Mohammad A. Quayum and Grace V.S. Chin (Eds), *The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English*. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. 144 pp. ISBN: 9781032669724.

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How does one address the notion that postcolonialism systemically reinforces the "implicit structures it aims to critique," to use the words of Netty Mattar in her essay, "Diffractive Spaces: An Analysis of Malaysian Cyberpunk"? (114). Mattar demands that individuals move past the constraints of hybridity (115). How then does a writer form "an alternative spatial imaginary outside western binary frames of understanding"? (116). The works in *The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English*, edited by Mohammad A. Quayum and Grace V.S. Chin, compel postcolonial individuals to use multifaceted texts and genres to "connect with alterity that is constructive and advocates coexistence" (122).

Mattar's work primarily focuses on cyberpunk as a method to imagine a world beyond current restrictions imposed by (post)colonial tendencies. Mattar writes, "If cyberpunk is about the impact of such changes on our understanding of spatiality, then Malaysian cyberpunk can tell us how the new spaces of globalization are appropriated under current capitalist conditions, and the extent to which exploitation, dispossession, and radicalization have intensified" (114). She explores how works such as Anna Tan's "Codex" create that spatiality through science fiction and Jekyll-Hyde personas. The sci fi genre, or SF, as Mattar calls it, allows readers to consider "Malaysian cyberpunk through the concept of difference-focused reading" that explores "completely different world views" (121-22).

Can sci fi or even webcomics really create that liminal space, one might ask, despite the alternative mediums? Writers such as Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics*, and Charles McGrath, author of "Not Funnies," explore the marginalized status thrust upon comics. McGrath writes, in 2004, that "the comic-book form until recently has been unable to shed a certain aura of pulpiness, cheesiness and semi-literacy." Comics, or comix, for mature audiences, must fight for authority with manga and anime. Even in the twenty-first century, the resurgence of *Calvin and Hobbes* and, more recently, *Garfield*, as well as the publications of graphic novels (often labeled more autobiographical works not to be confused with comics, as per McGrath) such as Jerry Craft's *New Kid* or Cece Bell's *El Deafo*, still does not elevate comics to a higher literary platform. And yet, the creators of these "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" stipulate that audiences take them seriously, just as a marginalized, postcolonial subject must insist the same (McCloud 20).

Ernest Ng's webcomic *Covidball Z*, as discussed by Susan Philip in "Satire and Community in the time of COVID-19: An Analysis of Ernest Ng's *Covidball Z*," teeters on that delicate tightrope between sardonicism and a unified community (136-37). Ng coaxes his readers toward that community despite his commentary on COVID-19 concerns, such as when the then-Health Minister suggests drinking warm water to combat COVID (qtd. in Ng 134). Philip details how the use of Malay and English and of burly, superheroical political leaders empower Ng to consolidate his community despite a tense, polarizing issue.

Although Philip focuses on a webcomic, the other works in this collection concentrate on non-visual works of fiction and poetry, including those by Lloyd Fernando, Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan, Zen Cho, and Omar Musa. Despite the differences in mediums, the efforts to unify communities despite political and cultural divergence remain a core theme throughout *The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English*.

The first two chapters focus on Aw's works,[1] offering a candid glimpse of China's pervasive economic and societal role in a pre-COVID society. Walter S.H. Lim, author of "China, Malaysia, and Millennial Diasporic Identity in Tash Aw's The Face and Five Star Billionaire," observes, "Aw represents the possibilities of China as the new millennium's land of promise," adding that Aw "portrays the fragmented and alienated nature of individual and social being fashioned by Asian capital" (20). China, as noted by scholar Kerry Liu, "was the major contributor to the growth of the world economy during 2013–2019 (Liu, 2022) and 2020–2021, [and yet] China's dynamic Covid-zero policy will certainly weaken its role in the future," socially, economically, and politically (Liu 828).

In contrast, in Malaysia, the Chinese (and Indians) might resent the colonial impulse to consider them as transient workers. The importance placed on land (and the tin mines) as "commodity . . . alienated the indigenous communities (Kratoska 1975, 135)" (114). These colonial tendencies highlight the dichotomy of a rich, but contradictory China and a labor-focused Malaysia, in a pre-COVID society. For example, Angelia Poon's work, "Universalism and the Malaysian Anglophone Novel: Exploring Inequality, Migrancy and Class in Tash Aw's We the Survivors," considers the role of the individual of Chinese descent;, and Ann Ang's "Transnational Re-Memorialization in Preeta Samarasan's Evening Is the Whole Day", reflects on the impact of Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP)[2] on those of Indian descent (39). The works in The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English address, from different angles, the role of the marginalized individual, impacted by Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP), and the relationship of that individual to postcolonial impressions.

Ang also recognizes the tensions arising from colonial tendencies. Ang explains, "Samarasan's . . . novel effects a powerful critique of the racialized exclusion of non-bumiputera,[3] [and] its transnational re-memorialization may not fully depict the complex origins of race as a contemporary social formation in Malaysia, or the varied composition of the Malaysian Indian community" (50). According to Ang, the novel largely "rejects the possibility of growth or change . . ." (50). Ang also notes the stagnancy of the "cultural politics," as embodied by Samarasan, resulting in the ongoing "re-memorialization of the racial discrimination faced by Malaysian Indians" (50).

Despite Samarasan's portrayals, several authors in this collection make unflagging efforts to plow fresh ground for growth and connections. As Grace V.S. Chin, co-editor of this volume and author of "Interracial Relations and the Post-Postcolonial Future in Zen Cho's *Spirits Abroad*," explains, Cho chooses an "inclusive attitude . . . where the margin becomes the new centre, where differences are resolved through dialogue and communication . . ." (64) in her fantastical and supernatural writing. These dichotomous views embody the slippery and transforming ways in which the postcolonial millennium, still only two decades strong, will lead Malaysia.

If the Chinese are rich, powerful, or temporary workers and the Malaysians seek to retain their precolonial foothold, leaving the Indians to fend for themselves, then how can these works unify these groups? Jason Eng Hun Lee and Sreedhevi Iyer, authors of "On Not Writing Back: Cosmopolitan Paradoxes in New Diasporic Writing in Malaysian Writing Today," boldly suggest, "We might perhaps be said to be comfortable finding home within that 'otherness', …" (93). Editors Chin and Quayum explore how authors in this volume use diffraction or even a parang or hyphen to demonstrate this painstaking exploration (7-8). Chin and Quayum note, diffraction "allows us to be more attentive to how different cultural entities

and ontologies impede, pass through, or interfere with one another, while observing how differences are upheld and strengthened" (8). In addition, Lee and Iyer explain that their article "explores how our deterritorialized cosmopolitanism informs the intention and craft of our own writing, particularly as it is received by multiple audiences across the globe" (85).

To probe ways to deterritorialize and cosmopolitize, these authors write about forest spirits, share images of a herculean rendition of a virus in a webcomic, and explore the role of the parang and hyphen in poetry.[4] These writers, several of whom anthologize Malaysia from abroad, shed an exilic view in favor of a recursive journey. They reject expectations to "self-orientalize," in the words of Lee (92). This journey, these authors urge, is progressive. Although scholar Susan L. Roberson largely focuses on the "voyager," in her essay, "Defining Travel: An Introduction", her ideas apply to the Malaysian author, within and without Malaysia, who must "reconstruct[] the cognitive maps by which we find our way in the world" (xvii). The process is a journey, and no matter how wearisome and compounded marginalization becomes, whether via COVID-19, a contradictory world power or leader, or one's own neighbors and friends, the reimaginative writing space must morph.

Notes

1. See Walter S.H. Lim, "China, Malaysia, and Millennial Diasporic Identity in Tash Aw's The Face and Five Star Billionaire," and Angelia Poon, "Universalism and the Malaysia Anglophone Novel: Exploring Inequality, Migrancy, and Class in Tash Aw's We, the Survivors."
2. See also p. 53 of Chin's "Interracial Relations and the Post-Postcolonial Future in Zen Cho's Spirits Abroad" for a reference to the New Economic Policy.
3. *Bumiputera are the "sons of the soil," or the indigenous Malays. See Lim, 13.*
4. Weihsin Gui, author of "Hyphenational Poetrics in Omar Musa's Parang and Millefiori," notes how Omar's "hyphenation poetics" demonstrate how "the horizontal dash of the hyphen can connect people and cultures but also, as the blade of a parang, slash and pierce the hypocrisy and empty rhetoric emanating from the 'mansion on the hill'" (75).
5. *Chin and Quayum write, "Tash Aw, Preeta Samarasan, Zen Cho, Omar Musa, Jason Eng Hun Lee, and Sreedhevi Iyer . . . live outside Malaysia" (5).*

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