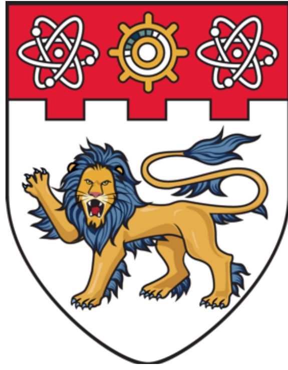

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

A GATE OF DRAGON'S TEETH: A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO WRITING PRECOLONIAL HISTORICAL FICTION IN SINGAPORE

NG YI-SHENG
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A Gate of Dragon's Teeth:

A Decolonial Approach to Writing Precolonial Historical Fiction in Singapore

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2021

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SUMMARY

This creative dissertation consists of a novel titled *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth*. This is a work of historical fiction based on the history and legends of precolonial Singapore and the region, as documented in *Sulalatus Salatin* (also known as *Sejarah Melayu* and *The Malay Annals*). Beginning in the year 1025 with the conception of the divine prince Sang Nila Utama, it traces his life through the eyes of other mythical-historical characters, up till his founding of the kingdom of Singapura in 1299. Through the use of immersive detail, fantastical elements and a focus on marginal figures in society, the work prompts readers to reappraise their assumptions about what might constitute a glorious historical past for the nation of Singapore.

The exegesis applies the principles of decolonial theory to the creation of novels in this genre, with particular regard to deimperialisation and Walter Mignolo's model of the colonial matrix of power. Part 1 tracks the shifting place of precolonial Singaporean history in public memory, including its erasure during the early years of independence and its flourishing in the 21st century. Part 2 consists of a survey of poetry, fiction and drama set during this period, with a specific focus on the authorial stance towards royalty and hierarchy. Part 3 documents my creative process, including research, adaptation, characterisation, point of view, aesthetics and incorporation of magic, with the specific intent to challenge the colonial matrix of power and the hubris of the zero point.

EPIGRAPHS

"And Singapura became a great city, to which foreigners resorted in great numbers so that the fame of the city and its greatness spread throughout the world."

—*Sulalatus Salatin (Sejarah Melayu),* trans. C. C. Brown (21).

"The island of Singapore as such has no long past… What happened before 1819—if anything worthwhile happened at all—has been irretrievably lost in the mists of time."

—S. Rajaratnam, *Speech By Mr S Rajaratnam,*
Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs),
at A Seminar on "Adaptive Reuse:
Integrating Traditional Areas
Into The Modern Urban Fabric"
Held At The Shangri-La Hotel
On Saturday, 28 April 1984 At 10.30 A.M. (5).

This will not do; we must stand aside and let the Lion
crash through a madness of cymbals back to that dark jungle heart
when eyes were still embers waiting for a crownless Prince of Palembang.

—Alfian Sa'at, "Singapore You Are Not My Country" (41).

REDACTED

EXEGESIS

Introduction

The beginnings of *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* go back to 2014, when I enrolled in Novel History: a Creative Writing MA module at the University of East Anglia, focussing on the craft of the historical novel. Though the class was undoubtedly instructive, I found myself frustrated by its Eurocentrism. Why was the first example of the genre considered to be Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), rather than Shi Nai'an's *Water Margin* (1300s) or Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (1300s)? Why were our assigned readings exclusively composed of European authors and settings, save for the token inclusion of an American work: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*?

As a form of redress, I embarked on a short story exploring Singapore's precolonial past. As part of my research, I referred to *Sulalatus Salatin*, also known as *Sejarah Melayu* or *The Malay Annals*, a royal chronicle of the Melaka Sultanate, compiled by Tun Seri Lanang (1565-1659), Bendahara of Johor, around the year 1612.[1] It is the opening chapters of this work which supply us with many of this country's familiar legends, including that of Sang Nila Utama's arrival on this island, his auspicious sighting of a lion, and his subsequent founding of the kingdom of Singapura.

Upon reading the text, I was astonished to discover details of the narrative, absent from the numerous adaptations of the tale I had previously encountered, whether in print, on stage, in museum displays or as part of the National Day Parade. Never before had I heard of

[1] *Sulalatus Salatin* (translated as "The Genealogy of Kings"), is the original name of this work, cited within the text (Brown 2), and has become the preferred title for reference among Malay-speaking intellectuals. *The Malay Annals* and *Sejarah Melayu* (translated as "The History of the Malays") are more frequently used by Anglophone Singaporeans, but they are in fact colonial impositions, coined by John Leyden in his 1821 English translation of the text (Hooker and Hooker 35-36). For the purposes of this thesis, I shall refer to the text as *Sulalatus Salatin.*

Wan Seri Beni, the queen regnant of Bintan Island, who adopted Nila Utama, funded his exploratory voyage and thereafter supplied the "men, elephants and horses… to establish a city here at Temasek" (Brown 20). Nor had I known the background of Demang Lebar Daun, best known as the royal attendant who identified the "strange animal" as a lion. He was a former Raja of Palembang who had first abdicated his throne to Nila Utama, then wedded his daughter to him, forging a crucial covenant between rulers and subjects which still holds influence on Malay politics today. *Sulalatus Salatin* was, in short, a fount of literary material, of which writers before me had tapped but the most meagre of draughts.

To my discredit, I did not complete this story. Nevertheless, I was determined not to squander what I had learned. Under the aegis of Nanyang Technological University, I began writing *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth*, declaring in my thesis proposal my intention "to recreate the legendary glory of the kingdom of Singapura (1299-1398) in the form of a historical novel." I even ventured to state that, "just as the *Mahabharata* is regarded as the great epic of Bharat, or India, I have lofty ambitions that this work may be regarded as a 'Mahatemasika,' a great epic of Singapore."

My aspirations were not only aesthetic, but also pedagogical. In an interview, I lamented the public's ignorance about precolonial history, stating that "it's easier for the average Singaporean to name the six wives of Henry VIII than the five Kings of Singapura" (Chiew). Privately, I harboured dreams that my work might someday serve as the basis for a television serial, thus sparking a wave of popular interest in this era, just as *Dae Jang Geum* did for Joseon Korea, *Love Destiny* for Ayutthaya period Thailand, and *The Little Nyonya* did for the Peranakan history of Singapore.

However, in the course of my project, I was moved to reconsider the rhetoric of "greatness" and "glory" underpinning my conception of the novel. Two principal events steered me towards this shift.

First, the Singapore Bicentennial was held in 2019. Though originally conceived as a commemoration of Sir Stamford Raffles' colonisation of our island in 1819, this year-long festival was reconfigured as an occasion to reflect on 700 years of history, beginning with the arrival of Sang Nila Utama. As a result, a plethora of media was produced depicting Singapore's precolonial past. Other writers and artists had taken on the task of educating citizens about their distant history.

Second, decolonial theory became increasingly discussed in Singaporean intellectual circles, thanks principally to the efforts of Nazry Bahrawi, comparative literature professor and co-founder of the critical humanities collective Bras Basah Open.[2] As described by the Maori New Zealander anthropologist and activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "decolonization,[3] once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognised as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power" (33).

A crucial concept therein is the *patrón colonial de poder*, or coloniality of power. Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano coined this term in his essay "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," explaining that since the first wave of European global colonisation in the 1500s, the world has been subject to a programmatic imposition of Eurocentric cultural standards, which today have been so normalised that they are often mistaken as objective and universal principles applicable to all humankind:

> Not surprisingly then, history was conceived as a[n] evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from pro-capitalism to capitalism, etc. And Europe thought of itself as the

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[2] I first encountered decolonial theory via Nazry's lecture "Repel One Korner: Decolonising Mat & Art." 17 Aug. 2019, Objectifs, Singapore.

[3] Although I use British spelling, I have opted to retain American spelling in quotes from source texts.

> mirror of the future of all the other societies and cultures; as the advanced form of the history of the entire species. What does not cease to surprise, however, is that Europe succeeded in imposing that 'mirage' upon the practical totality of the cultures that it colonized; and, much more, that this chimera is still so attractive to so many. (176)

Argentinean theorist Walter Mignolo elaborates on this idea, describing the hegemonic system as a colonial matrix of power, encompassing "four interrelated domains: control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity" (2011, 8). He further notes how certain Asian nations, including Singapore, have begun to challenge Western dominance in a process he calls dewesternisation. This involves not only the insistence on political and economic autonomy, but also "affirmation in the sphere of knowledge, subjectivity" (48), as exemplified by Lee Kuan Yew's invocations of Asian values, or Mahathir Mohamad's calls for Islamisation of culture. However, dewesternisation is not equivalent to decolonisation. "Decoloniality['s] aims are to delink from the colonial matrix of power," he explains (Mignolo and Walsh 125). "Dewesternisation… disputes the control of the colonial matrix of power but doesn't question its very foundation."

This forced me to rethink my desire to celebrate "the legendary glory" of precolonial Singapore. Was I simply hoping to aggrandise my homeland by embellishing its history according to a colonial yardstick, such as Australian archaeologist V. Gordon Childe's influential but much-critiqued ten-point list of characteristics that distinguish a civilisation? Would I have to conjure up "monumental public buildings" and "systems of recording and exact, but practically useful, sciences" (12, 14), despite there being few archaeological remains to suggest what these would resemble?

Decoloniality also entails deimperialisation. Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan-Hsing has called upon intellectuals even in formerly colonised nations to begin "reexamining their own imperialist histories and the negative impacts those histories have had in the world" (vii). Since gaining the status of a First World nation, Singapore has begun to take on the attributes of a neo-colonial power: a wealthy city-state performing "an imperial form of extraction and exploitation" upon its poorer Southeast Asian neighbours (Alfian and Neo 31).

The figure of Sang Nila Utama, with his accompanying "notions of grandeur and royalty," has already been co-opted into the international branding of the nation (Koh Buck Song 131). It is not far-fetched to imagine that he might one day be abused as a means to perpetuate oppression, as is the case with Hang Tuah, a legendary warrior of Melaka who "has suffered the fatal association with power and the symbols of power and violence" in Malaysian rhetoric, having been "adopted as one of the popular icons of… Malay Muslim ethno-nationalist movements" (Farish 238, 240).[4]

What, then, might be a decolonial approach to writing this novel? Here, I take inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* Tracing her ancestral origins as a queer Chicana (Mexican American) writer and theorist, she chronicles the colonial wounds her community has suffered: the Spanish conquest of Aztec Mexico in 1521, the US invasion of Texas in 1846, the corporate exploitation of Mexican-American farm labour in the 1930s. Yet she also delves into deep precolonial history: the crossing of the Bering Strait, the settlement of Texas by 35000 BCE, and the migration of the Aztecs from the Southwest US to Tenochtitlán in 1168 CE:

---

[4] Hang Tuah has much in common with Sang Nila Utama. He, too, features as a figure in *Sulalatus Salatin*, though he is better known for his appearance in the 17th-century epic *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. He, too, is described as making a voyage to Singapura, where he encounters a strange beast: a white crocodile, whom he wrestles (*The Epic of Hang Tuah* 468-69).

> *Huitzilpochtli,* the God of War, guided them to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine.[5] The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the "higher" masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America. (5)

For Anzaldúa, the founding of the city of Tenochtitlán is not a moment of unmitigated triumph. Indeed, it reveals the beginnings of "control… of gender and sexuality" that Mignolo would later describe as being a key component of the colonial matrix of power (8). The evolution of the Aztecs from a nomadic culture to a patriarchal urban civilisation is, in effect, a prelude to the later ravages of colonial oppression.

Is it possible to imagine the beginnings of Singapura in a similar light? Undoubtedly so. Scholars of classical Malay literature have already laid bare the political agendas behind the legends of *Sulalatus Salatin*, which bear an uncanny resemblance to the imposition of "authority" under the colonial matrix of power. V. I. Braginsky explains that the themes of loyalty and divine kingship in the text arise from "[t]he economic need for centralisation in the Malay world," where all efforts had to be made "to strengthen the power of the Supreme ruler… and especially to elevate his charismatic significance" (6). Sharifah Maznah Syed Omar goes one step further, condemning Tun Seri Lanang as a fabricator of "propagandistic history," arguing that "[t]he creators of Malay myths abused history in the sense that they appropriated the past and coloured it accordingly to serve the ideological interest of the ruling

[5] Profound parallels exist between Aztec and Malay iconography. Throughout Southeast Asia, the garuda, an aquiline mythical beast, is viewed as a representative of the upper world, with its counterpart for the underworld being the naga, a serpentine creature or dragon (Wessing 211).

class" (95). She further claims that works like *Sulalatus Salatin* have a corruptive effect even on contemporary culture, noting that they propagate "a spirit of traditionalism and formalism which has continued its influence to this day" (39).

I am also moved by Anzaldúa's description of the US-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Singapore, too, is the product of historical trauma, having been severed twice from Nusantara, or the Malay world: once with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, when the British and Dutch East India Companies divided the Malay Archipelago between them, thus sundering our connections with Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi and other territories of the future Dutch East Indies and Indonesia; again with Separation in 1965, when we ended our political union with Malaysia, becoming an independent city-state with an ethnic Chinese majority, speaking English as our lingua franca.

Today, Singapore has emerged as a First World nation, identified in the 1990s as one of the Four Asian Tigers, together with the East Asian entities of Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan; an outlier in the Third World region of Southeast Asia. Lily Zubaidah Rahim has highlighted our leaders' celebration of "Singapore's 'regional other' status… manifested in the PAP government's ongoing Sinification campaign while at the same time downplaying the country's Malay historical origins" (2). Yet our Nusantara connections live on: not only in our Malay minority population, but also in the Malay-inflected culture of our Chinese, Indian and Jawi Peranakan communities; our Pasar Malay-speaking elder generations; our considerable population of migrant workers from Malaysia and Indonesia. Blood still courses through our own open wound, or *luka terbuka* in Malay.

This exegesis will examine the contexts and processes behind the writing of *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth*, with a principal focus on the politics of representing precolonial Singapore in fiction. Through historiography and a survey of literary texts, I will reveal the many ways

in which this period of history has been portrayed, occasionally delinking, but more often reaffirming the colonial matrix of power. I will then explore how decoloniality has provided a theoretical foundation for the creation of my novel, informing every aspect of writing, from research to characterisation to aesthetics.

One key strategy is derived from Chen's *Asia as Method*, in which he advocates how "using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt" (212). I have attempted to employ "Southeast Asia as method," not only looking to Singapore, but also delving into the vibrant heritage and intellectual scenes of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and our other neighbours: my own personal gesture of commitment towards healing the *luka terbuka.*

Here in this introduction, a moment of self-interrogation is also necessary. I must confess some hesitation to describing my literary efforts as decolonial. I am a Singaporean citizen of Hokkien Chinese descent, and my family traces its ancestry along the paternal line to my great-grandfather, who migrated from Xiamen to Singapore during the colonial era of the late 19th century. I may not be of purely Chinese stock: two of my great-grandmothers were Peranakan. Nevertheless, I do not feel I can claim to be an indigenous writer. To identify as such would be a form of settler nativism, which American critical race theorists Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have described as "a settler move to innocence because it is an attempt to deflect a settler identity, while continuing to enjoy settler privilege" (11).

I find I am comforted by Mignolo's dictum for decolonial epistemology: "I am where I think" (xvi). This is not only a riposte to Descartes and the myth of Western thought as universal and objective; it is also a reminder that one's intellectual identity is shaped by the culturally specific influences of one's surroundings. Thanks to my father, I was able to learn Pasar Malay in my childhood, and I have spent much of my adult life researching Malay and

Southeast Asian heritage, in dialogue with Malay and Southeast Asian writers, artists, activists and friends; even editing and co-translating Malay work, as in the case of the 2021 edition of Othman Wok's horror stories, *A Mosque in the Jungle,* which I helped to bring to print. Though I am Chinese, and enjoy the majority-race privileges thereof, Malayness informs me and is part of who I am.

I do not envision this novel as a definitive reinterpretation of *Sulalatus Salatin*. Rather, I hope that this work suggests new directions for readers to connect with the precolonial history of Singapore and the region. It would be the greatest of honours if future writers, especially Malay writers, use it as a resource for reimagining the past on their own terms.

1. Debating Temasek: the Shifting Place of Precolonial Singapore in Public Memory

a) Precolonial Memory, Colonial Persistence

The legends of precolonial Singapore, as narrated in *Sulalatus Salatin*, form a crucial part in the lore of the greater Malay world. Virginia Matheson Hooker and M. B. Hooker explain how the work "has been viewed by a range of local power centres on both sides of the Strait of Melaka, as a framework for establishing the legitimacy of local Malay ruling families" (31). Furthermore, we see variants of the story of Sang Nila Utama's arrival in Singapore repeated in other classical Malay texts, such as *The Epic of Hang Tuah* (13-16) and Raja Haji Ali's *The Precious Gift (Tuhfat al-Nafis)* (12-13). It is uncertain, however, if the average person in the Malay world was conversant with these stories. Courtly manuscripts were not widely distributed, but were instead locked away in palaces to be perused by a select elite, only read aloud on formal occasions (Faris, "Finding Merdeka in a World of Statues" 136).

The legends were, however, influential enough that British colonists were drawn under their spell. In 1818, Sir Stamford Raffles wrote to the scholar William Marsden of his eagerness to visit "the site of the ancient city of Singapura" (Raffles 374); upon establishing a settlement here in 1819, he boasted to the Duchess of Somerset that this was "the site of the ancient maritime capital of the Malays, and within the walls of these fortifications, raised not less than six centuries ago… I have planted the British flag" (378).

Colonisation dealt a blow to Singapore's early heritage. This is best exemplified by two anecdotes from Abdullah bin Kadir's memoir, *Hikayat Abdullah*. First, there was the desecration of Bukit Larangan, now named Fort Canning Hill (146). The hill was a taboo zone, reportedly haunted by numerous ghosts; possibly indicating a folk memory of its former significance as the site of the royal palace. Colonel William Farquhar refused to

respect this prohibition, trundling a cannon to the summit, firing it to dispel the phantoms of the past, then ordering that the area be cleared of vegetation and marked with the British flag. Second, there was the demolition of the Singapore Stone, an ancient sandstone monument inscribed with writing in an unknown alphabet. In the process of widening the mouth of the Singapore River, Settlement Engineer Captain D.H. Stevenson had the artefact destroyed, an act which Abdullah calls "a great pity, and in my opinion a most improper thing to do" (166).

Nevertheless, memories of precolonial Singapore persisted. Shrines to royals of the distant past were visited by "Mohammedans, Hindus and Chinese equally" (Crawfurd 72): at the Keramat Iskandar Shah on Fort Canning Hill, they prayed to Iskandar Shah, the fifth and last king of Singapore; at the Keramat Radin Mas at Mount Faber, they honoured Raden Mas Ayu, a Javanese princess supposedly martyred in Singapore.[6] Hokkien speakers routinely referred to Fort Canning Hill as "Ong Ke Sua" (皇家山), meaning "the hill of the imperial family."[7] The colonial administration itself played an active role in disseminating the tales of *Sulalatus Salatin* to a wider public, introducing William G. Shellabear's 1909 rescension of the text into schools as a canonical work of Malay literature (Tan Huism et al. 136-138).

By the mid-20th century, knowledge of the precolonial era had grown mainstream enough to be employed by the nationalist movement. After Singapore gained self-government in 1959, the People's Action Party opened the country's first two Malay-medium secondary schools, naming both after figures associated with *Sulalatus Salatin:* Sang Nila Utama Secondary School in 1961 and Tun Sri Lanang Secondary School in 1963. At the same time, the burgeoning Malay film industry was adapting tales of the period into historical epics, introducing them to even broader base of consumers of modern pop culture; examples include L. Krishnan's *Raden Mas* in 1959, and Omar Rojik's *Singapura Dilanggar Todak*

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[6] It should be noted that both shrines remain active as folk religious sites.
[7] My earliest evidence for this toponym is an article from 1906 (Tan Kee Soon et al. 201). However, what led me to this discovery is the fact that my own Hokkien parents still use this name to this day.

(Singapore Attacked by Swordfish), Hussein Haniff's *Dang Anom* and S. Roomai Noor's *Badang,* all in 1962. These in turn spawned the publication of Malay language novellas retelling these legends, such as Abdul Jalil Haji Noor's *Hang Nadim Pahlawan Kechil* (The Little Warrior Hang Nadim) and Ali Aziz's *Dang Anom*.

However, a great cultural shift was on the horizon. In 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia, becoming an independent nation. Malay-language film studios, seeing little profit in remaining in a Chinese-majority city-state, headed north to Kuala Lumpur. Since then, not a single feature film or television series has been produced set in precolonial Singapore.

b) Nationhood and Erasure

After independence, the PAP government embarked on a policy of downplaying the island's precolonial Malay past, identifying 1819, the year of British colonisation, as the date of the city-state's birth. In 1969, celebrations were held marking the 150th anniversary of Raffles' arrival, with Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam declaring, "To pretend that he did not found Singapore is the first sign of a dishonest society" ("Raffles" 5). In the same speech, he made a subtle dig at Sang Nila Utama, saying, "If we put up the first Malay, first Chinese, first Indian or first Indonesian as the founder of Singapore then there would be dissension among the communities."

Rajaratnam later delved into the reasoning behind this decision more deeply, acknowledging the glamour of a mythic past, yet insisting that to promote it would breed the same racial violence that plagued many postcolonial nations:

> Singapore's knowable past began in 1819—exactly 165 years ago. As pasts go, I confess, this is not much of a past in a world when countries can boast of histories

> dating back thousands of years. Some nations claim direct descent from sun goddesses, moon goddesses, from sexy gods in [sic] Mt. Olympus, the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve. Some light-hearted tribes have claimed honourable descent from owls, eagles, lions, wolves and I believe in one instance from a pig…
>
> [W]e could have contrived a more lengthy and mind-boggling lineage by tracing our ancestry back to the lands from which our forefathers emigrated—China, India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and Indonesia. The price we would have to pay for this impressive genealogical table would be to turn Singapore into a bloody battleground for endless racial and communal conflicts… The present government, much to the dismay of local racial and cultural chauvinists, has been careful about the kind of awareness of the past it should inculcate in a multicultural society. (5-6)

This rhetoric of anti-racism is rendered somewhat hollow by the PAP's divergent treatment of Malay and Chinese intellectual cultures in the late seventies and eighties. In 1978, the Ministry of Education announced its intention to phase out non-English pre-university classes, marking the first step in the eradication of mother tongue medium education (Koh Yan Poh). Sang Nila Utama Secondary School closed in 1988, leaving Singapore bereft of opportunities for higher Malay-medium education. Though similar fates befell Mandarin-medium schools, their defenders were assuaged by the 1979 creation of the Special Assistance Plan, which allowed some of these schools to survive as bilingual institutions, teaching both Mandarin and English at high levels to linguistically talented students. The creation of the Speak Mandarin Campaign the same year, and the PAP's promotion of Confucianism as a state ideology in the decades that followed (Lam 111-22) have led some to accuse the party of operating a "campaign to sinicise Singapore" (Barr 158).

As a Singaporean born in 1980, I experienced the results of these policies first hand. When I visited the National Museum, I beheld twenty dioramas depicting Singapore history from 1819 to 1965; the only reference to our precolonial past was the scene of an 1823 archaeological dig on Fort Canning Hill.[8] My secondary school history textbook, *Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore*, created by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, featured a mere four pages of text on precolonial history, serving as the most perfunctory of prefaces to the arrival of the British (1-8).[9] Even here, the Malayness of our past was deemphasised: only two of the five kings of Singapore, Sang Nila Utama and Parameswara, were named, while the visit of the 14th-century Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan was embellished with a full page of illustrations, depicting a Chinese junk and a geographical formation he saw in our bay: the Longyamen (龙牙门) or Dragon's Teeth Gate. Meanwhile, my Chinese-educated mother relentlessly sought to instil me with jingoistic pride in my race, often boasting of our "five thousand years of history," or asserting, "We Chinese were living in palaces when Westerners were still living in caves."

Nevertheless, precolonial Singapore found its way into my childish imagination. I may have first encountered its legends at the National Library, such as Chia Hearn Chek's picture books *The Redhill: A Singapore Folktale* and *The Raja's Crown: A Singapore Folktale*. I was able to absorb them in greater depth through Pugalenthi and Noel Chia's collection, *Myths and Legends of Singapore*.[10]

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[8] These dioramas were sculpted for the National Museum in 1984 by sculptors for the Ayala Museum, Manila (Gamboa 11). The Ayala Museum itself boasts sixty dioramas chronicling Philippine history; ten depict scenes from before Spanish colonization in 1565 ("Ayala Museum").

[9] Five of these eight pages are dominated by illustrations and maps. For comparison, my father's textbook, Philip N. Nazareth's *The Malayan Story*, devotes 17 pages to history before the Portuguese invasion of Melaka, and a further 21 to history before Raffles' arrival in Singapore.

[10] Noel Chia was, by coincidence, my social studies teacher, and he too intended to adapt these tales into an original work of fiction. I recall how, one afternoon in the early nineties, he deviated from the syllabus to describe his plans for a precolonial history-themed fantasy novel. This work never came into fruition, which is a shame, given the intriguing premise: when archaeologists reassemble the fragments of the Singapore Stone, the ghosts of ancient armies rise once again, triggering a Singaporean apocalypse.

These were brief, superficial renditions of the tales of *Sulalatus Salatin*, nowhere near as elaborate as the films of the fifties and sixties. Still, towards the turn of the millennium, they were inspiring sophisticated derivative works. The nineties saw references to the legends in novels such as Hwee Hwee Tan's *Foreign Bodies* and Daren Shiau's *Heartland*, as well as in Alfian Sa'at's poems "Singapore You Are Not My Country" and "Sang Nila Utama by Moonlight." Famously, in 2003, visual artist Ho Tzu Nyen presented the exhibition *Utama: Every Name in History Is I*, consisting of a video, a performance lecture and twenty oil paintings, exploring "the intertwining of myth and history, the impossibility of ontology, the instability of all beginnings" (Darryl Wee).

I made my own juvenile contribution to this list. In 1998, I staged a one-act play titled *Redhill Blues* at the Raffles Junior College Drama Feste. This was based on the tale of Hang Nadim, the quick-thinking boy who saved Singapore from a swordfish attack, only to be executed by a Raja who feared he would rise to overthrow him. Through comedic anachronisms and asides, the work functioned as a reflection of my anxieties as a former student of the Gifted Education Programme, as well as constituting a satire of contemporary Singaporean politics. It was also my personal riposte to *The Singapore Story – Overcoming the Odds*, a government-organised history exhibition held that year, which had lamentably, but predictably, omitted the precolonial era from its timeline.

In the years following independence, historian K. G. Tregonning had famously declared, "Modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only" (14). Perhaps, for Anglophone artists of my generation, this apparent lack of "particular relevance" generated a powerful sense of mystique, motivating us to reimagine how citizens of postcolonial Singapore could find meaning in these tales of the distant past.

c) 21st-Century Revival

Gradually, government policy adapted to accommodate Singaporeans' growing interest in precolonial history. One of the clearest signals of change was visible at the reopening of the National Museum in 2006 after extensive renovations. The new Singapore History Gallery not only included a chamber devoted to precolonial artefacts; it also featured a commissioned video by Ho Tzu Nyen titled *Sejarah Singapura,* dramatising events from *Sulalatus Salatin*, depicting scenes of everyday life in the 14th century as described by Wang Dayuan, and highlighting the puzzle of attempting to reconstruct the early past based on Malay, Chinese and Portuguese accounts.

In the decade and a half since then, the Singapore government has more fully embraced this era as part of our national heritage. In 2014, history students were presented with a new textbook: *Singapore: The Making of a Nation-State, 1300-1975*, by the Curriculum Planning & Development Division. This devoted an unprecedented 84 pages to coverage of the precolonial past, with the story of Raffles' arrival told as an eight-page conclusion within the relevant unit, "Tracing Singapore's Origins: How Old Is Singapore?" The same year, the National Museum featured an exhibition titled "Singapura: 700 Years." In 2016, the pageantry of the National Day Parade centred on a relatively obscure figure from *Sulalatus Salatin*, Badang, with an explanatory video for the perplexed, revealing how he was an ordinary villager who gained his superhuman strength from a river demon and used it to hurl the Singapore Stone to its position on the banks of the Singapore River (NDPeeps).

This trend culminated in the Singapore Bicentennial of 2019, which reinvented itself from a commemoration of British colonisation to an exploration of the island's past over the longue durée, with its website declaring, "our history is a 700-year journey going back 500 years before 1819" (quoted in Nien). The year-long festival included the erection of a statue

of Sang Nila Utama at the Raffles Landing Site; re-enactments of precolonial events in the Bicentennial Experience interactive tour; the creation of 14th-century-style permanent attractions within Fort Canning Park such the Sang Nila Utama Garden and the Pancur Larangan (Forbidden Spring); and the publication of numerous books dealing with Singapore's precolonial and colonial history, ranging from Kwa Chong Guan et al.'s nonfiction print work *Seven Hundred Years: a History of Singapore* to Dan Wong's comic ebook *The Aceh Attack of 1613.*

Behind these reforms, one may discern a decolonial impulse, with agents giving due recognition to Malays as Singapore's indigenous people. In an interview with *The New York Times*, historian Derek Heng notes how educators were once reluctant to discuss "links to the ethnicity of the past"; today, with fears of racial riots long faded, they "are more confident to say we were once a Malay polity cutting straight down through Asia" (Peterson). In the same article, Brian Farrell lays out the racial dynamics more plainly: "If Singapore before 1800 was a sleepy backwater, the Chinese majority could say, 'We built Singapore; before it was a blank slate.'"

Yet there are limits to the progressiveness of this approach. Faris Joraimi is highly critical of the prominence given to Sang Nila Utama and other figures of *Sulalatus Salatin*, noting that this "does little to address the structural discrimination that Malays face," and that Singapore "makes use of this mytho-historical corpus as a kind of legendary prologue to 1819" (136, 138). In my own research, I have documented a trend of artists juxtaposing Nila Utama and Raffles, in works such as Dick Lee's pop song "Rasa Sayang" and Marcus Goh's short film *Raffles vs. Utama: Dawn of Singapore*, but falling short of condemning British colonialism: "In fact, they arguably normalise it, presenting colonial Singapore as a successor state to Singapura" (Ng 2019, 613).

Whatever the ethical complexities, the government's newfound affection for precolonial history appears to have had an impact on the collective imagination of the Singaporean public. There has been a resurgence in creative work exploring these themes, both in professional fields, such as Krishna Udayasankar's 2015 novel *3* and Koh Chong Wu's 2021 animated web series *Fantastic Fables: the Southern Seas*, as well as in the amateur worlds of Internet fan art and student writing. In 2018, art collective A Good Citizen received numerous contributions to their *Sang Nila Utama Super Fanart Exhibition* (Ong); in 2021, Victor Fernando R. Ocampo noted in his lecture "New Surveys / New Works" that when he teaches speculative flash fiction in secondary schools, over half the tales submitted by pupils are variations on the legends of Sang Nila Utama and Hang Nadim.

Given this glut of new historical literature, how is it possible to create a novel that breaks new ground? To answer this question, it is necessary to survey these publications, and thereby comprehend the tropes and current limitations of the field.

2. Depicting Temasek: Precolonial Singapore in Contemporary Literature

The history and legends of precolonial Singapore have been interpreted in a vast array of diverse media, but for the parameters of this chapter, I will focus on depictions in literature, including poetry, fiction and drama. I fear I lack the expertise to analyse non-text-based works, such as Law Wai Lun's 2003 orchestral composition *Prince Sang Nila Utama and Singa* (王子与狮子) and Amazing Chambers Singapura's 2019 escape room experience *Sang Nila Utama and the Lost Crown.*

Before embarking on a literary survey, however, it is imperative to consider the remarkable accomplishments of the Malay filmmakers of 1950s and 60s in their portrayals of the precolonial period. Works such as L. Krishnan's *Raden Mas,* Omar Rojik's *Singapura Dilanggar Todak,* Hussein Haniff's *Dang Anom* and S. Roomai Noor's *Badang* may have been recorded in black and white, yet they were able to recreate the lost world of early Singapore in vivid multisensory detail, by means of traditional music, dance, martial arts, costumery and dialogue informed by classical Malay idiom. Among these, *Dang Anom* was a particular masterpiece: Lim Kay Tong notes that "[t]he cinematography, each frame bustles [sic] with people and movement, is best caught in the storming of a palace, generally regarded as the best scene ever filmed in the history of Malay film" (130-31).

Nor were these works utterly faithful to their source material. Screenwriters felt at liberty to interpolate characters, subplots and details of their own, some of which are now accepted as canonical by later generations of storytellers. It is in *Singapura Dilanggar Todak* that we first find the clever child who saves Singapore from a swordfish attack identified as a boy called "Hang Nadim"; *Sulalatus Salatin* does not specify his name, nor even his gender (Nazry 2019, 29). Likewise, it is in *Dang Anom* that we first see the name of "Dang Anom"

bestowed upon the protagonist, a royal concubine unjustly executed by Sultan Iskandar Shah, the last king of Singapura.

Even more fascinatingly, films of the period are largely possessed of an anti-feudal agenda, quite at odds with the spirit of classical Malay literature. In *Raden Mas*, the prince Pangeran Adipati Agung is reprimanded by his father for marrying a commoner, but counters him with a pithy, humanistic argument: “What’s the difference between a jasmine and a rose? Both are flowers. Why should a dancer be different from a princess? Both are human beings.” In *Badang*, the court is portrayed as a clownish arena which dissolves into chaos with the admittance of the former slave Badang. In *Singapura Dilanggar Todak,* the Raja orders the executions of two innocents: Hang Nadim, whose boyish intelligence has saved the kingdom, and the Muslim holy man Tun Jana Khatib, making him both a child murderer and an anti-Islamic apostate.

In the words of Amir Muhammad, it appears that the filmmakers of this era strove to “pick the myths most likely to paint royalty in the worst light possible” (21), thus dealing a blow at the notion of centralised authority: one of the four interrelated domains in Mignolo’s vision of the colonial matrix of power. This may be the reason why, despite the popularity of period pieces, the studio system never yielded a feature-length movie about the founding of Singapore by Sang Nila Utama. Such a pro-royal narrative would have been profoundly out of step with the pro-democracy reformist politics of the day.

a) Monarchist Fantasies

In contrast to the world of pre-independence cinema, postcolonial Singapore has yielded a surfeit of artworks celebrating Sang Nila Utama’s deeds. Books for young readers paint a uniformly rosy picture of the monarch’s exploits, as seen in works such as Chia Hearn

Chek's *The Raja's Crown: A Singapore Folktale* in 1975, Pugalenthi Sr. and Noel Chia's *Myths and Legends of Singapore* in 1991, Catherine G.S. Lim's *Legendary Tales of Singapore* in 2001 and Ngo Chew Yeh and Victoria Carlton's *Prince Nila Discovers a New Kingdom* in 2018. The narratives are largely the same, corresponding to the standard five-part plot structure of Gustav Freytag's pyramid. First, the exposition is laid out, with Nila Utama engaged in the princely sport of deer hunting, spying the white sands of Temasek and expressing his wish to visit. Second, we have the rising action and conflict as he sails to the island, only to encounter the obstacle of a storm which forces his crew to jettison all their cargo into the sea. Third, we have the climax: he makes the sacrifice of casting his crown into the oceans, successfully pacifying the tempest. Fourth, the falling action, which consists of his arrival in Temasek and his sighting of the fabled lion. Fifth and finally, we have the dénouement, in which he resolves to build a city on Temasek, naming it Singapura, the Lion City.

This a simple, triumphalist tale, glorifying the ruling class, convenient for instructing children to respect powerful elites. It is also a prime example of what Neil Gaiman has called a male story, characterised by usually male heroes overcoming challenges, as opposed to a female story, driven by interpersonal relationships, often between women (Bender 117). Women are, as I have noted before, extremely marginal to these retellings. Wan Seri Benian appears in a solitary paragraph in Pugalenthi and Chia's version (38), and on three brief pages in Lim's comic rendition (5-7), while Ngo and Carlton devote two illustrations to conjectural scenes of Nila Utama's "fairy princess mother" guiding his ship to safe passage (13-15, 17).

Nila Utama's heroic journey receives a fuller treatment in Krishna Udayasankar's 2015 novella *3*, which reimagines the Raja's life as a bildungsroman set amidst the tumultuous events of 12th-century Southeast Asia: the decline of the Srivijaya Empire, the

growing influence of Mongol China and the rise of Majapahit. Our royal protagonist narrates the tale in first person present tense, as we follow him from his childhood as a prince in Palembang to his youth as an exiled emissary in Java and his middle years as a warrior against piracy and prince consort of the Queen of Bintan, only making his storm-tossed voyage to Temasek in the final chapters. The work is textured and emotionally complex, filled with contemplations of fame and dynastic duty, as well as symbolic dreams of the garuda and the lion. Though this is, fundamentally, a male story of a man coming of age and mastering his destiny, it humanises Nila Utama as much as it lionises him. His conversations with family members reveal him to be both sensitive and flawed, as seen in the following exchange with his queenly wife:

> 'Oh Nila! What is it about you…? You're fearless enough to do as you wish in every matter, but you need the world's validation for the simple state of being happy. It's almost as if you believe you don't deserve to live in joy and peace, though that is what you want most of all.'
>
> She is right and she is wrong, and I want her to be neither, for I want to be neither the conqueror who made his own destiny nor the prince who forsook his duty, but a man, just a man who lived as men are meant to. (181-2)

However, there is no disguising the royalist leanings of *3*. The cast of characters is dominated by royals, with commoners barely granted a voice. Perhaps the sole exception is the pirate who mocks our protagonist once he is held captive in Temasek, pointing out his history of oppressive violence against the Orang Laut. Nila Utama's response is to request an audience with the chief of the pirates, ultimately convincing him to allow him to lead his

people as Raja, forging their settlement into a legitimate kingdom: "not just a port and a marketplace, but a city, a nation complete in itself and existing for its people" (257), where piracy is increasingly obsolete and policed into oblivion, "making us a safer, more preferred destination" (259). We are assured that he recognises that "Tumasik belongs to the Sea People" (273), even declaring his willingness to the Majapahit Emperor that he would battle him on behalf of the Orang Laut. Yet the colonial parallels are clear: a male representative of empire has the responsibility—a brown man's burden, if you will—to civilise the barbaric indigenous peoples of his newfound island.

Udayasankar's sympathies for the ruling class are so profound that they manifest even her 2019 ebook *The Ghost King*. This work centres on the last Raja of Singapura, the hated concubine-slaying antagonist of *Dang Anom*, as he makes his escape from the island amidst its fall to invaders. Surprisingly, the author's devotes all her attention to the weight of the king's grief, not his tyrannical sins. A single throwaway paragraph suffices to reveal his cruelty. "Now, he wondered if he ought to have let the girl live. Or maybe, he should have had her father executed alongside. Either way, the omission had claimed its price, and in full," he reflects (25-28).

We must not assume, however, that all works in praise of Sang Nila Utama are politically regressive. Writers have, on occasion, invoked him for anti-colonial purposes, as a symbol of glory lost with the advent of foreign domination; an "anti-Raffles," in the words of Faris Joraimi ("Finding Merdeka in a World of Statues" 64). Alfian Sa'at, for example, sees him in the figure of a solitary man counting his fingertips beneath an MRT flyover in his 1996 poem "Sang Nila Utama by Moonlight": a fabled figure from Singapore's Malay past, bewildered by the concrete jungle his island has become:

And you, Sang Nila, how strange you look,

Without your crown.

Was it worth to have

Had it sacrificed

To tame the ravenous sea

And arrive

At this stagnancy? (13)

His is a fate shared by the Malay race. “Your children are dreaming of a future that is not yet theirs,” Alfian writes. Mohamed Latiff Mohamed shares the same sentiments in his 2007 Malay language poem “Sang Nila Utama,” declaring that the surrender of his crown was futile, and that his royal ship was indeed sunk, leaving “his descendants to fall into a lengthy dream/to prove/that they had a king/they had a sultan” (152). Even Samsudin Said, a Malaysian poet, mourns him in his 2011 piece “Bicara Diri Sang Nila Utama” (Sang Nila Utama’s Monologue”), declaring, “His face is now dust/Plastered onto the stone-relief of Time/Just an object of ancient tales/The progeny of his race/Still carelessly sleep” (65).

It is not only Malay authors who lament this loss. Daren Shiau’s 1999 novel *Heartland* focuses principally on teen Singaporeans Wing, Chloe and Sham as they endure junior college and National Service. However, it periodically intersperses this narrative with chapters tracing the royal bloodline of the kings of Singapura, from Alexander the Great to Sang Nila Utama to Parameswara. Compared to their epic deeds, the lives of modern Singaporeans appear trivial and aimless, and the downfall of these monarchs due to war and colonialism is presented as a tragedy. Nor has our rise as a developed nation state restored the dignity of the line. As Shiau informs us, “[t]he Sultan of Singapore is an NTUC Comfort taxi driver whose seventy-odd beneficiaries in his family receive less than five thousand dollars each from the government every year” (218).

Correspondingly, there are fantasies of Nila Utama's messianic return. Elangovan's satirical play *Alamak*, staged by Agni Kootthu (Theatre of Fire) in 2008, imagines the Raja teleported to contemporary Singapore by an oceanic vortex and captured by the Police Coast Guard as an illegal immigrant. What follows is a series of clownish encounters with characters who reveal the rot at the heart of Singapore society, including a toilet attendant, an anti-riot officer, a pair of bar girls, an Indian man driven insane by racism, a pocong (a Malay ghost still confined to its shroud), and the Merlion itself. Ultimately, he is defeated by the powers that be: he learns that his crown was in fact discovered during excavations for the building of Changi Airport, but used by the government as a spittoon, while he himself is ejected into outer space as "our first Singastronaut… the highest honour accorded to one from the presumably inferior minority" (68).

Daryl Lim Wei Jie's 2016 poem "Sang Nila Reclaims the Throne" is more optimistic, envisioning a Saturday evening in the near future when the Raja breaks out of a keramat at Telok Blangah and successfully stages a coup, his operatives assassinating key politicians with arrows "except for the Minister of Culture, a secret double agent" (25). He reveals himself to be confused, attempting to pay his cab fare "in old Chinese coins, each worth tens of thousands" and promising "to sustain the alliance with the Mongol Emperor" (26); while the citizenry is just as disoriented, finding little information on their new leader in history books, and with "no idea what flags to wave, what banners to brandish, what to shout, and in what language." Nevertheless, the system does not fall apart; in fact, "[s]ome civil servants remarked that government had never been smoother." Though the scenario is absurd, the underlying message bears serious thought. We must not assume Singapore's current sociopolitical status quo is ideal, and it might well be improved by a change, whether subtle—such as the recognition of the island's early indigenous history—or radical—such as the reinstatement of monarchy.

b) Rebellious Retellings

Where, then, may one find anti-royalist portrayals of precolonial Singapore? For this, one merely has to look towards the numerous renditions of the Hang Nadim legend. This story is arguably as popular and widespread as Sang Nila Utama's: in her 2005 MA history thesis, *Fishy Tales: Singapura Dilanggar Todak as Myth and History in Singapore's Past,* Sophie Sim Meijun counts at least twenty retellings of the tale (3), including Chia Hearn Chek's 1974 picture book *The Redhill: a Singapore Folktale,* Ch'ng Jit Koon's 1996 neighbourhood history work *Bukit Merah: From a Hilly Kampong to a Modern Town*, as well as three different versions in Damiana L. Eugenio's 1995 collection *ASEAN Folk Literature: an Anthology*, variously ascribed to the Chinese, the Malays and the Peranakans.

In these tales, the Raja[11] is consistently portrayed as foolish, attempting to deal with the swordfish attack by ordering his soldiers to form a human barrier with their legs against these creatures. Hang Nadim, a child of commoners, suggests that they use banana tree trunks instead. When this plan works, the Raja's response is not only ungrateful, but power-hungry and callous: on the advice of his courtiers, he orders the boy's execution out of fear that he will rise up and pose a threat to his throne. Nadim's ultimate fate varies from version to version: some authors specify that he is drowned, while others claim he is stabbed to death on a hilltop, his blood staining the earth red and yielding the present-day geographical feature known as Bukit Merah, or Redhill.

[11] *Sulalatus Salatin* names the Raja as Paduka Sri Maharaja. However, in the majority of these retellings, both he and Hang Nadim are unnamed, or even given inexplicably different names. The ostensibly Malay version of the legend in Eugenio's *ASEAN Folk Literature* calls him Raja Iskandar (336-37), which corresponds to the name of Paduka Sri Maharaja's son, Iskandar Shah. Occasionally, as in The Theatre Practice and Alfian Sa'at's work, he is misidentified as a Sultan.

A few artists have attempted to bowdlerise the story. In 1997, The Theatre Practice staged the Chinese language puppet drama 《大战红山》(*The Battle of Redhill*), but took pains to soften the violence for its juvenile audience.[12] The swordfish trapped in the banana trunks are not slain; instead, they are forced to apologise to the villagers for injuring them. Though the Sultan plots to kill Hang Nadim (here named Ah Mu), the boy escapes thanks to his friendship with the Sultan's daughter; the Sultan then makes a display of his repentance by cutting his own finger, allowing his blood to stain the hill red. These changes provoked the ire of *Straits Times* reviewer Jason Leow, who rubbished them as a "moral whitewash." "Some adults believe children should never be reminded that life can sometimes be cruel," he wrote. "Better to have shown them that sometimes life allows good to be thwarted." Unspoken, but implied, is the belief that this is a story that is fundamentally about the abuse of power. To sanitise its bloodiness is to pervert its essence.

In her thesis, Sim notes Hang Nadim's tale has provided a means whereby "non-political elites… [may] enunciate their grievances against the local government" (87). Her evidence is Alfian Sa'at's 2001 poem "Hang Nadim Speaks," wherein, she argues, the poet draws a parallel between the child and himself, an intellectual who dares to speak out against the policies of Singapore's authoritarian government. We see this play out in the poem's closing stanza:

> I was a boy with an idea.
>
> I could have kept mum,
>
> Watched the folly of a king

[12] I have, alas, found other retellings of Hang Nadim's tale which attempt to exonerate ruling powers from bloodshed. In his 2013 collection *Red Onion, White Onion*, Malaysian author M. A. Badrie has the boy survive the drowning attempt, returning as an adult to confront his oppressor, who apologises in shame. In Koh Chong Wu's 2021 science fiction video series *Fantastic Fables: The Southern Seas*, it is a rebel group within the government which is responsible both for unleashing a swordfish virus and assassinating the childlike artificial intelligence called N4D1M.

Who would rather lose his men

Than their loyalty. Instead

I stood on the beach, my voice

Louder than the scream

Of any false martyrs too eager

To donate their marrow

To history. My mouth

Was so large it could have

Swallowed the sea. And I did,

Even though in all the records

They only mentioned how

It was the sea that swallowed me. (60)

I too have borrowed Hang Nadim's voice to speak truth to power. I did this in my 1998 school play *Redhill Blues*, where I made specific satirical reference to the People Action Party's persecution of opposition party politicians, as well as my 2018 short story "The Boy, the Swordfish, the Bleeding Island," where I imagine an alternate history in which Nadim successfully overthrows the Raja, then embarks on a centuries-long reign of conquest and global colonisation, revealing himself to be just as ruthless as his predecessor. It is not only individual kings, I suggest, who are dangerous; the power structures of kingship are deadly in themselves.

Anti-feudal sentiments are frequently seen in retellings of legends centering on non-royals. Alfian's 2001 poem "Badang Speaks" underscores the fact that the strongman was not a hero but a slave, his status utterly dependent on the strength of his body and the favour of

his ruler. In death, robbed of his physical form, he is exposed for the subaltern he is, with others speaking on his behalf:

> My strength returns only to haunt me.
> I am appearing here: no muscle, no will, all legend.
> Someone's hand is on the jaw of my skull
> Hinging it open, mumbling, aye, aye, I,
> In a language not even my own. (62)

The final line in this stanza correlates his predicament with that of all non-elite Malay-speaking peoples. Dead or alive, they are too often represented in powerbroking circles only in the colonial/neocolonial language of English.

The figure of Dang Anom, on the other hand, is invoked to examine the plight of women under patriarchy. She appears as a character in Jonathan Lim and Liu Xiaoyi's 2013 multilingual play 《她门》*(The Bride Always Knocks Twice)*, as well as its sequel, the 2021 interactive multimedia work《她门的秘密》(*The Bride Always Knocks Twice — Killer Secrets*). Here, she magically escapes her execution, only to find herself stranded in a limbo with women from across Singapore's history, from a Cantonese-speaking Samsui woman to a modern-day Anglophone bride abandoned at the altar, all seeking refuge from their troubles. In Shelly Bryant's 2017 short story, "The Handling," she again survives, hidden away from the wrath of the Raja, only to be thrust into the arms of the new Raja as soon as soon as her husband is ousted. In my own 2018 story, "Garden," I fantasised about her travelling through time on multiple paths as selected by the reader in the fashion of Bantam Books' *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. Here, I envisioned her ability to find fulfilment with the aid of other women in the future, but also her far more numerous deaths at the hands of men.

Likewise, the tale of Sisters' Islands serves as a useful vehicle for exploring female oppression and solidarity. According to this myth, two sisters, Lina and Mina, are torn apart when a pirate claims one of them as his bride; both plunge into the ocean, thus becoming Singapore's offshore isles, Pulau Subar Laut and Pulau Subar Darat. Jean Tay's 2013 play *Sisters: The Untold Stories Behind the Sisters Islands* dramatises the legend, juxtaposing it with another story of male violence against women: the 1963 murder by drowning of the bar girl Jenny Cheok by her rich lover Sunny Ang on the shores of Sisters' Islands, and her relationship with her elder sister Irene. Like《她门》*(The Bride Always Knocks Twice)* and "Garden," this is a female-centric narrative that spans centuries, reminding us that the abuses of patriarchy have not been extinguished, surviving from ancient times to the present.

These anti-feudalist and feminist threads merge in Kee Thuan Chye's *Swordfish + Concubine.* This play was first performed in Singapore by W!ld Rice under the title *The Swordfish, then the Concubine* in 2008, then reprised in remixed form as *Swordfish + Concubine: The Fall of Singapura* by Young 'n' W!ld in 2011. It arrived in the playwright's hometown of Kuala Lumpur under the aegis of Pentas Project Theatre Production, first as a Chinese performance titled 《劍魚◉妾》in 2016, and was only realised in its current English form by the same company in 2017.

As the title suggests, this work combines the tales of Hang Nadim and Dang Anom, here renamed Nurhalisa. Here, Nurhalisa is a friend to Nadim, and a witness to his death. She demonstrates considerable agency, attempting to launch an investigation into her friend's murder, only agreeing to become the Raja's concubine as a means to influence state policy towards reform, and ultimately earning her death sentence due to her activism, not, as in the film *Dang Anom*, because of romantic envy.

There is, crucially, a third precolonial legend from *Sulalatus Salatin* that Kee incorporates into his play. In the prologue, we learn that Sang Nila Utama, here called Sri Tri

Buana, is unable to find a suitable consort, as each of the thirty-nine princesses he has wedded has been infected with disease the morning after their deflowerment. His minister Demang Lebar Daun agrees to sacrifice his daughter Wan Sendari to him, provided that they make a covenant:

> DEMANG LEBAR DAUN: With this marriage, my descendants shall be the subjects of Your Majesty's descendants. I beg to be assured that they will always be treated well. If they offend, and their offence is great, let them be put to death, if that accords with the divine law. But no matter how grave their offence may be, they shall never be disgraced.
>
> SRI TRI BUANA: I agree to the undertaking but in turn, I require one from you. Your descendants shall never be disloyal to my descendants, even if my descendants oppress them and behave in an evil manner…
>
> DEMANG LEBAR DAUN
> If any ruler puts a single subject to shame, his kingdom will be destroyed by Almighty God. (6-7)

The scene closes with the Raja escorting away a terrified Wan Sendari, who, in the 2008 and 2011 productions, was played by the same actress as Hang Nadim and Nurhalisa,[13] thus underscoring the cyclical nature of institutional oppression. Unlike in *Sulalatus Salatin*, there is no reassuring revelation that she survives the nuptials unafflicted.

[13] This may appear logistically impossible. However, I had the pleasure of watching these early versions, and I recall that Nadim and Nurhalisa were then portrayed as characters from different generations. They were only depicted as contemporaries in the 2017 script.

Throughout *Swordfish + Concubine*, characters repeatedly invoke this covenant, with some insisting rulers deserve absolute unquestioning loyalty from their subjects, and others challenging its terms. "If we seek the truth and stand up for what is just, that is not disloyalty," Nurhalisa argues (39). "When Demang Lebar Daun made the covenant with Sri Tri Buana, he overlooked an important point in calling us "subjects." That makes us subordinate. But we are not subordinate. We are not servants or slaves. We are citizens." When she persuades the Raja to consider reviewing the covenant, the queen, Tun Dara, is so alarmed that she plants seeds of suspicion in his heart against her. However, even Tun Dara is alarmed at his cruel sentence of death by impalement, warning him that this may bring about the fall of the kingdom as per the pact (104). Indeed, when the Majapahit forces invade, they do so at the invitation of Nurhalisa's vengeful father Sang Ranjuna Tapa, who defends his actions with a Malay proverb: "Raja adil raja disembah, raja zalim raja disanggah" (the just king is to be worshipped; the tyrant is to be deposed) (126).[14]

The play concludes with a villager, Ris Kaw, unequivocally condemning the covenant, blaming it and its authors for the multiple forms of violence the kingdom has endured, and calling for a more democratic form of government:

> I can also see what the Covenant has done. So many centuries after Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun shook hands on it… It has been screwing up the mind… And so, why not pull it out from the mind and chuck it away? No more killing of Hang Nadim, no more death by impalement, no more turning into stone. (*Beat*.) It's time for the people to rock, yo! (136)

[14] The idea that the fall of Singapura was caused by the Rajas' breach of the covenant is not of Kee's own devising. In his 1998 article "The Rise And Fall of the Great Melakan Empire: Moral Judgement in Tun Bambang's 'Sejarah Melayu,'" Cheah Boon Keng argues that the author of *Sulalatus Salatin* purposefully uses the terms of the covenant to foreshadow and explain the demise of the kingdoms of Singapura and Melaka.

This speech holds deep contemporary relevance in Malaysia, where Sultans still wield considerable influence on politics, while their critics are admonished with the statement, "Melayu pantang derhaka!" (Treachery is taboo for the Malays!)[15] Indeed, commentators still reference this very covenant when discussing the merits and duties of their royals (Mohd Rizal). Yet it does not resonate so profoundly with Singaporeans, who have not been ruled even nominally by a Sultan since the 19th century. For us, the notion of Malay kingship is far more intangible and abstract.

c) Acts of Irreverence

As noted earlier in this essay, it is not uncommon for Singaporeans to express nostalgia and even longing for an age of Rajas. However, a more widespread response is incredulous amusement. Today, we are so culturally removed from a culture of traditionalist monarchy that it is genuinely difficult for many of us to take the concept seriously.

We see evidence for this in popular renderings of the tale of Sang Nila Utama's arrival. Dick Lee's 1989 remix of the folk song "Rasa Sayang" celebrates Singapore's success, but gives "thanks to the man named Utama" in a flippant, throwaway line, part of a jaunty rap. Similarly, Hossan Leong's viral 2006 song "We Live in Singapura," a localised pastiche of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire," opens with an even more impudent verse: "Sang Nila Utama/Saw a lion, alamak/Name the village Singapura, then run very far" (mrbrownshow.com).

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[15] Ariff Sabri Abdul Aziz critiques this cultural belief in his opinion piece "The Ancient Covenant and Punishment." *The Malaysian Insider,* 18 May 2011. He, too, traces it back to Sang Nila Utama's pact with Demang Lebar Daun.

Haresh Sharma's 2000 play *History, Whose Story?* exemplifies this cheekiness. Written for schoolchildren, the piece delivers a brief but manic history of Singapore, full of anachronisms, with an ensemble cast both impersonating figures of the past and playfully questioning these portrayals. The founding of Singapura is depicted as follows:

> Zoom in on Sang Nila Utama and his boat.
>
> Yes, that's me. No autographs please. Talk to my manager.
>
> Sang Nila's schedule is very tight. He's got lunch at 1, the storm at 3 and the lion at 5.
>
> Sang Nila, Sang Nila, why was there a storm?
>
> Please, no questions about the storm!
>
> Was it because of your stormy relationship with the Queen of—
>
> —Silence!
>
> *SANG NILA SINGS A SONG. PAUSE.*
>
> I found a land, but lost my love.
>
> I saw a lion, but—
>
> —It was actually a tiger.
>
> No, it was a musang.
>
> A pisang?[16]
>
> Musang! A masked fox.[17]
>
> Real or not? (54)

[16] Malay for "banana."

[17] Better known as a civet, this species is indigenous to Singapore, unlike the lion.

Repeatedly, Singaporeans have cast doubt on whether the first of our Rajas could possibly have sighted a specimen of *Panthera leo* in the Southeast Asian forest. In his 1994 theatrical monologue *I Have Heard It Said*, Ong Eng Chye asks, "Did Sang Nila Utama really see a lion in Temasek, or did he just LONG to see one?" (TheatreWorks). Selena Tan's 2007 sketch comedy *Dim Sum Dollies: the History of Singapore Part 1* shows the Raja being duped by a real estate agent into believing that the island is home to this auspicious animal, hence the lyric, "Singapura, sunny island, founded on a lie… on." In Ho Lee-Ling's 2011 short story "The White Tiger of Temasek," the creature is a tiger disguised as a lion; in Lesley-Anne and Monica Lim's 2015 children's book *Danger Dan Creates the Ultimate Utama Uproar*, it is the time-travelling protagonist wearing a lion mask accompanied by holographic multimedia; in Manish Melwani's 2018 short story, "Sejarah Larangan; or, the Forbidden History of Old Singapura," it is a harimau jadian: a person supernaturally transformed into a tiger.

These interrogations of our founding myth have little sense of viciousness about them. In fact, Alfian Sa'at, who has frequently invoked Nila Utama as a symbol of Malay sovereignty, has also authored one of the most impudent proposals for the true identity of the mysterious beast. In his 2004 monologue "N*n*k," he argues that the creature "with the red body and the black mane" must have been a "nonok"[18] winking in the sun, the lips parted slightly, moist with both the river water and its own secret secretions." There is instead a carnivalesque joy in poking fun at the high and mighty, however blameless they may be.

There may even be a sense of pathos in such depictions. In Hassan Hasaa'ree Ali's 2013 Malay language short story "Skizo Singa," Nila Utama is diagnosed with schizophrenia, with the beast a mere hallucination brought about by his condition. His courtiers are fearful

[18] A coarse Malay term for "vagina."

of the consequences of their ruler's ravings: what if word spreads of his insanity, prompting rivals from Bintan, Majapahit and Ayutthaya to usurp him? They therefore inform him that what he beheld was a lion, a creature so mighty that he is inspired to name his new kingdom after it.

There is, of course, a spirit of anti-authoritarianism in this tale. But Hassan, a nurse by profession, makes no suggestion that Nila Utama's illness causes direct harm to others. Instead, he notes the signs of his physical distress, describing how "his face was pale, sweat dripping down his body and hair."[19] Furthermore, he describes the courtiers' acts of tenderness toward their master: washing his face with magically blessed water, reassuring him that the lion is "a marvellous beast of gallant might,"[20] thus lending him strength when he has none. This is a narrative about underlings compensating for the incompetence of their leader, yet it also a story of caregiving for the sick and vulnerable.

Even more pitiful is the Nila Utama of Jordan Melic's 2020 *A Tree to Take Us Up to Heaven*, a fantasy novel loosely based on Singapore history. This Nila, too, is a weakling: a "bare-chested youth… his lean, pallid frame, covered in a soft flabbiness… caught in a fit of indecision, one moment striding resolutely towards the Sea Town, then losing his nerve and trudging off in the opposite direction" (164). Worse, he has no retinue to lend him authority; no ship or crown, since both are sunken in the storm; no throne in Palembang, since that has been conquered by the Javanese invader Gajah Mada;[21] and not quite enough charm to win over the thuggish Chinese who control the trade of the island. Though he dreams of rebuilding Palembang on the island, he is murdered before he has even begun to make good on his dream, and perishes an utter failure.

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[19] This is my own translation. The original reads: "Muka baginda pucat, peluh membasahi badan dan rambut" (101).

[20] My translation for "Seekor binatang menakjuban dan gagah perkasa" (105).

[21] Historical sources suggest that Gajah Mada (c. 1290 – c. 1364) did in fact conquer Palembang, hut only in the 1340s, well after Sang Nila Utama's departure. This appears to be a deliberate anachronism: throughout the novel, Melic manipulates history with extreme elasticity.

Again, this is not mere mockery. Kueny, the principal protagonist of the novel, finds herself drawn to the spirit of optimism that Nila brings with him:

> This king who Ah Ti has found at the beach has brought something else to the island. A kind of energy. Not the usual, sulky, belligerent variety that washes up with the driftwood; something else, a kind of hopefulness, mad and blind and rude all at once. It draws Ah Ti to him like a moth to a flame. In spite of the unbroken string of rejections he receives, this king does not stop rushing up to people and attempting to persuade them to join his army, convinced that someone will eventually agree. There is something to admire in that. He will not let go of his Palembang. He refuses to become just another character at the toddy house who has become unmoored from his past and is left to memorialise it in incoherent, drunken rants, or even worse, one of the bodies that washes up at the harbour, bloated with nostalgia. (174)

Kueny is sufficiently moved by Nila that she allows him to sleep with her, "clumsily, adamantly, joined by an overpowering sadness, realising that this was probably as close to our new Palembang as we would ever get" (227). She ends up bearing his son, Ah Boy, who, in the flexible timeline of the tale, grows up under British colonial rule, attending an Anglophone school and shunning both his Malay and Chinese roots.

This ambiguous, ahistorical treatment of Sang Nila Utama encapsulates much of the complexity of the emotions a contemporary Singaporean may experience when considering the precolonial era. There is little objectively to boast of: any accomplishments of the period are outshone by the heights of neighbouring civilisations such as the Majapahit in Java, and its legacy is so eclipsed by Western hegemony that one wonders if it matters whether it

existed at all. Still, simply to imagine that there were once Rajas on this island gives many of us a tiny thrill of glamour, a tinge of hope and pride, a semi-ironic belief that we are destined for greatness.

d) Problematic Portrayals

In the above survey of works, I have focussed primarily on the question of how different writers approach the notion of political authority: whether they endorse, rebel against or casually deconsecrate the Rajas of Singapura. However, while studying this body of literature, I have become aware of recurring issues in literary depictions of precolonial Singapore: issues which, as an author myself, I intend to address. These are loosely divisible into three categories: historicity, respect for Malay culture, and the incorporation of magic.

First is the matter of historicity. Only a handful of texts set in precolonial Singapore appear to have been created with the desire to accurately reflect the time period of 14th-century Southeast Asia. Udayasankar's *3* and Hassan's "Skizo Singa" are noteworthy for contextualising the founding of Singapura in 1299 with their references to the rise of Majapahit, Ayutthaya and Yuan Dynasty China; the same could be said for Joan Yap's 2010 novella *The Sacred Hill*, which covers the lives of all five Rajas with accompanying appendices on Fort Canning Hill and the artefacts of the National Museum of Singapore History Gallery. Likewise, comics commissioned in 2015 as part of the Singapore Bicentennial are commendably researched. These include Foo Swee Chin's *Parameswara and Temasek: the Sacking of Singapura*, which reveals the treachery and moral complexity of the last Raja of Singapura based on the account of Tomé Pires' *Suma Oriental*, as well as Dan Wong's *The Aceh Attack of 1613*, which brings a little-known historical event to life,

bringing unexpected dimensions to the characterisation of figures such as Tun Seri Lanang and Iskandar Muda, Sultan of Aceh.

For the most part, writers appear unconcerned with historical accuracy. Even Alfian Sa'at and Kee Thuan Chye, both intellectuals well-versed in regional history, consistently call the rulers of precolonial Singapore Sultans instead of Rajas: a misnomer, as they had not yet embraced Islam, nor assumed its titles of political leadership. European and New World crops occasionally appear in these retellings, despite the fact that they were absent from Southeast Asia until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century: apples and pears are pictured in Ngo and Carlton's *Prince Nila Discovers a New Kingdom*; frangipani in Melic's *A Tree to Take Us Up to Heaven*.

Such details are arguably inconsequential: these authors are largely interested in the mythic potential of our legends, not dutifully recreating them based on fact. Occasionally, however, the blunders are egregious. Diane Taylor's "Prince Parameswara and the Naming of Singapore," a tale in her 2003 picture book *Singapore Children's Favourite Stories*, claims that it was not Sang Nila Utama who sighted the lion, but the double-crossing Parameswara, the final Raja of Singapura. Chua Eu Tiong's 2010 verse novel *Sang Nila Utama* is so misguided in its understanding of historical Malay titles that the narrator routinely refers to its protagonist simply as "Sang," the honorific of a noble: as absurd as a retelling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that calls the protagonist "Sir."

This brings us to the second issue: respect for Malay culture. Non-Malay authors frequently display a lack of awareness of the conventions regarding these legends in the popular Malay imagination. This is especially evident in retellings of Hang Nadim's tale: in The Theatre Practice's play《大战红山》(*The Battle of Redhill*), the boy is renamed Ah Mu; in Hwee Hwee Tan's novel *Foreign Bodies*, she calls him Ali.

Again, these are small missteps. But they are illustrative of a larger problem: the failure of certain authors to recognise that these legends are the patrimony of the contemporary Malay community, which remains politically, socially and economically marginalised in Singapore; and that it is therefore ethically questionable to appropriate these tales to elevate other racial groups at their expense. One may see an example of this in Terry Ho's 2012 novel *Crown of Earth's Desire*, where a team of university students enters a portal on Fort Canning Hill to engage in adventures in the fantastical Kingdom of Turasik. Though this realm is explicitly inspired by precolonial Singapore and populated by Malay-coded characters, none of the protagonists are Malay. Instead, we have the half-white American, half-Peranakan Chinese Keith Anderson, the Chinese Singaporeans Clarissa Lee and Lim Poh Chung, and the Indian Singaporean Vijay.

Melic's *A Tree to Take Us Up to Heaven* is similarly problematic. It devotes the first of its three parts to the idyllic, privileged childhoods of Ah Ti and Kueny in the Valley of the Maiden, an analogue of imperial China. After their fall from grace, the siblings take refuge in Sea Town, or Temasek, which is depicted as being populated by Chinese ruffians well before Nila's arrival. In spite of the invocation of Nila Utama's legend and Gajah Mada's invasion, this is a retelling of Singapore history that ultimately sidelines Malay indigeneity in favour of Chinese heritage. It, too, suffers from a dearth of Malay characters: aside from the two aforementioned historical characters and Ah Boy, the novel contains no further named characters of Malay descent.

The work I find the most perturbing, however, is Udayasankar's *3.* Despite the author's demonstrable historical research,[22] she makes little attempt to describe the characteristically Malay heritage of her setting: there is no mention of kampungs or

[22] Udayasankar provides a bibliography of "Selected Sources" that she drew on to write her novel, listing thirteen books and articles (290-1). All but one is authored—or in the case of *Sulalatus Salatin*, translated—by white men.

rambutans, kerises or mousedeer. Instead, she takes inspiration from the substantial Indian influence on the pre-Islamic Malay world, and further Indianises the names of featured characters and islands. Wan Seri Benian is thus renamed Sri Vani; Wan Sendari becomes Sundari; Sangsapurba is Prabhu Dharmasena; Sang Maniaka is Mutthaiah; Sumatra is Suvarna; Borneo is Varuna. In her sequel, *The Ghost King*, Iskandar Shah becomes Sikander.

Why alter these names, many of which would only be familiar to Singaporean readers in their original form? One reason is that Udayasankar's primary base lies elsewhere. Though living in Singapore at the time of publication, she had previously gained her literary reputation thanks to Indian readership of her series of mythic historical novels, *The Aryavarta Chronicles*. *3*, notably, was published by Penguin Random House India before its local release.

These changes were not, as it turns out, driven solely by market considerations. In online collaterals for the 2016 event "Afterwords – Writing and Identity with Krishna Udayasankar," the author reveals that she is using her fiction "to map her identity as immigrant Singaporean — not unlike our nation's founder Sang Nila Utama."[23] In private correspondence with Faris Joraimi, co-panellist with Udayasankar on the 2019 Singapore HeritageFest event "Will the real Sang Nila Utama please stand up?," I further learned that she embraced the idea of Nila Utama as a Tamil immigrant, as she felt unable to relate to the more common working-class narratives of 19th-century arrival in Singapore as convict and coolie labour.

According to the earliest manuscript of *Sulalatus Salatin*, Nila Utama's father Raja Chulan was indeed a Tamil Emperor.[24] However, both this text and *3* portray the character as coming of age in the Malay world of Southeast Asia, away from his father; thus, in-text,

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[23] *Sing Lit Station*. http://www.singlitstation.com/calendar/2016/9/9/afterwords-writing-and-identity-with-krishna-udayasankar

[24] This is the Raffles 18 version, which is the basis for C. C. Brown's *Sejarah Melayu*. Udayasankar has depended on John Leyden's *Malay Annals*, which depicts Raja Chulan as Nila Utama's grandfather.

whatever his parentage, he would have been culturally Malay. Faris further elaborates: "The other issue is of course that such categories as 'Tamil' or 'Malay' are not stable through time, and so whether SNU was Tamil or Malay is not really a helpful question: what matters is his importance as a cultural symbol in Malay lore, and to claim him and his associated legends is a kind of cultural appropriation" (WhatsApp correspondence).

Finally, there is the issue of the incorporation of magic into literature. Our precolonial legends are replete with miracles, such as Badang's feats of superhuman strength and the transformation of a pair of sisters into the geological formations of Sisters' Islands. Such events are usually repeated unproblematically in texts whose principal agenda is to transmit the tales to a new generation, such as Pugalenthi and Chia's *Myths and Legends of Singapore* or Shiau's *Heartland*. They also provide useful fodder for metaphor and spectacle in poems and plays, such as Alfian's "Badang Speaks" and Tay's *Sisters: The Untold Stories Behind the Sisters Islands*.

In fiction, however, authors are often more hesitant to embrace the supernatural. Ho's *Crown of Earth's Desire* does so without hesitation, as a novel in the genre of fantasy. But, by and large, fictionists have opted to portray precolonial Singapore through a realist lens, as in the case of Hassan's "Skizo Singa," Bryant's "The Handling" and Udayasankar's *3* and *The Ghost King*. Lim and Lim's *Danger Dan Creates the Ultimate Utama Uproar* attributes all otherworldly events to future science, not magic, and though Melic's *A Tree to Take Us Up to Heaven* contains miracles aplenty in its early Chinese-themed setting of the Valley of the Maiden, such prodigies are nowhere to be seen in the bleak world of Sea Town.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this tendency is Joan Yap's 2010 novella *The Sacred Hill*. This work attempts to reconstruct the rise and fall of the kingdom of Singapura from the text of *Sulalatus Salatin*, with all fabulous events blunted into more believable versions of themselves. The island, for instance, is not attacked by swordfish, but by

crocodiles. Nila Utama does not descend from the heavens, miraculously turning a ricefield to gold; instead, he emerges from hiding, dressed in the royal regalia his family has hidden for generations, onto a field where the rice grains have ripened to a golden hue. Occasionally, logic fails the author: she refuses to regurgitate the myth of Raja Chulan discovering an undersea kingdom in a glass submarine, but still has a prince sealing himself into "a magic chest made of glass with a lock and a chain of gold," and somehow still meeting a beautiful woman and siring three sons (12). Ultimately, she reveals two great drawbacks to the erasure of magic. First, it leaches the legends of much of their wonder and charm. Second, it denatures the tales, rendering them unrecognisable to those who know them, and miseducating those who do not.

A Gate of Dragon's Teeth is, in many ways, a personal response to this cultural legacy. I wish to honour the anti-feudal spirit of early Malay films, while also capturing the complexity of a contemporary Singaporean's relationship to this regal heritage. I intend to strive for historical accuracy and to give due respect to the Malay community, to whom the legends principally belong. And I refuse to sacrifice the dazzling magic of the tales for the trivial sake of realism.

3. Decolonising Temasek: New Strategies for Imagining the Precolonial

At the opening of this exegesis, I expressed my consternation that my UEA instructor considered Scott's *Waverley* to be the first historical novel, rather than any of its Asian precedents. During my research process, I discovered that this view may be traced to Hungarian literary historian Georg Lukacs' *The Historical Novel*. Here, the theorist addresses the issue of "'precursors' of the historical novel… [in] China or India," arguing that "[w]hat is missing from the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age" (19).

Lukacs further argues that such a manner of thinking was only possible thanks to the advent of the Enlightenment: in the wake of the French Revolution, historians embarked on "the first attempt at a rational periodization of history, an attempt to comprehend the historical nature and origins of the present rationally and scientifically" (28). *Waverley* is significant, not because of its picturesque portrait of the Scottish Highlands, but because it depicts the downfall of a feudal class that supports the Jacobite cause and the rise of a modern United Kingdom. Only a belief in historical progress can engender the dictum that the past is a foreign country: an exotic scenario ripe for adventure.

Mignolo, however, identifies the cult of historical progress as a colonial imposition. He notes how, during the Enlightenment, "barbarians" beyond Western Europe began to be rebranded as "'primitives'… located in time rather than in space… in the lower scale of a chronological order driving toward 'civilization'" (2011, 153). This bred a widespread belief in the necessity of reform, and the collective effort of well-intentioned colonists and colonised peoples to transform their former cultures, sacrificing old traditions in order to mimic Western modernity.

This linear understanding of history is not, alas, overturned by the knowledge of advanced precolonial civilisations. A past period of prosperity can easily be recontextualised as a Golden Age which natives have since regressed from, but might someday reinstate with the guiding hand of modernity. Precolonial Singapore has come to occupy such a role in national narratives, as in the case of Yap's *The Sacred Hill*, which declares in its penultimate paragraph, "One day, the Lion City would reawaken from its slumber and regain the fame and glory that has surpassed the imagination of people near and far" (79).

Certainly, the historical novel may be wielded as a tool against Western hegemony. One need only recall Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's famous declaration: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (45). Nevertheless, one must also contend with the Enlightenment roots of the genre, and the fact that coloniality is stitched into the very fabric of its conventional structures. What deliberate steps might I, as an author, take to challenge these norms?

a) Research and Inspiration

From the outset, one of my principal aims in writing *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* was to recreate precolonial Singapore in fully immersive detail, so vivid that even readers with no knowledge of its history might be able to relive the events of my narration. This, I hoped, might compensate for the lack of cinematic representations of the era since the 1960s, as well as the sketchiness of description and considerable psychic distance that characterise many prose retellings of the legends. This, I also thought, might also force my audience to grapple

seriously with this period of our past, warts and all, rather than dismissing it as a mythical once-upon-a-time mirage, only relevant as a prologue to our present.

One great source of inspiration was a passage from Goenawan Mohamad's essay "Ruins," in which the Indonesian author recalls visiting the stupa of Borobudur for a family picnic at the age of seven, and receiving a surprising injunction from the caretaker:

> 'Please do not eat when you are on the temple, for the people who built this temple had to fast while they were working here putting these stones together and carving the reliefs.' His voice was convincing: at least we children, the youngest in the party, took note. We did not eat the rice and fried noodles and whatever else we had brought with us. But it wasn't just this that was important. The caretaker… with a little story made up to discourage children who liked to throw rubbish around, succeeded in linking my body in the present with a huge task that took place in the ancient past. He connected a single history between those builders of Borobudur and me, a little snotty-nosed kid. The history held in those hills of Kedu was my own past. (103)

It was, I realised, vital to capture not just the outward minutiae of life in another age, but the visceral sensations of what it might be to live through the period. I therefore took a broad approach to my research process, consulting a wide range of written works from across Southeast Asia in order to better imagine the lives of my characters. I perused not only historical studies of Singapore and the Malay world, such as John N. Miksic's *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea 1300-1800* and Paul Michel Munoz's *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesian Archipelago and Southeast Asia*, but also more recent works such as Haji Mohtar bin H Md Dom's *Malay Wedding Customs* and Susan-Jane Beers' *Jamu: The Ancient Indonesian Art of Healing* in order to reconstruct ceremonies and bodily practices.

There were, of course, many aspects of traditional Malay life that could not have existed in the 13th century. No trade networks between Eurasia and the Americas existed; therefore, common crops such as chilli peppers, papayas and peanuts would have been absent from the diet. Islam had not yet been widely embraced; as such, dog ownership, the eating of pork and the drinking of alcohol would not have been taboo.[25] Nor did the Hindu-Buddhist customs of the time involve vegetarianism and abstention from beef; these are fairly modern impositions even in India (Ashraf), and remain irrelevant among those who continue the traditions today, as may be observed by scanning the menu of any Balinese warung. Studies of early Philippine and magic societies, relatively untouched by Indic and Abrahamic influences, also helped to shift my perceptions of what might be considered normative in 13th-century Southeast Asia. William Henry Scott's documentation of the Visaya in *Barangay: Sixteenth Century Philippine Culture and Society*, for instance, provoked the question of whether Nila Utama might have been tattooed, or sported a penile piercing.

Besides academic literature, I indulged myself in creative works that might give me insight into historical subjectivities. The epic literature of the region was a particular delight, including works from the Malay tradition such as *The Epic of Hang Tuah*, *The Epic of Bidasari*, A. W. Hamilton's translations of *Malay Pantuns* and numerous others summarised in Liaw Yock Fang's *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, as well as texts from further afield in Southeast Asia such as Damiana Eugenio's *Philippine Folk Literature: The Epics* and Sunthon Phu's *Phra Aphai Mani* from Thailand.

Contemporary creative literature, too, was instructive. It is, after all, not only Singapore's precolonial past that has served as the basis for Southeast Asian historical fiction. It gave me confidence to see projects of reclamation parallel to my own, such as

[25] Pig hunting and dog ownership are still in fact practised in contemporary Muslim Minangkabau, as noted in Zainuddin Zulkifli's "Sharia and Tradition, Pig Hunting in Minangkabau."

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's 1951 *The King, the Witch and the Priest*, which retells the 11th-century legendary history of the Balinese ruler Airlangga (1000-1049), the sorceress Calon Arang and the holy man Bharada; also Jimmy Donald's 1991 *Keling of the Raised World*, which narrates the adventures of the Iban mythological hero Keling in novel form, based on the author's recordings of oral epics by bards of his own tribe.

Singaporean authors, too, have explored our cultural roots by looking toward nearby kingdoms; in particular, the Sultanate of Melaka. A notable example is Harun Aminurrashid's 1958 Malay language novel *Panglima Awang*, which explores the real-life story of Enrique of Melaka, a man enslaved by Magellan during the 1511 siege of Melaka, who may have been the first person to circumnavigate the globe. Another would be Haresh Sharma's 2011 play *Singapore*, which depicts the origins of our country's multiculturalism in the interracial marriage of Sultan Mansur Shah of Melaka (r. 1456-77) and the legendary Chinese princess Hang Li Po.

My research did not solely consist of reading. I was fortunate enough to attend numerous public talks on these topics, such as the Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre's "1819 and Before: Singapore's Pasts" lecture series and the National University of Singapore's "Singapura before Raffles: Archaeology and the Seas, 400BCE – 1600CE" conference. I was also able to visit museum exhibitions exploring the deep Malay past, such as the Malay Heritage Centre's *Seekor Singa, Seorang Putera dan Sebingkai Cermin (A Lion, A Prince and A Mirror): Reflecting and Refracting Singapura*, which provided an indigenous perspective on early Singapore history, as well as the National Museum's ongoing *A Voyage of Love and Longing*, which interprets the William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings through the lens of Malay botanic and zoological symbolism.

However, some of my most profound influences come not from the written word nor institutional heritage events, but from the field of visual arts. As noted before, among the

most sophisticated of early explorations of Singapore's precolonial history were Ho Tzu Nyen's *Utama: Every Name in History Is I* and *Sejarah Singapura*; he has continued to explore diverse aspects of the region's history and folklore in works such as his ongoing multimedia project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*. Zarina Muhammad has interrogated Malay magic, myth and land-bound histories in lecture performances such as *not terra nullius* and installations such as *Pragmatic Prayers for the Kala at the Threshold* and *Apotropaic Texts*; she has also been generous in sharing expertise and advice with me through personal correspondence. Both Lenne Chai and Vimal Kumar have created provocative projects visualising what a Singaporean aquatic goddess might resemble, in the form of *Salvation Made Simple* and *Singapore River Yantra* respectively. I even had the opportunity to participate in *Reclaiming Nusantara?*, led by artists Ila, Norah Lea and Nurshafitri Ya'akob. In this workshop, we acknowledged the violent histories of attempting to unify the Malay world, exemplified by Gajah Mada's invasions and Konfrontasi (Evers), while engaging in exercises of dance, syair poetry and ketupat-binding as we brainstormed possible decolonial paths for the future.

Perhaps the single most significant artwork for me on this journey is Zai Kuning's *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, centred on the obscure figure of Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa (r. 671-702), first ruler of the Srivijaya Empire. Central to this exhibition is the skeletal frame of a ship, constructed from rattan, red string and beeswax, representing the king's siddhayatra: his sacred maritime pilgrimage. On the fringes of the display, we see photographs and videos from the artist's documentation of his life among the nomadic, animistic Orang Laut in the Riau Archipelago, as well as their practice of the Malay opera form mak yong. Both are testament to the long but often unacknowledged history of the Malays, predating both Islam and colonialism, as well as the centrality of sea travel to their cultural identity. Both also reflect the fragility of such heritage. In his accompanying essay,

"Transmission of Knowledge: they get up from their knees and walk," Zai relates a comment by an Orang Laut elder, driven into poverty by their deprivation from their traditional territories by settlers and corporations: "all of them talk about progress, but we tell ourselves that this is a curse which has fallen upon us and it is the end of us. We do not die immediately but slowly" (32). It is a heartbreaking indictment of the colonial mindset of modernity.

Dapunta Hyang informed my research, not only through its themes and motifs, but through the processes of its creation. As his principal collaborator, Zai chose not a fellow Singaporean or Malay, but a Thai artist, Wichai Juntavaro; his participation led to the serendipitous discovery of numerous congruences between mak yong and the southern Thai dance form menorah. This reaffirmed my chosen rubric of Southeast Asia as method, as opposed to an exclusive focus on Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia alone. His insistence on the primacy of dreams and imagination in historical artmaking, rather than academic research (40), encouraged me when I was overcome with impostor syndrome.

Furthermore, his insistence on actually visiting the sacred sites of Srivijaya, Palembang and Jambi, rather than merely channelling them through secondary documentation (149), drove me to visit these sites myself. I shuttled between these cities from 27 February to 5 March 2020, witnessing the strange coupling of veneration and neglect of contemporary denizens towards their ancient past. At Bukit Seguntang, where Sang Nila Utama first manifested on Earth, veiled women sat in silence beside the hilltop tombs, yet the archaeological interpretive centre was filled with caterers slicing watermelons and students changing into marching band uniforms. It was not, perhaps, the Mecca-like experience that Zai described (38), but revelatory nonetheless: a reminder that ultimately the *rakyat*, the common populace, holds sway over the memory of kings. It is to my fortune that I was able to make this pilgrimage before international travel was frozen by the Covid-19 pandemic; it

is also my great regret that I could not pay similar visits to the other two Indonesian locales of my novel: Minangkabau and Bintan.

My most vital resource was, of course, *Sulalatus Salatin*. Initially, I believed I could rely entirely on C. C. Brown's 1970 text, titled *Sejarah Melayu: or Malay Annals*; this was a translation of Richard Winstedt's 1938 Romanised Malay transcription, which in turn is based on the earliest extant manuscript, Raffles M.S. 18. I later learned that my Malay-speaking friends' edition of choice is A. Samad Ahmad's *Sulalatus Salatin* (1978), which contains key episodes from later manuscripts that are missing from Brown's version, such as the slaying of the dragon Saktimuna by the hero Permasku Mambang and the miraculous manifestation of the foam princess, Puteri Tanjong Buih.[26] These tales are reproduced in John Leyden's 1818 translation, *The Malay Annals*, though critics have cautioned that this is "a very free rendering of the Malay text" (Roolvink xvi).

I therefore relied on Brown, A. Samad and Leyden as my three field guides as I plotted the course of my novel.[27] When my meagre Malay failed me, Google Translate was surprisingly helpful; when that proved insufficient, I was grateful to have friends like Malay classics researcher Faris Joraimi and librarian Hafiz Rashid to consult.

To be able to engage in this prolonged research has been a rare privilege, available to few of my compatriots. In a spirit of equity, I have shared many of my findings on my public Instagram and Facebook accounts, under hashtags such as #yishreads and #sghistory, with photography, text summaries and commentary on books, talks and exhibitions I have absorbed in my pursuit of knowledge about precolonial Southeast Asia. Even if little comes

[26] It was playwright Anwar Hadi Ramli who alerted me to this difference, following my questions about *Kurun Yang Hilang* (The Lost Century, 2020), his gallery tour of the Malay Heritage Centre that consisted of re-enactments of episodes from *Sulalatus Salatin*.
[27] I had hoped to gain new insights from Muhammad Haji Salleh's 2020 translation, *The Genealogy of Kings.* Alas, it uses the same source material as Brown, and is very clumsily edited.

of my novel, perhaps these notes may inspire and inform my peers, who may then craft finer works of art than mine.

b. Adaptation

In my introduction, I noted my surprise and consternation upon discovering how other authors have consistently under-utilised *Sulalatus Salatin* as a literary source. It is frankly bizarre how numerous details of well-known episodes had been erased from modern retellings. Why, for instance, have no prior interpreters of the tale of Sang Nila Utama mentioned the fact that his crew's first act upon arriving in Temasek was to "amuse… themselves with collecting shellfish" (Brown 20)?

In retaliation, I adopted an almost fundamentalist tactic of scriptural literalism. Whatever the text stated, I would accept as canon, no matter how miraculous or unlikely it appeared; if it strained belief, I would render it credible through the addition of meticulous, period-appropriate description and context. Even if a plot point appeared in one version of the text and not the other, I would strive to incorporate it into the narrative. For instance, Leyden and A. Samad record that Wan Empok and Wan Malini were wedded to princes, but Brown does not; thus, in my novel, these marriages take place, but are brief, followed by amicable separations.

Occasionally, the accounts contradicted each other. Brown relates that it was Nila Utama who manifested on Bukit Seguntang, while A. Samad and Leyden claim it was his father, Sang Sapurba. Faced with such a dilemma, I ultimately decided on the option that suited the structural unity of my narrative: that it was the same man, Nila Utama, who transformed a hill of rice into gold and founded the city of Singapura. However, I surmised, his long absence from Palembang and his divinely youthful appearance might have confused

subjects into believing that these were the acts of two separate Rajas. When in doubt, I generally chose Brown's version of events: thus, Nila Utama's wife is Wan Sendari, not Wan Seri Beni, as A. Samad and Leyden stated. Nevertheless, a shadow of this alternate account persisted in my novel, with Nila Utama initiating a torrid love affair with Beni.

It was not only the denotations of the text that caught my attention, but its connotations. An apparently trivial remark could provide me a framework to reconstruct an entire character, such as the fact that Wan Seri Beni had visited Sham, the old Malay term for Syria. This inspired me to make her an aficionado for all things Middle Eastern, and also served to explain why she is ascribed the Arabic name Sakyidar Shah, invents the royal nobat orchestra, and owns horses that she later gifts to Singapura. Frequently, to better comprehend characters, I would investigate the etymologies of their names. "Empuk," I learned, is Malay for "soft," which is why I made Wan Empok a tough but tender-hearted woman; "Malini" is Sanskrit for "the garlanded one," which is why Wan Malini was more fanciful and accepting of the pleasures of royalty.

I could not, however, recreate the densely textured world of precolonial Southeast Asia following a doctrine of *sola scriptura*. I had to cross-reference other historical texts, mapping out the events of my novel onto a timeline. This could be problematic, as in the character of Rajendra Chola. In *Sulalatus Salatin*, he is called Raja Chulan, but he is transparently a representation of a Rajendra Chola I (r. 1014-44), ruler of the Chola Empire, who led an expedition of conquest through Southeast Asia in 1025. How, then, could he be the father of Sang Nila Utama, who disembarked in Temasek almost three centuries later in 1299? I had to put this down to supernatural causes: perhaps time passes differently in the undersea realm. There were, on the other hand, benefits to having a solid date as my reference. I could, for instance, identify the "Raja of China" who was Rajendra's adversary. This, to my delight, turned out to be a woman, the Empress Liu (969–1033), whose crafty

background of co-opting power from her adoptive son seemed well suited to a personality who might outsmart the imperial impulses of the Chola (Chaffee).

Soon, I realised that *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* could not be solely understood as an adaptation of *Sulalatus Salatin*. It was an act of bricolage, where narratives and characters from diverse sources might merge and mingle. Below, I present significant points in my novel where the novel is penetrated by secondary texts and histories:

Book	**Chapter**	**Year**	**Events**	**Intertexts**
One		1025	Rajendra Chola encounters a Chinese fleet in Temasek.	Song history, as per John Chaffee's "The Rise and Regency of Empress Liu (969—1033)." Chola history, from *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, eds. Hermann Kulke, K Kesavapany & Vijay Sakhuja.
Two	2	1265-1279	Demang Lebar Daun reflects on his youth among the Mongols.	Marco Polo's *The Travels.*
	7	1279	Dara returns as a vengeful spirit and is propitiated.	Folklore of the pontianak, from Ad Maulod's *The Haunting of Fatima Rock: History, Embodiment and Spectral Urbanism in Singapore*.

Three	1	1279-1299	Permasku Mambang learns martial arts from his mother, and later learns the legends of Minangkabau.	Folklore of the origins of silat, from "Silat," *Wikipedia.* Folklore of the Minangkabau, from "Minangkabau People," *Wikipedia.*
	2		Puteri Tanjung Buih is reminded of the Javanese wars with Palembang and the Mongols.	Singhasari and Majapahit history, from *The Pararaton*, and David Bade, *Of Palm Wine, Women and War: The Mongolian Naval Expedition to Java in the 13th Century.*
	3	1299	Wan Seri Beni recalls her predecessor and meets with Wan Empok and Wan Malini.	Folklore of Bintan as orally preserved by Pak Atan Abdul Zahman, from Gilles Massot and Ludvik Kalus's "Between Legend and Reality: The Bukit Batu Cemetery of the Island of Bintan, Riau Archipelago."
	4	1279-1299	Tanjung is told of the collapse of the Song.	*History of Song* and *History of Yuan*, as per "Battle of Yamen," *Wikipedia.*
	5	1299	Mambang meets Mrigank, also known as Melquíades, and witnesses his death on Temasek.	Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

These secondary texts are of diverse provenance and prestige, encompassing Chinese court histories, a medieval European travelogue, contemporary oral folklore from the Malay world and a 20th-century Colombian work of magical realist fiction. The connections I have forged are, in many cases, acts of whimsy. Since *Sulalatus Salatin* does not name the Chinese nobleman who weds Puteri Tanjung Buih, I had to assign him an identity of my own, and the most obvious period-appropriate candidate happened to be Zhao Bing (1272-79), the last Emperor of the Song Dynasty, supposedly killed on the cliffs of Lantau Island at the age of seven. Likewise, I could not resist paying homage to García Márquez, one of my most beloved authors, whose fascinating creation, the Roma alchemist Melquíades,[28] proclaims that he once "died of fever on the dunes of Singapore" (79).

However, there is also a decolonial impulse driving this game of mix and match. By drawing on texts with wildly disparate levels of apparent credibility, I am wilfully engaging in what Mignolo calls "epistemic disobedience": a rejection of the Western colonial myth of objective knowledge. He explains:

> Once upon a time scholars assumed that the knowing subject in the disciplines is transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured. From a detached and neutral point of observation (that Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007) describes as *the hubris of the zero point*), the knowing subject maps the world and its problems, classifies people and projects

[28] Melquíades is referred to as a "gypsy" in Gregory Rabassa's translation of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Today, this term is viewed by many in the Roma community as an ethnic slur ("Terminology." *European Roma Rights Centre*). Yet it also links the character with the destiny of the Orang Laut, often called "Sea Gypsies" in colonial documents. I have used the character to elaborate on tales of the Roma's emergence from India, before their settlement in Europe.

> into what is good for them. Today that assumption is no longer tenable, although there are still many believers. At stake is indeed the question of racism and epistemology… As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science. The need for political and epistemic delinking here comes to the fore… (2009, 160)

My hybrid narrative, borrowing freely from divergent accounts of the past, muddies the distinction between the voices of *humanitas* (colonial and neocolonial peoples, who claim the power to objectively observe the world) and *anthropos* (colonised peoples, who have traditionally been the objects of study). Its mixed heritage is also a homage to the classical Malay tradition, which is born from such a blend of cultural influences that it is difficult to reasonably categorise its works as purely indigenous, Indic or Islamic (Sweeney 26-28).

c) Character, Point of View and Society

Let us return to Mignolo's model of the colonial matrix of power, represented by four domains of control (2011, 8), listed below. In the wake of independence, formerly colonised nation-states have come to view these as a set of standards distinguishing the civilised from the uncivilised. Any society that excels in each of these domains, whether Western or not, might be deemed worthy of the title of *humanitas*; likewise, an individual who enjoys advantages in said spheres sits at its very apex of said society.

Domains of control under CMP	**Society**	**Individual**
economy	economically sophisticated and prosperous	wealthy
authority	led by a centralised hierarchical government	royal or noble
gender and sexuality	patriarchal, based on the heteronormative family unit	male, cisgender, heterosexual
knowledge and subjectivity	literate, logical, scientistic	intelligent, neurotypical

One cannot help but notice the congruence between this ideal individual and the typical princely protagonist of legend, of which Sang Nila Utama is a prime example. In derivative fictions, he is consistently portrayed as fulfilling each of these four criteria—though not always, as we have seen in Hassan's "Skizo Singa," where he is diagnosed with schizophrenia.

I have chosen to narrate my novel from the viewpoints of six lesser-known characters from *Sulalatus Salatin*, most of whom fail these standards in some way. They are half male and half female, half noble and half commoner, some exhibiting physical disabilities and neurodiversity, with a range of ages and sexual practices, thus reminding readers of the breadth of human experience that must have existed even in precolonial times. In sequence of introduction to the narrative, these are:

Book One	**i) The Unnamed Scholar:** an elderly male Chinese librarian, stripped of his privilege, sent to Temasek in exile and poverty.
Book Two	**(ii) Wan Empok:** an early middle-aged female rice farmer of Palembang in a same-sex romantic relationship, who is briefly made a queen, but is later cast into the forest where she becomes a priestess. As she grows older, she becomes reliant on a crutch to walk. **(iii) Demang Lebar Daun:** an early middle-aged male nobleman, once the Raja of Palembang, who abdicates to take on the role of Mangkubumi.
Book Three	**(iv) Permasku Mambang**: a young male guard and hunter of Palembang and later Minangkabau, who displays traits associated with autism and is sexually attracted to a divine monster. **(v) Puteri Tanjung Buih**: a teenage female princess and later queen of Palembang, who has albinism and divine powers, and displays traits associated with attention deficit disorder. **(vi) Wan Seri Beni:** a late middle-aged female Raja of Bintan who remains sexually active with her younger male lover.

I thereby demand that my reader empathise, not with a regal hero who exemplifies our aspirations to *humanitas*, but with the numberless subalterns. These include not only the characters above, but Nila Utama's thirty-nine despoiled brides (many of whom I name and describe, to imbue them with identity, including Ratna, a transgender woman) and nomadic peoples such as Ratu of the Orang Selat and Mrigank/Melquíades of the Roma. Nor do I

disguise the fact that this remains a slaveholding society. There are subalterns in this text who are not afforded the chance to speak.

My sequencing for these point-of-view characters is also deliberate, reflecting a consistent challenge to the colonial matrix of power on the societal level. In Book One, I begin with the unnamed scholar, a representative of Song Dynasty China, a literate imperial society that easily meets the standards of *humanitas*. Stripped of his privileges and connections, he eventually embraces a new way of life among the *anthropos*, namely the Orang Selat. In Book Two, Demang Lebar Daun's encounters with the Mongols gives him imperialist ambitions for Srivijaya; these not validated, but crushed by the end of the cycle. In Book Three, Puteri Tanjung Buih resists her Chinese husband's aspirations to restore the Song; the novel closes not with the triumphant founding of Singapura, but with Bing's embrace of his new Malay life, and with Wan Seri Beni's premonition of a time beyond 21st-century Singapore, when "the cities would rise higher, higher, and the oceans too, till the age of gods and magic came once more."[29]

Throughout the text, I also portray societies that function as alternatives to the typical model of centralised government: not only nomadic tribes, but the heterotopic space of the Mahadewi shrine and the raucous crew of the Lancang Kuning. These are in fact inspired by genuine Southeast Asian communities: the non-violent egalitarian cultures of the Orang Asli and the purposefully stateless highland peoples of Zomia (Endicott 8-9; James C. Scott x-xi). Even within the structures of kingdoms, I portray female political and religious leadership as commonplace: also a feature of pre-modern Southeast Asia, where, as Australian historian Barbara Watson Andaya argues, "the female figure as a locus of power… grew out of the experiences of real people" (232). It was also my conscious choice not to have any of my

[29] The inspiration for this vision was anthropologist Vivienne Wee's lecture "The Orang Laut of Singapore: Past, Present, Future," where she anticipated how climate change may force us all to learn from Orang Laut culture by diversifying our resource range and embracing flexibility and autonomy.

point-of-view characters related by blood, thus disrupting the trope of familial lineage and inheritance. Empire, patriarchy and the heteronormative family unit have been represented enough in fiction; I decided to turn the reader's eye towards other options for social organisation.

There are, however, drawbacks to my focus on characters who are in some way marginal to society. Their agency is limited, thus rendering them somewhat passive in their character arcs. Wan Empok's subplot, for example, is not driven by desire or destiny, but a simple will to survive the repercussions of Nila Utama's arrival.

Philippine author Vida Cruz defends such a literary choice in her essay "We Are the Mountain: A Look at the Inactive Protagonist." The active protagonist, she notes, moves with "almost fluid mobility toward his 'destiny'… The mobility that is not afforded to anyone who isn't young, healthy and able, neurotypical, affluent/middle class, white, cis, straight, and/or male." Too often, the obstacles to the fulfilment of his destiny—the mountain he must climb, if you will—are in fact humans:

> Every time this mountain is represented by a tribe of non-white people threatening to throw [the protagonist] John into a volcano for the sake of a savage god; by a woman refusing to give him sex; is coded queer or trans in their villainous behavior; is given a tragic backstory rooted in the loss of a body part or a mental disorder or abuse; is a blue collar worker who turned to terrorism out of desperation—every time these "characterizations" are used, it reinforces that what is not default is to be beaten. Conquered. Killed…
>
> Make any one of these people the protagonist. They become the mountain and John and whoever and whatever he brings with him becomes a wave. Wave after wave of

> conflict and violence. This kind of protagonist is not going anywhere because their circumstances, their lack of mobility, keep them rooted to the spot, unable to take the wave head on. But they keep standing because it is either survival or annihilation. This is also a valid way of presenting a character's agency in fiction.

There is a toxicity to the well-worn trope of the questing, privileged hero; I have therefore seized opportunities to undermine and complicate characters in my novel who might fit this trope. Sang Nila Utama is feckless, irresponsible, easily manipulated by Demang Lebar Daun, and ultimately at the mercy of feminine supernatural forces, for whom he must dress as a woman for the sake of mercy. His brother Sang Nila Pahlawan is weak at walking upon first manifesting on Earth, later revealing himself to be a clumsy swordsman, thus requiring him to delegate his warriors to slay monsters. And while Permasku Mambang is young and martially talented, he is socially reclusive and regretful of his greatest feat of valour. It is only under compulsion that he commits the sexual act that will sire the future rulers of Minangkabau (A. Samad 29), and he finds fulfilment, not through slaying another monster, but in annihilating himself in the presence of the divine.

However, I must recognise the irony of a Chinese author denying glory to Malay characters in the name of decoloniality. As Syed Hussein Alatas has noted, European colonists constructed "the image of the indolent, dull, backward and treacherous native" to censure Malays who refused to participate in their economy; this has since "changed into that of a dependent one requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress" (8). This is why, in lieu of celebrating Malay proto-imperialism, I filled my novel with the motif of Malay mobility, from Lebar Daun's journey to the court of Kublai Khan to Wan Malini's accidental circumnavigation of the world, extending even to Tanjung's magical passage through the seas and Nila Utama's odysseys into the mythical realms of Persian and Buddhist cosmology. In

this way I paid tribute to the impressive maritime heritage of the Malay race, from the initial Austronesian dispersal to the memorialisation of Enrique the Black in Hamin Aminurrashid's *Panglima Awang*; a patrimony encoded into a popular etymology of their demonym, derived from "laju," indicating a river's swiftness (Sweeney 51).

d) Aesthetics

Writing *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* was a slow and laborious process. Throughout its course, I found myself meticulously crafting my sentences so that they might strike wonderment in their delivery; even scouring works such as Siti Zainon Ismail's *100 Malay Proverbs* to infuse my prose with the spirit of classical Malay literature. This puzzled Jing-Jing Lee, who served as my instructor for the Asia Creative Writing Programme course, "How to Finish Your Novel"; she believed I was hobbling myself and my readers by refusing to write in simple straightforward English. I too was a little alarmed at the surfeit of adverbs I was using, running counter to the common advice given to writing students that "the road to hell is paved with adverbs" (King 139).

However, I must defend my authorial choices. As American author Matthew Salesses points out in *Craft in the Real World*, "'pure craft' is a lie" (3), and the rules of good writing I myself have drilled into others as an instructor are by no means universal, but simply 20th-century Anglo-American conventions. It was, in my view, a necessary decolonial act to experiment with alternative literary norms, regardless of its dilatory effects on my speed of writing.

Readers will notice that I have made liberal use of poetic structures such as alliteration and parallelism in my text. This echoes the way the Malay literary tradition is informed by the mnemonic patterns of oral poetry and recitation (Sweeney 106-37). I have

also created a trio of stories within stories in Book 3, with Tanjung first listening to tales of the past from her servants and her husband, then becoming the subject of a tale by Bath. This is a homage to the framed narrative, or *cerita berbingkai*: a genre unto itself in classical Malay writing, with famed examples such as *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* and *Hikayat Kalilah dan Dimnah* (Liaw 264).

Even the divisions of my novel are based on indigenous aesthetics. As noted before, the tales are divided between male and female perspectives: this is reflective of how "[t]he Southeast Asian universe is bipartite, with opposite yet complementary gendered aspects recognized and respected in daily life and ritual" (Maxwell 99). It is divided into three books, both a reference to Sang Nila Utama's title as Sri Tri Buana, Lord of the Three Worlds, and to the Malay notion of a tripartite cosmos, made up of an upper world of the heavens and mountains, a middle world of the earth, and a lower world of the waters. Through the novel, the reader makes a gradual ascent through each of these realms, from the seas and shorelines of Temasek in Book One to the palace and jungle of Book Two, ending on the hilltops of Gunung Marapi, Gunung Bintan and Bukit Larangan in Book Three. Likewise, we begin with conflicts of temporal power, move into a world touched by divine princes, and end in communion with goddesses and fantastical monsters.

Even my own acts of departure from *Sulalatus Salatin*'s plotlines have precedent in the Malay tradition. In his studies of oral literature, Malaysian linguist Amin Sweeney has identified the power of schematic language to transform even the contemporary anecdotes of his peers into the formats of familiar yarns: he describes witnessing a friend's tale of hearing a cackle in a graveyard morph into a full-scale tale of a pontianak sighting, and his own unremarkable jeep journey to be turned into a cautionary tale, simply through the imposition of standard "plot points" in oral storytelling (145-46).

Rewriting these legends, I am driven by schemata from my own age. If Sang Nila Utama heartlessly infects his thirty-nine brides with disease, the laws of urban myth insist that one of them return to seek retribution as a pontianak, as in modern Malay language works such as Glen Goei and Gavin Yap's film *Revenge of the Pontianak* (2019). And if a well-meaning foreigner weds a divine Malay princess, expecting her to be nothing more than a mute handmaiden, she must necessarily rise up to assert the pride of her people and bend him to her will.

e) On Fantasy and Magic

A brief word may be necessary regarding the use of fantastical elements in my novel. For me, there was no question of exorcising the supernatural from *Sulalatus Salatin*, as so many other authors have done. It was, after all, magic and myth that first provoked my fascination with the precolonial history of Singapore, and my research has only deepened my appreciation for the rich symbology thereof. I now wince at reductive attempts to identify the species of animal that Nila Utama beheld, when the creature identified, *singa*, can refer not only to lions but mythical apotropaic beasts that combine elements of the tiger and serpent (Wessing 230; Maxwell 49). Nor am I completely disbelieving when it comes to magical rituals. It is my hope that that my excerpts of genuine shamanic incantations in my novel do not arouse spiritual disturbances among my readers (Laderman 122-24).

Lest we forget, miracles are commonplace in the pre-modern literatures of every continent, from Valmiki's *Ramayana* to Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy.* Literary realism emerged as a movement in 19th-century France, with Western hubris of the zero point at its very heart: the de facto manifesto of realism, Honoré de Balzac's preface to *The Human Comedy*, "associates the role of the writer with that of the rational scientific observer,"

expressing the author's "affiliation with the rational-empirical tradition stemming from eighteenth-century Enlightenment" (Morris 59-60). By the mid-20th century, this ideology had spread to the colonies, where local intellectuals praised realism as a signifier of modernity. The prominent Singaporean Malay language writers' organization ASAS '50, for instance, pitted itself against "societal backwardness… those whose consciousness have been frozen by the influence of feudalism and myths, and superstition that has been enmeshed with religion" (Keris Mas 131). Magic was no longer welcome in the pages of respectable native literature.

In my thesis proposal, I advertised *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* as a work of magical realism. This granted my project a mantle of respectability, as it meant I would be following in a long history of authors rewriting history from the margins, as in the case of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty Is a Wound.* The genre would accommodate both my desire for literary experimentation and my commitment to decolonial activism. As American literary scholars Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris declare, "Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures" (6).

However, in recent years, I have reconsidered this move. Since the release of my short story collection *Lion City* in 2018, I have become increasingly known as an author of fantasy and science fiction. This has motivated me to explore the history and breadth of Southeast Asian speculative fiction, conversing with its current creators and delving into the writings of those past. For reasons that shall follow, I believe that I would, without shame, label *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth* as a work of fantasy.[30]

[30] The fantasy genre has its own baggage of Eurocentric norms. During my research process, I discovered that

I maintain that it is not magical realism that kept the folkloric tradition alive in an age of deracinating modernity, but popular speculative fiction. Proof of this may be seen in the career of Othman Wok, one of Singapore's first horror writers. His Malay-language ghost stories were avidly consumed across Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s, despite the disapproval of more highbrow authors; in this way, he provided the means for tales of indigenous spirits to be disseminated through the printing press (Ng 2021, xi-xv).

The 2010s have seen a resurgence in the genre throughout the region. Southeast Asian authors have gained international prominence, such as Dean Francis Alfar from the Philippines, Neon Yang from Singapore and Zen Cho from Malaysia, while publishing houses such as Epigram Books in Singapore and Buku Fixi in Kuala Lumpur have invested in developing local communities of writers and readers. Singaporean Malay authors, notably, have been a substantial enough part of this trend that Nazry Bahrawi has identified it as an *aliran* or cultural movement (Diana, Hassan and Nazry).

These authors and their critics are grappling with conundrums of mythopoesis that bear great similarities to my own. Bruneian author Kathrina Mohd Daud mourns the loss of her nation's Hindu-Buddhist heritage, lamenting, "We've been traders and Muslims for so long that we've forgotten what we were before that" (56). Aliette de Bodard, a French writer of Vietnamese heritage, confesses that she has "issues with fantasy classifications… because my family reads historical books that would be considered fantasy in the west (with ghosts, spirits, sometimes dragons)" (@aliettedb). Philippine literary scholar J. Neil C. Garcia asks, "Might there be an ethical dimension to the issue of center-based writers appropriating the ancestral stories of cultural minorities… In other words, is it okay for Manila or Cebu-based

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horses were rare in 13th-century maritime Southeast Asia (Clarence-Smith 36), so I had to describe overland journeys by other means. Nevertheless, it felt deeply counter-intuitive to focus almost exclusively on travels by oxcart, elephant and palanquin.

artists to poach for ideas, characters and images from the folklore of the beleaguered and marginalized cultures in their midst?" (261)

Vitally, the region's speculative fiction writers are in dialogue with one another, appearing in journals such as *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*; creating cross-border anthologies such as Joyce Chng and Jaymee Goh's *The Sea Is Ours: Tales from Steampunk Southeast Asia.* The community we are collectively forging represents a step toward the healing of our *luka terbuka*, our open wound.

Finally, there is a more material reason why I would be glad to see my novel classified as fantasy. While magical realism is marketed as literary fiction to an intellectual elite, fantasy is a far more democratic genre, regarded as accessible to audiences of all educational levels, especially young adults. The respect of scholars is less precious to me than the opportunity to enjoy a larger print run and a broad, diverse readership.

Conclusion

When I first envisioned *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth,* I imagined that the novel would focus on the kingdom of Singapura, comprehensively covering its rise, flourishing and fall as detailed in *Sulalatus Salatin.* My completed work falls short of this goal, beginning with the circumstances of Sang Nila Utama's conception and ending with the founding of his new city. Ironically, of the seventeen chapters, only two take place on the island of Singapore.

I am not, however, disappointed with this outcome. It serves my decolonial agenda well to de-centre Singapore, thereby prompting readers to consider the artificiality of our national borders, reminding them of how much of our heritage lies on the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Bintan. These are territories we have distanced ourselves from, claiming, as our first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew did in the title of his 2000 autobiography, that "The Singapore Story" is distinguished by our ascension "From Third World to First."

There is, of course, some irony to the fact that my novel hardly references the object of its title: the Longyamen or Dragon's Teeth Gate, a granite outcrop that once marked the entrance to Singapore's harbour, nicknamed "Batu Berlayar" (Sail Rock) in Malay and "Lot's Wife" by the British. Its fate follows the pattern of so much else in Singapore's precolonial history: it was demolished by the British in 1848, only to be replaced by the government in 2005 with what the Singapore Heritage Society dubbed "a historically dubious 'replica'" (Kevin Tan Yew Lee 15).

Nevertheless, I have some fondness for the symbolic resonance of each of the noun components of *A Gate of Dragon's Teeth.* There are indeed dragons in the tale, in their Hindu-Buddhist form, the naga: in the allusion that Wan Malini makes as she first beholds the glow of her rice field to turned to gold, in the metamorphic figure of Saktimuna, and also in the inspirational text of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which reclaims the divine

image of the snake as “the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life” (35). Teeth, too, are present, in the literal form of Dara’s man-eating fangs, as well as in metaphorical form, as the cruelty and greed of humankind. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, there is the gate: a passageway reflecting the innumerable tales of travel in my story and also a portal of transformation for characters and readers alike. Those who enter do not merely discover a new world; they are renewed themselves.

I cannot, of course, pretend that this novel will make a substantial difference to the political status quo. As Tuck and Yang remind us, “decolonization is not a metaphor” (3), and arts projects by settler peoples like myself are no substitute for the restitution of property and sovereignty to indigenous populations. Even within the sphere of speculative fiction, it is painfully evident that Singaporean and Malaysian writers of Chinese descent have been granted more global platforms than their Malay counterparts (Nazry 2021, 175). As a writer and researcher, I must continue to uplift Malay and other indigenous Southeast Asian voices, rather than imagining that my own explorations of their culture are an adequate substitute.

Ultimately, I believe I have had some success in charting a decolonial strategy for the creation of a novel set in precolonial Singapore. Rather than stoking nationalistic pride in the glory of a distant mythical past, I have set out to critique aspects of the colonial matrix of power that persist both in 21st-century society and in our recreations of history. It is my hope that my readers are touched, and have their colonial presumptions challenged, as they cross the threshold of my tale. May those who go swimming in this sea of words realise that another world is possible.

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