

afield”? I can see that my rhetorical questions are beginning to betray a certain frustration.

This is a useful book in two rather contrasting ways. It first reprints some theoretical pieces that provide a lot of energy: the Altman and Morton but also Joseph Boone’s *PMLA* article, “Vacation Cruises,” which has become a ubiquitous citation since it was first published in 1995. On the other hand, there are the regional and national articles mentioned above. Still, it is not the book it might have been, I suspect because the disparate voices just would not come together in the way Hawley wished. Dayal writes, “Reading same-sex desire back into the colonial calculus certainly adds a dimension to the understanding of the traveling discourse of empire. The promise of this approach, probably not fully realized even in this collection, is that it could radically restructure the understanding of desire and its ambivalences in the colonial primal scene, where the structure of affiliation, we are told, led to the shuttling of affiliation” (311).

Dayal resorts to theory-speak but the substance is valid. The “colonial calculus” needs this “dimension” but it is “probably not fully realized even in this collection.” While Butler’s “Finally” is no doubt unjustified, it looks like pocco-queer is a field that is going to need many founding moments. This is one more worthy attempt.

Terry Goldie

Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, eds. *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pearson Education Malaysia, 2001. Pp. xiv, 338.

This book professes to be “the first serious collection of literary criticism on the subject of Malaysian Literature in English ever to be put together in published form.” Regardless of whether the collection as a whole or its parts live up to the ambitious scope of the project, such a claim does point to the salutary nature of the undertaking involved. Given that a body of writing identifiable as a Malaysian literature in English goes back fifty years, the belatedness of an endeavour of this sort is itself a sign of the fraught dynamics arising from the adoption of English into, and its adaptation by, a postcolonial, diasporic context.

The editors’ introduction is particularly helpful given the complex entanglements between English and the Malaysian nation-state. Although the

issues and debates are looked at in depth by several of the essays that follow, the Introduction provides a useful overview of the cultural politics framing the use of English from the 1960s to the present.

In Malaysia, the dominant ethnic group comprises the Malays, who, claiming indigeneity to the soil, call themselves *bumiputeras* (Malay for “sons of the soil”). This self-definition symbolically excludes the mainly English-speaking ethnic Chinese and Indians, mostly descendants of migrants brought over in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to service colonial Malaya’s tin and rubber industries. After Malaysia gained independence from British rule in 1957 and through a systematic process of “cultural decolonization and abrogation” (xii) employed in the period of nation-building, English lost its status as the language of administration and public discourse. Since the National Language Act of 1967 and its re-enforcement, after the ethnic riots of 1969, through the Constitutional Amendment Act of 1971, which made it illegal to question its privileged status, Malay has been at the heart of all official attempts to construct a narrative of identity and culture for the Malaysian nation.

Thus only writings in Malay are accorded the status of ‘national’ literature; works in English and vernacular languages such as Tamil or Chinese are known as ‘sectional’ literatures. English itself is officially designated a ‘second,’ if not a ‘foreign,’ language. Although used widely for personal and professional purposes by Malaysia’s burgeoning middle class, English is viewed in nationalist quarters as the “language of continuing economic and socio-cultural dominance” (x). Apart from sporadic attempts by the private sector to sponsor English writing competitions, there is hardly any state support for creative writing in English.

Against such a contextualized understanding of the institutional practices that impinge on the creative process in Malaysia, one realizes both the predicament of English literature in the country and the cultural and ideological role played by this volume.

The book is organized in four parts. The first section brings together essays that chart the development of English literary writing in Malaysia, from its genesis in the 1950s as a literature rooted in local realities to the early 1990s. Included here are key pioneering articles by Lloyd Fernando, which attempt to delineate a “tradition” of Malaysian literature in English in the processes of its formation.

The essays here and in the section that follows – which examines the state of Malaysian cultural productions in English in the major genres of fiction, drama and poetry – provide a useful context that frames the literary criticism in parts three and four. The criterion for selection, according to the

editors, is “the best criticism that has been written and published about the subject over time” (xiv). In setting out “to fill a gap in the ready availability of relevant readings on the various English literary forms in a Malaysian context” (xiii), Quayum and Wicks have pulled together previously published as well as specially commissioned essays, written from 1969 to 2000 – mostly by Malaysian and Singaporean academics in the field.

Included in the section on individual authors are essays by, as well as interviews with, the country’s most important creative writers in English. A noticeable omission is the important recent article “The New Diaspora” by K.S. Maniam, which should have replaced the much-anthologized essay that is included here. Authors examined include novelists Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang and Maniam; poets Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam and Shirley Lim (who also writes fiction); and playwright Kee Thuan Chye. Of these, only Maniam, Wong and Lim continue to actively write and publish.

The literary criticism is somewhat uneven, in terms of both its critical methodologies and conceptual paradigms. While this is somewhat inevitable, since the essays range over a thirty-year period, even in more recent selections the criticism is moored to old practices of cultural and literary critique. One obvious instance is the use of terminology such as “Malaysian Anglophone” writing, which is adopted unself-consciously by the editors and some of the contributors. What this volume does make clear is the need for literary criticism in Malaysia to move away from the teleological model of Commonwealth-literature criticism to a postcolonial criticism that is more concerned with the locations of cultural self-representation.

Also, one of the interviews reads more like a chat, and a few of the critical essays carry a descriptive rather than an analytical thrust. These should have been left out, especially since the editors declare that only “the best criticism” is included in the volume. The introduction also fails to do what all introductions should do—shed light on the organization of material in the book, or provide some general principle of coherence guiding the volume. Also, nowhere here do the editors indicate that a very useful selected bibliography of criticism (of material that, for unspecified reasons, has not already been incorporated into the volume) is appended at the end.

A volume like this, however, is timely given recent efforts to ‘reinstate’ English into public life through the national education system. This, as the editors themselves recognize, is a pragmatic acknowledgement by the present government of the value of English as Malaysia enters the information age and seeks developed nation status by 2020. A critical distinction has to be made, therefore, between what is a merely utilitarian and what is a cul-

tural principle informing the place and status of English in the country. For until and unless English comes to be viewed as another Malaysian language, English literary writing in Malaysia will continue to be pushed to the peripheries, viewed as a tradition of writing unrooted to the soil.

A collection like this is necessary to make visible the continued and valid existence of a creative and critical consciousness in English in Malaysia, and to provide an intervention in the nation's hegemonic cultural and literary traditions.

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

Arundhati Roy. *The Cost of Living*. Vintage Canada, 1999. Pp. vii, 126. (Cdn) \$14.95.

Arundhati Roy. *Power Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001. Pp. 1, 182. (U.S.) \$12.00.

The title of the last chapter of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* becomes the main title of her next book, *The Cost of Living*. That the cost of living for certain people is tragically and ironically death continues to shock and steer Roy to write again and again. She writes about that which cannot even be imagined, the unimaginable, for it is really real. Rahel would know this. Ammu would know this. Velutha would know this, but he wouldn't be given a chance to let us know what he knows. So say my students of International Literature reading and re-reading *The Cost of Living*.

Once again, it is about the small things that are never little, that ought not ever to be belittled. The book too is small, but only in size. The first essay, "The Greater Common Good" – its title alluding at once to Jeremy Bentham and Mahatma Gandhi – is about the slow and legal destruction of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly the aborigines, the untouchables, and the poorest of the poor in India, who are being displaced by big and small dams as part of the development that both globalization and nationalism demand. The second essay, "The End of Imagination," is a response to the government of India's nuclear tests of 1998. Roy's theory is simple: "There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense . . . It doesn't *matter* whether or not we use them [bombs]. They