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Unity lost? Reframing ethnic relations in Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*

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This essay reads Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour* (1993) against the “lost” (forgotten, erased) but recently recuperated histories of ethnic unity in Malaysia to challenge the state’s account which paints the past as a time of disunity and animosity between the ethnicities essentialized as “races”. Specifically, I reframe the racial violence of “May 13, 1969” at the heart of *Green is the Colour* to argue that the novel gives the event a much more radical treatment than has been critically acknowledged. Instead of presupposing racial difference as the natural and spontaneous cause of the violence, the novel, I show, unmasks as myth the account by the state which renders its own complicity invisible.

**Keywords:** ethnic relations; unity; Malaysia; “May 13, 1969”; Lloyd Fernando; UMNO

**Introduction**

“National unity” has been a problematic goal and ideal ever since the modern nation-state was invented in the 18th century, serving as a focus that simultaneously galvanizes and polarizes differentially marked social subjects of the nation-space. This applies no less to contemporary Malaysia where, in order to normalize the narrative of the nation as a symbolic force (Bhabha 2), the multiple ethnicities of the country are constantly reminded by the state about the importance of maintaining unity between ethnicities popularly essentialized as the “Malay-Muslim race” and other “races”, such as the Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups. Although it is clear that unity is an essential and necessary good, there is interestingly little consensus on what constitutes unity and whether it actually exists. We see this exemplified, for instance, in the claim by the former prime minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, that “unity is not a slogan” but “in fact, is a way of life in this country” (“PM: Unity”), and the counterclaim by Zaid Ibrahim, a respected Malaysian political leader of Malay background, that “our ethnic relations [are] not good and national unity [is] non-existent” (Rahman and Chan).

Is, and was, there ever unity in Malaysia, if we provisionally mean a degree of cohesion and harmony that is more substantive than the surface multicultural side-by-sideness presented in tourism brochures? Is, and was, there the kind of togetherness portrayed by Maniam where ordinary people would sit and talk as individuals, “not as people made different by their own kinds of worship and living” (106)? Certainly we will never arrive at the definitive answer since unity is a word that signifies radically different things to different people. For some, unity is a reality lived every day beyond rhetoric despite the increasing number of reported cases of racial and religious chauvinism in Malaysia. For
others, it is a lost object standing in for a past time when race and religion did not form barriers to keep people apart. For yet others, unity is conditional upon the maintenance of the very racial and religious barriers some want to remove, because they believe their removal will threaten the dominant status of Malays and Islam. That the definitive is impossible has done little to deter factions in Malaysia from attempting to realize their respective visions of unity. Unity continues to be a dominant goal in the Malaysian imaginary and narratives continue to circulate about how Malaysia achieved unity, lost or never had it, and who are/were responsible for its absence/presence.

These contemporary Malaysian concerns are of direct relevance to readings of Malaysian literature in English since all key texts recognize a fundamental disjunction in Malaysia, whereby unity is undermined by racially exclusionary politics, attitudes and actions. Works by canonical writers such as Shirley Lim, Lloyd Fernando and K.S. Maniam have been popular with literary scholars whose critiques have highlighted the engagement and intervention of Malaysian literature in the country’s politics of race. Less clear, however, is how critics should orient themselves towards the problems of race and unity when they encounter them in a Malaysian text. This is not insignificant since the way critics frame a text does, to a great extent, shape the conclusions they draw from it.

For instance, if critics approach a text like Maniam’s *In a Far Country* with an unproblematic acceptance of the Malays as *bumiputras* (sons of the soil; “master race” of Malaysia) and the Chinese and Indian as members of “migrant communities” (Wong, “Traversing”) even though they were born into Malaysia as citizens, then what they effectively achieve is not to describe the “races” but to concede defeat even before any interventionist critique of unity can commence. In other words, they unwittingly legitimate the ideologically constructed racial division and hierarchy that make racist exclusions possible in the first place. Entering the text in this way would also be to ignore the historical reality that around the same time that waves of immigrants entered Malaya from China and India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was “a corresponding increase in the movement of people who were subsequently called Malays to and within the frontier regions of the Peninsula and the less densely populated parts of Outer Island Indonesia” (Kahn 39). In the state of Johor in the late 19th century, for instance, four out of five Malays were migrants from Java (Ting 47). The Malays’ migrant roots are today entirely erased from the Malay-dominated state’s history of Malaysia which considers them as an indigenous race above the rest.

The state’s rewriting of the past applies also to the paradigmatic racial violence of “May 13, 1969”, perceived by an overwhelming majority of Malaysians as the day the nation truly lost its unity. Considering that “May 13” serves as background to the late Fernando’s second novel, *Green is the Colour*, what would be the implications if critics read the novel without interrogating the competing truth-claims about the cause of “May 13”? This is a key question I will examine in this paper in an attempt to rethink unity in Malaysia and Malaysian literature through *Green is the Colour*.

Although *Green is the Colour* has been available for nearly 20 years and has acquired canonical status, substantive critiques focusing on race and unity in the text remain few and far between. Most essays tend to analyse *Green is the Colour* alongside Fernando’s first novel, *Scorpion Orchid* (Wicks), or with a novel by another author, for example, V.S. Naipaul (Koh), Shirley Lim (Quayum, “‘My Country’”) and Joseph Conrad (Kurtz). Only a handful of single-text studies exist that focus primarily on race and unity in *Green is the Colour* (Wong, “Unveiling”; Quayum, “Imagining”; “Shaping”). Collectively, these critiques of varied scope and depth have undoubtedly helped to open up the interpretative possibilities of Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*. Strangely, however, none has questioned the cause of “May 13”.
In her study on *Green is the Colour*, Wong makes an interesting case in situating modernity (experienced by Malaya/Malaysia through colonialism) as the overarching force responsible for engendering the proliferation of “cultural particularisms and heterogeneous discourses” (“Unveiling” 76) that led to “May 13”. At no point, however, does Wong raise the question of whether “May 13” could have been caused by agents other than the impersonal force of modernity. Only briefly, and in passing, does she mention that the text provides subtle evidence to suggest that, while the powers that be “may not have directly intensified the civil disturbances that form the background of the novel, they are not unduly disturbed by these events because of their entrenched power” (81).

By contrast, several essays by Quayum on Fernando’s text are more sanguine. In writing on *Green is the Colour*, Quayum asks:

How can Malaysia with its plurality and multiplicity find unity? This is the question that the author centrally poses in the novel and his answer, both implicit and explicit, is: through understanding, love, mutual respect, natural integration of races, and above all by shunning extremist as well as ultra-radical, racial and religious views in favour of a dialogic vision that accommodates widely different outlooks for the sake of promoting fellowship and peace. (“Shaping” 168–69)

I agree in principle with the universal values mentioned in the above paragraph. However, the problem with positing them as the solution to the loss of unity resulting from “May 13” is that it offers too much and too little at the same time. That is to say, it provides no real insight into Malaysia’s racial impasse. Although clearly beneficial to some, they provide no answer to the question of how to deal with someone from across the ideological divide. How, for example, does anyone reason with a Malaysian like Omar in *Green is the Colour* who believes with religious fervour that redemption lies in the national purging of the corruptive West and the cultures of those who “live with little or no religion and pray to idols” (Fernando, *Green* 37)? How does one shun the likes of Panglima and the other shadowy figures of the *Penaung*, a Malay term for “protection” which “also connotes surveillance and control” (Wong, “Unveiling” 80)? Representing the underside of the state, the powerful *Penaung* characters’ appreciation of the universal values of liberal humanism, which leftist liberals like Dahlan championed, is illustrated by their forcing a foot long pipe into Dahlan’s anus. How does one forge unity based on love, respect and mutual understanding in Malaysia when the antagonists have no qualms in resorting to violence to uphold their belief that the only way to achieve unity is for the non-Malay/Muslims who “came here as strangers” to do their “duty” by “showing their understanding” (Fernando, *Green* 86) that “The Malays were here first. The others came later” (Theophilus)?

The other problem with Quayum’s reading of *Green in the Colour* as positing the aforementioned universal values as a solution to the loss of unity resulting from “May 13” is that it overlooks how the event, as the ground from which the solution emerges, is unstable in terms of causality and signification. By positing the solution without first taking note of the ground, Quayum effectively depoliticizes “May 13”. To presume stable truths about the event, even more than 40 years later, is to foreclose further inquiry into the violence.

In this paper I argue that *Green is the Colour* goes beyond the universal values Quayum posits as the novel’s solution to the problem of unity arising from “May 13”. Working as a kind of parallel historiography, the text unmasks the official account of the violence as a myth that renders invisible the causal role of certain figures from the United Malays’ National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay political party dominating the state that not only disavowed culpability for “May 13” but also benefited the most from it. The text achieves this by drawing attention to hidden truths about the event by recapturing the historical
scepticism and suspicion towards the state’s official account. Furthermore, the text draws on popular memory of the violence and reworks it without losing historical resonance or erasing counter-official views of the event. This reading refers to the text and Fernando’s implied authorial orientation towards the issues at stake as in his remark:

[T]here is so much that is explosively divisive, so much that is corrupt, so much public chicane
er that is covered up by mute public assent, that we are cowed by public appeals for unity
and restraint. We become our censors. (“Truth” 224)

To situate the novel in the context of other media engaged with issues over unity, I begin by examining two short films by Fahmi Reza, a young Malaysian director, because film has, in the past decade, become young Malaysians’ preferred medium for creative expression and social engagement. The filmic references I make also serve to illustrate how fiction in general and Fernando’s novel in particular is not the only mode of contesting essentialist understandings of unity in Malaysia; the terms of contestation are also shared by Malaysians working in other domains of cultural production. Fahmi Reza’s films focus on Malaysian history in the 1940s and 1950s, to illustrate ongoing efforts to recuperate moments of unity erased by time and the state. I then examine unity in the 1960s in light of the racial violence of “May 13, 1969”, which I subsequently employ as background to discuss the radical interpretative potential of Fernando’s Green is the Colour.

Recuperating unity

In 2007, Fahmi Reza created ripples in Malaysia with the release of his short documentary 10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka [10 Years before Independence]. Winner of the “Most Outstanding Human Rights Film” at the 2007 Freedom Film Fest, 10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka presents a rare glimpse of a past which, although familiar to a few mostly older-generation historians and specialists of Malaysia, has been virtually “lost”, unknown to the younger generations, whose notion of history is generally skewed towards the version tied to the interests of UMNO. It captures the era of pre-independent Malaya, a time when the different ethnic groups, instead of being perpetually in conflict with each other, as represented in UMNO’s history, were in fact productively united in a common cause.

Historians have noted that Malaysian history, as endorsed by the state controlled by UMNO and taught in schools, bears a strong right-wing Malay ethno-nationalist bias. This version of history focuses primarily on the Malay Rulers and the Malay population as the key actors, while the role of the non-Malay population in building the nation is rendered peripheral at best, if not distorted, at times to “cast aspersions on the loyalty and patriotism of past Malaysian Indians and Chinese” (Cheah, “Ethnicity” 239, citing Ranjit Singh Malhi). The official history further paints a past in which tension and disunity existed between the races until UMNO came into existence in 1946 to heroically fight for independence and bring liberation and harmony to the people through the so-called “social contract”. Although designed as a temporary measure to help the Malays until they caught up socio-economically with other ethnic communities, the “contract” has now come to mean perpetual Malay hegemony as a matter of birthright.

The dominant UMNO-centred history of the nation’s founding, which supports the claim to Malay dominance, has been described by historian Paul H. Kratoska as flying in the face of “the historic accommodation among the races of the Peninsular achieved during the transition from colonialism to independence” (231). Kratoska’s point is amply illustrated by 10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka. The film shows how the multiethnic leftist coalition
of Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA; Centre for People’s Power) and the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) successfully organized a series of people’s demonstrations throughout the country to demand independence from colonial Britain and to protest against its collusion with UMNO elites and its allies in sidelining the masses in the drafting of the Constitution of the Malayan Federation. Protests peaked with the 1947 Hartal (passive civil disobedience), which successfully shut down British-controlled Malaya and Singapore for a day.

Fahmi’s short documentary does not present a picture of absolute unity at all times between the different ethnicities in the pre-independence years, or show the ideals fought for by the coalition of left-wing parties as being free from racial tensions. But it credibly contests the dominant version of the past in which the races were invariably divided, facing each other with fear, suspicion and animosity, by providing an inspiring example of what Sumit Mandal calls “transethnic solidarities” or “efforts by Malaysians [to] actively participate in society without respect to ethnic background” (50). The unity evidenced by the 1947 Hartal is indeed a momentous rediscovery. But just how significant is it? Is it not an exception rather than representative of Malaysia’s overall state of unity, past or present? No doubt, more historical examples of interethnic conflicts than of transethnic solidarities can be found. Yet this does not mean that more evidence of the latter is not waiting to be revealed. As Mandal notes, transethnic solidarities are among “the most obvious and yet least studied aspects of Malaysian society” (50). In any case, they are worth studying in so far as they help construct imaginable relationships based on inclusion and mutual empathy.

Fahmi’s forthcoming short film Revolusi ‘48 [“Revolution of 1948”] provides yet another example of lost/forgotten narratives about Malaysia’s past emerging to contest the official line. The sequel to 10 Tahun, Revolusi ‘48 covers the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), which is today seen as the time when the “communists” attempted to seize the country through violent means, killing thousands of innocent people. Revolusi ‘48 tells a radically different story. From the leftist perspective, the Emergency, officially declared by the colonial government of Malaya in order to eradicate the “communists”, was in fact a pretext to suppress not only the demonized Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) but also the multiethnic left-wing parties behind the 1947 Hartal, working together to demand independence. The left was a threat to British interests and was therefore outlawed, their leaders arrested en masse or driven underground. It was during this turbulent period that leftist splinters formed the transethnic Malayan National Liberation Army which engaged in armed struggles for liberation. The suppression of the left created a political vacuum which made it easier for UMNO to hijack the leftist agenda for independence, work with the British unhindered and later lay claim to the role of liberating the country. In short, as is now re-emerging, the Emergency was an armed revolution of the people whose freedom fighters, having lost the war, are now written into the state-endorsed history as terrorists.

Efforts at recuperating lost/forgotten narratives of Malaysia’s past focus on almost all the key moments in the country’s history, including the rupture of “May 13, 1969”, which I will now consider before moving to discuss Fernando’s Green is the Colour.

Reframing “May 13” and Fernando’s Green is the Colour

If Malaysians had to date the loss of unity – which clearly existed in certain ways – they would point to “May 13”, the watershed moment during which Malay and Chinese factions clashed violently in the wake of the general elections in 1969. Officially, the number of
dead stood at 196, with more than 250 injured, hundreds of houses gutted and scores of vehicles burnt (May 13 88). The unofficial death toll was as high as 2000, mostly Chinese (Parker 6). The loss of unity dated “May 13” is widely believed to be a loss from which the nation has never really recovered. “All of us changed after that” (Fernando, Green 73).

Fernando chose “May 13” as the context of his second novel, Green is the Colour, clearly for its emotive powers. Against the tense historical background of what Time magazine described ominously as a “race war” (“Race War in Malaysia”), he examines a complex web of racial and religious conceit. Through a gallery of multiethnic characters – including Dahlan, Yun Ming, Gita, Siti Sara, Omar, Panglima and Lebai Hanafiah – the reader enters into their dangerous times, when “[T]he hope for unity based on equality had been forgotten” (Fernando, Green 42). In an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, some of the characters strive to retain their liberal egalitarian ideals about Malaysia. Others, driven by the ideology of Malay-Muslim supremacy, unapologetically seek to put non-Malay/Muslims, with their infidel cultures and ideas, at the margins of power. These fraught issues of race and religion raised by Fernando are as relevant today as they were in the years prior to the novel’s publication in 1993.

The questions raised in Green is the Colour against “May 13” are familiar: to whom does Malaysia belong? Does it belong to the Malays/Muslims first, before other Malaysians, namely the non-Malays/Muslims? On what and whose terms should the “races” relate to each other? Undoubtedly the authorial voice in the novel is on the side of sympathetically presented characters like Siti Sara, Yun Ming and even Dahlan, who reject racial and religious extremism, opposing the zealous Omar and the insidious Panglima. The novel articulates an implicit vision of a united Malaysia built on the bedrock of plurality, one yet to be realized. Critics could argue, as Quayum does, that the novel offers, as antidote to Malaysia’s ethnic disunity, “understanding, love, mutual respect, natural integration of the races, and above all [the] shunning [of] extremist as well as ultra-radical, racial and religious views” (“Shaping” 169). Or they might query whether race was not the cause but merely an excuse to hide the deeds of the powerful “hidden hands” that Said Zahari refers to in his poem on “May 13”. In “Hidden Hands” the hands are attributed to political elites who used “Colour, race, religion and language” as “sharp blades” to spill “the blood of the poor / To cling on to power” (np). Are these hidden political hands present also in Fernando’s Green is the Colour, or does the novel instead posit racial difference as the cause of “May 13”?

In the official account of “May 13”, the chain of events leading to the first outbreak of violence began when the Chinese-dominated opposition parties provoked the Malays with racial taunts after dealing a serious blow to the Alliance in the 1969 general elections. The Alliance was led by UMNO, the right-wing Malay political party currently controlling the state. Igniting this spark, the official report written by the powerful National Operations Council claimed, were the agents of the Chinese-led CPM who, “together with paid secret society agents, generated racial tension to a dangerous pitch” in attempts to topple the government (May 13 27). That the “Chinese” were officially named as a cause is not necessarily common knowledge to all Malaysians today. “May 13” is often gentrified/depoliticized and the question of causality ignored in order to represent the event as a universal precautionary tale to Malaysians about the dangers of racial extremism and the importance of showing understanding and respect for the racial “other” if Malaysia is to prevent another “May 13”. The explicit lesson of this generic tale is that the races are different and that racial difference can naturally generate spontaneous conflicts if they do not strive hard to respect each other’s “sensitivities”. Always, however, an implicit racial lesson is inscribed into the universal tale, with which a majority of Malaysians are familiar: “May 13” will repeat itself
if the Chinese, or any other race, challenge the political power of the Malays in whose name UMNO purports to speak.

Even before the publication in 2007 of Kua Kia Soong’s controversial book which names several UMNO leaders as the perpetrators of “May 13”, as the incident was unfolding in 1969, serious questions were already being asked as to whether the UMNO-led government, including the police and the armed forces, had acted properly and impartially during the crisis. Despite a local media blackout following the eruption of “May 13”, news trickled in from eyewitnesses and foreign correspondents, giving credence to the widespread belief that the riots were not spontaneous but were in fact part of a planned pogrom against the Chinese.

Reading *Green is the Colour* intertextually with the conflicting reports and analyses on “May 13”, critics will find that Panglima and his shadowy associates are not without historical antecedents. Besides Tun Abdul Razak, Mahathir Mohamad and Ghazali Shafie, there was Harun Idris. All four were identified by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the then prime minister, as conspiring to unseat him (Kua, *K. Das* 110, 112). The name of Harun, then the *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) of Selangor and a powerful UMNO leader, recurs constantly in counter-official accounts reconstructed from sources such as eyewitnesses, foreign correspondents and recently declassified documents. A well-known proponent of Malay supremacy, Harun had called for a Malay rally to counter the Chinese-preponderant opposition’s victory parade following the 1969 elections. On 13 May, before the outbreak of violence, Malay youths had started to assemble in front of Harun’s residence near Kampung Baru, even though a police permit for the counter-rally had yet to be obtained. A confidential report by the British High Commission observes that “groups of Malays came into KL during the day from fairly distant areas and that some of them were armed” (Kua, “Racial” 46). By 6.30 p.m. the planned demonstration had spiralled into the worst racial violence the country had ever experienced.

Today, as in 1969, there continues to be deep scepticism that “May 13” was a spontaneous outburst of powerful racial emotions between incompatible “races” rather than a plan engineered by ultra-right-wing figures within UMNO. The contention remains unchanged: UMNO had feared losing power after faring badly in the general elections, and had thus either planned or knowingly allowed the first mob violence of “May 13”. The objective of the premeditated violence was threefold: to teach the Chinese a lesson for challenging UMNO’s hegemony through the 1969 elections; to take advantage of the national crisis by staging a secret political coup against Tunku Abdul Rahman, then prime minister; and to create an excuse to invoke Emergency powers so that UMNO could thwart the will of the people by clinging to power.

Against this historical background, I want now to return to *Green is the Colour* and tease out how the novel could be read as supporting the counter-official narrative of “May 13”, focusing first on Dahlan, the liberal Malay lawyer and social activist in the novel whose criticism of the state represented by Panglima, for example, makes him a target for disciplining. Panglima is a Malay state official whose name and title connote the head of an army unit and, more generally, leadership and potency (Wong, “Unveiling” 75). The novel’s counter-positioning of Dahlan and Panglima is but one of several instances which alert us to the ideological, rather than racial, basis of the power alignment behind “May 13”. Race, that is, is not presented in the novel as the force that overdetermined “May 13”. Otherwise, we would not see the transethnic bonds existing between Yun Ming and Siti Sara, or between Gita and Dahlan. Nor would Dahlan, who shares the same race as claimed by Panglima, speak critically about the government in whose name Panglima acts.

There is no mystery in *Green is the Colour* as to where the arrow of culpability points: rather than emphasizing racial incompatibility between the Chinese and the Malays it
singles out individuals like Omar who conceitedly elevates himself above the non-Malays/Muslims because he believes “This country is ours [the Malays’]” (Fernando, *Green* 102). It points to the beard-stroking Wan Nurrudin, whose job as Secretary-General in the Department of Unity is to manipulate the masses with clever aphorisms into offering unquestioning loyalty to the government in the wake of “May 13”. Above all, the novel intimates that “May 13” was mediated by the powerful figures of the *Penaung* standing above the law, constituting the state’s dark machinery. Panglima, a high-ranking state official, only belatedly reveals himself as a secret *Penaung*.

As we have seen, the representation of “May 13” in *Green is the Colour* does not quite adhere to the official account of the event. Instead of affirming the narrative that Malaysia’s racial plurality was the cause of the 1969 violence and the Chinese precipitated it, the text implies the presence of larger forces at work behind “May 13”. It urges the reader to ask whether, in the final analysis, race was not an excuse employed by hidden hands to manipulate events to their advantage, all in ways opaque to those located outside the circle of power. To quote Sara, “Was there some mysterious, political, religious, or financial plot, too complex for anyone to understand?” (151). The reader is also urged to ask whether ordinary people like Gita, Dahlan, Sara, Yun Ming and Omar are not mere pawns in a political game played by figures like Panglima, who controls events anonymously until he finally reveals himself as the puppet master with deep and powerful connections.

The novel hints further at hidden truths about “May 13” through Sara’s personal grappling with the incident. Sara was in the United States with Omar, her husband, when the incident erupted in Kuala Lumpur (KL), and:

[S]he had entered into some defensive arguments with her American friends over whether Malays were killing Chinese and Indians, or vice versa [...] She added that, after all, we are building a new country, we were working out our own future and we will solve our problems as they arise. She developed and clung to the use of the plural personal pronoun because they soothed her: they stirred feelings of patriotism, of love for fellow citizens whether Malay, Chinese, Indian, or Eurasian. They exempted her from asking what really had happened.

Tonight for the first time [having returned to Malaysia since “May 13”] she knew that she had not really wanted to know: she had embraced a specious feeling of togetherness with people in the abstract to cloak her unease, to disguise her semi-instinctive wish not to know. (76–77, my emphasis)

What is it that Sara does not want to “know”? Why does she desire to exempt herself from asking questions about the violence of “May 13”? At first it seems that she seeks to avoid the truth because it would shatter her emotionally invested ideal of Malaysia as a race-transcending egalitarian society. “Knowing” would mean waking up to the contested reality that the racial togetherness she believes in is either lost or has never existed. This reading is sustainable until Sara realizes, travelling by car, that “Yun Ming knew [...] his eyes, pinpointrs of black, flash in the light as he spoke. They mesmerised her: she knew he spoke as one who knew” (77, my emphasis). Neither Sara nor Yun Ming ever spell out what is to be known, for this revelation would make Fernando cross from fiction to the real world where the Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act await. It is notable that Fernando wrote *Green is the Colour* at a time before the Internet when the state’s tolerance for freedom of speech was much lower. He would have been aware and affected by the 1987 impasse which many feared would repeat “May 13”. Amidst high interethnic tensions, the UMNO-led government launched *Operasi Lallang* (Weeding Operation) to crack down on its opponents, resulting in the arrest of over 100 opposition leaders and social activists, and the revocation of the publishing licences of two major newspapers. It
also triggered an exodus or voluntary exile by mostly non-Malay Malaysians to countries like Singapore, Taiwan, Australia and the United States.4

To further unpack the half-spoken about “May 13” in Green is the Colour, it is pertinent that Yun Ming, prior to becoming a target for state disciplining, was a civil servant working directly under Panglima. He was conceivably privy to information shared only within the power circle. Could he, in his capacity as Panglima’s assistant, have come into some terrible knowledge about “May 13” – knowledge “he felt justified in suppressing” (Fernando, Green 132) because of his misplaced notion of patriotic loyalty to the country? As Yun Ming admits after awakening to the fact that fidelity to a leader like Panglima is not the same as fidelity to the nation, he had previously disregarded “some obvious facts” because he thought that would “make a bridge” (132). He had believed then that “May be, just may be, that was [the] path to truth”, implying that “not telling the whole truth” (132–33) about “May 13” would be better for everyone. Perhaps Yun Ming feared, as does the civil servant protagonist in “Heroes”, Karim Raslan’s short story about “May 13”, that “the truth” would only bring more “chaos, destruction and death. There are times when whole nations are happier subscribing to the great ‘lie’” (32). Green is the Colour hints at all this but offers no confirmation. It only goes so far as to suggest interpretative possibilities, relying on the reader to connect the allusions intertextually to arrive at a larger picture.

Until state documents of the tragedy are declassified and a truly independent commission is set up to investigate “May 13”, the official history will remain contested, as it is in Green is the Colour. The novel does not spell out in documentary terms the specific details about the suspicious circumstances behind “May 13” or the state’s handling of it. It instead brackets the claim that race overdetermined “May 13” and it achieves this through a textual recapturing of the historical scepticism and suspicion of the people who continue to dog the state. It borrows from popular memory of the violence, reworking it without losing its historical resonance or erasing alternative views of the event.

The loss of the loss of unity

How, if at all, does Green is the Colour help us to better understand unity in Malaysia, if we read the text against the lost/recuperated history of the people traced earlier in the essay? No doubt, the fact remains that unity was lost in the strictly qualified sense, that soon after the first violence of “May 13” the “races” became something of a monolith in each other’s eyes. Mutual fear and suspicion bred more of the same, which over time gradually drove more Malays and non-Malays further apart. Most concretely, “May 13” led to the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 and subsequent similar pro-Malay racial policies, the controversial implementation of which drove an even larger wedge between racially marked Malaysians. Notwithstanding this, it is crucial to establish that, although “May 13” dealt a major blow to interethic relations, and although racial tensions were palpable in the period leading up to and immediately after the outbreak of violence, it did not create the unmitigated total loss of unity that has been imagined to exist on at least two fronts. The first, as we just saw, relates to the counter-official position which posits that unity was not lost on “May 13” because the event was not the culmination of Malays and non-Malays fearing and hating each other out of some primeval racial passion. Fear and hate, while always present to a degree in any multicultural society, were rather the effects of “May 13”, caused by the owners of “hidden hands” who, unable to accept the results of the 1969 general elections, incited racial violence as a cover to seize power.

If racial difference did not primordially cause “May 13”, then the whole problem of unity as it has been popularly conceived will have to be rethought. That is to say, if at first
the problem was about how to stop the racialized ethnicities from disuniting and polarizing themselves, it should now be reframed as how Malaysians can unite across structural divides (race, religion, class, gender, and so on) to prevent further division and manipulation by political elites speaking in the name of race, religion, people and nation. What is required of Malaysians, in other words, is not simply love and understanding. More radically, they have to enact the loss of the loss of unity. They have to realize and integrate into their conception of the world the knowledge that the overwhelming trauma commonly associated with “May 13” is in actual fact insecurely premised on the state’s ideological construction of the past.

On the second front, rethinking the problem of unity should also lead to the realization that “May 13” did not cause unmitigated loss as widely imagined. The popular over-emphasis on violence in the discourse of “May 13” has led to the distorted view that nothing but hatred, fear and bloodshed exist between Malay and non-Malay. “May 13” was no doubt traumatic but this is often emphasized to the exclusion of considering the acts of tranethnic solidarities which occurred then. The emergence of accounts by hitherto unheard Malaysian voices, especially on the Internet, has helped in correcting the imbalance. The Internet, notably, has become a crucial democratic space for Malaysians to access news and debates censored or blacked-out by the state-controlled media. A blog project collecting personal lived memories about “Where were you on 13 May 1969?”, for instance, features dozens of accounts which clearly show that the violence wreaked was not total and that for many unity remained intact. One account details how the Chinese, Indians and Malays pooled together to create a tranethnic homeguard patrol to keep their neighbourhood safe from outsiders seeking to incite racial violence: There was “NO RACE, NO COLOUR, NO POLITICS, just the need to defend ourselves.” Another first-person account describes how where they lived. “We made good pocket money selling coconuts, kangkong (water spinach), and stale bread, but we Malays, Chinese, Indians and others were on the lookout for the unknown enemy all the time and he never came.” Yet another, a young boy then, remembers how, in the days following “May 13”, “everything seemed normal [ … ]. We even ventured out to the open field opposite our houses, to sit under the trees and while away the lazy afternoons – us, boys of different races.”

One might be tempted to conclude that unity today is, if not lost, a pale shadow of its former self – unless one realizes that, just as tranethnic solidarities existed in the lost/recuperated past, so they exist today, unreported and unsung:

Did the Umno people not see the Malays in Kampong Baru open the doors of their houses so that the Hindraf Indians who were being chased by the police after being tear-gassed could seek refuge? Did the Umno people not see the PAS Malays drag the Indians and Chinese blinded by tear-gas into the Jamik Mosque so that they could escape retaliation from the police during the 10 November 2007 Bersih march? (Raja)

The recent events referred to above by influential blogger and activist Raja Petra Kamrudin were well covered in the local state-controlled media. What was not reported, Raja Petra highlights, were the momentous acts of tranethnic solidarities taking place in full public view despite the threat of police brutality. “Hindraf” refers to the Hindu Rights Action Force, a coalition of Hindu non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which staged a series of protests against the UMNO-dominated state’s failure to protect the constitutional rights of minorities to religious freedom. It was during a police crackdown on a Hindraf protest that the Malays in Kampung Baru (the Malay heartland of Kuala Lumpur) “opened the doors to their houses”, offering refuge to the Hindraf Indians. The act is doubly significant in so far as it demonstrates yet again that Malay is not synonymous with UMNO, and
that a majority of Malays neither subscribe to UMNO’s ideology nor are threatened by the ethnic minorities’ call for the defence of their constitutional rights. Similar acts of solidarity were also witnessed during the 2007 rally organized by Bersih, a tranethnic coalition of opposition parties and NGOs demanding that the UMNO-dominated state reform the electoral process. The same overlooked acts of tranethnic solidarities are present also in Green is the Colour, as in key moments in Malaysian history commonly perceived as dark times for “race relations” in Malaysia.

The emerging people’s history of tranethnic solidarities enables critics to reorient themselves towards the issue of dis/unity in Malaysia, compelling us to question and rethink received ideas about race and religion in our reading of Malaysian texts. The people’s history, when read intertextually with a novel like Green is the Colour, reminds us that literary criticism, like historiography, operates squarely within the field of power. It reminds us to be conscious of the fact that the statements that critics make and the truths they validate or repudiate in discussing a text like Green is the Colour can have repercussions. They can either advance the cause of those seeking to inspire the birth of an egalitarian Malaysia, or detract from it.

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Notes
1. The term “multiethnicities” is used to refer to all ethnic groups constituting Malaysia, the Chinese, Malays, Indians, indigenous people and others. It also signifies “the irreducibly mixed and intertwined racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious histories that characterise, in particular, certain parts of South and Southeast Asia” (Perera 14). On race and cultural production in Malaysia, see Lim (The Infinite; Overcoming); and Goh et al.
2. For detailed discussion on the rise of a new wave of filmmakers in Malaysia and their (dis)engagement with “race”, see, for example, Khoo.
3. For detailed discussion on the left-wing movement, see, for example, Muhammad; and Cheah (“The Left-Wing”).
4. On the self-imposed exile of Chinese Malaysians educated mainly in Mandarin Chinese, see, for example, Wu; and Tee.

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Works cited


