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ARTICLE

Mobility as Memory: Refiguring Temporal and Spatial Mobility in Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain*

Ann Ang

University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
Email: ann.ang@wadham.ox.ac.uk

This article discusses the operation of memory as an effect of narrative structure in *The Gift of Rain*, with a particular focus on the spatial and temporal mobility of narratorial perspective. Tan's novel is situated within Malaysian writing in English, a body of minor literature in a minority language amid the country's promotion of Bahasa as the linguistic medium for a national literature, alongside the attendant racialization of language. However, the status of *The Gift of Rain* as a world Anglophone novel, which circulates transnationally while depicting trans-temporal and cross-spatial trajectories, imaginatively inscribes Malaysia with a more multifarious assemblage of its cultural origins through the hybridity and queer temporality of its protagonist. Further temporal and spatial mobilities emerge in the dynamic relationship between the novel's frame and inner narratives, where the reading experience is akin to memory processes. The veracity of fiction as memory intervenes into historical inscription and so resists the pervasive ethno-nationalism that limits cultural discourse in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mobility; memory; Tan Twan Eng; Malaysia; world Anglophone

In an interview with *Asymptote* just after winning the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012, Tan Twan Eng is asked about his views on the coexistence of aesthetic refinement with war atrocities as a theme common to his depiction of Japanese culture in both his novels, with the suggestion that such aestheticization would merely obscure the presentation of historical truths. In response, Tan observes that the Japanese are not unique in this respect, the Germans being another example of how great wartime cruelty transpires despite civilizational refinement. He goes on to make a case for the duality of culture as an analogy for the different facets of human nature, one that Tan himself attempts to "channel" in his fiction into "something permanent and good" because "great beauty" should not be feared.[1]

[1] Nicole Idar, "An interview with Tan Twan Eng," *Asymptote*, May 2013 (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-tan-twan-eng/).

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The role of literature as spiritual and moral salvation carries Arnoldian echoes, which sit uneasily with the positioning of Tan as a Malaysian Anglophone author whose work would be regarded as part of a longer postcolonial genealogy of writing in English, where the politics of social struggle and the ethics of redress carry greater weight, sometimes at the risk of regarding any form of literary aesthetics as needing paranoid exposure against historical contexts. This is further complicated by the popular reception of Tan's work as part of a growing canon of prize-winning world Anglophone writing, which exceeds its material basis for global circulation as "open, inherently pluralised texts that are both shaped by and modelled on processes of circulation, translation and exchange" in the imaginative act of literary worlding.[2]

Unsurprisingly, the multiple and shifting contexts of Tan's literary production have made any reading of his novels in relation to Malaysia's sociopolitical situation at best a discussion of these frames in their mediatory role, and at worst an extended critique of its fictional liberties and historical inaccuracies. Notwithstanding Tan's own keen interest in the history of his home country, the popular reception of *The Gift of Rain* has highlighted the novel's reliance on an exotic image of the East, with reviews variously describing the book as "a Merchant Ivory film with lots of martial arts"[3] or as "visual and racy, episodic plotting [which] might have been more naturally realised in a decent Manga production."[4] The novel received some harsh criticism from fellow Penang novelist Kee Thuan Chye, also a judge for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2010. Kee explains that Tan's novel was not short-listed for a number of reasons and accuses him of having "skewed the novel towards the Western medium he is mainly writing for." He considers Tan's descriptions of Chinese and Japanese to be exotica. Kee's main contention, however, is that the progress of the narrative is hindered by the prevalence of such "cultural morsel[s] or travel guide tidbit[s]" and, with a final flourish, describes it as "a practice that is demeaning, somewhat akin to harlotry."[5]

Indeed, as evinced by the scholarly response to both *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), Tan's fiction is frequently critiqued for undermining its stated commitment to a cross-cultural, anti-parochial agency with its reliance on culturally specific aesthetic practices for important moments of self-transformation. In his second novel, for instance, the stalwartly independent Malaysian Chinese protagonist Yun Ling fulfills her lifelong wish to locate her sister's resting place only after she realizes that the sophisticated, body-length *horimono* tattooed on her back by the Japanese emperor's former gardener is in fact part of a map, making "her aestheticization by Aritomo

[2] Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl, "Anglophone World Literatures: Introduction," *Anglia* 135.1 (2011): 3.

[3] Sam Jordinson, "Booker Club: The Gift of Rain by Tan Twan Eng," *The Guardian Books Blog*, August 31, 2007 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/aug/31/bookerclubthegiftofrainb).

[4] Ed Lake, "Man Booker 2007 Prize: The Gift of Rain," *The Telegraph*, August 18, 2007 (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3667300/Man-Booker-2007-Prize-The-Gift-of-Rain.html).

[5] Thuan Chye Kee, "In Search of Good Penang Fiction," *Penang Economic Monthly*, May (2010): 33.

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complete."[6] *The Gift of Rain*, in comparison, features a bicultural British-Chinese protagonist, Philip Hutton, whose homoerotic romance with his aikido master, Endo-san, has been critiqued as less about queer love and more about the agentic reach of imperial Japan. When read in consideration of the Edo period in Japan's history, their relationship may not be historically transcendent or exceptional for its time, and instead "is a reiteration of the hegemonic male–male erotic relationship structured according to the power principles of *nanshoku*." This serves to "Nipponize" Philip in a time of war and allows him to serve effectively as an agent for the Japanese.[7] That Tan's fictional worlds rely on an assemblage of civilizations and cultures in a vividly imagined version of the past seems to open his novels to the criticism of insufficient engagement with its historical provenance.

If the allure of Tan's work does not seem to be sufficiently addressed by reading his portrayal of cultural aesthetics against a more accurate understanding of their historical and social provenance, this is perhaps due to a certain incommensurability between the processes of memory at play in his novels and the claims being made in tandem with the historical and ontic reality of Malaysia, where cultural identity is deeply entangled with long-term processes of racialization and politicization. Even with Tan's better-studied second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, there has been little attempt to consider the effects of temporality and memory generated from triply interlocking time periods and multiply embedded recounts. The narrative structure in *The Gift of Rain* is considerably simpler. As a whole, the novel shuttles between the present and the past, and begins with an aging Philip in contemporary Penang. Here the community regards him variously as a war hero who stole intelligence from the Japanese invaders and as a turncoat who worked as an interpreter. Philip's reverie at the start of the novel is disrupted by the arrival of Michiko, his sensei's lover in prewar years. Her visit is prompted by the belated delivery of Endo-san's letter to her, sent from Penang, just before the war ends. At her gentle insistence, he narrates the events of the past half a century after they have taken place, and the interlocutory space between Philip as a Malaysian-born person of indeterminate cultural origins with Michiko as a reminder of the Japanese occupation, becomes transmuted as an alternative, if overly liberal, historicization of Malaysia's past.

This article discusses the operation of memory as an effect of narrative structure in *The Gift of Rain*, with a particular focus on the spatial and temporal mobility of narratorial perspective. The article first locates Tan's novel within Malaysian writing in English as a minor literature in a minority language amid the country's promotion of Bahasa as the linguistic medium for a national literature, alongside the attendant racialization of language. Of importance too is the specific status of *The Gift of Rain* as a world Anglophone novel that depicts trans-temporal and cross-spatial trajectories as much as the material text itself circulates beyond

[6] Angelia Poon, "Transcultural Aesthetics and Postcolonial Memory: The Practices and Politics of Remembering in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.2 (2016): 199.

[7] David C. L. Lim, "Agency and the Pedagogy of Japanese Colonialism in Tan Twan Eng's the Gift of Rain," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52.2 (2011): 239.

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Malaysia. This fascination with an enlarged terrain of circulation marks Tan's work as one that imaginatively inscribes Malaysia with a more multifarious assemblage of its cultural origins through the hybridity and queer temporality of Philip's perspective. The article moves on in the second half to examine the novel's employment of a frame narrative, as well as the many occasions of prolepsis and analepsis in the narrative. Tan goes beyond trading in the value of the marginal as the exotic by making the act of reading a process of remembrance, with the reader tasked with bridging juxtapositions between inner and outer diegeses to arrive at a stance of reconciliation with this reinscribed past. These comprise an internal circuitry within the novel, initiated and cross-hatched by the delayed circulation of a number of cultural artifacts. The effectiveness of Tan's novel as an imaginative intervention into the pervasive ethno-nationalism that limits cultural discourse in Malaysia is dependent on the veracity of fiction as memory, one aided by a plangent sense of temporal depth in the narrative. Whether *The Gift of Rain* directly leads to coherent social or political responses to Malaysia's contemporary reality is perhaps an imperfect criterion to apply given the novel's deflection of present cultural sensitivities into the past.

Queer Temporality and the Oneness of the Hyphen

As an author, Tan Twan Eng can be seen as a "mobile Malaysian," for whom Malaysia continues to be home, despite the continued understanding of race as an exclusionary state discourse mobilized as Malay ethnic nationalism.[8] Born in Penang, the British-founded colonial town that he chose as the setting for *The Gift of Rain*, Tan studied law at the University of London. Later, while studying for a master's degree in law in Cape Town, and still missing Malaysia, he began work on his debut novel. Tan himself charts a cross-border trajectory to the Anglo-American metropole, where paradoxically, a sense of belonging is further textured by a "culture of migration," a movement that echoes the earlier inflow of Chinese immigrants during the nineteenth century into Malaya.

Although maritime Southeast Asia has been a region long characterized by migration before the arrival of Western colonialization, it was the massive influx of immigrant labor from South and East Asia that resulted in the gradual racialization of cultural identity as part of the social organization of colonial Malaya, which had an economic basis in tin-mining and rubber-tapping. While it is not possible to discuss Malaysia's journey to independence at length, from the late 1940s, *Ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay supremacy, became an important concept for the articulation of postcolonial nationalism in British Malaya, through which the Malay race was bound inextricably to the concept of *bumiputera*, or indigenous rights.[9] The term *bumiputera* (literally "son of the soil"), has a political and

[8] Sin Yee Koh, Race, *Education, and Citizenship: Mobile Malaysians, British Colonial Legacies, and a Culture of Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 197.

[9] Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, "History of Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practise of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered," *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity across Boundaries*, ed. Timothy P. Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2014): 135–48.

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legal dimension in Malaysia because it refers to a group of people construed as "native" and therefore deserving of preferential treatment, although it was already in use in colonial times.[10] In contrast, the term also "foreignizes" Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indian citizens, who are seen as "immigrants," *pendatang* (newly arrived) or *penumpang* (transients, squatters, or trespassers).[11] Though processes of racialization within Malaysia have a much longer history, the bloody clashes between Malays and Chinese in Kuala Lumpur following the release of 1969 election results, known as the "13 May incident," have been regarded as a watershed event that continues to ascribe and ethnicize the country's Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities on the basis of impermeable racial boundaries.

Tan's fiction, written in English and extensively portraying the migratory and transnational origins of Malaysia, evinces a relationship to the racialization of migrant identity in his home country—one that is further textured by the status of literary writing in English. The "13 May incident" occurred amid national debates about the cultural and linguistic fabric of the nation, undergirded by tribalist loyalties that situated language usage within the framework of ethnolinguistic nationalism.[12] Instituted two years earlier, the National Language Act of 1967, designated Malay, though rightfully the precolonial language of the region, exclusively as the sole national language and the basis of a national literature. In a historical moment where language, race, and religion were perceived as synonymous, the non-Malay English language writer was increasingly marginalized. Well-known Anglophone poet Ee Tiang Hong sought to migrate because he "could no longer accept, intellectually or emotionally, the official and Malay definition of the Malaysian nation and culture,"[13] while fellow poet Wong Phui Nam stopped writing all together in the 1970s, finding himself linguistically and culturally exiled in his own home.[14] Though Malay could have potentially been a language of national intercommunication, it became a "static, highly exclusionist expression of Melayu hegemony."[15] As an after-effect, English language literary works from the 1980s demonstrate a focus on the ethnic community of the author and "a noticeable withdrawal from engagement with multi-ethnic and multi-religious issues."[16]

As part of a proliferation of Anglophone writers from Malaysia in the international book market in the new millennium, Tan Twan Eng, together with his

[10] Frederik Holst, *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 33.

[11] Sharmani P. Gabriel, "The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-Colonial and Possible New Conjunctures," *Ethnicities* 15.6 (2015): 785–800.

[12] Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 180.

[13] Ee Tiang Hong, "Literature and Liberation: The Price of Freedom," *Literature and Liberation: Five Essays from Southeast Asia*, ed. Edwin Thumboo (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House), 11–42.

[14] Wong Phui Nam, "Getting to Speak Without a Language," *From the Inside: Asia Pacific Literature in Englishes*, eds. Edwin Thumboo and Rex Ian Sayson (Singapore: Ethos Books), 33–45.

[15] Leow, *Taming Babel*, 180.

[16] Andrew Hock Soon Ng, "The Novel of Malaysia," in *The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. Alex Tickell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 328.

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contemporaries, such as Tash Aw, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Preeta Samarasan, Rani Manicka, and Zen Cho, differ from their immediate predecessors by being published in the United Kingdom and the United States. In comparison to novels by Anglophone Malaysian writers of the 1980s, such as Lloyd Fernando, K. S. Maniam and Lee Kok Liang, their works have a heightened visibility and circulation in book markets outside Malaysia. Besides writing in English, their fictional works, comprising novels for the most part, address multiple audiences through their subject matter. Through the imagination of worlds, characters, plot trajectories, and in the linguistic fabric of literary style, the Malaysian novel in English is a particularly mobile form that reworks historical material to depict the peninsula as a capacious transnational assemblage. The broader question at hand concerns the tendency of world Anglophone literature to preempt its own transnational circulation through the depiction of cross-border journeys, which themselves become an occasion for interweaving immigrant narratives into the larger historical narrative of Malaysia as a postcolony. *The Gift of Rain* then could be fruitfully reconceived in the pluralization of "literatures" as constellated amid the horizontal multiplicity of a post-imperial milieu.[17]

In a historical overview of the novel in Malaysia, Andrew Hock Soon Ng queries if the international success of these novels implies that literary authenticity has been compromised[18]—a contention that Philip Holden also highlights in his analysis of the global Malaysian novel. He singles out Tan's *The Gift of Rain* for its heavy-handed downloading of anthropological information for a global audience.[19] Both Ng and Holden acknowledge that global or world Anglophone Malaysian novels to some extent reprise stereotypes in their works for an Occidental audience, thereby opening themselves to the charge of exoticization and commodification. However, both critics also see the cultural production of these novels as being irreducible to their commodity value in the global Anglophone book trade. Tellingly, Ng writes that "too much authenticity" precludes the Malaysian novel from "global critical renown."[20] Against the rather limiting perspective that equates any reliance on cultural essentialism with exoticism and political quietude, Ng and Holden indirectly imply that there is a separate affordance to the transnational dimension of Tan's novel.

Building on Holden and Ng's suggestion, this article suggests that these constraints of "authenticity" might refer to the limits of current discourse, where a significant moral majority continues to demonstrate a "passion for race" as proof of communal loyalties.[21] The transnational subject matter of *The Gift of Rain* leads to a spatial and temporal expansion beyond the narrow racialization of cultural identities. Although the novel certainly does employ essentialist and ahistoricized cultural frames, this will require further examination in terms of the novel's heavy reliance on the dynamics of spatial and

[17] Neumann and Rippl, "Anglophone World Literatures," 3.

[18] Ng, "The Novel of Malaysia," 335.

[19] Philip Holden, "Global Malaysian Novels: Prospects and Possibilities," *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 30 (2012): 50.

[20] Ng, "The Novel of Malaysia," 335.

[21] David C. L. Lim, *Overcoming Passion for Race in Malaysia Cultural Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3.

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temporal mobility to understand if the outcome is indeed a reinforcement of ethno-national perspectives as the narrative shuttles between wartime Penang and the nineties in Malaysia.

The bridge between the inner and outer diegeses of *The Gift of Rain* is intricately and multiply constituted through Philip Hutton as a homodiegetic character, as he recounts the many hurts and losses experienced during the world war. Philip's act of remembrance would be incomplete without Michiko as an interlocutor. As Endo-san's former lover, her arrival in Penang is precipitated by a mysteriously delayed letter from him, along with the delivery of his Nagamitsu sword, Illumination, which forms a pair with Philip's, that bears the ritual name Cloud. Through successive evenings of Philip's tale-telling, she displays an uncanny sense for unearthing artifacts that Philip himself had long thought was lost to the past, such as his father's collection of Malay ritual daggers, or *keris.* The expanded geographical and temporal scale accrued by the presence and circulation of these artifacts adds an additional dimension to the mobilities at play—one's perspective may travel across spatial and temporal divides via memory or the imagination, but remembrance and recollection are equally provoked by the absence or presence of significant objects that exceed and disrupt notions of cultural essentialism. As Philip's recount of the past unfolds, a parallel development occurs in the outer frame as Michiko stands in for a reader, who, with the benefit of hindsight and contemporary sensitivities, gently and retrospective witnesses Philip's struggle to reconcile himself with his hybridized cultural and racial origins.

The son of a wealthy British tradesman and a Straits-Chinese mother, whose relationship is frowned on by both Europeans and local Chinese, Philip's bicultural background and freely chosen apprenticeship under a Japanese aikido master set the stage for a confrontation between ethno-nationalist loyalties and friendships that persist despite such communal prejudices. The central dynamic of Book 1 is Philip's gradual reconciliation with both his British father and Chinese grandfather, both of whom have been estranged from Philip since his mother's early death. This is where Tan perhaps exercises too free a hand with ethnographic detail as readers travel with Philip to a multitude of settings to learn about colonial life, Chinese festivals, and Japanese cultural practices. From Endo-san's island house replete with photographs and memories of Japan to the streets of Penang where "one could easily lose one's identity and acquire another just by going for a stroll," the ornate and claustrophobic interior of the Snake Temple and the grounds of the Hutton residence, the reader is taken on a whirlwind tour of cultures not usually considered central to the Malayan peninsula.[22] Philip's grandfather also tells the tale of how he was once the tutor of Wenzhu, the chosen heir to China's last emperor, who took his life in the chaos that followed the collapse of dynastic rule. His subsequent escape to Malaya as a laborer, or coolie, and his further accounts about clans, festivals, and traditions paint a detailed portrait of Chinese society in Malaya.

[22] Tan Twan Eng, *The Gift of Rain* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Myrmidon Books, 2007), 87.

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Although this barrage of information seems at times to be an indulgent assemblage for the benefit of the non-Malaysian reader, these are also digressions into temporalities and spatial orders that richly implicate Penang as a Malaysian locale in a larger East Asian imagining. More importantly these evocations of different cultural settings serve as a backdrop to the gradual emergence of Philip's hybridized identity. As he transforms from a surly youth into a young man whom his father is proud to identify as a Hutton worthy of inheriting the family business, Philip Arminius Khoo-Hutton finds himself pivoting among multiple genealogies. Though this can be understood on one level as a formulaic multiculturalism, Philip's self-understanding is inflected through the embedded accounts that locate him amid parallel but asymptotic temporalities. Upon realizing that Philip was coming under the tutelage and influence of Endo-san, Grandfather Khoo offers his own story of flight from the Forbidden City in order to remind his grandson that he has "a long tradition" behind him and that he does not "have to chase after a tradition that is not [his]."[23] He also takes Philip to visit the ancestral hall of the Khoos, with "the tiers of tablets rising up to the darkened ceiling, generations of our blood, filtered down through [his] grandfather to [him]."[24] Yet in this important scene, the inclusion of an entry bearing the name Khoo-Hutton causes Philip to experience "a shifting feeling of being brought apart and then placed back together again, all by the single stroke of a hyphen," which he concurrently realizes is similar to the ideogram for "one" in both Japanese and Chinese. This significant three-way translation melds together popular notions of cultural hybridity and notions of oneness without collapsing their differences. As Pheng Cheah suggests, if we understand cultural hybridity as constructed through the process of discourse or signification, we depart from notions of "culture as a self-identical and knowable entity, norm, or subject" and "articulate a political theory of culture as a process or production in language."[25] Though Grandfather Khoo subsequently reminds his grandson that if he ever feels lost "in this world or on the continent of time" to remember how "these people were all you, and you are them," it is clear to the reader that Philip understands this oneness as referring to all the significant figures in his life, Chinese or otherwise.

The notion of contiguous but non-intersecting temporalities is furthered through a romantic reincarnation plot between Philip and Endo-san. In many ways the emotional heart of *The Gift of Rain*, the queer relationship between Philip and his sensei, persists despite the overwhelming demands made by the war for each man to serve the nation that he is affiliated to by culture and genealogy. When he starts working as a translator for the Japanese in a bid to protect his British family from ill treatment, Philip loses their trust. Neither is he accepted by other Japanese for being a "half-breed." By its sheer incommensurability with external events, the homoerotic romance between Endo-san and Philip stands

[23] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 136.

[24] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 239.

[25] Pheng Cheah, "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitan Freedom in Transnationalism," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 293.

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outside historical time and occurs in a queer temporality of its own, one that is linked to a recurring cycle of violence in their past lives, where the older man ends up killing the younger out of a misplaced sense of duty to a higher authority. As Endo-san reminds Philip when it is clear that the Japanese are about to invade, "Remember always that I love you, and have loved you for a long, long time."[26] Later, this knowledge of their past lives comes to Philip in a mystical vision as he is rowing his boat across to Endo-san's island, located off the coast of Penang, so that the geographic and temporal coordinates of Malaysia are subverted and expanded, an impression bolstered by how Endo-san has built an exact replica of a guest cottage on his father's estate in Japan. Philip's crossing represents how the palimpsestic confluence of temporalities in a moment of recall has the capacity to bridge places and lives:

> I rowed to Endo-san's island beneath the fading sun and the multiplying stars, enjoying the pull and yield of the oars. For once the trip felt unending, as though I were rowing in a viscous dream, all movement slowed. Part of me realised I had entered the deepest state of *zazen* and that I was not holding the oars anymore.[27]

The rhythmic physicality of Philip's experience forms the prelude for taking leave of individuated experience to enter the state of *zazen*, a form of meditation he previously learned from Endo-san. Accompanied by this is an expansion of consciousness as chronological time ceases. Equilibrium is restored after Endo-san requests Philip to ritually behead him at the end of the war in Penang, thus putting an end to both his life as a Japanese war criminal and the larger violence as accruing from multiple lives and deaths.

The capacity of Philip and Endo-san's relationship to persist outside the frames of national loyalty and cultural affiliation points to the importance of a queering of temporal coordinates in *The Gift of Rain*, as a basis for resisting the collapse of one's identity into preexisting categories. In contrast to a model of genealogical accounting, where cultural identity is located by tracing one's ancestry to provide "a distinguishing past to the person or community,"[28] queerness serves as a source of "alternative temporalities" because participants imagine their futures outside the logics and "paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death."[29] However, the crucial distinction to be made is that the queerness of Philip and Endo-san's romance occurs against the logic of ethno-national loyalties, as exacerbated by the war, rather than as a deviation from heteronormativity. As Kelly Yin Nga Tse observes, their relationship resonates with the Buddhist principles of nonattachment to nationalistic desire, and nonaversion to the other, and gains its

[26] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 230.

[27] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 317.

[28] Ato Quayson, "Postcolonialism and the Diasporic Imaginary," in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, eds. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 148.

[29] J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 14.

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truth-value and normative force from a Buddhist ethics of reconciliation within an East Asian cosmology.[30]

Thus, the queer temporality folded into the subject matter of Tan's writing urges a divergent view of self-identity outside the temporality of nationhood or cultural origins, one that richly implicates Penang as a Malaysian locale in a larger cross-border imagining.

The "I" of Philip's vision is temporally and spatially mobile, transcending not merely his already hybrid cultural identity, but the boundedness of a life lived in a one historical moment. In this respect, *The Gift of Rain* has been understood as advancing a literary intervention into Malaysia's cultural nationalism from a queer diasporic perspective, which de-territorializes the hegemonic state. Weihsin Gui examines the relationship between Endo-san and Philip in terms of the slippages it affords among national, familial, and romantic loyalties, noting that Philip's love for Endo-san "inverts the dominant perception in Malaysia and Singapore of the Japanese as militaristic sadists during World War II" and may be classified as belonging to a category of works about the Japanese occupation that presents a more human face of the invaders. Drawing links to the larger framework of critical nationality, Gui understands Philip as embodying "the multi-ethnic and polyglot admixture of peoples and cultures that make up colonial and postcolonial Malaysia."[31]

Both queer temporality and the hyphen as a visual pun in translation are ways in which Tan's narrative resists the seeming automaticity of cultural categories, providing a counterbalance to current critiques of *The Gift of Rain* for its seeming reliance on essentialist tropes in the depiction of pre-independence Penang. Additionally, these divergent temporal and translational orientations suggest that Tan's work is transmuting the minor status of Malaysian literature in English into minoritization as a form of dialogue with the larger body of world Anglophone writing, thus escaping the racialized framing of language as a basis for the production of a national body of literature in Malaysia. The temporal and spatial mobility that undergirds Philip's self-understanding, and his romance with Endo-san, may be read as valorizing mobility as a capacious basis for cultural identity in Malaysia, as opposed to the xenophobic and nativist regard of Malaysians with immigrant origins.

Fictional Memory as Historical Inscription

Although the wartime interdiegesis of *The Gift of Rain* already enacts a number of temporal and spatial mobilities, a further temporal mobility arises in the play between Philip's embedded recount and the outer frame narrative. As mentioned

[30] Kelly Yin Nga Tse, "Queering Imperial History: The Ethics of Reconciliation in Tan Twan Eng's the Gift of Rain," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, June 12, 2018, 11 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989418769447).

[31] Weihsin Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 193.

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earlier, the surprise arrival of Michiko with End-san's letter is what prompts this retelling of earlier events.

While the exact date of the present-day fabula is never mentioned, we can assume that it is 1995 because Philip has just refused an invitation from the Penang Historical Society to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Indo-Pacific.[32] The radicality of Michiko as a witness must be understood in the context of Japanese brutality during the Second World War, which has been well documented by historical scholarship. By having Michiko as a key interlocutor seeking out the events of Endo-san's last years, Philip's suffering and pain during the Japanese occupation is brought to the fore, before memory rearticulated as testimony in the presence of a witness leads to a cathartic and generous liberation from long-remembered grief. Her presence helps Philip to reconcile himself to the two central losses in his life, the execution of his father by the Japanese during the war and the death of Endo-san by his own hand. At the heart of his initial refusal to narrate the past—resulting in a prolonged and pathological mourning—is Philip's conviction that he has failed Endo-san and his own father, Noel Hutton, in being unable to protect neither his British family from the Japanese nor his sensei from the British postwar tribunal.

The temporal play between the inner and outer diegeses is reinforced by the circulation of key objects across these time periods, one of which is the aforementioned pair of finely wrought Japanese Nagamitsu swords named Illumination and Cloud. When Endo-san gives Cloud to Philip as his own, these twin weapons come to symbolize the intimacy and emotional depth of their relationship, while their sword-play attains an erotic charge as Endo-san "attacked [Philip] again and again, pressing into [him] with such intensity, as though he wanted to imprint a part of him in [Philip]."[33] Yet, for reasons that remain unspecified in the text, Endo-san decides to send Illumination to Michiko, along with a letter, the contents of which are never disclosed to the reader. More than being another example of the queering of chronological temporality, the status of *The Gift of Rain* as a world Anglophone novel invites a reconsideration of such finely wrought objets d'art against the trope of circulation. Transversing time and space on the conceit of narrative, the Nagamitsu swords travel on a material circuit devised on the rubric of recollection and memory. They resurface to bridge important moments, such as when Philip's father is sentenced to death in his place and his painful reflective commentary about this moment. Noel Hutton is beheaded in a public execution by Endo-san, using the blade of Illumination, which is also the last time Philip glimpses the sword before Michiko presents it to him on her arrival. Like a lasso enclosing the past and present, each appearance of Illumination gains resonance with previous moments, further transmuting the significance of Philip's earlier years from raw grief into serene memory. After he is finally able to tell Michiko about the scene of his father's death, he confesses how the "stagnation of [his] memories" arose from a "loss of the ability to

[32] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 14.
[33] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 320.

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trust."[34] Michiko's presence, as listener and witness, puts into flow and circulation as narrative what Philip has statically preserved as private rumination.

The internal economy of memory in *The Gift of Rain* stands in marked contrast to previous critiques, which treat its employment of cultural essentialism as "a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange."[35] The fictional circuits of this novel provide a different inflection of the commodification of cultural difference as the exotic and marginal in the symbolic economy of the cultural marketplace, as theorized by Graham Huggan. The social life of the Nagamitsu swords breaches divides between temporal phases as well as between the personal and the public, and so raise the question of how public memory may be inscribed differently as the result of the spatial and temporal mobilities in their material circulation. While symbolizing the two key romances in the novel, Illumination and Cloud are eventually put on public display as part of the Penang Historical Society's collection. At an event commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Japanese occupation, the president of the society praises Philip's donation as well as his "efforts in protecting the heritage of Penang." For Philip however, the swords have released their affective charge and "appeared almost unremarkable under the spotlights" as he "said a silent farewell to them."[36]

This transition from personal to public memory can be read as an attempt to inscribe fictional memory as history because it is through the telling of the tale as a diversionary relay that *The Gift of Rain* makes its strongest claims about the importance of a narratorial perspective that exceeds the claims of national and cultural loyalties. The swords, as is the case with the other "memorabilia and documents relating to the war," may be regarded as *lieux de mémoire*, as an externalization and preservation of memory as history. Typically taking the form of monuments or public sites, they could also take the form of a wider array of artifacts, all of which exercise a heavily symbolic and pedagogical function.[37] However, personal remembrance as mediated through the frame narrative of *The Gift of Rain* insists on an intervention into the public significance of these sites through the latitude of memory for alterity. Though heritage conservation is typically seen as a public good under the auspices of the state, Penang's own history of voluntary activism is part of a tradition of resistance against a state government more interested in commercial development.[38] Philip's founding of the the Hutton Heritage Trust is a thinly veiled allusion to the the Penang Heritage Trust and the organized struggle to preserve the historical edifices of Georgetown, which was subsequently endorsed by Malaysia's federal government as part of a successful bid in 2008 to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

[34] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 411.

[35] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.

[36] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 442.

[37] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 22–23.

[38] Edmund W. Cheng, Anthony H. F. Li, and Shu-Yun Ma, "Resistance, Engagement, and Heritage Conservation by Voluntary Sector: The Case of Penang in Malaysia," *Modern Asian Studies* 48.3 (2014): 635.

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In the novel, Philip's mission to hire craftsmen from China and England and "to obtain materials as close to the originals" as he could, and his jubilance at acquiring a mansion that would otherwise have been redeveloped by a foreign buyer as an art gallery, implicitly gesture at how memory has an activist orientation in the novel as an intervention into public history.[39]

In its dynamic interweaving between past and present, Philip's testimony about the war years can also be read as an inscription of memory into history, one that is enhanced by Michiko's presence as a gentle critic and guide. As a witness to the act of witnessing, she plays the role of an intermediary for an account of the war that was previously suppressed. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub discuss in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, the act of witnessing inaugurates an event in its own right, allowing subjective truth to reframe historicity.[40] Besides the incommensurability of the war in Malaya and the Holocaust, the crucial difference between Felman and Laub's work with Tan's novel is the sheer fictionality of Philip's testimony as event, which speaks to the novel's role in imagining a different contemporary relationship to history.

It is Michiko who helps Philip to see what is truly essential at the end of life, as she herself has come with minimal luggage while suffering from a debilitating illness. As the juxtaposition between frame and inner narratives becomes more frequent toward the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the deeply entrenched grief and hurt of the past will be resolved not in the future but in a shared reinterpretation of the past.

Having reached the end of his wartime account with the scene of Endo-san's ritual suicide, Philip concludes that "fellow travellers across the continent of time, across the landscape of memory ... did not need words."[41] In the very next analepsis to the outer frame, it becomes clear that words are very much needed and to be more precise, words from an interlocutor. For decades, Philip has blamed himself for failing to prevent Endo-san's death, and it is Michiko who supplies the necessary meta-language for the role memory plays in healing. After declaring to Philip that "you did not fail him," she also makes the all-important claim that "the heart's memory is love itself."[42] In other words, Philip's remembrance of Endo-san is love enough and that he has in fact lived "strong and safe and unafraid." All that is required is a renewed perspective on his own life as reinterpreted through another's perspective. Upon this assurance, the impact on Philip is physically uplifting, a final unworded utterance of traumatic loss, released as an image of nostalgic recollection at the distance of years:

> I made no sound, but stood there like a statue in Istana's garden, feeling the accumulation of grief flow out of me, accompanied by a rush of images that

[39] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 181.

[40] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62

[41] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 436.

[42] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 438.

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> could have been forgotten memories or remembered dreams. I felt myself lifting up, on the arch of my feet, then on my toes.[43]

As a fictional hypothesis about the rendering of memory into history, this extract hinges upon the oxymorons "forgotten memories or remembered dreams" that constitute the raw somatic voice of Philip's newfound release from his congealed grief. Here the line between dream and memory, and by extension fiction and history, is uncertain, thus emphasizing the malleability of memory as fiction. The capacity of memory to be reframed in the intersubjective space between Philip and Michiko, itself an interlocutory circuit that spans vast and entangled mobilities across temporal and spatial divides, would seem to be akin to Michael Rothburg's concept of multidirectional memory. Though originally theorized in the context of the Holocaust, where different collective memories in the same discursive sphere compete for preeminence, multidirectional memory is "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative."[44] By imagining the history of Penang, and by extension that of Malaysia as produced dialogically from a locus that negotiates the transnational coordinates of the Second World War, *The Gift of Rain* makes a bid to reframe Malaysia as a minor but transnational setting as part of its worldly address.

Much of the veracity and impact of *The Gift of Rain* as a narrative derives from how its narrative structuration mimics the operations of memory. Though the proleptic and analeptic splicing of chapters is a common fictional technique, what sets Tan's novel apart is the intense visuality of Philip's recount, and the doubling of locations in the inner and outer diegeses, which as the narrative unfolds, leads to an uncanny effect of recognition on the part of readers that mimics the process of recollection. These include the houses that Philip restores under the Hutton Heritage Trust, one of which is the Blue Mansion, an actual heritage property in Penang, fictionalized in the novel as the house of Towkay Yeap. The most powerful trans-temporal loci by far is Endo-san's small island, located just off the coast from Philip's own seaside mansion. As described earlier, to access it physically and psychologically is to enact a mobility across the temporal, cultural, and spatial divides that are key to the novel. Many events of note transpire within the sliding screen doors of Endo-san's Japanese-style house or on the island's beaches, and with each successive scene, readers recall previous moments vertiginously. In the frame narrative, Philip brings Michiko to the island only once, after his recount is complete. After pointing out Endo-san's unmarked grave to her, Philip glimpses "the memory of her love for Endo-san" in a moment where he holds her as Endo-san might have done while they both "felt his arms encircle [them]."[45] The surrogacy of their mutual presences echoes powerfully the affective chronometry at play as readers recall the many trajectories, including Michiko's, that find their completion in this moment.

[43] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 439.

[44] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

[45] Tan, *The Gift of Rain*, 439–40.

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Though bearing some resemblances to Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, which she defines in the context of a broader study as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up,"[46] the outward and diffusive transmission of memories toward the readers of Tan's novel cannot be usefully described as intergenerational. Instead, Alison Landsberg's theorizing of prosthetic memory, which is formulated through the visual medium of cinema, might be more apposite in highlighting how "a shared archive of experience" may result from "bodily affects in the experience of the narrative" through which the audience has not actually lived.[47] Though Landsberg is discussing the intergenerational transmission of memories in diasporic communities, she makes a case for how memory is generated not just through stored visual images, but stored bodily reactions as prosthetic memory. This in turn, creates the conditions for "ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognising the alterity of the other."[48]

In light of Landsberg's conceptualization, *The Gift of Rain* may be seen as a form of prosthetic memory, except that the suturing of fictional memory and historical inscription occurs both in the experience of the narrative, as well as its constant referencing of landmarks and geographical features of Malaysia. In addition to the coast of Penang, Penang Hill, Georgetown, and the distinctive limestone hills of Ipoh are made resonant with wider geographies and timescales now imaginatively interwoven with the historicity of Malaysia. In contrast to state-led attempts to reimagine a transcultural Malaysian nation as with the 2010 "1Malaysia" policy, which remain enmeshed in the paradigm of race as attempts are made to "work round or through it,"[49] Tan's novel advocates an openness to contemporary reformulations of Malaysian identity that are more akin to the country's emerging trans-ethnic, urban, and middle-class "third spaces of cultural exchange and collaboration."[50]

In Tan's debut novel, memory is a refiguration of temporal and spatial mobilities to present a deeply imagined inscription of Malaysia as a locus resonant with expanded geographies and histories. Despite earlier critiques of *The Gift of Rain* as relying too heavily on a palette of cultural stereotypes and the exotic mystique of the East, Tan's narrative is much more subtle in its employment of mobility as a trope and structuring device. As part of its depiction of Philip Hutton's hybridized identity and the queer temporality that is embedded in his romance with Endo-san, the novel insists on the importance of a

[46] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

[47] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 14.

[48] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 9.

[49] Anthony Milner and Helen Ting, "Race and Its Competing Paradigms: A Historical Review," *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms*, eds. Anthony Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong, and Tham Siew Yean (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 49.

[50] Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," *Critical Asian Studies* 43.3 (2011): 358.

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perspective that moves outward and away from the fixity of existing national and cultural genealogies. The structuration of the narrative itself presents a hypothesis on how fictional memory can potentially intervene in the making of history, particularly when the processes of memory themselves are part of the reading experience. Of importance too is the way memory is co-constructed in the frame narrative with Michiko as an interlocutor, thus highlighting the importance of the ongoing production of memory in new intersubjective contexts. As a circuit between past and present, and across cultural and geographical distinctions, memory in *The Gift of Rain* refigures mobility as the source of emergent perspectives on Malaysia's racialized framing of its national imaginary. Located as it is in a bygone era, *The Gift of Rain* may not inspire any immediate reactions to the Malaysia's contemporary sociopolitical circumstances, but as a world literary text that circulates among a larger Anglophone readership, the novel addresses Malaysia from a capacious perspective that may be mobile enough to escape the parochialism of popular discourse.

Author biography. Ann Ang is a DPhil candidate in English at Oxford and researches the postcolonial inheritance of English as a literary language in South and Southeast Asia in the transnational moment. She is currently working on contemporary Anglophone writing from India, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. (Email: ann.ang@wadham.ox.ac.uk)

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