time of the audience/Malaysian politics, the other 18 scenes alternate between public and domestic spaces, staging the increasingly conflictual and claustrophobic territory of contested identities. The play begins with an elaborately panoramic scene: dancers are seen dancing behind a wooden frame that suggests a television set upstage right, which is balanced by a huge picture of Big Brother upstage left, when a group of Party members that include a high-ranking party official, a religious devotee, "assorted politicians, teachers, students, policemen" begin to riot and the Westernized images/figures disappear from the stage. Wiran manages to run off-stage during the melee which ends only after Big Brother appears on the screen to address the Party members. The play ends with Wiran in scenes 16, 17, and 18, "curled up on the floor of a cell" (69), then "pushed into room 101," the notorious torture chamber, before rupturing the stage boundary and fleeing the police along the aisle in the last scene, while "a search spot surveys the auditorium" (88). The space of conflict thus shrinks visually on the stage, symbolizing and

paralleling the intensifying narrative of surveillance and entrapment, before bursting out to include the space of the audience in its conclusion.

The relentless pace of spatial contraction is counterpointed by the alternating direction of the actions, what theorists term the drama-*gon*, the work of the actions. As Eugenio Barba points out,

actions . . . are not only what the actors do and say, but also what sounds, lights, changes in space are used . . . actions are the different facets of a situation, the arches of time between two accents of the performance, between two changes in the space—or even the evolution, according to a relative autonomy, of the musical score, the variations of the light . . . The objects used in the performance are also actions, transforming themselves, acquiring different meanings and different emotive colorations. (Barba 75-76)

1984—Here and Now works intensely with such synaesthesia, with the performance developing through parallel structures of concatenation of causes and simultaneity

Through the causal structure of concatenation, the drama, echoing the classical Shakespearean plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, narrates an emerging love relationship between Wiran, a Party member, and Yone, a Prole. The sexual tragedy is related to gender divisions, with Yone's father and other male characters represented as brutalizing chauvinists, and to class-ruled totalitarianism, as Wiran, who joins the Movement for a New Brotherhood to oppose Big Brother's dictatorship, is betrayed and tortured by Shadrin, an Inner Party member.

This linear development, following the free adaptation of Orwell's fiction and advanced in separate scenes, is interwoven with scenes of simultaneous actions and long, detailed passages of directions. The longest and most remarkable of the *mise-en-scene* appears in the opening scene. The huge wooden frame/television screen is already present in scene 1. By scene 3, the play suggests that the screen "could be a permanent feature on stage regardless of the set-

ting" (12), a physical signifier of Big Brother's panoptic omnipresence. The character of Big Brother is thus much more than human: he never appears on the stage or is seen interacting with other characters, but his giant televised figure and long rhetorical speeches punctuate the plot at decisive moments, imposing the presence of a totalitarian state regime that governs by manipulation of a communal or race-supremist ideology:

[the Proles] must understand that, above all else, the Party members must be kept happy. The Party members must not feel threatened or deprived in this land that is rightfully theirs. (3)

In the first part of the play, scenes of complex synthesis alternate with intimate scenes that follow Wiran's growing entanglement with Yone, the young Prole woman who falls in love with him, and with the oppositional Movement for a new Brotherhood. Wiran's discomfort with the Party's explicit tyranny prepares him for these double seductions, for the play, through the character of Shadrin, insinuates that both Yone and Barouk were "planted to trap subversives like you" (86).

Ironically, the only intimate relation that remains unshadowed in the play is between Wiran and Shadrin. Shadrin's speeches, like Big Brother's, are characterized by wordiness and rhetorical flourishes. But where Big Brother's speeches address a general public, and rely on plural first- and second-person pronouns, Shadrin seduces Wiran by the use of an intimate first-person/second-person address: "That's why, you see, I'm not afraid . . . You know me, Wiran, I don't hold back . . . If I don't like anything, I'll say it" (32); "I'll be frank with you, Wiran . . . Between you and me, no" (34). This person-to-person relationship is the only one Wiran is permitted by the play's conclusion, suggesting the peculiarly intimate relationship shared by torturer and victim as portrayed in scene 18. In this scene, Shadrin's dialogue intimates for Wiran his suspicions and fears, and mimics the psychological penetration of Wiran's belief-system. The scene enacts the

ways in which totalitarian propaganda penetrates and colonizes the consciousness of individual subjects:

You are probably thinking how you could have loved a slut, aren't you? . . . You feel like getting up and denouncing her for the bitch she is, don't you? You feel like smashing the screen and tearing the tape to shreds? Go ahead. (86-87)

In sharp contrast to Orwell's *1984*, however, the torturer here is unsuccessful. In the conflict constructed between love, which can overleap class and race division, and totalitarian ideology, which succeeds though maintaining class and race boundaries, the protagonist/hero does not betray his love but escapes the torture chamber. The play's conclusion differs radically from Orwell's bleak denouement. Wiran remains a romantic and heroic figure as he flees the police. The last scene shifts attention to the character of the audience (in both senses as actors and as attribute), which is the as-yet-undetermined factor deciding the play's as-yet-undetermined conclusion.

The scenes of crowded simultaneity most clearly offer the play's radical departure from Orwellian narrative. Antonin Artaud had noted of the Balinese dance, it is "through the labyrinth of [the dancers'] gestures, attitudes, and sudden cries, through the gyrations and turns which leave no portion of the stage space unutilized, [that] the sense of new physical language, based upon signs and no longer upon words, is liberated" (cited in Worthen, 13). Similarly, in these scenes, the staging of the elaborate movements of multiple characters constructs a recognizably albeit militarized Malaysian cultural site. This "new physical language" visualizes the Malaysian state as one established on the policing force of its Internal Security Act which legalizes the judicially unrestrained power of the State to imprison civilians. We see such staging in the purdah costuming of Party members, the militaristic "jungle-green" fatigues of anti-Klout forces, the post-modern juxtaposition of rock music and media forms such as televi-

sion, newspaper posters, and political banners, two "tiger dance" performances that mimic the Chinese lion-dance, "the insistent beating of drums," chanting of demonstrators, sirens, police whistles, way-ang-kulit staging and instruments "used to punctuate key moments," sounds of marching feet, and heavy metal doors opening and closing.⁵

The play's dialogue is asymmetrically aligned, dominated by the language of the Party, beginning with Big Brother's monologue in scene 1 and dense with Shadrin's dialogue with Wiran in scene 18. Even Wiran's concluding pro-democracy dissenting speech at the last scene belongs to a Party member. The Proles who appear as oppressed creatures, even when oppressing their own, have truncated, abrupt speech. Their sentences, even in the few long passages ascribed to them, are short, ungrammatical, disjointed, and highly colloquial: "Like our Prole party lah. Weak like anyting. Everything Big Broder say, O.K. Like balls shaking in der pants, man" (15). Eloquence and rhetorical control, like human rights and material comfort, are not permitted the Proles. Their emotions are offered as crude outbursts. Yone's brother, speaking of her disgrace, says,

My sister. She bring shame only. I shy even to call her my sister," and turns against his mother, "Shaddup la, you! You lousy mother la, you. (46)

His speech act performs the social degradation to which the Party has brought the community. Even Yone, the romantic heroine, is permitted only this degraded tongue:

One day, I got fed up. After finish school lah. I couldn get a place in university because places for Proles limited. So I wen out to work. (47)

But what the play's text does not inscribe of the Proles its actions do. The presence of Proles in many of the scenes offers a different testimony to their cultural vitality. They are, we assume, the dancers gyrating to the opening disco-music scene. The drums and festiv-

ity of the tiger dance take center stage in scene 3 and reappear in scene 11. Proles form members of the political demonstration in scene 11, whose choreographed anarchy of movement ("the opposing group makes a charge, with parangs. Commotion. Some demonstrators flee, others use the sticks" 50) is in sharp contrast to the highly mannered movements of the Inner Party meeting ("Their dialogue is delivered in heightened manner, their physical mannerisms broad, puppet-like" 62) in scene 14. The Party members' long, rhetorically patterned speeches that dominate the text are counterpointed by the short bursts of action that construct Prole opposition. Such counterpointing figures the tension between the coercive monological discursiveness of the totalitarian state and the resisting dialogism of the oppressed. The short exchange among the mahjong players brilliantly encapsulates the play's construction of Prole identity: a belief in fortune or contingency, the recognition of injustice and oppression together with a resignation before it, and the resilience and faith of the survivor:

Cannot get, find oder job lah. Not say cannot get. You got brain, you got arm, you got leg, cannot die one la. Haisay, beautiful card la. Bes in der world! (16).

1984—Here and Now, in moving away from the Orwellian narrative of class rule toward a critique of the ways in which a hegemonic ideology of nationhood is constructed to exclude and oppress groups of others along race and class divisions, has moved Orwell's modern distrust of the totalitarian state toward a contemporary critique of the postcolonial nation. The postcolonial nation state seeks to manipulate the postmodern condition of pluralistic, multi-ethnic, de-essentialized and hybrid subjectivities, as seen in Wiran and Yone's mutual yearnings for the Other, in order to establish one-race domination. That the play is about Malays and Chinese, not about Party and Prole members, is the local veil that the Orwellian adaptation tropes for its insider audience.

The Big Purge drops this veiled ethnic identification for a direct

representation of characters and interests as Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and so forth. Yet, through the character of the narrator-actor-*dalang*, the play disavows the pretense of representation or fictivity, and speaks directly, for example, of the May 13, 1969 racial riots (2). This direct "reportage" provides the political context as the immediate pre-text of the *dalang*'s story:

Racial tension is at its height. Non-Malays who find the situation unbearable are leaving the country by the thousands, migrating to Canada, New Zealand, and mostly to Australia. (*The Big Purge* 3)

before moving on to the drama itself. Thus, while *The Big Purge* repeats the blurring of distancing strategies with the effect of direct political commentary that we find in *1984—Here and Now*, by means of staging an adaptation of a puppet show, its juxtaposing of puppeteering and traditional mimetic performance deliberately transgresses and subverts the usual protocols that observe the boundary between the genre of play as textual production and commentary as interventionist socio-political production.

Like the Balinese dancers that Artaud analyzed, the puppet-characters performed by the *dalang* are not supposed to be representations of politicians, which is what would have happened if actors had played these roles. They are part of a "presentationist theater," both conceptualization of Malaysian real-politik and realizations. The puppet-characters have undergone a "systematic depersonalization" (Artaud 58); and so their dialogue cannot be taken as imitating or representing real persons but as evoking the "power of a system" (Artaud 55). The Prime Minister figure is a mechanism, an abstraction whose speech and gestures cannot be deciphered or mined for rational motivation. Instead they function as signs and conventions that signify, like the symbolic action of the traditional *wayang-kulit* universe, the workings of good and evil and of state mastery in a Malay teleology. The theatrical performance of Malaysian real-politik as puppetry offers a performative distance from real-life political

commentary, while drawing upon the teleological meaning of the static universe of good and evil that Clifford Geertz had theorized as central to a South East Asian/Malay world-view. The authority of the Chinese immigrant-descent playwright is displaced by the authority of the *dalang*, a figure that is always racialized as Malay and native, even as the *dalang*'s commentary, that which transgresses what is safe in Malaysian political discourse, becomes transformed into traditional theatre, or play.

In *The Big Purge* Kee abandons the "authority" of the British canonical pretext of his first play for the "authority" of the Malay traditional pretext of the *wayang*. The *dalang* thus is the first producer of the play's meaning for the audience, a strategy that was perhaps more urgent for Kee as the play was performed (the only time) first for a British audience. Yet, while the *dalang* provides the historical context in an overt and direct manner, his speech is self-consciously Malaysian, and Malay terms, proverbs, and concepts crowd the play's dialogue, demonstrating the play's resolute Malaysian setting, content, and address.

The puppetry scenes stage the performance of the Malay political world, in which the buffoonery of a Prime Minister who cannot shit is enacted simultaneously with his treachery in manipulating a racial crisis to provide an excuse to imprison dissenting opponents and to strengthen his dictatorial regime. The unfolding, mannered, almost predictable drama is punctuated by a second performance within the realistic mode. This second play narrates the unraveling relationships between two couples. The first, a married Chinese Malaysian pair, is composed of Wei Liang, a patriotic Malaysian Chinese who resists his wife's, Joan's, desire to emigrate to Australia. The second, the Malay couple Junid and Mazlina, is a tolerant, Westernized and liberated pair who are active in the *Harapan* (a Malay word meaning 'hope') Movement to rid Malaysia of racism and injustice. The plot in this play-within-a-play revolves around the promotion of a Malaysian Indian, Ravi, who plans to leave the country should his deserved promotion go to a Malay. Junid, who is offered the position solely because of his race, refuses it, but he and Mazlina are later

picked up for subversion for dissenting from their race privilege.

As in *1984—Here and Now*, the play critiques Malay race-supremacy by creating dissenting Malay characters as well as dissenting Malaysian Chinese characters who question the polarization of Malay and Chinese characters into evil oppressors and good victims. The play refuses the essentializing, stereotyping, demonizing, and polarization of Malaysian society into religious, raced, and classed groups. It insists instead that a Malaysian social and national identity must be performed on an intercultural, interracial field. While the satire of Malay state hegemony is stronger here, so is the criticism of Chinese chauvinism, again seen in the actions of an older generation. *The Big Purge* offers a more nuanced examination of the dilemma of the Chinese Malaysian. Where in *1984—Here and Now*, the community is seen as oppressed racially but also as oppressively patriarchal, in the second play it is also riven by class division. Joan's mother complacently predicts that the Australians will "welcome" the family "anytime," although "They don't simply take the half-past-six type" (41), to which Wei Liang replies, "That's the middle-class Chinese mentality for you. But what about those who can't immigrate . . . Nobody cares for them" (41).

That "elsewhere" which the non-Malay characters continuously idealize—"a good future," "equal opportunities" (42)—is implicitly in contrast to the "here and now" of Malaysian real-politik. But to Ravi's question, "What could be worse than here?" Liang replies, "this is home" (43), appealing to a notion of belongingness of citizen and territory that is continuously undermined by state apparatuses. The internal play works in a different direction from the political dimension/abstract universe of the Malay *wayang* which encloses it. It works through constructions, entanglements, and deconstructions of concepts that allude to chiefly elusive and ineffable sentiments such as love, loyalty, home, and family, in order to address the fears, desires, and hopes of ordinary Malaysians. The internal play thus operates as irrevocably multiracial and multicultural, both inside and outside the mono-Malay political sphere. Joan, like her parents, is both fearful and prejudiced: "These Malays are the worst type of people.

When they go crazy, they just run amok" (46. Even Liang and Junid, the idealistic protagonists, lose hope and trust. As Liang confides to Mazlina, "I'm also afraid for myself . . . I end up seeing a cell five feet long and three feet wide" (73).

The play-within-a-play ends with Liang, Junid, and Maz choosing to remain in Malaysia to fight the case of *Kalwat* (illicit sexual relations) brought against Liang and Maz, a hopeful note of resistance which is however immediately overturned by the radio broadcast:

The Government move to detain 250 people under the ISA makes it the biggest in ISA history . . . the secretary-general of the Malaysian Chinese Party has come out in support of the move and called it a judicious use of power. (83)

The closing scenes focus on the Chorus, composed of seven members, narrating yet another race-divided crisis and singing of their resolve to emigrate to Australia:

Going Down Under, Going Down Under . . .
Goodbye, Malaysia, here's two fucks to you. (85)

followed by the Prime Minister on *Wayang Kulit*, who proclaims:

So, more Chinese and Indians are migrating, flocking like sheep to Australia. Let them, lah. We don't need them . . .
Who cares as long as I can shit in peace . . . at last I've passed it out. (85)

At curtain call, to make emphatic the play's criticism of race segregation and oppression, all the actors, except the actor playing the *dalang*, appear in hoods, "as they did when they first came on to be introduced in the Prologue" (86). Malaysian real-politik, the costumes suggest, produces as noxious ideologies of race supremacy as the notorious Ku Klux Klan in the American South.

In *The Big Purge*, it is not the bourgeoisie, or the ruling class, the capitalists, who form the oppressive Other. The play suggests, in the intersection of the foreign boss and corporation with the special privileges for *bumiputraisim*, that class and race operate to produce a caste structure in which the non-*Bumiputras* must fill the subordinate class position in the "prevailing mode of production" (McLellan 389). In Marxian thought, "the bourgeoisie is defined as the owners of the means of production and the employers of wage-labour, the proletariat as those who own no means of production and live by selling their wage-labour" (152). In the play's classification, Big Brother/the Prime Minister represents the power of the state to manipulate religious and social divisions to contain the segmentation of Malaysian society in a hierarchical caste system where the *Bumiputras* rule over the non-*Bumiputras*.

According to Aihwa Ong, "Historically, immigration policy toward Asian immigrants has concerned itself with how Asian immigrants are to be positioned vis-a-vis other class and ethnic groups in civil society, and how they are to be disciplined and defined in relation to the changing political economy" (Ong 763). In the U.S., "Orientalist discourse constructed Asian-ness as the model or embodiment of the desired human capital of diligence, docility, self-sufficiency, and productivity, and as a model to be emulated by other minorities" (Ong 764). This model minority stereotype is complicated in Malaysia by other historical tensions of race and class. Chinese Malaysians have been frequently imaged as avaricious, materialistic, unreligious, and so forth; but at the same time the dominant Malay population has been also urged to emulate them in their industry and competitive work ethic. The contradictions between culture/race competition and capitalist corporate ethics are manifest in these opposed formulations. Kee's plays dramatize these contradictions as conflicts contained through a political craft of separatist racialization and disempowerment of one caste for the special privileges of another.

Ong theorizes that Orientalizing practices by Overseas Chinese are "fundamentally ambiguous, mobile and 'revisable'" (quoting Mbembe 1992, 23 expressing a deterritorialized modern conscious-

ness that plays along with Orientalized image realities, emphasizing different valences [and] depending on the particular contexts" (Ong 770). Kee's dramatic representations, however, offer a different kind of ambiguity, where the Chinese Malaysian national subject has to negotiate a tighter and tighter space for Malaysian national self-image and, in response to these diminishment, finds only the economic field available for identity. Unlike Ong's "deterritorialized modern" Chinese diasporic consciousness, the condition of "ambiguous, mobile, and revisable" diasporic identity for Malaysian Chinese is neither freely chosen nor voluntary but an involuntary formation responding in large part to state-imposed material and historical forces. *The Big Purge* voices a different conceptualization of the Chinese diaspora from either the old notion of dispersal without loss of original cultural and national identity or the new notion of an "Overseas Chinese," "disengaged from any positive ideological links to the nation-state [who] place their faith in the family and personal relationships (*guanxi*) rather than in the government" (Ong 755). Kee's plays illuminate and testify to a third diasporic formation, in which subjects of Chinese immigrant descent through everyday praxis construct positive ideological links to an imagined nation-state different from China. Like Timothy Mo's Chinese diasporic character Aldolph Ng in his novel, *The Redundancy of Courage*, Kee's resisting protagonists are actively engaged through cultural work in contestations with state-ideological-apparatuses whose official culture excludes them from a race-dominant imagined community of the postcolonial nation.⁶ Kee's nationalistic vision of "a distinctive Malaysian theatre" goes beyond the state-manipulated identities of race divisions and so beyond the correspondences produced through the Manichean aesthetics of allegory, for fixed binaries cannot produce a theater that is "robust, dynamic, emotionally and intellectually stimulating, and relentless in exposing truths" ("Bourgeois Brave New World," 1996, 8).

NOTES

¹ In this influential essay, Jameson differentiates the cognitive aesthetics rising from "Third World" and "First World" geopolitical histories. Because the "Third World" is defined by its history of "colonialism and imperialism," "nationalism" is the exclusive ideology operating in the literature written by "Third World" writers, and thus, "all third-world texts" need to be read as "national allegories." The fullest criticism of Jameson's argument has been made by Aijaz Ahmad in the chapter "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness" (*In Theory* 95-122).

² *We Could **** You Mr. Birch*, written seven years after *The Big Purge*, continues in the tradition of Brechtian theater. Robert Yeo's "Introduction" to the 1995 revised edition offers a good discussion of "the influence of Brecht's epic theatre" on the staging of *We Could **** You Mr. Birch*. Like Yeo, I have not seen a performance of the play. According to Yeo, based on "reading reviews and scrutinizing photographs" (19), "the sets and costumes are naturalistic," and the performance is composed of ensemble acting with swift role shifts across the free borrowing from, as Kee himself says, traditional Malay theatre and films, situation comedies, Absurd Theatre and contemporary Malaysian playwright Noordin Hassan (20).

³ In a paper presented at the "Old Worlds, New Worlds" Symposium in Hong Kong February 28 to March 5, 1996, Kee noted:

Theatre in Malaysia is very much dictated by the socio-political conditions obtained in the larger society. Its development is thus affected by the same factors that hamper the country's development on several fronts—and by the contradictions at the core of Malaysia's desire to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020.

The contradictions stem from the practices that do not cohere with the aim of forging a new world. Like the privileging of the dominant Malay race over other races in the country. Like the curbing of free and open debate on

the 'sensitive' issues of race, language, and religion. Like the pre-empting of the growth of a genuine multiculturalism. ("Bourgeois Brave New World" 1).

⁴ Kua Kia Soong, in fact, calls the dramatist to question on this device, complaining that "even when . . . the playwright . . . calls a spade a spade, it still has to be done within the vehicle of George Orwell's 1984" (114).

⁵ Personal accounts of detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA) appear in a number of publications by Malaysian citizens, among them S. Husin Ali's *Two Faces: Detention Without Trial (Dua Wajah: Tahanan Tanpa Bicara)*, Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 1996; Aziz Ishak's *Special Guest: The Detention of an Ex-Cabinet Minister*; Kassim Ahmad's *Universiti Kedua (Second University)*; Kua Kia Soong's *445 Days Behind the Wire*; Poh Boon Sing's *Fragment from Kamunting* and James Wong's *The Price of Loyalty* (cited in *Human Rights Dialogue*, Vol. 6, September 1996: 8). As noted in the review of Ali's book, "There is too much room for abuse of the ISA for dubious political ends, and the ISA is a travesty to any society's notion of human rights and dignity" (8).

⁶ See my discussion of this construction of the Chinese diasporic subject in Mo's novels, in the chapter "Who Do We Name When We Say 'Diaspora'? Race, National Identity, and the Subject of the Subject in Timothy Mo's Novels" (*Writing S.E./Asia in English* 91-104).

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