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# Creativity in Dissent: From the Politics of Pedagogy to the Art of Pedagogy

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This essay examines the historical conditions of the politics of pedagogy that have shaped the history of postcolonial higher education and attempts at producing countermovements to its subsequent institutionalization. I consider this in relation to pedagogical practices that reference creative forms in avant-garde art and theater. A genealogy of rethinking education through creative means can be traced back to the establishment of Nanyang University and the teaching of contemporary Asian literature by Han Suyin, with later artists such as Wong Hoy Cheong engaging with Paulo Freire's ideas on learning in Wong's course on Third World aesthetics, Universiti Bangsar Utama's reimagination of the role that education could play in Kuala Lumpur during the 1998 Reformasi, and most recently Buku Jalan's decentering of education. Finally, I consider the pedagogical stakes at hand by exploring the life story of a bookseller in Kelantan and his embodiment of a local cosmopolitanism.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, avant-garde, Paulo Freire, student power, university education

When we think of creative dissenters in the public view from Malaysia today, two individuals stand out: Fahmi Reza (b. 1977), a filmmaker, street artist, social historian, and activist; and Zulkiflee SM Anwar Ulhaque, a.k.a. Zunar (b. 1962), a cartoonist who uses satire to comment on sociopolitical issues in the country. In 2016, as controversies surrounding the embezzlement of public money through the Malaysian government's strategic development company 1MBD—and the noise about them—increased, the images of these two figures, who were trenchant critics of Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration, also achieved wide circulation in the media. Not only were they making global headlines as public figures of political defiance through creative acts, they also came to stand for something else altogether through a collusion of signs that added up to a mythology of the rebel.

I use the word “mythology” here in the sense of the critical theorist Roland Barthes's understanding of the term. Barthes suggests that a myth (especially modern myth) helps

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to naturalize worldviews and offers us simplicity of essences rather than complexity of substance (Barthes 2009, 143). After all, in the age of YouTube, the simplicity of the message behind the image has an advantage in capturing short attention spans. We may consider the “modern” myth of the rebel in relation to our case study. For example, in the case of Fahmi, he is always dressed in black and sports skinny jeans with a bandanna wrapped around his neck. The look is defined as much by his coolness as by his individuality and devil-may-care attitude, especially when compared against a conservative Malay politician in a baju Melayu who stands for communal interests and nativist rights. In the case of Zunar, photos of him being arrested in handcuffs contribute to a picture of an oppressive environment through which his cartoons attain a greater political edge. One senses a calculated projection of a certain image on the part of these two protagonists.

What do these images say? On the one hand they draw our attention away from whether or not the creative form of expression is in and of itself a potent tool for political awareness or consciousness raising. In the view of the writer and artist Tan Zihaio, popular circulation of these images of the rebel distracts us from the ineffectiveness of satire as a tool for political commentary. Tan elaborates:

Satires decry the rulers as much as they mock the readers. We are not the only one laughing. The persistently slick smiles of Fahmi’s clowning Najibs and Zunar’s beaked Donald Dedaks are telling. These bastardised Najibs are still smiling because they are unwreckable. (Tan 2016)

Tan’s pithy observation overturns the popular view of locating creativity in the guise of rebellious heroes. He concludes that certain creative forms, though heavily publicized, might not ultimately possess the kind of political bark that we make them out to have. In turn, he suggests that creativity in dissent could potentially reside elsewhere, even if this is not spelled out. Not discounting the good work that both Fahmi and Zunar have undertaken, one could still wonder about their staying power and what role the media plays in installing these figures as cult personalities. Perhaps we need to ask whether, in the context of creativity in dissent, the figure of rebellion must be represented by the individual.

This paper now turns to the project of building a critical mass through creative means. With the eruption of creativity—in the streets, cyberspace, and publishing—what kind of groundwork laid the foundations for creativity and dissent? Creativity and dissent can be viewed as artistic expressions of belligerence or opposition to the status quo. Often, studies focus on the works of art themselves (Lee 2017) or identifying structural tendencies within the movement as a whole (Smeltzer 2017). However, the kind of labor invested in rethinking pedagogy in creative terms that has produced this phenomenon is not given a profile, let alone understood in relation to history.

This paper instead examines the historical conditions of the politics of pedagogy that have shaped the history of postcolonial higher education and attempts at producing a countermovement to its subsequent institutionalization. This departs from the standard narrative of art and politics that links artistic output to moments of political crisis. After all, the latter has become the standard narrative of artistic avant-garde throughout the twentieth century (Groys 2014). Moreover, the cleaving of art to politics is not always precipitated by moments of political crisis and could be generated by market demands (Syed Jaymal 2016). Rather, the essay attempts at a genealogy of artistic projects with pedagogical aims and to account for the terms in which creativity and learning were tested, in many instances, to disrupt or to find an alternative to formal institutional structures of learning.

This entails an uncovering of the intersection between art and education, especially through contemporary art initiatives that might not at first appear visual enough in the public's perception. Nevertheless, this format draws from an intellectual lineage and mode of operation rooted in modern art's avant-gardism. During the twentieth century, what the artistic avant-garde attempted was to challenge prevailing academic norms and definitions of what constituted the fine arts. Movements such as Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Expressionism also sought to attack the sociocultural codes and political decorum associated with art institutions and to discover an alternative mode of creative existence that was attuned to the contemporary sociopolitical situation. In the early twentieth century, the new tendencies toward abstraction were stylistic innovations that sought to question the entrenched Western classical conventions of visual representations that were premised on verisimilitudinal representation of the physical world.

The movements introduced aesthetic changes that were a shock to the bourgeois sensibility of Europeans, who saw Western tradition rooted in the naturalism of the human form in classicism as the foundation on which one could cultivate the rational and civilized man. Though the values of Western humanities were challenged by art in the twentieth century, art museums soon absorbed many of these artistic challenges into a seamless history of art as marked by a gradual progression from figurative to abstract art. Each time this was done, a new generation of avant-garde artists would seek to push the boundaries again. Therefore, in the forms of avant-garde art since World War II, one seldom sees elements that are visual in the strictest sense of the word. Works of contemporary art are never only visual in the strictest sense of the term. For example, installation as a format is about the creation of immersive spaces and many sound artworks are concerned with highlighting the aesthetic experiences that arise from the activity of listening. Then there are social-engagement projects that are understood under the framework of art, in which social processes (negotiations, discussion, argu-

ments, confrontation, intimacy, strange encounters) are scenarios that form the basis of an artistic inquiry (Kester 2004). Often the output is not in the form of an object and is thought of as more of an outcome, or, in the words of the art critic Hal Foster, “a ruse for other practices altogether, such as pedagogy . . . or politics” (Schneider and Omar Hussain 2010). Creativity in this instance is a measure of how one is able to design a structure for conversation and learning, rather than the conventional idea of an artist producing an image to deliver what he or she intends to say.

## Student Power

Fahmi gained huge media capital for his agitprop designs such as the “Badut” or clown cartoons, which caricaturize Prime Minister Najib as a comic performer and call into question his ability to lead effectively. The Badut cartoons were mass produced as stickers, T-shirts, as well as images that could be downloaded from the Internet, essentially creating a viral template that was used to spread the message across the country and worldwide via the Internet. Fahmi is also remembered for his highly celebrated documentary *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (Ten years before Merdeka), about the 1948 strike or *hartal* by a coalition of unionists against British machination in the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. This federation was a social, political, and economic compact that was inherited by the ruling government upon the independence of Malaya.

There is a different project of his as an entry point into what I would qualify as the “art of pedagogy.” In essence Fahmi’s *Student Power*, a staged performance lecture, is about the recovery of history that creatively enables a new imaginative space for political action, and it mirrors my interest in trying to account for what Buku Jalanan is doing in Malaysia today. Buku Jalanan exists as a loose collective of cultural organizers who are interested in the use of public spaces to build a network of youths through fostering a reading culture to get young Malaysians interested in politics, economics, arts, culture, and activism.

By the art of pedagogy, I suggest that we might define creativity in this instance as initiatives that expand the philosophy of learning in search of new ways of relating to each other without relying on the state. These artistic initiatives are often projects that resemble community-building cultural initiatives rather than artistic objects, initiated by artists who feel that the visual form is not sufficient to address the question of communication. Nevertheless, many projects discussed below are equally suspicious of mass media technology. Instead, they turn toward the conceptual tools afforded by contemporary art history as well as its interdisciplinary discourse to produce a working framework.

Often the output is eclectic. For example, Fahmi's *Student Power* began primarily as a research cluster. The group met at an artist colony in Section 17, Petaling Jaya. This was where, together with other university students interested in local history, Fahmi began to map out the literature of how the student movement came to be in 1960s Kuala Lumpur. This was when an autonomous campus of University of Malaya was established in the new capital of Malaysia in 1959 before taking over the university name in full capacity three years later from the campus in Singapore (Tan and Lee 1996). Through interviews and archival research, Fahmi and his team were able to build up a repository of knowledge about a modern historical phenomenon that is not widely discussed in public discourse, let alone included in the history curricula of public schools. Curricula have moved away from civilizational accounts of history to stock narratives of political nationalism, which prioritizes the Malay nationalists' contribution to the formation of UMNO (United Malays Nationalist Organisation), the dominant monoracial political party in the ruling coalition that has ruled the country since Malaya's independence in 1957.

Fahmi's research on the 1960s student movement was presented as a series of mobile lecture performances, often delivered by Fahmi and occasionally guested by former student leaders from the 1960s. The performances often featured only one theatrical prop, a stone dais resembling the old speaker's corner at University of Malaya. To some extent, it symbolized free speech. But by design it was replicating the past in the very present moment when the lecture was staged, to suggest that the past spoke very much to the conditions of the present day. In turn, the prop served as a transportable rallying point that created a temporary space to reflect on the purpose of gaining an education.

The lecture performances were intended to rouse the student body into believing that education in and of itself could not be separated from political action. The context in which the political flames were fanned was, of course, by no means isolated. However, often the global anchor for this historical phenomenon referred to the student barricades of Paris 1968. But if we are to speak of the 1960s student movement as a global phenomenon, then our frame of reference need not be Paris 1968. What was happening in Malaysia was not simply a local manifestation of such a form of political agitation, but coexisting with a network of student agitations across the world. In turn, reading the global event as rhizomatic, one is reminded that these incidents were isolated from wider discourses and solidarity networks that were being forged around the world, even if the concerns were characteristically local (Weiss 2012).

As a staged performance lecture, *Student Power* was directed at students who were facing new challenges under a pedagogical regime at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Fahmi's restaging of this history was strategic in a sense. Over and beyond the need to

stir a new generation of students to think for themselves in political terms, *Student Power*—which was unveiled in 2010—was responding to deep structural changes occurring in the global education system. In 2008 Ghauth Jasmon was appointed as the new vice-chancellor of University of Malaya and pledged to return the university to its former public glory through climbing up the global university ranking system, in which the university had fallen precipitously between 2005 and 2008. With both the government and the university suffering from such an ignominious loss of confidence, the university underwent a structural overhaul (which included quantitative evaluation of academic performances, new emphasis on academic publishing, industry linkages, international engagements) largely through the design of the global consultancy firm McKinsey. McKinsey in turn created a road map that was principally concerned with measuring academic excellence based largely on the numerical game of peer-review publications and a corporatization of university education (Ong and Zairil Khir 2013). In turn, university courses were encouraged to incorporate industry training in response to corporate demands for a workforce aligned to their present-day needs. This was a reaction to populist opinion that graduates were not prepared for an employable future.

Against this top-down solution is a different kind of energy coursing through a collaborative research project like *Student Power*, whereby historical knowledge is reenacted and pressed into the service of rethinking contemporary debates. What *Student Power* underlines is that another subject position is available, if only the why's and how's of learning is critically assessed. This does not fall into the degree-churning mill that universities have become, tasked by the expanding middle class and their attendant bourgeois social values. Creativity in dissent comes from revising the premise of one's learning, which is to foster imagination as key to an intellectual and emotional freedom. It is markedly different from the goal that universities in the twenty-first century are pressured to work toward.

### **Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning: The Postcolonial University**

The question I want to ask is: Is it possible to trace the historical circumstances that resulted in the emergence of creative dissent against institutionalized pedagogy? We may have to briefly go back in time to the very foundations of modern education in Malaysia in order to characterize the nature of such changes. The chronology here is cursory, and its main aim is to highlight the historical development of educational institutions.

Unlike India, Burma, or Hong Kong, where a colonial university was founded in the early twentieth century, the first university in Malaya came into existence only after

World War II. In 1949 the Carr-Saunders report recommended the establishment of University of Malaya: “the university shall act as a single medium of mingle [*sic*] for enhancing the understanding among the multi-ethnics [*sic*] and religions in the back than Malaya [*sic*]” (Khoo 2005, 6–9). Underlying the postwar engineering of a Malayan identity was a desire on the part of the British to secure a framework for unity. Its inclusive nature meant that multi-ethnicities also included the Europeans, who needed to safeguard their business interests even when Malaya would eventually gain political independence. The multiethnic social compact was also an alternative to Communism and revolution.

The “Malayan” discourse, though introduced by the British, was never solely defined by the colonial authority. Cultural intelligentsia of all stripes were also drawn into debates about the exact definition of “Malaya’s” vaguely worded nation-building ethos. But the Malayan discourse was never in any way singular. On the one hand, Anglophones constituted an elite class groomed to take over the leadership of an independent country. Often, members of this language community perceived that an English-language education was the only means of cultivating a cosmopolitan worldview. The cosmopolitan worldview was, in turn, regarded as an ideal for leaders of a multiethnic nation. On the other hand, being an elite class meant that Anglophones required popular support to win the elections. In a sense, ethnic-communal nationalism was tolerated as long as the Anglophone elite class were given primacy to head any ethnic-specific component parties in a race-based coalition.

While race became an overriding determinant of governmental politics, it was the larger class-driven politics at play that gave context to the establishment of Nanyang University. Nanyang University could be counted as the first large-scale attempt at reimagining what tertiary education could be on creative terms. The university was built solely through contributions from the Chinese business community and funds raised by the Chinese working-class public. Not a cent was received from the British colonial government, and this meant that the university was also not recognized by the British and existed primarily as a private company (Kee and Choi 2013). The British were dead set against Nanyang University because they were convinced that since it was a Chinese-medium institution it was a communal enterprise that went against the cosmopolitan aspiration of a Malayan identity that the colonial government was trying to foster.

Yet, studies have shown that Nanyang University offered an equally compelling and competing form of Malayan identity and culture that was built on what was called the “nanyang” aesthetic. In this instance, “nanyang” can be loosely defined as a cultural hybridity that combined Eastern and Western cultural forms while synthesizing these aesthetic traditions to address local subject matter and social conditions (Low 2012, 237).

If the university was founded in a context where “nanyang” as an aesthetic principle



was debated, one could argue that the building of the university constituted a form of creative dissent against the colonial status quo in the primacy of Anglophone culture within Malayan's multiethnic social compact. What the dissent suggests is that the ideological contestation between Nanyang University and University of Malaya was not exclusively marked by divisions along language lines. On this point, it is important to note that I am referring primarily to the founding visions of the two universities and not the inter-varsity camaraderie amongst students. The choice of which language to use as the primary medium of instruction also became a debate about which language community would gain new privileges from the university as an institution that validated an individual's knowledge on an area of study. Even so, when it comes to a language community, though the basis of the community's identity is a shared language, the community is not wholly defined by it and allows for different kinds of accommodation. At the same time, while the building of Nanyang University received tremendous support from the Chinese community, significant contributions also came from Chinese business leaders. These acts of generosity suggest that the competition had in many ways to do with the values that would strengthen the class positions of either the Anglophones or the Chinese business community. These values were to be imparted to future politicians, technocrats, teachers, and officials in the institutions that were set up.

Given the context spelled out above, Nanyang fought hard against the public perception that it only had Chinese communal interests at heart. At the same time, it needed to find a new ground on which it could offer a different cosmopolitan worldview. When the author and physician Han Suyin was invited by the first vice-chancellor of Nanyang University to teach English literature, she rejected the offer. When she was asked, she "shook my head. I did not know anything about English literature."

"But you write English," the vice-chancellor exclaimed.

"Not English literature," Han replied. "I did not want to teach Dickens and Thackeray, worthy though they might be" (Han 1980, 90).

Instead, Han wanted to put together something else altogether. Han elaborated on this point: "I tried to explain my idea of literature; that we must create an Asian type of literature; we needed something other than nineteenth-century English writers . . ." (*ibid.*).

Finally, by 1959, Han was able to teach a three-month course titled "Contemporary Asian Literature." She taught at night, twice a week, for two hours. In the course, she was able to introduce students to Asian literature translated into English. The writers covered included Rabindranath Tagore, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Chinua Achebe, and Ahmed Ali. They were studied in the context of literary outputs emerging "from colonialism" (Aamer Hussein 2017).

By distancing the idea of literature from the English literary canon, what Han proposed was that the constitution of what she called “Asian literature” need not be language-specific but have a shared common condition. The fact that literary texts for the courses were either written in or translated into the English language also suggests that in claiming ownership over the English language, one decolonizes the language of colonial oppression by using that very same language to communicate one’s individual experience across other contexts in the community that one imagines to be “Asia.”

In arguing that there was a creative dimension to the founding of a pedagogical institution in Nanyang University, I am also suggesting that the institution was in no way a communal and reactionary response to the cosmopolitan Malayan cultural identity that University of Malaya was attempting to foster. If anything, it offered a contending cosmopolitan vision of a Malayan identity. A cosmopolitan Malayan identity was not the sole purchase of an Anglophone elite who viewed every other language community as communal and insular. Here was an institution of higher learning that took a creative role in nurturing a different imagination of Malaysia.

Nevertheless, university education in the post-independence period focused primarily on nation building. In this sense, administrative control was gradually centralized, often at the expense of the university’s autonomy. Following the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, Nanyang University was administratively merged with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore (Tan and Lee 1996). This followed from the taming of the university and the expulsion of leftist elements during the 1963 Operation Coldstore, when then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew embarked on a leftist purge in order to consolidate power over the island state to demonstrate his political mandate to the federal government of Malaysia as the date of the merger inched closer (Poh *et al.* 2013). In 1970s Malaysia, following the racial riots of May 13, 1969, the government introduced a law that would curtail student involvement in party politics (Universities and University Colleges Act 1971).

Under Section 5 of the 1971 Act, the establishment of universities outside of the government purview was prohibited. Were such a stipulation in place in 1955, Nanyang University would not have been established. While the 1971 Act was designed to police the spread of extremist ideologies within academic institutions, once the act was in place it allowed the state to wield a great degree of control over a system of learning and define its values. By 1974, university students mobilized to highlight the destitution of rubber tappers in Baling, Kedah, following a slump in rubber prices. They saw the cause of poverty in a system of labor exploitation as a symptom of an unequal distribution of wealth. In turn, university students accused the Malaysian government of protecting the economic interests of British investors by safeguarding their ownership of plantation

estates in spite of Malaysia's political independence while neglecting to care for the welfare of its citizens.

To stamp out the belligerent student body, the Internal Security Act, a preventive detention law passed in 1960 that allowed for detention without trial or criminal charges under legally defined circumstances, was invoked to arrest a number of student leaders involved in the Baling peasant protests. Soon after, the 1971 Act was further strengthened through a revision to ensure that what appeared to be the most vocal political demographic stayed silent.

The redistributive system known as the New Economic Policy, which was introduced in 1971, allowed for some form of social reconfiguration to take place just as the economy and education were slowly being centralized. The policy of centralization extended also into the realm of culture, with the formulation of a National Cultural Policy the same year. The National Cultural Policy was the outcome of a series of deliberations known as the National Cultural Congress, whose scope was to orient culture toward an expression of nativism. The first feature of this policy was that the concept of a National Culture would be based on cultures local to the region. Second, non-Malay cultural forms would be included as part of National Culture if they were suitable. Last, Islam—as the official religion of the country—was recognized as an important component in shaping National Culture.

This suggests that by the end of the 1970s, the nation—or the national as a discourse—had concretized into a set of characteristics and policies that represented the government. For activists and artists who were suspicious of the political and cultural agenda behind such instrumentalization of culture, they would have to draw strength and imagination from elsewhere. It would take a while for this new culture to crystallize into an output, given that by the 1980s, when Mahathir Mohamad became the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, he instituted a sweeping modernization program and numerous campaigns aimed at reinventing the cultural framework, culminating in the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. This was a framework that would allow a new economic model to emerge, based on the desire to foster a corporate class of political allies through privatization of key government assets and agencies.

These socioeconomic changes produced a growing middle class that was silenced by the wealth and opportunity in Malaysia. On the other hand, they also created small pockets of resistance to what was perceived to be a misdirected vision of modernity. This perception resulted in nascent attempts at thinking of an educational curriculum that privileged creative expression as a channel for social justice. It also recognized in pedagogy a means to redirect the public's sympathy to social issues that were not immediately relevant to the urban middle class. By the 1990s, the state was seen to have monopolized

the definition of nationalism. The countermove was therefore not to produce an alternative national vision, but to cultivate a relationship with the world that was not always aligned to the present-day narrative of the nation-state. Attempts were made to bring into awareness historical alignments and the unrealized ideals that had been promised. By the early 1990s, in a small private art school called the Malaysian Art Institute, a course titled “Third World Aesthetics” was being taught by the artist Wong Hoy Cheong (Soon 2014, 90).

Wong, who returned from the United States in the mid-1980s, had studied painting under John Grillo and was also a student of the abstract painter Hans Hoffman, known for his theory on the push-and-pull effect. Departing from Renaissance one-point linear perspective, Hoffman argued that the compositional push-and-pull of form produced a visual tension that evoked in the viewer an experience of depth and motion on the flat surface of a canvas.

Even though Wong later abandoned painting to experiment with other media, he did not entirely dispense with the push-and-pull approach. As a conceptual tool, the very tension evoked in the visualization of the push-and-pull corresponds philosophically to dialectics as a mode of discourse. What is achieved through the use of contrasts and opposites is a psychological depth that can speak forcefully as a response to the conditions of contemporary life. In this sense, Wong was also taken by the hermeneutics of the German philosopher Hans Georg-Gadamar, especially with what he called the fusion of horizons as central to the act of interpretation. Understanding emerges through the act of reading, not in order for an objective meaning to surface. Instead, the interpreter gains a deeper empathy for the subject matter through the production of a common horizon.

When offering a working definition of contemporary art, Wong spoke as early as 1989, in a seminar paper, of the need to unyoke artistic practice from a mannered understanding of tradition. At the First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics, he rejected the prevalent tendency of cultural essentialism that he saw in many contemporary artists who engaged rhetorically with tradition. Instead, he said:

We need more of the present, more empathy for the living and breathing people of our society. We need to confront the fabric of everyday life and not be tangled in the cobwebs of the past. As it is, we have enough myths and legends, pucuk rebungs, dragons and phoenixes, batik motifs and wayang kulit. (Wong 1989, 122–123)

To counter the tendency to mythologize the past, Wong asked for a renewed sensitivity to the new denizens of everyday spaces. He argued:

The anonymous singers in Karaoke lounges, the medicine men and prostitutes in the backlanes of Chow Kit, Mat Rocks and heavy-metal music, the squatters of Sungai Way, the computer salesman, the bank auditor, the travel agent—they too make up our culture. (*ibid.*)

These questions would be asked and solutions would be sought through the Third World aesthetics course that Wong taught. The course was influenced in part by Paolo Freire's idea of *conscientização*, according to which the purpose of learning is centered on a practice of consciousness raising that he calls "reading the world." This engages learners through a process of questioning the nature of their historical and social situation. Augusto Boal's concept of a theater of the oppressed was also influential in shaping Wong's artistic practice. Wong notes:

I was interested in asking: is there such a thing as third-world aesthetics? I used the class as an arena to think through some of these ideas together with students. But I stopped teaching it after a few years because I came to realize that often there's a thin line between third-world nationalism and fascism and authoritarianism, and that while meant to be liberating, "third-world aesthetics" also had a strong nationalist agenda to it that could easily be co-opted. These different relations are all so slippery. (Merckle 2011a)

Wong taught the course for about three years, during which classes often became arenas for him to explore ideas of transformation, pedagogy, and even more complex issues such as consciousness raising or *conscientização*. Rather than offering a blanket solution, Wong explains what consciousness raising entails with a question that calls for a flexibility of approaches: "How do you make students conscious of themselves and acquire a reflexivity about themselves, their environments and the societies in which they live?" (Merckle 2011b).

Collected texts that were disseminated and taught in Wong's classes included those by Lefhanded (Malaysia), Caravan and Caribou (Thailand), and Iwan Fals (Indonesia) on music; Moelyono (Indonesia) and Black Artists of Asia (Philippines) on art; Emha Ainun Nadjib (Indonesia), PETA (Philippines), and Maya (Thailand) on theater and performance; and Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Indonesia) and other Filipino writers on writing (Wong 2013).

Freire also became a central point to examine how channels of communication were central to cultural studies in a conference organized by the Communications Program at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, in 1993 titled "Communication and Development in a Postmodern Era: Re-evaluating the Freirian Legacy." The purpose was to apply Freire's cultural strategies to the field of communication studies in Southeast Asia. Zaharom Nain, the conference co-convenor, noted:

the focus of the Conference will be on examining feasible and progressive alternatives. Alternative communication and cultural strategies, especially, which have emerged and developed in different sociocultural contexts in response—and even in opposition—to dominant, mainstream discourses imposed on these societies. (Zaharom Nain 1993, 1)

Freire in a published foreword expressed dismay that postmodernity commonly understood as relativism produced a historical province of a “round time,” which in its neutrality was “almost without continuity with what went before and what is to come; without ideologies, utopias, dreams, social classes or struggles” (Freire 1993). This sensibility of the world was in essence a “denial of History itself,” according to Freire. Instead, he called for a progressively postmodern educational practice that was

based on democratic respect for the learner as one of the subjects of the process. It treats teaching-learning as an inquisitive and creative moment when educators recognise and reform knowledge previously known and when learners grasp and reproduce what was previously unknown. . . . It is one that humbly learns from differences and rejects arrogance. (*ibid.*, 3)

If by the early 1990s artists and educators still felt that there were redeeming features in existing pedagogical institutions, the political frustration that built up into the 1998 Reformasi movement, following the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, shattered this illusion. A mass movement cohered around the theme of Reformasi, or reformation. The expressed purpose was to call for the resignation of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and put an end to the culture of corruption and cronyism that was rampant under the UMNO-led government, which had had uninterrupted rule of the country since Malaya’s independence in 1957. The call to arms, coupled with the Asian financial crisis, created a kind of rupture in societal values.

What this rupture entailed was a quest for alternative forms of engagement, which also meant effecting change outside formal institutions of learning by creating pedagogical structures that addressed some of the goals and objectives raised by Freire in the passage above. Since 1998 Bangsar Utama has been a place for student activists from various campuses in Kuala Lumpur to hang out and discuss progressive theories, current affairs, and issues. These informal discussions over *teh tarik* in mamak stalls translated into a decision to rent a space in Bangsar Utama in April 2000 to carry out community-based programs and activities. The collective was known as Universiti Bangsar Utama (UBU) and had Hishamuddin Rais, a student activist who had returned from years of exile following the clampdown on the Baling protest of 1974, self-appointed as principal lecturer. UBU was cheekily described by Hishamuddin as “you be you,” perhaps a call to discover one’s individual self that was free from the pressures of cultural conformism (Krich 2015).

The neighborhood of Bangsar is known for its affluence. In fact, in the retail and residential district of the nearby area known as Bangsar Baru, clubs and bars are regular watering holes and hangouts for well-to-do Malaysians. Bangsar is also a neighborhood of contrasts. In Bangsar Utama, residents live mostly in two large public housing apartment buildings—the Seri Pahang flats and the KTM workers flats. University of Malaya is located a short five-minute drive away. University students are drawn to Bangsar Utama for its cheap rent and cheap entertainment. But by virtue of being in close proximity to low-income residents of the area, students decided that to reeducate themselves they also needed to understand the work of education within the community they were located in.

UBU's education programs were divided into three categories. First, UBU directly addressed the needs of the community in Bangsar Utama. This meant English, mathematics, art, theater, and music classes for secondary school students. It also organized camping trips, visits to art galleries and museums, as well as other activities for youths in the neighborhood. Second, the programs addressed university students in the Klang Valley, a common name for the Greater Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area. Activities included organizing monthly panel discussions, weekly discussion groups on social issues, weekly film screenings, as well as workshops focusing on democracy and human rights. This was to form a network of politically aware students across different universities. Lastly, activities were organized also for the public, which included street theater and agitprop performances as well as musical events.

Even as the seeds of imagination were sown, UBU remained successful—but solely as an organization that grew because it was located in Kuala Lumpur. It never developed a significant structural virality. One explanation could be that UBU was still by and large driven by the charisma of Hishamuddin. Hishamuddin's personality has arguably outshone many of his acolytes' and apprentices', even if a number of them managed to hive off. It would seem that the cult of personality parallels the current public fascination with Zunar and Fahmi, not in terms of what they actually do but as vaguely conceived figures of rebellion against an autocratic system of government. The solution to this cult of personality would not arrive for another 10 years, in which the virality of an opposition movement would spread like the weeds that Mahathir tried to stamp out through his 1987 Operation Lalang. Like all weeds, they grow in all directions and appear to be irradicable.

## Lalang

In 1994 Wong presented a performance/installation titled *Lalang* at the Creative Centre of the National Art Gallery, then located in the former Majestic Hotel. The work was part of a group exhibition with Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Raja Shahrman titled *Warbox, Lalang, Killing Tools*. In this multi-part work, realized over several days, Wong planted a type of weedy grass called lalang (*Imperata cylindrica*) in a flower bed reminiscent of a European garden (Langenbach 1994). He then sprayed weedkiller, cut and burned the dead lalang, dug out the roots, and replaced it with cowgrass, restoring the site to its original state. It was an ironic statement performed as a trenchant critique of the stifling space that shaped Malaysian society as well as the kind of creativity it purported to sustain and support but also kept in check and smothered. The entire event was laced with a morbid dose of pessimism. In fact, Wong commented on this phenomenon the year before:

“The majority of young artists would find no awkward contradictions between rebellion and a need for the support of the dominant art institution. But I see this as a development of a parasitic culture . . . you are critical of the power structures and yet you are dependent on these very powers to legitimise and evaluate the worthiness of your work.” (Jit 1993, 8)

*Lalang* therefore did not only refer to the 1987 political detention known as Operation Lalang, when Mahathir Mohamad’s status quo in UMNO was under threat, but as a metaphor it also spoke for a desired structural transformation that required creative practitioners and educators to embody a practice based on the concept of the rhizome. The rhizome as a concept was featured prominently in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983) and draws on the idea that in botany the rhizome is a subterranean plant-stem with a mass of roots that grow perpendicular to the force of gravity. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is an “image of thought” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 129) that suggests a network model that is horizontal in nature rather than “arborescent” or tree-like—which denotes hierarchy and a top-down relationship.

In a sense, the concept of the rhizome offers an imagery for the unpredictable and untameable manner in which ideas circulate and spread within a social space, like the weeds or lalang in Wong’s performance. Wong’s performance ended on a wryly pessimistic note with the weeding of the garden patch and the planting of cowgrass, using the metaphor of gardening to comment on the state’s effort to clear away the uncontrollable movement of ideas and replace it with a homogenous value system.

But weeds—like ideas—never really die; they simply bide their time. In October



2011, a group of students at UiTM (Universiti Institut Teknologi MARA) started organizing gatherings under the banner *Buku Jalanan* (Streetside books). The format was simple: they would set up a temporary library at the Shah Alam Lake Park one evening every fortnight. The setup normally consisted of a bookshelf filled with books brought over by members of the collective. Woven mats and picnic cloths were laid out on the grass. The setup would be inviting enough for the public who were in the park to stop by and browse through the selection on offer. Typically the books covered a whole range of genres: history, literature, philosophy, economics, sociology. No longer were there attempts to contain the range of materials to “local” history, although in describing the international, there was a keen interest to explore regions and localities beyond Europe or America. Books could also be borrowed. But principally, the books acted as a conversation starter. Lasting roughly two hours, each session often included a discussion on a particular topic.

The founders were Zikri Rahman, Azrie Ahmad, and Ihsan Hassan, none of whom were from the fine arts faculty at the university. What was considered fine art was very much shaped by a desire to define the artist principally as a creative entrepreneur whose prestige was measured through his or her ability to secure gallery representation, produce works for exhibitions, and receive financial validation from local collectors through the sales of artworks. By 2011, buoyed by a robust commercial market, fine arts graduates from UiTM came to see the criteria spelled out above as a career trajectory. The result was that the works produced were primarily easel-based, or fitted to the demands of the white cube. These included installation, multimedia projection, and sculpture.

Members of *Buku Jalanan* were instead primarily interested in reading. But what was interesting about *Buku Jalanan* was not how it conducted its gatherings. After all, these were tried and tested methods we have seen in the setting up of *Universiti Bangsar Utama*. What was interesting was how modular and adaptable the format was. *Buku Jalanan* is truly modular, in that each chapter in different townships and areas has its own ways of determining the scope of its intellectual engagement. Today the organization has at least 60 active chapters all over Malaysia—in all major townships, including in East Malaysia. It also has chapters overseas, in at least 10 countries where Malaysian studies can be found—from India to Germany, from Ireland to South Korea—and in city-specific chapters from Cardiff to Melbourne. Never has a ground-up initiative achieved this level of national and transnational coverage. In fact, it was flagged as potentially dangerous in leaked slides from a 2015 teaching module prepared by the government’s *Biro Tatanegara* (BTN), or the National Civics Bureau, an agency tasked with nurturing the spirit of patriotism and aligning this with the nation’s development efforts. BTN

fulfilled its objective by organizing courses that civil servants as well as government scholarship holders are required to attend.

In one of the courses organized a few years ago, BTN put together a presentation on “indie” culture to newly recruited scholarship holders who were about to embark on their university education overseas. The presentation offered stern warnings about the dangers of alternative thinking and listed groups and initiatives that BTN deemed to be “countercultural” (Zikri Rahman and Faisal Mustafa 2015). Many such movements were connected to the increasingly robust Malay-language publishing scene, which began posing a challenge to Malay cultural norms since, unlike the English language, the Malay language not only had great symbolic purchase as the national language, but it also had a political reach that extended to a huge demographic.

What is significant about Buku Jalanan is that unlike earlier activities that were centered in the capital city, it successfully designed a local platform for creative dissent that was rhizomatic in character. Until today, it has no official leader. Each chapter operates autonomously, and networks are formed informally. Chapters hive off from existing chapters, like the rhizome’s tubular roots that spread outward and in all directions. What this ultimately does is to unmake the very parameters of what a national discourse could be. For example, Buku Jalanan was featured in an exhibition in Jakarta, and through that exhibition connections were forged with Indonesian organizations that shared similar pedagogical goals of being alternative. Outside of the government-sanctioned overseas Malaysian student platforms funded by UMNO, Buku Jalanan has become a counter organization through which open discourse is encouraged (Zikri Rahman 2017).

Ultimately, though, what it does is to enable a new class of politically aware students to be connected to each other—an imagined community, so to speak, not of nation but of books and shared political sympathy. Speaking of her time as a student in Shah Alam, the activist and filmmaker as well as early member of Buku Jalanan Maryam Lee reflected on how formative the collective in Shah Alam was to her own development of a critical consciousness (Lee *et al.* 2015). She also noted that when one assumed that political awareness came primarily from students who studied overseas—because of the heavy surveillance in local public universities—there was a tendency to disregard the role that local university students played in fostering greater political awareness among Malaysia’s youths. Such dynamism, not seen since the Merdeka period, highlights a groundswell of activities aimed at the possibility of creating, in creative and dissenting terms, pedagogical counter-sites to the university.

In this instance, the form of organization, its mode of operation, is the substance. Like the horizontal spread and growth that characterizes the rhizome, Buku Jalanan’s *raison d’être* was premised on a completely different idea of pedagogy in comparison to

the university. Unlike the university and state-run institutions where education is measured through a metricization of learning outcomes, learning happens through encounters. As such, its modus operandi is the setting up of infrastructure that facilitates encounter and allows for the virality of ideas. Unlike the modern nation-state, Buku Jalanan's pedagogical aim is not to inculcate values and ideals that create a cohesive society; rather, it takes the possibility of dissent as the very unit to build up a network system that allows different ideas to circulate. Buku Jalanan takes up minimal space, resources, and time. By the end of the two hours, the books, the shelves, the mats are all packed up. The lake gardens seem to return to what they were before. And yet, something has changed.

### **Beyond Chicken and Egg**

The interplay between creativity and dissent is ongoing. The view that political crises give rise to some of the most interesting artistic expressions has been taken as the stock narrative of twentieth-century avant-garde art. What is seldom explored is the underlying systemic change in thinking that has resulted in dissenting forms of creative expression. This has to do with our attitude toward pedagogy and experimentation in which knowledge can be shared. Even if we speak of the emergence of a critical mass and the iconicity of rebellious figures in the limelight, sometimes it is worth reminding ourselves of anecdotes from the margins. One could think of these anecdotes as allegories that shed light on the two-pronged approach that many of the creative projects, discussed in this essay, adopted. The approach is premised on a critique on the institutionalization of education and a belief in the outlier local cosmopolitan as a symbol of self-learning.

The first anecdote concerns a performance titled *Zone* by the American-born performance artist Ray Langenbach, who has made Malaysia his home since the late-1980s. *Zone* was performed at the 1993 conference on Freirean legacy in the postmodern age discussed above. It features three teenagers, in secondary school uniform, representing the Malay, Chinese, and Indian configuration of Malaysia's multiracial identity discourse. The schoolchildren were provided with a passage from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: all they had to do was recite the text in front of a group of scholars from all over the world to deliberate on Freirean strategies in relation to communication studies. In addition, each of the schoolchildren held a hen in their arms, and an egg was placed in front of the hens. As the text was recited, the hens slowly pecked away at the eggs. The performance artist and archivist Loo Zihan suggests:

It stems from Ray's research that eggshells contain potassium and the hens will do that if they are hungry. So he thought it made an interesting image . . . children regurgitating information fed to them to those who provided them with the information and the adults killing and eating their young. (Loo 2017)

*Zone* was a reminder of the destructive cycle of pedagogical institutionalization that can take place even when the Freirean legacy is institutionalized. Much like how modern art is absorbed and normalized into an expanded art historical canon, the modern politics of pedagogy can become ossified into mere ideological ceremonies. For avant-garde artists, the new challenge is to find a new *modus operandi* so that the visual is no longer prioritized as the site of political resistance. A convergence in this sense occurs when the creativity in dissent transforms the politics of pedagogy into an art of pedagogy. What the latter prioritizes stems from a desire to change the terms in which knowledge is produced and shared. This in turn speaks to a whole class of people who are not privy to the opportunities offered by a formal education and yet display an equal measure of curiosity.

I end my reflection with a personal encounter, since this interaction returns the story to an individual because all work of mental cultivation is ultimately solitary. This example highlights the work that is done away from the media spotlight and speaks of a much more complex condition that is shaping the curiosity of youths in Malaysia. The account offers a counterpoint to the image of the rebel that the media has simplified. On one of my recent trips to Kota Bahru in Kelantan, Zaidi, who was introduced to me by Zikri Rahman, one of the founders of Buku Jalanan, was kind enough to take me for a spin around town on my last night on his motorbike. Along the way he spoke of a different city, one whose youths were mired in drugs, alienation, and a lack of desire for self-improvement. This was a generation where a university paper qualification promised an office job that never came, where high school graduates could not read, where religious rectitude simply became outward political ceremonies that masked the hidden cost of "progress."

For Zaidi, the 1990s generation under Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Malaysian Islamic Party) was *sudah hancur*—already destroyed. Social gains and desires under an Islamic flag had split the population into a clique of haves, who had risen up the ranks through political favors and connections, and the have-nots, who had turned into roaming zombies hooked on *pil kuda* (a type of methamphetamine drug) for RM15 a pop. For Zaidi, a love of *berniaga* (business), which he attributed to Kelantanese culture, had brought him here to set up his online book dealership.

This was after saving up from years of working in factories in the Klang Valley. The lack of an overseas education (or any tertiary education for that matter) did not reduce his love for books, which he sourced from around Malaysia and Indonesia. Today he is

even an independent book publisher, and his activity of consciousness raising does not occur in a university setting but on the streets, in the marketplace, every Friday morning before prayers, when he sets up a stall behind the PAS headquarters and peddles books on literature, radical politics, and Kelantanese history.

Zaidi was ready to help me with my research into a self-taught Kelantanese cultural historian by the name of Abdullah bin Mohamed, and I had a feeling he was perhaps the only one who had an inkling of what I wanted to recover. But that is because I think we share a conviction that the figure of the cosmopolitan is not just one who is privileged with an overseas education or reads/speaks the English language, but one who can inimitably fashion the world from their locale, no matter where they may reside or what station in life they come from (Foo 2009, 7–8). After all, this is an attitude to learning, not a privilege. And what other chance do we have in a society defined largely by material status, wants, and needs?

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