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A museum, the city, and a nation

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The purpose of this article is to understand how a corporate museum in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia works to create proleptic myths of nationhood to under-gird a broader state-centric project of nationalist–capitalist modernization. The article examines how these myths are expressed in the museum's design plans and are manifested in the museum's displays and spatial layout. From this analysis it becomes apparent that, first, the museum's designers intend for Malaysian museum-goers to both learn and embody particular myths of national modernization. Second, the museum's displays are dedicated to establishing a Malay-centric origin narrative for the contemporary nation-state. Third, as one moves through the museum, Malay-centrism gives way to narratives of a 'multi-racial' society that link technological modernization with social progress. Eventually, however, 'race' is trumped by 'class' as the social identity category deemed appropriate for 'information age' citizenship and nationhood in Malaysia in a story that parallels broader cultural and political–economic state-centric aspirations to achieve 'development'. The deployment of 'class' in this context melds strategies of government with selective aspects of neoliberalism that seek to manage the possible cultural and political experiences of nationalist–capitalist accumulation and democratic authoritarianism in contemporary Malaysia. I suggest that while these aspirations expressed through the design of the museum might appear to overcome certain limitations of racial communalisms among different Malaysians, they also dissemble underlying symbolic and material violence that enforces a state-centric stability on the possible meanings of citizenship and national identity in contemporary Malaysia.

Keywords: Identity formation • Malaysia • modernization • museum • myth

Nationhood is an imagined sphere with no given identity or essence; it is a cultural construct. We can know about it as long as we employ certain technologies to inscribe the possible sphere. In turn, such technologies create the knowledge of it, create a fact of it, and the entity comes into existence.[1]

The map, it has been said, precedes the territory.[2] At Telekomuzium, a corporate museum in a small neo-classical building dwarfed by surrounding skyscrapers in downtown Kuala Lumpur, Information Age Malaysia hangs, glowing, on a wall (see Figure 1). The text beneath the map reads, 'Malaysia's Communications Network extends to every corner of the nation, by land, sea, and air.' This map records the locations of telecommunications networks and satellite ground stations. But it also records aspirations for nationhood premised on assumptions about the transformative power of technology. On the map, to the south of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city, a small dot marks 'Putra Jaya' (subsequently named 'Putrajaya'). Today that city is the new seat of the federal government. Speaking in 1997, then prime minister Mahathir described the government's move from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya as 'more than a physical migration. It is also symbolic of discarding old legacies and mindsets (…) we hope this move will set in motion a paradigm shift in our ways of thinking, working, and living'.[3] Approximately one year after this map went on display to the public at Telekomuzium, final termination notices were handed to plantation workers at Perang Besar, the largest remaining plantation site on which the new city of Putrajaya was being built.[4]

FIGURE 1 Map of Malaysia at Telekomuzium. Photograph by the author.

Telekomuzium is a myth of modernization that narrates a highly particular version of nationhood for contemporary Malaysia. As James Ferguson argues, such myths need to be understood as more than 'simply' factually inaccurate stories that have come to be widely believed. Instead they can be approached from an anthropological perspective which focuses attention on the narrative's role as a 'cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience'.[5] The significance of Telekomuzium is that it is a material site that brings visitors in contact with the nation as an object of contemplation and embodiment. I emphasize the notions of contemplation and embodiment because of the role of interactivity built into many of the museum's displays. Interactivity is an idea explored recently by Heath and von Lehn.[6] Through video-based analysis of museum visitors' talk, visual conduct, and physical orientation, these authors show that visitors transpose museum artefacts and pedagogical principles to their bodies through embodied action. This finding leads the authors to question approaches to museums and their artefacts that tend to theorize them exclusively in terms of the psychological or cognitive dispositions of museum-goers. Although my approach here is broadly similar, my study of Telekomuzium is more limited in that it did not include research on visitor receptions of the museum. Consequently, my interpretations of how Malaysian visitors might experience the museum are limited to speculation.

While my interpretations of the museum's displays are coloured by my own positionality as a non-Malaysian, they develop from the evidence of designers' intentions expressed in the museum's own design documents. In this sense, my approach to the museum parallels Sherry Errington and Ann Anagnost who explore the meaning of miniature landscapes of the nation in theme park-like settings in Indonesia and China respectively.[7] Errington demonstrates how a particular open-air miniature landscape in Jakarta is part of a state system of provincial and sub-provincial museums that materialize state-centric nationalist discourses of ethnic 'unity in diversity'. Similarly, for Anagnost, such landscapes are boundaries demarcating spaces of representation structured by kitsch in which the nation becomes an object of contemplation for visitors of these landscapes. Such landscapes configure the nation and its people through disjunctive forms of representation that reorder both time and space into proleptic myths of nationhood.[8] For Visvanathan, such disjunctive myths – in their reorderings and erasures – are a source of material and symbolic violence that accompanies fixed or exclusionary understandings of nationhood and citizenship.[9] The sentimental expression of populism, or kitsch, works by glossing over or erasing the realities of material and symbolic violence that grant an apparent stability to the otherwise ambivalent categories of nation and citizen.[10] Visvanathan points to the histories of genocide that underwrite the apparent stability of the category of nation in the democracies of Europe and the settler societies of North America and Australia, for example. Such material violence can be glossed over or erased through the performance of populist expressions of belonging to the nation that are often defined in opposition to an Other construed as outside the fold of the nation and citizenship such as immigrants, refugees, and aboriginals. As we will see, the museum's disjunctive representations of the geohistory of Malaysia and its people selectively erase and (re)order markers of 'Other' identities and territorializations to grant an apparent stability to citizenship and nationhood in contemporary Malaysia. In this sense, Telekomuzium is a

boundary-making machine; a site for manufacturing modern Selves and Others that also dissembles certain forms of violence.

I argue that the museum narrates broader state-centric aspirations to shift notions of citizenship and national identity away from Malay-centric communalism (or race-based identities) to what Khoo calls 'market nationalism' (or class based identities).[11] These aspirations are part of a larger nationalist–capitalist project[12] of development initiated under the 'democratic authoritarianism' of Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir and which is being continued in somewhat modified terms under current prime minister Abdullah Badawi.[13]

In 1991, then prime minister Mahathir offered a bold aspiration for Malaysia to become a 'developed nation' by the year 2020 at a meeting with Malaysia's business and political elite. 'Vision 2020', as it came to be called, aspires toward the transformation of Malaysia not only into a 'post-industrial' society, but a 'post-racial' one as well. In this speech, Mahathir advocated for the emergence of Bangsa Malaysia, a term that fuses 'race' and 'nationality' in new ways. In this fusion, the meaning of 'race' in Malaysia begins to change; the denotation of supposed essential biocultural differences between 'Malays', 'Chinese', and 'Indians' fades out while a nationalist–capitalist political unity fades in. As Mahathir described the transformation, Malaysia should become:

> a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward-looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future.

> (A) united nation, with a confident Malaysian society … with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one '*Bangsa Malaysia*' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation.[14]

Since Mahathir's retirement in October 2003, Malaysia's new prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, has continued to advocate Bangsa Malaysia, but with a renewed emphasis on the government's Malay constituents through what he refers to as The Malay Struggle.[15] This 'struggle' is an edict to Malays that they must: 'nurture a global mindset', 'face global challenges', 'acquire … knowledge and skills', 'master technology and compete', 'build up international networks', and 'communicate in the global *lingua franca* (of) English'.[16] While this notion of The Malay Struggle certainly emphasizes discourses of race it is, like Bangsa Malaysia, ultimately directed toward a shift in identity of citizen–subjects vis-à-vis the nation. That identity is to be not one based on ethnic communalism, but one based on class cohesion. Old notions of ethnic communalism are meant to give way to a meritorious Malay(sian) professional middle-class competing 'globally' and on par with their fellow citizens no matter what their ethnic affiliation.[17]

This attempt by the state to actively guide a shift in Malaysian identity from biocultural notions of race to economic–nationalist notions of class can be usefully understood in terms of what Hoffman calls 'patriotic professionalism'.[18] Patriotic professionalism describes the formation of self-enterprising citizen–subjects employed as marketized labour in skilled professions who are simultaneously 'concerned with, and (have) affinity for, the nation'.[19] This process involves a form of governmentality characterized by a combination of state-centric action and forms of neoliberalism through notions of choice and autonomy to achieve a

co-construction of personhood and nationhood. What results is a form of governmentality in which there is no fundamental contradiction between state-centric action (in the form of patriotism, active guidance of citizen–subjects, nationalist rhetoric) and neoliberalism (in the form of calculative choice, marketized labour, and the primacy of a self-enterprising ethos).[20]

One possible reason for the deployment of class as a governmental strategy for nation building in Malaysia is that class can be a way to talk about and explain socio-economic difference without relying on explanations grounded in supposedly essential biocultural differences denoted by 'race'. Because of the way some notions of class build in connotations of nonexclusive social belonging (e.g. in the mythos of the self-made individual), class becomes a kind of political cipher in Malaysia, a way of conceptualizing and practicing social difference that can avoid the sensitivities of older ethnic communalisms. Class can trade on connotations of a certain kind of inclusiveness: if – as the mythos of the self-made individual in neoliberal economic thought goes – anyone can improve their socio-economic lot through hard work (rather than it being determined by the 'birthright' of 'race') then any Malaysian can belong to Bangsa Malaysia, that is, to 'the 'market nationalism' of 21st-century Malaysia.[21] In this sense, class is as much a pragmatic technique of governing as it is an aspirational category for maximizing socio-economic mobility for the greatest number of people. It is a social formation, whereby the ongoing ethnically inflected struggles for continued dominance in the political domain are exercised through appeals to the supposedly apolitical domain of the economic. In other words, class can act as a political cipher because it can 'explain away' the reality of genuine socio-economic disparities in Malaysia in terms of the 'merit' and 'choice' of individuals engaged in a collective nationalist–capitalist project of nation building. Even though 'class' has an exclusiveness to it, it is a flexible form of social identity useful as a technique of governing because it can replace older discourses of race that posited supposedly essential biocultural differences as the source of uneven socio-economic development with individual responsibility.[22]

As an interactive experience, Telekomuzium is a material site where Malaysian visitors come into contact with this form of governmentality as an object of contemplation and embodiment. In what follows, I demonstrate how the museum was intentionally designed to encourage Malaysian visitors not just to learn, but to embody a coherent narrative of progressive, collective identity change through technology-led modernization toward a post-industrial and post-racial society. Through that embodied experience, aspirational notions of being in, and belonging to, Information Age Malaysia might become phenomenologically real. By playing off the idea of 'interactivity' I am able to show how the museum's designers have turned state-centric idealizations of citizenship and nationhood into a material space of representation that appears to open up some possibilities for being in, and belonging to, Information Age Malaysia that transcend existing ethnic communalisms. However, just as such new possibilities of pluralism and social belonging are opened, they are quickly straight-jacketed into tightly scripted kitschy performances of class. This kitsch is important to consider not from a position intended to confer on the critic a sense of superior taste or sophistication; instead, the importance of kitsch in the museum derives from its role in dissembling the symbolic and material violence of erasure and disjunctive myth-making that occurs while the museum's narrative poses as a disinterested representation of national 'modernization'.

Enter the museum

(T)he visitor will feel empowered by the museum … They will bring their friends and relatives to show them their stories and to help them express their memories about Malaysian history in general and the history and feats of Telekom in particular … The museum offers a unique gift to the visiting public. The opportunity to use their imagination to stimulate all their senses and to tell the stories of us all.

Excerpt from *Design Concept* for Telekomuzium[23]

This is not a story about a corporation, but many stories about all of us and how we play our part in the development of the Nation.

Excerpt from *Visitor Narrative*, a guide for interpreters[24]

The above excerpts emphasize the explicit intentions of the museum's designers to help visitors realize themselves as active participants in experiencing and enacting a national development narrative. As visitors interact with the museum and its displays, it is hoped they will thereby come to embody a shared sense of belonging to Malaysia as a technologically sophisticated nation.[25] The design concept for the museum that was submitted to Telekom Malaysia by Pico International, the firm ultimately awarded the contract for designing and building the museum, is a nearly 80-page document that contains detailed textual descriptions and diagrams of proposed displays and overall museum layout. It also describes the effects the museum and its displays are intended to have on visitors.

According to Hetherington, museums are key forms of space for making sense of the fragmentations and dislocations that are said to accompany experiences of modernity.[26] Indeed, as Sharon Macdonald argues

The museum is not … merely a product of or a site for displaying the narratives of modern developments; it is also one of the technologies through which modernity – and the democratic ideals, social differences and exclusions, and other contradictions which this has produced – is constituted.[27]

Discussing the emergence of science and technology museums in 19th-century Britain, Andrew Barry contends that 'as an institution of government, the museum would act not so much through controlling and disciplining the public, but by enlisting its active support for liberal values and objectives'.[28] This interrelationship between museums and state power in the form of assent by 'the people' to a shared sense of belonging to, and support for, the state is implicated in both symbolic and material violence.[29] While I am not suggesting that Telekomuzium has a despotic intent underlying it, in a moment I begin to show how it separates out a highly specific past that erases and reorders Other identities and territorializations in ways that dissemble such violence through performances of kitsch in, for example, the populist celebration of the stories of 'us' and 'we' signalled in the excerpts cited earlier. Even in Telekomuzium's representation of Malaysia as a 'multiracial' plural society, there are important reasons not to accept such representations uncritically, especially as an unambiguous sign of a progressive society.[30]

Entering the museum, one is greeted by a male voice-over in both Malay and English:

Welcome to Telekomuzium. From this point onwards you will journey back in time, return to the present, and into the future where you'll uncover the dawn of telecommunications in Malaya from the 1800s, experience its trials and tribulations from the beginning, trace its amazing progress to this day and beyond.

This welcome message sets boundaries around an audience, directed as it is to those who speak English and/or Malay (but not Tamil or Hokkien or …).[31] In the centre of the room are two prominently displayed male mannequins wearing baju Melayu (customary Malay clothing; Figure 2). The hand of one of the mannequins is poised to strike a large wooden object hanging from the ceiling. At the mannequin's feet is a small textbox offering an explanation in both Malay and English stating that the object is a *ketok-ketok* (literally a 'knock-knock'). The textbox describes the *ketok-ketok* in terms of Malay 'tradition' and 'custom'. Visually and textually this very first display is transporting museum visitors into the past and signalling a particular set of markers of Malay identity. The references to 'tradition' and 'custom' together with their projection into a 'pre-modern' past also connote 'origin' and 'rootedness'. We might think of this and other displays as boundary objects, that is, repositories of ideal types that some Malaysian museum visitors might contest, others might accept, but all will be familiar with.[32]

The Malay version of the textbox beneath the mannequin does not translate the word *ketok-ketok*. Thus it speaks an implicit question that it also answers: Do you, the museum visitor, need a translation of *ketok-ketok*?[33] If so, then you are different from us, a group who needs no translation of the Malay word. As one of the first displays that museum visitors see and perhaps read, the *ketok-ketok* display establishes a temporal frame, an origin point in which Malay identity is established as primary. The work achieved by these displays is to begin to tell a highly particular origin narrative as a shared, but Malay-centric, *national* origin story.

The national narrative being told in these and adjacent displays pushes imaginings of Malay indigeneity to what is today contemporary Malaysia over a wide territory and far back in time,

FIGURE 2   Display showing a *ketok-ketok*. Photograph by the author.

indeed into the mists of 'pre-history'. According to a textbox accompanying a reproduction of cave paintings against the back wall:

> Around 4000 years ago, the Neolithic people of Malaysia must have used various simple means of communication. When they painted pictures on the walls they were conveying some sort of meaning. Wall paintings have been found in the Niah caves of Sarawak; the Tambun Caves; the Batu Luas Caves at Ulu Tembeling, Pahang; and the Batu Cincin Caves in Ulu, Kelantan.

An important elision is being made here between the 'Neolithic people' and the people of the contemporary nation of 'Malaysia'. This display works by suggesting a primordial past of which the present-day nation is both outcome and container. Another textbox makes this link explicit:

> In bygone days ceramic objects were highly valued … This is clearly seen in the communities of Sarawak … In the Peninsula the *Labu Sayong* – a water pot shaped like a gourd – is well known in Perak, especially around Kuala Kangsar. It represents a cultural link between the people of ancient times and those of the present day.

The references in these textboxes to other sites in what are today Sabah and Sarawak reinforce contemporary political boundaries that define Malaysia as a modern territorial state with claims about primordial national origins.

Adjacent to the reproduction of Neolithic cave paintings is another reproduction, this one of the Inscribed Terengganu Stone.[34] Dating the Terengganu stone to the 14th century, the accompanying textbox tells visitors:

> Hieroglyphics were pictographic symbols, often inscribed on stone. Such old inscriptions can be very informative. For instance the Inscribed Terengganu Stone is evidence of the spread of Islam in this country.

Two important pieces of work are being achieved in this representation of the nation's history. First is the pushing back of Islamic (and hence 'Malay') influence as far back in time as possible. Implicitly, that which can be proven to be historically 'first' is also being used to lend authenticity to the contemporary situation of Malay privilege. Second, the Inscribed Terengganu Stone is described as evidence of the spread of Islam 'in this country' where 'country' connotes the thoroughly modern notion of 'state'.[35] Thus a link between the historical presence of Islam and its contemporary centrality to the nation-state is implied. It suggests a teleology in which the contemporary sociopolitical reality called 'Malaysia' already existed in an inchoate form in the past. The museum's displays are, to paraphrase Winichakul, creating the 'fact' of Malaysia and that entity is coming into existence.

As important as what these displays include is what they leave out. In the national origin story they are telling, there is no reference at all to other traditions and customs (e.g. Buddhist, Hindu, or Taoist) that might be important. The focus on the Inscribed Terengganu Stone, with its rumi script, emphasizes the legacy of Arabic trade with the region and thus a connection between modern Malaysia and the historical centre of Islam. Yet there is ample evidence of trade occurring between merchants from what is today India who brought Islamic influences to the region even before Arab traders did. There is also evidence of Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist influences from regions of what are today India, Burma/Myanmar, and

Thailand, not to mention mainland China as well as various cultural traditions linked to what are today Egypt and eastern Africa.[36] No reference to these cultural traditions are made anywhere in Telekomuzium. It is an absence that seems deliberate given the wealth of evidence for such cultural linkages.

To the extent that other customs and traditions important to Malaysia's constitutive 'races' (e.g. Buddhist, Hindu, or Taoist) are absent, questions of symbolic and material violence in the form of cultural erasure are at stake. This violence dissembled by the museum's own Malay-centric narrative of national origins is mollified to some extent by appealing to the experience of colonial hegemony as violence imposed from outside the nation's autobiography, in other words, violence that is 'Them' and not 'Us'. For example, adjacent to the mannequins are models of *sampans* (boats) used to traverse the riverene systems of the country where another textbox offers an imagined exchange between a Malay ruler, Datuk Maharaja Lela, and a commoner, Putum in 1875:

> Datuk Maharaja Lela: Putum, you are to take this letter to Raja Abdullah at Batik Rabit.
> Putum: But, Datuk … all the paths have been cut off by the white men.
> Datuk Maharaja Lela: Take a sampan. Make sure you don't lose the letter … if you do something terrible will happen.

It is not clear whether this display is referring to actual people and events, but the mention of the date and Raja Abdullah are suggestive; 1874 saw the signing of the Pangkor Treaty which formalized the British Resident form of proxy governance through the Malay elites in the region. The immediate justifications of the treaty are said to have been the restoration of order in Perak and Selangor after civil unrest brought the tin trade there to a standstill.[37] Colin Abraham working from the colonial archives argues, 'this pretext was soon used to open up the country and its resources to exploitation by British capital investment'.[38] At the same time, Raja Abdullah was also jockeying for a ruling position in the state of Perak. Abdullah requested a British Resident be sent in return for his recognition as Sultan. In anticipation of support by the British for his ruling ambitions, Abdullah is said to have stated, 'we and our greatmen desire to settle under the sheltering protection of the English flag'.[39] The Pangkor Agreement of 1874 formalized this arrangement.[40]

Abraham contends that 'it seemed clear to the British that the form of "government" in existence in the Malay states was inimical to the kinds of demands that would be made in the new expanding economic situation'.[41] In an 1880 letter to the Secretary of State, one British official in Negri Sembilan wrote 'I doubt if Asiatics can ever be really taught to govern themselves. Good native government seems not to be a plant congenial to the soil'.[42] This dismissive attitude and its justification of colonial hegemony is reiterated at an adjacent display. In a glass case an edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* c. 1890 lies open to an entry for 'Malay Peninsula'. Describing the 'state' of Kedah and its administrative relationship with Siam, it reads in part:

> The state (Kedah) is not so much better governed than other Malayan countries (sic) which are not under European management, the Siamese concerning themselves but little with the details of administration and displaying in their own land a deplorable lack of political purity and love of justice which seemingly are flaws from which no Oriental government has the power to free itself.[43]

Syed Alatas argues that colonial writing like the preceding excerpt 'never fails to mention that the colonial powers were driven to acquire territories by sheer necessity' and thus dissimulate the violent reality of colonial control.[44] The adjacent displays of the mannequins and the *sampans* capped by the encyclopaedia lying under glass are a disjunctive ordering of space and time that selects out and (re)members a national origin story that will remind contemporary Malaysian visitors of an apparently shared colonial history. Yet, these displays lack any mention of how British colonialism was experienced differently by different groups in what was, to the British, the Malay states. No mention is made, for example, of the sometimes collaborative role that Malay elites and Chinese mining interests played with the British.[45] Consequently, these displays appear as a commonly shared memory of violence, the imposition of an outside Other, against which all contemporary Malaysian museum visitors can imagine themselves in equal opposition. In this sense, these displays offer a kitschy reworking of the past where what were ethnically variegated experiences of colonial collaboration and violence are sentimentalized as populist shared experiences of 'Malaysians' versus the 'colonial British'. As such, the apparent contemporary stability of the relation 'Malaysian Self' – 'non-Malaysian Other' is shored up through a selective reordering of violence. At the same time, the museum's own symbolic violence of erasure of markers of Other Malaysian (non-Malay) identities poses as a disinterested narrative of equally shared experiences of material violence imposed from outside itself.

Telecommunications and monuments to modernization

Further into the museum the displays turn to the story of radio- and microwave-based communications. Here 'technology' begins to take on a role even more iconic than utilitarian. This is an important moment: just as the means of communication become increasingly invisible (moving through the air as electromagnetic waves), its infrastructure becomes monumental and linked to the realization of collective social progress of the nation and its citizens. For example, describing the Bukit Nanas Tower in central Kuala Lumpur, one plaque reads, 'The Tower which is 400 feet high was a symbol of the nation's development. The Microwave System at Bukit Nanas was linked to the whole country' (capitalization in the original). Meanwhile, an adjacent plaque reads, 'On 13 February 1960 YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, officially inaugurated the tower which was sometimes referred to as Kuala Lumpur's Eiffel Tower. It is an important landmark in the capital.' With this monumentalized technology a new entity is emerging: the nation as a modern, independent, political state.

Simultaneously at this point in the museum, so does a changed representation of citizen–subjects. A third plaque reads, 'Working as a technician at the Bukit Nanas Radio Station was a great experience that I will never forget. My workmates were of several different races and we all got on very well together, just like a big happy family.' This explicit mention of 'race' and 'family' is the first clear reference in the museum to Malaysia as a multiracial society. Up to this point, the displays have worked hard to establish a Malay-centric view of national origins. However, the plaques describing Bukit Nanas Tower suggest conceptual links between increasing 'technological progress' and parallel 'social progress' toward racial harmony.

Bunnell has argued that the Malaysian state has been self-consciously involved in rescripting national identity in multicultural, rather than Malay-centric, terms since the early 1990s.[46] This rescripting is one form of state strategy to deal with the political–economic realities of domestic contests for political power and economic 'globalization' in the form of the 'Information Age' or 'Network Society'. Malaysia's 'multicultural' society becomes a strategic advantage to market to foreign corporations looking for footholds into Chinese and Indian economies. Emphasizing multiculturalism also becomes a way to attract back talented 'knowledge working' Malaysians from overseas, who by a large margin comprise Malaysia's 'other' Malaysians, that is, 'Chinese' and 'Indians'.[47] Consequently, Bunnell cautions against an overly optimistic interpretation of the increasing emphasis on multiculturalism by the state given that the socio-economic benefits of this 'Information Age' development push are mostly accrued by a highly skilled professional elite.[48] It is these patriotic professionals that are being encouraged to return to Malaysia to play their role in the nationalist–capitalist project of Vision 2020.

After the descriptions of Bukit Nanas Tower the representation of Malaysians in the museum's displays as being part of a multicultural, progressive society increase. At the same time, the scenes and scenarios they depict are increasingly characterized by sentimental celebrations of populism; this kitsch glosses over other examples of underlying violence and further strengthens the apparent stability of the independent nation-state in the museum's narrative of nationhood. For example, at an adjacent display, visitors are encouraged to pick up a handset labelled 'Penang and Ipoh, 1969'. It offers the following conversation:

Pa: Hello son! <Hi pa> How is Ipoh treating you? Hey are you coming home for the Mooncake Festival, lah?
Son: This is 1969 and mum still wants to celebrate the Mooncake Festival?!
Pa: I know. You think Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon, but that doesn't mean centuries of tradition go out the window. Hey, anyway your mum is going to cook your favourite *Penang Laksa*!
Son: Oh! I'm on my way home, pa!

Accents, location, food, and non-Malay celebrations are the key identity markers in this conversation. Penang has the highest proportion of 'Chinese' of any state population in Malaysia. *Penang Laksa* is a Chinese dish that, given the prawns and pork that it often includes, would be *haram* ('forbidden') for Muslims. And, the Mooncake Festival is a Chinese celebration. But, the reference to '1969' is especially suggestive. Only two months prior to Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon, Kuala Lumpur had been the site of deadly post-election riots. This display directs attention outside the nation-state and away from this internal conflict. Indeed, some of the most serious violence occurred less than two kilometres from Telekomuzium in the area of Kampung Baru. These riots have been called 'the most significant event in post-independence peninsular Malaysia', yet there is no mention of them whatsoever at Telekomuzium.[49] Given the sensitivity of this event it is perhaps not surprising that it is absent from the museum's representations of national history. Its absence, however, is a stark example of the complex ways in which violence structures the myth of national modernization narrated by the museum. The conversation at this handset achieves at least two important pieces of work through its kitschy portrayal of father–son bonding. First, it reinforces the idea of a harmonious multicultural nation, granting it an apparent stability. Second, it erases a moment of extreme interracial tension that has become a cultural touchstone for Malaysians.[50]

An adjacent display linking technological progress and social progress through the prominent appearance of representations of women is another key example of the way symbolic and material violence structure the museum's narrative (Figure 3). The museum's designers envision a '1960s Exchange' like this:

> The sounds of the busy exchange can be heard as you enter a reconstruction of part of the 1960s Telekom exchange. Visitors can walk into the space. Mannequins are sharply illuminated in their working clothes.

> It is an opportunity to show women at work as Telekom operators.[51]

At the actual display pictured in Figure 3 sound recordings loop continuously. There are ringing phones, snippets of conversations, and a female operator's voice announcing ' … call for you from Kuala Lumpur.' What is important here is the sudden prominence given to female employees. The Visitor Narrative amplifies their importance to an even greater degree than the Design Concept:

> Throughout the history of international telecommunications women have played an active but rarely heralded part.

> An efficiently working exchange demanded co-operation, teamship and dedication to the task. Women of all races and backgrounds found employment in the industry an opportunity to become active members of Malaysians (sic) modern history.[52]

FIGURE 3 Display depicting a '1960' telephone exchange. Photograph by the author.

Both 'gender' and 'technology' are at play here signalling social progress toward being a 'modern' nation. This representation of women is perhaps significant to the extent that Telekom Malaysia is a flag-carrying enterprise, not to mention an economic arm of the state. The ruling government is often at pains to balance its domestic need for Islamic credentials with its international need to present a moderate (and 'modern') form of Islam to 'western' financial markets and political entities. The 'usefulness' of women in this role as 'evidence' of such modernity – and their prominence in the museum – is, tellingly, fleeting. A nearby handset offers a cheerful – and, oddly, male – voice who reminisces excitedly, 'Ah! The good old days! Callers needed us to connect every call. Now with modern technology our jobs have been replaced by automatic exchanges!' The apparent joy in this reminiscence glosses over the symbolic and material violence that accompanies – and indeed some argue, defines – the gendering of low-wage high-technology employment, especially in Malaysia.[53] Like the routinized violence experienced by stereotyped nimble fingered 'factory girls', these women operators are as much an example of a disposable labour force as they are symbols of the social progress of Vision 2020's nationalist–capitalist project of modernization. Having fulfilled their narrative function, the prominence of these women evaporates in a cheerful, sentimental celebration of the technology that displaced their labour.

Take-off

The visual impact of a 15-foot colour light box depicting an *Apollo* rocket launching into space leaves little room for subtlety (Figure 4). Visitors are 'lifting-off' into a new, exciting, future oriented phase of technology and nationhood, not just moving into a new part of the museum. This narrative of a dramatic break from history is a common feature of myths about becoming 'modern' and 'developed',[54] which are full of metaphors connoting 'advancement': nations are said to progress, move forward, move up the development ladder, follow the march of progress, leap-frog, etc. This light box is some of the myth of modernization's metaphors translated into wood, metal, plastic, electricity, and colour. But, the display is not just for looking at. The myth is also to be acted out through the body as visitors walk (or march, run, leap, 'take-off' …) up the stairs spiralling around the *Apollo* rocket to the second floor. A dramatic break is signalled in colour, light, and physical space. As the *Design Concept* describes it:

> A large light box with a rocket being launched … The light box is centred in the middle of the spiral staircase, drawing visitors up to the second storey gallery. They (museum visitors) are leaving behind the fundamental history of the development of the network of Malaysian communications and entering the space race, the images of Sputnik, President Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the office computer, man landing on the moon and satellites.
>
> It is the dawning of the age of modern telecommunications.[55]

The light box and spiral staircase are an important site of the social linking of individual, nation, and global(ized/izing) world into new relationships with one another.[56] Winichakul discussing the construction of real and imagined boundaries of national identity writes, '(a)n

FIGURE 4 The takeoff of modernization symbolized by an Apollo rocket launch. Photography by the author.

imagined identity always implies the absence of such an identity at the point beyond its boundary'.[57] The *Apollo* rocket is a celebrated symbol of American (thus, 'foreign') technological prowess. With its prominently displayed American flag it might confront visitors who are differently Malaysian with an outside Other against which they may perhaps (re)define their identity as 'Malaysians' – that is, as a group identity based on shared characteristics imagined in opposition to all that is not-Malaysian. Recall, for example, how the moon launch figured prominently in the conversation described earlier between a father and son as they discussed a return home for the Mooncake Festival over the telephone. Questions of identity were raised there with respect to concerns about losing 'traditions' in the face of being (or becoming)

'modern'. Furthermore, to the extent that the launch of the *Apollo* rocket references a series of 'major events of the 20th century' (*Sputnik*, President Kennedy, the Vietnam War, office computers, etc.) the nation of Malaysia is placed in new imaginative relationships with events in other nations 'out there' in a globalizing world. In a way then, 'Malaysia' also becomes a container inside of which is the famil(y)iar, the shared, the Self; outside of it exists all that is not-Malaysia, all that is Other. In this sense, this display works by creating an image of the nation as a boundary like that described by Winichakul and Anagnost. It is a container of characteristics ostensibly shared by *Malays*ians who now are (or are becoming) 'Malaysians'.

Lessons from a telematic diorama or being modern in the city

> In the authoritative imagination … squatter *kampungs* are sites which signify and propagate inappropriate Malay conduct. The repeated official goal of making Kuala Lumpur into a 'squatter-free' city is therefore bound up with broader governmental attempts to realize *Melayu Baru* (the 'new Malay') through appropriate urbanization.[58]

> … there are still some residual squatter settlements whose presence in the City (sic) is unacceptable for many reasons. They are characterized by unacceptable environmental conditions, high fire risks and a general lack of hygiene. In addition, many are located close to or along strategic routes or beside rivers thus marring the image of the City …[59]

As Bunnell argues, under the modernizing ambitions of the newly independent state, the Malay *kampung* (or, loosely, 'village') came to be 'singled out as the locus for "primitive" social practices and values'.[60] 'The urban' had come to be 'imagined as a potential incubator of modern Malayness'.[61] Bunnell's deft genealogies of race, space, and modernity in Malaysia suggest why, after they climb the spiral staircase of 'take-off', visitors to Telekomuzium are presented with 'the city' as a display anchoring their exploration of the 'modern' era of telecommunications in Malaysia (Figure 5). This city diorama is a miniaturized landscape-within-a-landscape were state-centric visions of modern Malaysia and Malaysians are reinforced as objects of contemplation for visitors.[62] Whereas Mahathirist discourse in the past deployed urbanization as a technique of governmentality for incubating appropriately modern *Malays*, this diorama of the city is suggestive of emerging culturally specific meanings of urban space in Malaysia directed toward incubating modern *Malaysians* as patriotic professionals. In this way, 'the city' as both an idea and actual place plays an important mediating role in fashioning connections between individual citizen–subjects and the nation in terms preferred by the state.[63] On first inspection, one might assume that the diorama is a scale model of Kuala Lumpur (KL), or some portion of it. The presence of Bukit Nanas Tower and Menara KL (KL Tower) atop the hill at the centre of the diorama would seem to confirm the impression that this is a replication of the actual city outside the museum's walls. The apparent realism of the diorama is so compelling that I maintained this impression over several visits despite being unable to get the model to match my experience of walking Kuala Lumpur's streets. Only later, after spending time in the museum's archives, did I realize that for all its realism, the diorama is in fact fantasy (and fantastic). It is a myth

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FIGURE 5 Diorama of 'The City'. Photograph by the author.

in Ferguson's sense of the term.[64] Described in the *Design Concept*, the diorama represents 'a range of demographies and geographies, from the suburban fringes of a big city, to the industrial estates, the factories and the countryside and coastline' – absent, however, are any signs of squatters.[65] This diorama is not a model of Kuala Lumpur – or of any actual city – it is a model of 'The City'. Like Winichakul's maps, it is a proper noun intended to turn human beings into verbs, the performers of proleptic myths of nationhood that prescribe ways of appropriately being in, and belonging to, 'Information Age' Malaysia.

Around the diorama are several handsets each offering a short conversation to listeners. The conversations are self-contained, but tell a single story about 'the co-ordination of a group of friends towards the end of the day for a dinner party that evening'.[66] Listeners can begin at any one of the listening stations around the diorama. If they decide to listen to all of them, they get enough clues to piece together a coherent story of this group of friends: Jim inviting his boss Silva and his wife Mary to the dinner that Jim instructs his wife Evelyn to cook. There is at least one implicit 'joke', too: Evelyn does not actually have a recipe for 'her' *ayam percik* (a chicken dish) which Silva and Mary have heard so much about, so Evelyn must telephone her mother for help.

At a listening station labelled *Calling mum*, the following scene unfolds:

Evelyn (E): Hello mummy … <sound of children in background>
Mum (M): Eh? Who's that?
E: Oh mum, don't tease. I know I haven't phoned you for three days. I've so much housework! By the way, can I come over to get some *ayam percik* cooked? Jim's friends are coming over to see our new apartment.

M: Evelyn doesn't even have *ayam percik* recipe?! How to cook?! I'll come over and help you, lah!

E: Thanks mum, you're wonderful!

Beneath the handset is an image of a *kampung* (or 'village') house, presumably 'mum's'. Adjacent to it are two other images of a young woman (presumably 'Evelyn') sitting in front of a television and talking on the phone. The following text separates the *kampung* and apartment image: 'Telekom Malaysia strives to serve everyone in the country, whether they are in cities, in towns, or in remote villages.' One important message communicated at this listening station is a sense of separation, for example, between old and young (mum and daughter), traditional and modern (mum in the rural *kampung*, daughter in the urban condo) all overcome by communications technology. Implicitly, the message is that Malaysians can be modern without losing their older customs of national identity.

The remainder of the story unfolds as follows:

Factory to home

Jim: Evelyn? It's me. You have to cook for two more people because my boss and his wife are coming because they've heard about your *ayam percik* … 'Bye luv! <in the background, factory sounds and machinery can be heard>

At this station, there is text adjacent to an image of a factory floor that reads, 'A widespread and efficient telecom network allows you to keep in touch with your loved ones at any time of need.'

Calling mobile phone

Silva (S): Please get my wife on her mobile phone. <sounds of phone dialling>

Mary (M): Hello? Mary here …

S: Hi darling. You know Jim? He's invited us to his new home for dinner tonight. Hey, by the way, where are you now?

M: I have just finished inspecting the dry dock at Port Klang. I am on my way home about to pass your office. Then why don't I give you a lift?

S: Ah great! We go home to change, then we take the expressway to town. Hey, but please remind me to get a gift for Jim. I'll see you later darling, 'bye!

This conversation is illustrated showing a man in collar and tie at a desk on top of which is computer keyboard, a phone, a day planner, and the stock pages. Next to this image is one of a woman in a *sari*, driving a car and talking on a mobile phone.

Untitled handset

Silva: Hello Jim. Yes, Silva, lah. I'm on my wife's mobile phone. We're already on the Federal Highway <female voice in background, admonishing: Thank Evelyn for the evening first!> … Ah! Thank Evelyn for the wonderfully delicious mean, lah. A fabulous evening, lah! I'm telling you the karaoke was really fun, lah!

> Actually, the reason I'm calling is because Mary asked me to remind you to get that – what?- that ayam percik recipe from your wife. Yeah, lah! You know these women, they want to collect every recipe, but we never know whether they going to cook any or not < laughs >. Okay friend, I'll see you at work tomorrow, uh? 'Bye.

The characters portrayed in this story of The City are gendered, racialized, and classed in evocative ways.[67] 'Evelyn' is shown wearing a *baju*, attire associated with 'Malayness', while Mary is shown in a *sari*, a style of clothing denoting 'Indianess'. Significantly, Mary is at work inspecting a dry dock in this attire, thereby expressing the idea that women can be modern, professional employees yet maintain cultural markers of custom. If only to underscore the ambivalences of Malaysian's incorporation of 'western' norms, all the men shown in images around these listening stations are wearing suits and ties, the markers of 'western' business attire.[68] All of the men (and one of the women, Mary) are professionally employed and work in The City. These couples use cars and cell phones to coordinate their dinner party, suggesting a highly classed group. They are ideal(ized) patriotic professionals.[69] This inter-racial group of people that might have remained fragmented outside The City, are brought together in it. In this sense, the actual emergence of Bangsa Malaysia aspired to in Vision 2020 is preceded by this model of The City and the imperatives directed to museum visitors to embrace technologically advanced, urban sophistication. In these ways the city as both an idea and an actual place plays a key role in the reimagination of citizenship and nationhood appropriate to 'Information Age' Malaysia as imagined by an institution of the nation-state.

Although I can only speculate, when Malaysian museum-goers listen to these conversations they may recognize the scenarios these conversations depict as familiar. Turned into active listeners for whom such scenarios are familiar, they might recognize themselves in them. That is, some visitors may come to realize themselves as particular kinds of citizen–subjects: patriotic professionals who, while technologically adept, have not lost their attachment to certain traditions and thus maintain an affinity for the nation. Other listeners may contest these scenarios. For example, some might find the portrayal of women as overly domestic and react negatively to the portrayal of Evelyn as a somewhat obsequious house-bound woman. Still other museum-goers might be just as troubled by the idea of a woman working outside the home as Mary, the diorama's second female characters, does. Whatever the case may be, the diorama works by calling forth listeners to actively participate in a mini-aturized landscape where state-centric aspirations for nationalist-capitalist development become objects of contemplation and embodiment for museum visitors.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Telekomuzium narrates state-centric aspirations to transform Malaysia and Malaysians into a post-industrial and post-racial nation-state. The design and layout of the museum offer disjunctive forms of representation that re-order time and space into proleptic myths of nationhood. One of the significant characteristics of this prolepsis is its own unacknowledged role in the symbolic and material violence of erasing the identities and contributions to nation-building of large constituencies of Malaysia's 'other' citizen–subjects. Kitsch glosses over the violence underlying the apparent stability of the experience of nationalist–capitalist development and democratic authoritarianism in contemporary

Malaysia. Moreover, just as opportunities for being in, and belonging to, 'Information Age' Malaysia are opened up to possibilities of transethnic belonging,[70] they are straightjacketed into tightly scripted, kitschy performances of class that gloss over the socio-economic realities of exclusion from this vision of nationalist-capitalist development. The museum and its displays work by concretizing reorderings of space and time that, through their disjunctures, appear to buttress the claims of factual accuracy about the nation's history and geography that the museum's narrative offers to visitors. This reordering of space and time in and through the museum and its displays is crucial for bringing into being state-centric myths and aspirations for 'modernization' and 'development'. The museum is one site where such abstract ideas as 'nation' and 'belonging' are materialized and, having been brought into contact with museum-goers, these abstractions are brought into being as objects of contemplation and embodiment. The museum and its displays thereby offer a site where such abstract ideals might be recognized and practiced, but within strictly bounded limits that reproduce a Malay-centric national origin story.

Is it an overstatement to argue that in the design intentions built into a single museum are lessons for understanding 'modernization' in contemporary Malaysia? The political economy of Telekom Malaysia's corporate history suggests it may not be.[71] The firm was among the first public entities sold off during the state's privatization drive that began in the late 1980s; its listing on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange came in 1991, the same year that Mahathir gave his speech to the Malaysian Business Council that would later be known as Vision 2020. Privatization of state assets was particularly appealing to the Malaysian state at the time. A depressed economy could be buoyed through the reduction of state expenditure and the injection of capital the sale of public assets would entail.[72] Additionally, privatization increased Malaysia's international prestige. It was lionized for its apparently neoliberal approach to economic 'modernization' by other countries, particularly the USA and Britain.[73] But we should not understand this apparent adoption of neoliberalism as a clear cut roll-back of state power in favour of market fundamentalism. Malaysia's relationship with the 'west' is, of course, highly ambivalent. Khoo, for example, contends that the World Bank's inclusion of Malaysia in the so-called 'East Asian economic miracle' 'did not move Mahathir' who saw such labels as another 'ploy to deprive the East Asian NICs'.[74] According to Khoo, Mahathir insisted the economic prosperity of the time was not a miracle, but the outcome of 'a great deal of "toil, tears, and sweat" on the part of East Asians'.[75] Indeed, Mahathir 'rejected any prediction that the 21st century would be an "Asian century" – a tantalizing idea which is most appealing to the Asian ego,' but was in fact 'the Yellow Peril all over again, only this time there are tinges of brown'.[76] At the same time it is an open secret that Malaysia's multiethnic (but Malay dominated) coalition government of the Barisan Nasional used the privatization of state assets under Mahathir's leadership 'to channel resources to its supporters or its own subsidiary firms'.[77] In this sense, the privatization of Telekom Malaysia is indicative of the interlocking and mutually reinforcing networks of political patronage and nationalist–capitalist development that continue to favour Malays and inflect Malaysia's political economy with complex intertwinings of race and class.[78]

Once visitors leave the diorama of The City, the last display they encounter is the map of Information Age Malaysia shown in Figure 1 that opened this article. The model and the map precede the territory – that is, both the types of citizens (patriotic professionals) to

inhabit it and the spaces (urban) to constitute it. The desired shift in identity from one based on 'race' to one based on 'class' is important for understanding longer term social change in contemporary Malaysia. The emphasis on class can be understood as a way of apparently de-politicizing the uneven social geography of nationalist–capitalist accumulation. From this point of view, 'class' is a tool of government in that it offers a way to talk about and explain socio-economic difference in Malaysia through an appeal to the 'market' framed as a politically neutral set of laws moved by meritorious individuals, rather than by 'race-based' political patronage and/or supposedly essential biocultural handicaps.

The representations of the desirable class-based rather than race-based identities in Telekomuzium suggest, as Hoffman argues, that it is helpful to combine analytics of govern-mentality and neoliberalism to understand 'illiberal' national contexts.[79] Through such a combination we come to understand the emphasis on class as a melding of strategies of government (such as patriotism, active guidance of citizen-subjects, nationalist rhetoric) with selective neoliberal elements (such as the mythos of merit, autonomy, and choice) that seeks to manage the direction of broader cultural and political experiences of the wax and wane of nationalist–capitalist accumulation and democratic authoritarianism in contemporary Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

Biographical note

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29 S. Esslinger, 'Performing identity: the museal framings of Nazi ideology', in D. Preziosi and C. Farago, eds, *Grasping the world: the idea of the museum* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2004), pp. 320–40.

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31 The Malay language is known as *Bhasa Melayu*, or 'national language'. Thus the use of the language in the welcoming voice over and in textboxes around the museum's displays reinforces a Malay-centric narrative of national origins and belonging; it conflates the official national language, the Malay people, and the museum while excluding other languages important to other Malaysians (such as Hokkien or Tamil).

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33 M. Akrich, 'The de-scription of technical objects', in W. E. Bijker and J. Law, eds, *Shaping technology/building society* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992), pp. 205–24.

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35 The Malay version of the text differs. It uses the term *negara* for 'country'. *Negara* can have the contemporary meaning of a political state, but it also connotes 'country' in the sense of 'kingdom', a country ruled by a king or queen, and – more broadly – a division of the natural world.

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38 C. Abraham, *The naked social order: the roots of racial polarisation in Malaysia* (Subang Jaya, Pelanduk Publications, 2004).

39 Ibid, p. 36 citing Abdullah.

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41 Abraham, *The naked social order: the roots of racial polarisation in Malaysia*, p. 29.

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43 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 'Malay Peninsula', (c. 1890), pp. 492–3.

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46 Bunnell, '(Re)positioning Malaysia: high-tech networks and the multicultural rescripting of national identity'.

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48 Ibid.

49 M. Leifer, *Dictionary of modern politics of South-East Asia* (London, Routledge, 2001).

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