

Introduction

Race is not only local, it is global. While shaped by specific histories and parochialisms, racial tensions and the inequalities that fuel those tensions can give us a picture of how different parts of the world are connected. Racial tropes such as the “yellow peril,” “model minority,” “terrorist,” “spy,” “threat,” or “contamination” have become commonplace in countries that otherwise do not share languages, cultures, religions, or histories. Stereotypes or variations of racist slogans such as “Go back where you came from!” and “This is *our* country!” turn up from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, and also across the Asia Pacific. How we talk about race, ironically, has become more similar in places and cultures still divided by significant political and cultural differences. The populist rage behind Donald Trump’s surprise election victory in 2016 can even seem belated when compared to the rise of the far-right elsewhere: Boris Johnson and Theresa May in the UK, Marie Le Pen in France, Pauline Hansen in Australia, Xi Jinping in China, Narendra Modi in India, Hun Sen in Cambodia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Najib Razak in Malaysia.¹ Racism, unfortunately, is neither isolated nor original, but why?

The State of Race argues that some modes of racial thought are a transnational phenomenon because they emerge out of global as well as local histories.² Historical events that take place and have effects across national borders have shaped conceptions of race and its social meanings even when they first appear to be formed within particular cultures and contexts. The racial tropes I examine in this book may indeed have a presence everywhere in unexpectedly analogous and informal ways, but I want to suggest that the examples drawn from this study are global because they are first a part of global history. In other words, this book is primarily about how racial vocabularies have become more similar because national histories and cultures

are formed in relation to transnational events, circumstances, and interests. The novels, short fiction, and cultural histories in the case studies of this book draw our attention to how racial tropes are similar across languages, borders, and time periods because they reflect the converging interests of each state as it is affected by the broader cultural phenomena that affect all states.³ This book does not insist that racial formations everywhere are always alike. Rather, my interest here is in how hierarchies of value embodied in racial difference often reflect each state's interests as it cooperates and competes with other states, and the overlaps in various states' interests as they operate in a global system is what accounts for the overlaps in racial language. The social meanings of racial difference are determined in response to global and local formations.

Modes of racial thought in different countries can take on remarkably similar forms because the state is still central to our cultures and politics. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have argued, we can neither do away with the state nor hold tightly to single nation frameworks in our analytical schemas: "Nation-states are alive as mechanisms of control and domination even when transnational corporations are supposed to have dissolved their boundaries. Minority cultural workers are transnational not because they transcend the national, but because their cultural orientations are by definition creolized in Glissant's sense" (9). In this book, the comparison of minor literatures helps us see that racism is resilient because it can be used to strengthen the political centrality of the state. This is not to say that racial formations are always identical. Differences in local expressions can in fact be valuable to the state precisely because race is flexible and adaptable to particular geopolitical conditions or historical periods. But while racial figurations need to be read within the national contexts where they circulate, they are not isolated from global flows. The model minority or invocations of the American Dream in the novels compared in this book demonstrate that the state mobilizes ideas about race to its own ends in response to events that take place across its borders.

But to understand how race is shaped by shared historical developments, we need to first understand the nation-state's effects on culture. Far from becoming outdated or obsolete, the nation-state has become more rather than less central to a globally-connected world after the end of World War II (WWII). Decolonization strengthened rather than weakened the world state system, and state sovereignty has to be understood in conjunction with its codependency on other states like it. Therefore, the cultural histories of state growth and development—especially in the second half of the twentieth

century—presented in this book play two roles. First, the history of colonial and postcolonial state growth in Malaysia plays an important pedagogical role because it introduces a less widely known culture to readers unfamiliar with Southeast Asia. Second, these cultural histories demonstrate that to become modern in the wake of colonialism is to see one's self and history as part of a racial group that forms the basis of the nation. Racial thought is a symptom of the hidden connections that make up global culture. How we conceptualize race is part of an informal but consistent global racial system grounded in the expansion of state strength and capitalist logic.

Contrary to what seems intuitive, the end of colonialism did not lead to the end of Orientalist and colonial forms of thought.⁴ Rather, the postcolonial state builds on colonial logic already embedded in the state infrastructures and institutions it inherited.⁵ Colonialism may have created modern conceptions of race as biological and civilizational differences, but racial politics now confirms or negates the postcolonial state's ideas of what it takes to guarantee its success. Race formalizes state power even as it is formed by the state. As the fiction and the cultural histories in this book demonstrate, racism appears to be a social problem but it actually performs a necessary justification for state power as the state mediates inclusion and exclusion, both real and symbolic. But the racial tropes that appear as self-evident are, however, revealed to play more complex roles. Racial tropes are not only forms of representation; the literary examples in the chapters reveal that racial language is performative because it is morally prescriptive.

The State of Race returns our attention to the state because, on the one hand, the state plays a regulatory role in the transnational issues of national and international governance, migration, war, and trade. But, on the other hand, transnational events also shape how we think and talk about race because they first affect the nation-state. The state's influence over cultural life is neither static nor unchanging. National and global flows need to be understood as a form of relation where neither can maintain the upper hand, and where each potentially strengthens or weakens the other. Race matters in the accounting of nationalist attachments because it can either enhance or destabilize state legitimacy, and the state's relations to other states. Racial anxiety is therefore a symptom of how the state sees in a world where global power relations are unequal and precarious. But how is it that we come to adopt the state's insecurities as our own? By paying attention to local histories, especially to how the state develops or intervenes in racial discourse, this book uncovers surprising assumptions about how power, the state, and beliefs about race are connected.

Events in recent history such as WWII, decolonization, the Cold War, and globalization have not only failed to rid us racism, these political upheavals and social changes have actually intensified racial difference as visual and cultural markers of social identity. The collapse of colonialism, the Cold War, and economic and technological globalization introduced new challenges to state sovereignty, but individual states also respond by strengthening its borders and what those borders symbolize—the power to decide how human life is valued, at least within its own borders. Political events such as Brexit and Trump’s “Muslim ban” are but two of the most recent instances of states reasserting their power in the age of globalization. The chapters that follow explain how in the wake of transnational historical developments, “race” has become even more authoritative in the organization of social life within the nation-state. The (global) American Dream embodies state desire from WWII onwards and it informs the figurations of the model minority and the terrorist spy in literary fiction and popular culture.

To that effect, this book draws on literatures and cultural histories from national and regional traditions not usually in conversation—the US and Malaysia in this case—to reveal how vastly different countries that on the surface do not have very much in common nonetheless share very similar ways of thinking about, and representing, racial difference.⁶ The unlikely comparison of otherwise historically disjunct sites not connected by either direct colonial, economic, or military ties is a comparison not of equivalence, but of convergence. Key texts in these two different literary traditions converge in their use of the tropes of moral exemplarity or degeneration, and of state strength and weakness. Racial figures such as the model minority or the terrorist spy can be correlated to how the state sees, that is, how it sees itself as well as its subjects. Both ways of seeing are crucial to state power and legitimacy.

The aim of this comparison is not to resolve the historical differences between the literary traditions and canons of Asia and America, but to propose instead that despite real and tangible contrasts in the two sites, their overlapping figurations of Asian minorities are not accidental.⁷ I do not mean to discount the influence languages and cultures has on racial formation, but I do want to propose that similarities as well as differences can be revelatory. Similarity and difference exist in a dynamic rather than fixed, binary, relation.⁸

While globalization is commonly thought to divide the world into winners and losers, countries on both sides of the purported divide actually

share a common language of fear and anxiety about the racial Other inside as well as outside of state borders. This anxiety is now a part of global culture. In *The State of Race*, shared racial tropes are animated across historical periods, cultural particularities, and geopolitical ties because they are put in the service of strengthening state power in an interdependent world state system. Each novel and each cultural history is singular, and each is a product of its time and people. But seen together as part of a larger narrative about the world and its historical changes, they reveal how the state's interests—shaped by global flows—are embodied in racial language.

The dynamic relationship between similarity and difference may also be a feature or effect of globalization itself. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues, globalization is not an obvious story of how the strong always conquers the weak. The universal and the particular both play a role in generating our experiences of the global. The peripheries do not merely confirm what we already know about globalization—often consisting of knowledge and observations drawn through an imperial gaze—but rather, they require us to rethink our very definitions of how globalization works. Local expressions of the global encounter modify what we think about the “global,” and these encounters reveal how interactions between the local and the global are sometimes contradictory, often messy, and that their outcomes are far from guaranteed. The comparison of the US and Malaysia in this book is only one of many potential global comparisons where both the “winners” and “losers,” or the “strong” and the “weak” countries of globalization adopt similar racial language.

Malaysia, in particular, serves as an interesting counterpoint because the US neither colonized Malaysia the way it did Vietnam or the Philippines, nor intervened in overt or extended ways either militarily or economically as it did Indonesia and Laos. The similarities of racial language in both countries show us that while global connections are historical, they are not always linear or immediately visible. The fictions we tell about state power and legitimacy are produced out of diverse locations not necessarily connected by formal colonial or imperialist relations. Instead, racial tropes emerge out of the historical-materialist conditions of global events such as colonialism, WWII, and the Cold War. The tropes and the moral force behind them embody the uneven but certain growth of the world state system. And the integration of postcolonial, postwar states into the capitalist, world state system overwhelmingly shapes our uses of racial language. Some racial slurs do remain peculiar to certain cultures. For example, Malays sometimes

refer to the Chinese as “pigs”—*Cina babi*—because the Chinese eat pork while the Malays who are Muslim consider pigs unclean or nonhalal. These differences in dietary habits do not appear as cultural differences in white US culture, and thus are not part of how Chinese Americans are racialized.

However, the more familiar racial marker, “slit-eyed” in English also appears in Malay as *sepet*. And while the quintessential Asian American stereotype of the “model minority” or “the yellow peril” is not translated into the Malay language, the figure of the overachieving Chinese or Indian Malaysian is nonetheless recognizable and common in local popular and political discourse. Chinese Malaysians are caricatured as *kiasu*, a slang word taken from Hokkien that is literally translated as “afraid to lose,” and used to ridicule the Chinese as driven, unethical go-getters who outperform Malays in schools and business. “White rage” and the Malay “amok” (transliterated into English as “amuck”) are different phrases that emerged out of different histories, but they both refer to moral outrage—and barely veiled threats—in a world where majorities perceive themselves as being “left behind” in their “own” country. Beliefs about innate, race-based aptitude motivate continued demands for the expulsion or deportation of minorities to secure the rights of the majority in the US and in Malaysia.

Given the recognizable overlaps in sentiment and semantics, what accounts for the analogous nature of racist imagery in countries that share neither a past colonial relationship, languages, religion, gender norms, nor cultural practices? *The State of Race* argues that the answer to this question lies in how race is a global problem because it is a problem of the nation-state in general, and not the American state in particular. National histories and fictions are discrete and local but they are part of a global story. While these racial stereotypes are varied in form, they describe similar kinds of tensions, sentiments, and anxieties about—and on the part of—the state under globalization. The comparison of minor racial formations, that is, not only within the context of white and nonwhite relations but also between nonwhite and nonwhite relations, shifts our theorizations of race within colonial and postcolonial studies. What we often take to be exceptional—in this case racism—is part of a much larger network of events and global shifts. In a previously unpublished essay, “India,” W. E. B. Dubois’s famous dictum, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” emerges in an augmented form as “The problem of the Negroes thus remains a part of the worldwide clash of color. So, too, the problem

of the Indians can never be simply a problem of autonomy in the British commonwealth of nations” (8).⁹ The problem of race is not limited to the national experiences of colonialism, slavery, or American segregation. Neither India’s nor the US’s problems with race can be understood only locally or solved by national independence. Race is a problem because it is not exceptional.

They [Americans] do not want to solve [the problem of race], they do not want to understand it, they want simply to be done with it and hear the last of it. Of all possible attitudes this is the most dangerous, because it fails to realize the most significant fact of the opening century, viz.: The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem. (33)

We need to understand how race works in specific, local histories and cultures, but we also need to recognize that focusing only on specific national examples can create lacunae in our conceptions of state and culture. These blind spots can moreover preempt critiques of the state as the literary scholar, Ania Loomba, and the anthropologist, Yasuka Takezawa, have argued about India and Japan, respectively.

But what is the global story of race, and how can we think of race as a “world problem”? Race became a world problem with the advance of European colonialism that identified racial difference as a problem its civilizing mission could erase. But colonialism also created new social divisions that disrupted local cultures. In its drive toward epistemic certainty, colonialism’s organization of human beings into racial groups posited race as both problem and solution. For example, racial identity became contentious in postcolonial Malaysia because the British guaranteed the rights and recognition of one race—the Malays—above and beyond those of other racial groups, including the *Orang Asli* or *Orang Asal* (literally translated as “true peoples” or “original peoples”), that is, the indigenous communities whose many different religions, customs, and languages are widely distinct from Islam and Malay *adat*. But neither the grouping of *Orang Asals* nor the Malays take into account native forms of social groups. And like American Indians, the indigeneity and prior claims of the *Orang Asal* have been relegated to the margins.

Colonial racial ideas not only continue after decolonization, they have flourished as part of dominant political discourse after the end of

colonialism. Postcolonial belief in Malay supremacy is a legacy of colonial assumptions about racial difference and how racial difference should be best managed. But more importantly, race provides the cultural and ideological continuity that guarantees state legitimacy as postcolonial elites inherited the colonial state apparatus.

For example, under the British colonial regime, Chinese Malaysians were deported “back” to China for crimes, poverty, and for holding the wrong political convictions, that is, communism, because the British assumed all Chinese belonged to China even if they were born in Malaya. Consequently, in their management of “bad” Chinese, the British actually created a structural necessity for the recognition of the “good” Chinese even if they did not call them “model minorities.” Malaysian-born Chinese had to perform as exemplary subjects or risk deportation to a land they barely knew. Today, conservative Malay politicians continue to exhort the Chinese to “balik Cina” or “balik Tongsan” when they pose a threat to supposed “Malay values.” In other words, the Chinese who perform according to the Malay-dominated state expectations of “proper” or “desirable” racial behavior can stay, while those who do not, are free to “go back.” Racist discourse thus transforms political disagreements into irrevocable racial and moral difference.

These epithets are rooted in British colonial logic and particular to the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Malaysia, but we hear similar sentiments in racist slogans in the US and other countries. “Go back to where you came from” is now part of a global culture of anxiety because these epithets reflect commonly held assumptions about the vitality of state power—usually as weak or threatened—under globalization. Racial tropes are global tropes because they are heavily invested in the sovereignty of the state and couched in a language of morality and rights that generate powerful attachments to the state. The “true” citizen can say “Go back to where you came from” to another person, and in so doing confirms his or her prior right to the state. Ironically, racism is seen as the political resolution to the social anxieties it provokes.

The State of Race contends that despite significant cultural, social, and political changes in the postwar period, cultural continuity runs from colonialism to globalization and it appears in the form of racial thought nurtured and protected by state power. The colonial state may have created and instituted modern notions of race in Southeast Asia, but it was the insecurities of young, postcolonial states in the Cold War period that turned ethnocentric fears and anxieties about the racial Other into an integral part

of the ideologies of the newly independent states.¹⁰ From Asia to Asian America, colonialist notions of racial difference as fundamental civilizational difference undergird representations of Asians and Asian Americans as efficient, industrious, and high achieving but also sly, dangerous, and untrustworthy. The contradictions in these racial stereotypes reflect the precarious positions of racial minorities often represented in relation to how “useful” they are as laborers, informants, or managers of other minorities in service to the state. Colonialism, Euro-American industrialization, and the need for cheap, indentured labor in Southeast Asia and the Americas first brought the Chinese and Indians to those new lands.

Colonialism’s naturalization of race as a stable, unchanging category that posits cultural sameness, coherence, and homogeneity is taken up by postcolonial states in order to strengthen their own positions in the face of globalization’s promises and its threats. Globalization, that is, the global flows, institutions, and processes that challenge the sovereignty of the state, has effects on how we think about racial difference because it has effects on the sovereignty of the state. The story of race as a global problem cannot be told without also telling the story of growing state power around the world driven by similar capitalist needs and geopolitical desires for increasing economic influence. European colonialism may have introduced modern ideas of racial difference to Southeast Asia through the setting up of the modern state, but national independence proved to be its incubator.¹¹

“Nationalist” or primordialist ideas about racial identity are fundamentally tied to the world state system because as the cultural histories in this book demonstrate, globalization does not do away with the state so much as it refocuses state power on new global threats. The state’s concerns around security and sovereignty are a reaction to globalization that serves to secure its own status within global economic, political, and cultural systems of influence that involve competing parties. The explosion of tribal nationalism or “populist” nationalism in the twenty-first century—a political push toward increasing the state’s power to protect itself—around the world is an example of how states believe their sovereignty is under threat.

The postcolonial state therefore develops and protects its sovereignty on two levels that are often interrelated and interdependent, that is, in its actions as a political actor and as an economic actor on the world stage. In both its roles as political and economic actor, the state describes racial difference in a way that has the curious effect of framing race in moral language. Racial minorities have to “contribute” to the state—“model minorities”—and if

they do not, they are traitors—“terrorist,” “spy,”—or simply “disrespectful” or “ungrateful.” Racial language has powerful effects on our social imagination because they not only presume to explain complex realities in an easily accessible manner, but because they inscribe racial minorities into moral narratives that have disciplinary functions. This moral language, however, takes the form of a morality that guarantees the health of the state above anything or anyone else.

Stereotypes such as the overachieving model minority or traitorous spy masquerading among true citizens organize racial identities into categories of either “good” or “bad” in ways that are useful to, first, the colonial state, and, now, the hypernationalist state in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Even “positive” racial stereotypes can mask complex relations. The myth of the model minority, for example, triangulates Asian American experience in black-and-white racial tensions in the US in a way that emphasizes Asian American alienness while simultaneously downplaying how race significantly shapes social experience. Racial language couched in moral language is moreover powerful because it explains and externalizes the alienation experienced in a world where economic and political insecurities have risen and look poised to continue to rise. The anxieties of being “left behind”—a strange but powerful use of apocalyptic, moral language—is the mark of being a subject of the state under globalization fearful of being marginalized in the new world order of global capital.

White nationalism in the US or Malay nationalism in Malaysia that claim a prior right to be in power argue that the US and Malaysia “belong” to whites and Malays. The state has the obligation to first secure the pursuit of happiness for racial majorities. Populist nationalism based on essentialist or “purist” notions of racial origin consequently harnesses moral language to make its claims for state sovereignty, and concerns about rights, protection, privileges, and victimization are presented as moral concerns that only the state has the ability to guarantee and protect. The state appears to be an effective bulwark against the threats symbolized by the immigrant or refugee because the state is able to take forceful, legal measures against “foreign” threats. Anxieties about race cannot be separated from anxieties about state power.

The following section of the introduction offers us a new postcolonial reading of racial thought as it developed from precolonial times, through European colonialism, to WWII, the Cold War, and finally, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Asian Americans and Malaysians have been racialized in different and uneven ways, and the next section retains

their radical differences in the telling of their cultural histories. But both histories of racial subjection are a record of how the state exerts, defines, and enacts its political sovereignty in relation to racial difference as biological difference, and racial difference as civilizational difference. In mobilizing the two modes of defining racial difference, the state abrogates to itself the right to determine “good” and “bad” racial behavior in order to protect its sovereignty.

Read together, we also see how shared concepts of race within both national imaginaries have been informed by colonial notions of biology and culture, imperial relations between the putative East and West, and finally, also by the ideal roles of the modern nation-state in international and global politics. The conflation of race and morality in these two cultural histories shows us how race came to define state power in the wake of colonialism and in the face of globalization’s future threats. Combined, both histories show us the contours of an informal system of race linked not by direct historical connections or geographical contiguity, but by shared anxieties around state power and how to secure it. The next section of the introduction offers broad overviews of how racial subjection is a function of state power.

State Power and Racial Categories

Colonial policies in British Malaya have been thought of as “benign” and successful compared to its more violent legacies in India, Burma, or British West Africa. But “benign” colonial policies have nonetheless had long lasting consequences that run even to the twenty-first century. For example, under the British, the major racial communities in Malaysia were segregated by the types of labor each group performed and where they took place. The Chinese were predominantly employed in as coolies in tin mines or were merchants in the cities; the Indians were laborers in the rubber plantations; and the Malays worked in rice-planting, agriculture or fishing. This division of labor that was the basis of British policy of divide and rule explains why as Malaya decolonized, it was left with economic and geographical racial segregation. As the primary form of social organization in late nineteenth century Malaya that has carried over throughout the twentieth century, British forms of racial management imparted an illusion of predictability and fixity during times of chaos, change, and historical transition. Colonialism introduced racial categories to mark cultural and linguistic distinctions, but

these categories were also treated as stable and unchanging, and finally, as natural and rightful forms of political and social identity. But the belief that race first signifies biological difference and then cultural and linguistic difference is a piece of colonial fiction that organized and separated racial groups by temperament, dispositions, political beliefs, and “virtue.” Today, brown bodies are still thought to be “lazier” and yellow bodies more “cunning” or “inscrutable” not only in the West, but also in the East. Race, consequently, is a distillation of the state’s views of productive or desirable forms of behaviors that are thought to be fixed and uniform within each racial group.

“Racial language,” or the language that colonialists used to describe the supposed behaviors, predispositions, and temperaments of the Malayan subjects laid the groundwork for racial stereotypes—the conniving Chinese, the lazy Malay, and the alcoholic Indian, for example—that still have emotive power and explicatory force. As they learned to recognize the racial categories that the colonizers introduced, natives started to see and speak of themselves and one another as raced subjects—separate and different on the basis of biology and moral disposition. Internalized racism involved not only seeing one’s self as raced, but seeing other Asians as raced as well.

The British are moreover remembered as “benign” and successful colonizers because they set themselves in opposition to the Malayan communist army, whom they portrayed as “vicious” foreigners and spies of communist China. The history of the communist insurgency more fully elaborated in chapter 2 demonstrates that colonial success was achieved not primarily through military might, but by changing the terms in which we understand “good” and “evil.” “Success” in colonial wars refers not only to actual, physical, or military victories, but also to how our language and conceptual categories about race and culture became infused with moral judgment.

To briefly summarize Malaya’s early colonial history, the Portuguese and the Dutch colonized coastal areas of Malaya as early as 1511 because of their geographic importance to trading lines in the South China Seas. The port cities of Penang and Singapore came under British control in 1786 and 1819, and in 1826, they merged Penang, Singapore, and Melaka after the Dutch gave up Melaka in 1824. Known collectively as the Straits Settlement, these states fell under the jurisdiction of the British government in India. Most of the local Malay chiefs did not recognize this cessation of power to the British,¹² but it nonetheless established the beginning of British direct rule in Malaya via the Treaty of Pangkor, signed on January

20, 1874. Concurrent disputes in the Perak court over a royal succession, and also among the warring Chinese clans who worked Perak's very profitable tin mines, gave the British an opportunity to portray themselves as "peace keeper" or "mediator" within the Malay and Chinese factions. This perception of the white colonizer as "peace keeper" is foundational to how the modern Malaysian state sees itself as necessary to adjudicating between different racial groups.

The success of British direct rule and its Residential System was established under the aegis of the second British Resident, Sir Hugh Low, a diplomatic Malay scholar and naturalist who involved local Malay and Chinese leaders in his administration. Low and his successor, Sir Frank Swettenham, were both fluent in Malay, sympathetic to Malay customs, and engaged Malays in their administration, if only at the lower levels.¹³ Local ruling elites began to cooperate with the British, and that consequently meant the colonizers could "govern a large country cheaply with a handful of Europeans" (Harper 19). However, the British limited Malay administration to areas with mostly Malay populations as the British did not trust them to govern the growing immigrant Chinese and Indian communities, thus imposing racial segregation in Malaya on social and administrative levels.¹⁴ This strategy of divide and conquer later further allowed the British to keep the racial communities separate and at odds with one another, especially when anticolonial sentiments developed.

The term "Melayu" or Malay was not originally a racial term, but was rather first used to refer to the status of subjects of the Malaccan Kingdom,¹⁵ and that of Palembang. Malays trace their civilization, sultanates, customs, and hierarchies specifically to the Malaccan Sultanate between the period of 1400 D and 1511 AD,¹⁶ and Chinese and Indian traders had a long history of contact with Malay rulers beginning as early as the fifteenth century, although never at the levels between the years 1830 and 1930 when British Malaya received the highest influx of immigrants and migrant workers. Later, Chinese and European writings ascribed "Malay" to the other sultanates in the Malayan peninsula (Milner 51).

Ironically, this mythical "point of origin" in the Muslim Malay ethos—now the basis for national identity and ethnocentric politics—is the result of an intersection of transnational flows and cultural syncreticism intensified by the popularity of Malacca's harbor as a connection between India, China, Persia, Arabia, Java, and later, Europe. China was a powerful ally to and patron of the nascent kingdom and played an important role in recognizing Parameswara's position as ruler in 1405, who later paid a visit

to the Chinese imperial court in 1411 as a form of tribute. The British themselves also played a part in creating and recognizing new sultanates as late as the nineteenth century, precisely so they could negotiate with local leaders and gain influence over those lands.¹⁷

However, historically, the “Malays” were not a distinct racial group. The founder of Malay civilization, Parameswara was a Hindu who converted to Islam and changed his name to Megat Iskandar Shah. However, Islam seems not to have taken a hold until 1446: “[. . .] when Indian Muslim merchants at Malacca organized a *coup d'état* and put on the throne a prince of the royal house whose mother was an Indian Muslim” (Gullick 39). Despite the prominence of Indian Muslims in precolonial Malayan history and origins, in the twentieth century, the racial group “*mamak*” are now considered “Indian” rather than “Malay.”¹⁸ As Judith Nagata points out, the offspring of mixed Muslim parents during the fifteenth century would have been considered full Malays, obliterating the fact that Malay royalty does not have a “pure” biological racial lineage (107–8).¹⁹ “Malay identity” in precolonial times was further complicated by the various linguistic and cultural practices among the different ethnic groups that are now recognized as Malay, such as the Bugis, Achenese, Minangkabau, Javanese, Boyanese, and so on. Loyalty was not accorded on the basis of “race,” but rather, was given to the sultan whose protection one fell under. Different groups had control of different sultanates. For example, the Minangkabau in Negeri Sembilan,²⁰ and the Bugis in Selangor, most of whom were in competition and antagonistic (Milner 14).

The Chinese settlers who immigrated to Malacca as a result of good relations between the two kingdoms intermarried with local Malays, and over time they lost command of their Chinese dialects and adopted Malay dress and customs, as well as European culture, but remained distinctly “Chinese.” Called the Straits Chinese and also known as “Peranakan” or *Baba* and *Nyonya* Chinese, they sounded and acted like Malay but were nonetheless “Chinese.”²¹ These examples of precolonial notions of race and race relations as part of political and cultural systems contrasts with modern colonial notions of race as homogenous, unchanging, and stable. As a contemporary example of how the postcolonial state abrogates more power to itself now by imposing its own definitions of “race,” today, non-Muslims who marry Malays are considered to *masuk Melayu* (become Malay) and are required by law to convert to Islam, take up a Muslim name, and their children are categorized as Muslim and Malay.²²

Similarly, the Chinese were never a homogenous community. Defined primarily by their linguistic groups, the Chinese maintained distinct forms of “Chinese” identity because they retained political and cultural autonomy within their linguistic communities. Leadership among the different Chinese groups took the form of what was called a Kapitan system, led by the *Kapitan Cina*, usually the leader of a secret society, respected by his community as well as the Malay court.²³ Mostly from the southern Chinese provinces, these groups rarely intermixed, and certain groups such as the Hakka were often ridiculed by other communities because of their customs and language. They were further divided by occupational specializations.

The Cantonese dominated mining and crafts, while the Hokkien and Teochew were agriculturists, small shopkeepers and boatmen. [. . .] Chinese of the same surname or clan but speaking different dialects also clung to their own dialect group. [. . .] When the Chinese migrants came to the Malay world, societies based on clan or dialect associations appeared to be an indispensable organization affording protection and assistance in an alien and often hostile environment. (Andaya 141)

Chinese laborers who arrived as indentured laborers were most often exploited by other Chinese and suffered appalling conditions onboard the ships that brought them to the tin mines of Malaya.

Precolonial Malays owed their loyalties not to an abstract idea of a singular Malay race, or a single sultan, but rather to their individual, respective sultanates in the different states. In his essay, Clive Kessler identifies as characteristic of Malay culture a political identity that has become conflated with “Malayness” and continues to have a hold on contemporary Malay group identity: “Malay society and culture, as they conceive of themselves, rest centrally upon a political condition: upon people having and being subjects of a *raja*, a ruler. The polity, a *kerajaan*, is not only a ruler’s domain but his subjects’ socio-cultural condition, that of having a *raja*” (139). In other words, the sultanate became a state-sanctioned marker of race in colonial Malaya, where racial identity became an important measure of one’s place in colonial order. As long as the dignity and standing of the Malay Rulers remained intact, Malay identity was still secure in the face of all other modernizing flows brought about by British colonialism and the increase of immigrant communities. Anthony Milner likens the subsequent colonial

dislocation of the relationship between ruler and commoner to “a type of psychological and spiritual suicide” (25).

The British successfully created the idea of the modern Malay by first uniting the competing sultanates. Individual sultans from the various sultanates were only first brought together at the first Federal Council or “Conference of the Rulers” in July 1897. As Frank Swettenham, the first British Resident, noted not without a little pride, the gathering of the Sultans was a success because it eventually led to the unification of the inland states on the peninsula.

Never in the history of Malaya has any such assemblage been ever imagined. I doubt if anybody has ever heard of one Ruler of a State making a ceremonial visit to another; but to have been able to collect together in one place the Sultans of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan is a feat that might have well been regarded as impossible. (As quoted in Chai 50)

Given the significance of the raja to Malay communal identity, the very act of bringing together the various heads of states from the different sultanates reified the colonial notion that all the brown peoples of Malaya were part of the same “race.” The enterprising white colonialists were the first to “unite” the Malays, for whom racial unity today is the bulwark of racial identity and race-based political parties.

But while colonialism disrupted local communities and traditional cultural life, these histories are also a record of how local existing systems of exploitation, kinship, patronage, and social hierarchies were integrated with modern ideas of race. Traditional rulers colluded with the colonialists, and traditional hierarchies became the basis for new, modern hierarchies. Tan Malaka, one of the foremost Indonesian communist intellectuals of the early twentieth century, argued that native elites were complicit in colonial exploitation of the country, where indigenous systems of exploitation continued to exist in a dual economy alongside Western capitalism: “All of the social, political and economic traits of traditional society had been left undisturbed—had, indeed, been reinforced in political terms—by Dutch colonialism, while the capitalist economy thrived in a number of more or less completely separate enclaves” (Christie 39). This duality allowed native elites to assume power after decolonization and accounts for the continuation of colonial logic in the postcolonial state.²⁴

The argument for the political and economic “rights” of the Malays today ties politics to economics in openly racial and religious discourse. Racial discrimination in favor of the Malays is the law of the land recognized by the British during decolonization and further entrenched in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵ Pan-Islamic movements were popular among Malays, Indonesians, and others of the Islamic *umma*, including Arabs who were at first not included as “Malays.”²⁶ These movements, aimed particularly at empowering nonelite Muslims to become more informed and educated both as Malays and as Muslims, were among the cultural factors that led to the interweaving of race and religion as modern Malay identity.²⁷ The end of colonialism left new postcolonial states with unwieldy new demographics, but the Cold War placed even greater challenges ahead of them. Developed more fully in the chapters of this book, the cultural history of the postcolonial state in the twentieth century exemplifies how the state looks outward as much as it looks inward in its drive to power. More importantly, it explains why state power in conjunction with the growth of capitalism has had such an overwhelming influence over the development of racial thought.

This relationship between race, state power, and capitalism as it unfolded in Southeast Asia was not isolated or limited to Southeast Asia. The US also has a long history of understanding or representing Asian Americans and Asians in relation to the labor they can perform within the larger goals of US state development, and their roles as laborers, workers, experts, or technocrats in the world economy. While different from Southeast Asian colonial history, the cultural histories Asian American literary critics, sociologists, and historians have produced paint a rich picture of the relationship between race and capitalism, and how trade relations and the geopolitical fight for dominance in the world economy have played important roles in shaping our beliefs about race through the Asian American experience. What appears as a common denominator in both histories is the emergence of racial tropes as moral tropes that secure state power driven by capitalist growth.

Modern relations between Asia and the US can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the Asia Pacific appears as a possible new market for the expansion of US capital. Lisa Lowe, David Palumbo-Liu, Colleen Lye, and others also argue that the racial formation of Asian Americans is intimately tied to economic success in Asia and that success causes anxieties about the US economy. The racialization of Asian Americans from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century takes place within the context of American economic needs and Asian labor read through

the prism of US Orientalist fantasies as well as its diplomatic relations with Asia. In other words, Asian American racial figures cannot be understood outside of the US state acting to protect both its economy as well as its polity from Asian immigrants. This history begins with the Nationality Act of 1790 that set aside Asians as “racially ineligible” for citizenship, and the Page Act enforced from 1875 to 1943 that banned Asian coolies from entering the US. While Asian American labor was crucial to the development of capital and the development of infrastructure such as its railroads, Asian bodies were deemed to be too threatening and unassimilable to the body politic.

The inclusion or the transformation of “Asians” into Americans at the turn of the century is made possible by imagining Asians as suitable laborers. However, Asian Americans were thought to be both desirable but also a threat to the United States. Asian Americans can supposedly “adapt Asia to America” and “transform America through the application of a ‘Confucian’ ethos” (Palumbo-Liu, 21), but they are also imagined to have an aptitude for economic development and thus might displace American workers. The production of the model-minority is made possible because of the correlations between Confucianism and Protestantism.²⁸ But Asian traditions believed to be Confucian practices, Palumbo-Liu shows, are really a product of the US imaginary.²⁹

During this period, the Orientalist anchoring of the referent “Asiatic” to capitalism was further cemented by the geopolitical concerns that result from the need to open up and secure new markets for Western regimes. Colleen Lye’s historicization of the representations of Asians or Asian Americans in the nineteenth century demonstrates that even while the US invented Japan and China as civilizational polar opposites, these oppositions were also collapsed to generate fear of an Asia that would overwhelm the US economically and demographically: “The ‘yellow peril’ articulates the numerical power of a ‘Chinese’ mass with a miraculous ‘Japanese’ developmental capacity” (Lye 17). The racialization of “Asia” was produced in the relations between US national identity and US relations with other nation-states. However, geopolitical lines were still changing, and Western countries began to fight for influence over China and access to its mythical, vast, untapped market as the colonization of Africa began to fall apart. The military presence of Russian in the region further complicated the politics of this time, and the British in particular played Japan against Russia’s expansion into China. In the process, Russia was also racialized as “Oriental” on the basis of its “bureaucratic corruption” (23). China, Japan, and Russian were then seen to make up the “East” as opposed to the West.

The formation of “Asia,” in this example, proves to be capitalism-driven geopolitics that is determined by so-called moral values assigned to particular races. Attacks against class or capitalism are similarly played out on the bodies of Asians as they appear in early-twentieth-century US literature. Lye goes on to argue that the figure of the “Asiatic,” as represented in American naturalism, becomes legible through a reading of historical materialism where the figure of the Asiatic “embodies” the logic of capitalism. Subsequently, Asian American characters cannot but suffer violent fates in fictional works; they become the object that resolves the tensions and excesses of capitalism’s effects in US culture. Asian bodies, or American bodies that resemble Asian ones, become the target of class critique because they stand in for capitalism itself.

That Asia is perceived to be both a challenge to and a part of US capitalism continues to structure US relationship to Asia in the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa point to “Pacific Rim” discourse as another form of closing the distance between Asia and the US, and that artificial contiguity allows for the imagining of an economic compatibility between the two polities.

. . . the “meaning” of Asia responds to the exigencies governing US (inter)national self-fashioning at a given moment: “Asia” is the threatening rival to US technological dominance, the untapped natural and labor resource for US industry, the limitless consumer market for US goods and culture, the mysterious and feminized territory awaiting and in need of US military protection. (4)

While Chuh and Shimakawa describe US-Asia relations during more recent history, their descriptions confirms a continuity with early-twentieth-century US race-relations; racialization parallels economic needs. “Asia” and “Asians” are defined not only in relation to whiteness, but also to national and global economies.

The shifts in how Asians were beginning to be reimagined are paralleled by shifts in US immigration laws surrounding Asian immigrations that took place in the twentieth century. Racial restrictions on citizenship were removed in 1953, and were later followed by a general overhaul in 1965 that allowed Asian war brides, refugees, adoptees, and students into the country. These shifts in the mid-twentieth century, Madeleine Hsu argues, was a result of a confluence of historical exigencies such as the needs posed by Cold War international relations, such as the US’s need for more allies

during and after WWII. Soft diplomacy, civil war in China, and the Cold War played important roles in changing public perceptions about the earliest Asian immigrants to the US, the Chinese. Moreover, the emergence of Chinese luminaries in the 1930s, such as Pearl S. Buck, Chiang Kai-Shek, and his wife Song Meiling—an American-educated Methodist who was also close friends with Henry Luce, the famous publisher and China-born son of American missionaries—made Americans more sympathetic toward the Chinese. And finally, the unexpected predicament of high-profile and highly educated Chinese students and scholars who became stranded as refugees in the US as a result of Communist victory in China during the 1940s also informed debates on immigration reform in 1943.

Debates and appeals in support of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act emphasized the “industrious,” “law-abiding,” “useful,” “assimilable,” and “upwardly mobile” natures of the Chinese, not to elevate the Chinese, but to change immigration laws so that they would receive similar privileges accorded to other racial groups (Hsu 99). It is at this time, Hsu argues, that we see a shift from the racial figuration of the Chinese as “yellow peril” to “model minority.” Only Chinese immigrants with good educational backgrounds and the right kinds of cultural training were deemed fit to enter the US, and the admittance of these new “right” kinds of refugees became an important propaganda tool in the Cold War where immigration quotas and restrictions were deemed as an affront to other states because it was seen as an exercise or show of power.

Racial representations of Asians as laborers or subjects, or as synecdoche for capitalist social relations or capital itself, however, imbricate not only capitalist relations between nation-states but also the global political conditions under which capitalism evolved in the postwar period, that is, how states began to see race after the experience of WWII and the Cold War. Broader historical trends in the second half of the twentieth century indicate that the very nature of racist discourse and state attitudes toward racism especially began to go through a significant change as noted by historians and cultural critics such as Tak Fujitani and Rey Chow.

Fujitani, a historian of US-Japanese relations in the twentieth century, argues that World War II became a “global system of mutual emulation” because both the US and Japan had to disavow racism in order to mobilize racial minorities in their armies as well as allies in other parts of the world. Racism depends on both economic exploitation, but also on the cooperation of racial Others. Overt, or what Fujitani calls “vulgar” racism had to at least be