

Speculative Fiction as a Return to Tradition: A Conversation with Joshua Kam

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Joshua Kam's manuscript, *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly the World*, won the 2020 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and was subsequently published in the latter half of the same year. Kam's first novel is a key work among a new wave of speculative fiction recently added to the body of Anglophone Malaysian fiction that has traditionally been rooted in consensus reality. Kam is currently pursuing a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell University, USA that focuses on culinary connections to the Middle East in classical Malay and Javanese Sufism.

The following interview was conducted by email between May and June 2022.

David Lim: Your debut novel, *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly the World (HTMIG)*, was first published in 2020 when you were 23 years of age. That it won the Epigram Books Fiction Prize in the same year must have been a welcomed validation of your effort. What inspired you to write fiction in general, and, in particular, the specific narrative that is *HTMIG*? Did any Malaysian fiction writers and Malaysian fiction serve as your mental interlocutors while you were working on your novel?

Joshua Kam: Oh God, I've been writing fiction for almost twenty years now. Not necessarily good fiction, mind us, but as early as Standard One I've wanted to tell a good story. I'm not sure if there was a titration point for that process. I grew up on a lot of the, uh, *penjajah* classics—C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, etc.—before realizing I wanted to create worlds of my own and share that with people I liked. Fast forward to 2017, when the first inklings of the book found their way into my journals, I think I was reflecting heavily on what stories hadn't been written in Anglophone Malaysian fiction. In many ways, I found myself exploring the tensions and dis-ease that seem so rife in any explicitly Malaysian return to the past—be that Tash Aw or Tan Twan Eng. I continue to admire the craft of both those writers, though, to be honest, I think their wrestlings with the past were very much catalysts for my own wrestlings with the past. But then, I wanted to write a book that spoke of queer Malaysian futures too. How do you write both? What if they're the same thing?

DL: *HTMIG* features a dizzying cast of gods, prophets, and historical icons, including Al-Khidir (the mystic in green), Mazu (the goddess of sailors and the South China Sea), Datuk Kong (local guardian spirit), Ratu Kidul (the supernatural queen of the Indian Ocean in Sundanese and Javanese mythology), and Tun Teja (a high-society woman of great beauty kidnapped by Hang Tuah and coerced into marrying the Sultan of Melaka). Liberally reimagined, they run riot in the novel even as they play integral roles in the plot. What was it like working these figures into your novel? Was it as fun and challenging as the reader imagines? How careful did you feel you had to be to avoid backlash, especially with the queering of Al-Khidir (also spelled as Al-Khidr), who has been called “a legendary Muslim figure of rebirth and renewal who occupies a unique place in Muslim imagination thanks to his role as an elusive figure of immortality and esoteric knowledge” (Wolper 122)?

JK: Honestly that was the fun part of writing. I study *hikayat*, Javanese *serat*, and mysticism in general for a living. A lot of my research trickled into the book. Rain through a leaky roof, or something like that. I think I was trying to be careful for my family—I wouldn't want any backlash against them. But I also felt that the polemic of the book, if a polemic there must be, was beauty. I wanted to write beautiful stories, stories that edit, redact, and in some cases drastically shift the narratives we tell of our beloved characters. In many ways,

this is about as traditionalist as you get—stories shifted in the Malay world. Hikayats might copy a story from somewhere else and give it a twist, fill it with new meanings and allegories that spoke to the political struggles that people in our part of world faced. Hindu, Chinese/Taoist, and Islamic figures wandered these genres, slipped in and out and ducked away. I confess, it didn't feel like a big step to write characters who spoke to what Malaysia was encountering in 2018. It felt more traditional than modern, whatever those words mean.

DL: *HTMIG* is clearly invested in Malaysia as a state and a people, this being an observation that the general reader is unlikely to miss. What is not apparent to the reader, though, is how the narrative evolved into its final form. In an interview with Two Book Nerds Talking (TBNT), you mentioned that you had to rewrite parts of the novel to keep up with real-life events unfolding in Malaysia. The events relate mostly to the emergence of *Malaysia Baru* in the wake of Pakatan Harapan's victory over the ruling Barisan Nasional in the 14th General Election in 2018, and the subsequent fall of the Pakatan Harapan federal government in February 2020. How would you describe the experience of rewriting towards the end? What and how much was changed?

JK: I'll keep this a little more open-ended, but I think a great deal of the queer anger that was simmering in the Malaysia Baru years hung on the fact that things got worse for queer people after we voted in the, uh, "new" government. Plenty of political reasons I haven't ink to elaborate on, but that angst stuck, and the dis-ease I think felt in the community tempered any optimism in parties. Of course, the new government didn't last all that long, so I found myself trying to write trajectories outside of, ahem, political salvation through electoralism. If there's any way out through the weeds, I'm not sure it will be a party, however liberal. Sometimes I wonder if those who went up the mountain were right in that respect.

DL: You have previously said that *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang* was not the title you originally chose for your novel and that it was arrived at collectively prior to publication, with input from the publisher and editors. The idea, you said, was for the final title to be disarming and not attract the censorious gaze of the Malaysian government. What were the original and subsequent titles you came up with? Does the final title in any way reframe the novel, taking it in a different direction, however slightly, as compared to the original title?

JK: I appreciate the question, but I'll pass on this one!

DL: *HTMIG* is a fine addition to the body of Malaysian fiction in English which has in recent times become increasingly diversified beyond mimetic or realist narratives. It is a genre-hybridised intellectual novel that one might shelve under “speculative fiction,” the term being “a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating ‘consensus reality’ of everyday experience” (Oziewicz), including science fiction, fantasy, and all their derivatives, such as Afrofuturism, cyberpunk, and dark fantasy. But speculative fiction, or spec-fic, encompasses not only the text but also the “field of cultural production,” that is, the “domain of activity that exists not merely through texts but through their production and reception in multiple contexts.” As a fiction writer, how useful or productive is “speculative fiction” to you as a way of thinking about fiction and as a cultural field in which truth, reality, and other singularities are interrogated, challenged, or defended by readers, critics, and the public?

JK: To be honest, I think the genre is massive, and bloated, and for that very reason incredibly useful. Surely all fiction is speculative, in a certain sense. At the same time, the notion of spec-fic allows me to blur the lines between when I comment about our world (the one we think we inhabit) and other possible worlds. There’s an old Javanese/Malay term used to describe hikayat literature—*pasemon*, that is, an extended literary metaphor which mirrors the world we are in now. It comes from the word *semu*, that is, hidden, underground, subtle, esoteric. And so, a good writer in the Malayo-Javanese world had to stick their hand in the past, pull out a story, and tailor it finely to fit the questions being asked by the court or the *rakyat*. Will the British win? What of the Bugis closer by? Will the King’s marriage bring peace? Hikayats were very often extremely speculative, in that they conjured past or parallel worlds that mirrored our own, and interrogated the meanings of both. They bore truth without being journalistic, and I think that’s something terms like “spec-fic” attempt to recapture. There were a lot of ways of knowing and imagining running through the waters of this part of the world, and spec-fic, I think, is beginning to catch up.

DL: Speculative fiction is commonly framed as a collective desire to envision possible futures in non-mimetic mode, not only in fiction but also in the lifeworlds that give birth to speculative fiction as texts. This seems to me to be the precise endeavour of *HTMIG*. Eschewing the limitations of pure empirical-materialist reality, the novel blends folklore, mythology, fantasy, religion, history, realpolitik, and ecocriticism to recover a sense of wonder on two levels. The first is on the level of the narrative, which reclaims the fantastic often subtracted from “serious” literature by exclusivists and infuses it into the story, thus lifting it off the mundane plane. On the second level, the recovery of wonder takes the form of a reminder of the hidden, erased, or forgotten realities for many Malaysians which are potentially

richer than are commonly acknowledged — realities in which it is not uncommon for spirits and gods to tread alongside mortals, or which bear testament to the abjured centuries-long Asian history of queer intimacy. On both levels, the recovery of wonder projects particular futures that remedy the present. What is your take on the question of futurity raised by the novel? What sort of futures relating to Malaysia and Malaysians does the novel speculate via its act of enchantment, or might it be interpreted as gesturing towards, from your viewpoint as the author, a reader, and a historian of ideas? Concomitantly, what politics does the novel intimate, given the view you shared on the Mackerel Podcast – that, with *HTMIG*, you did not set out to write a blueprint of how to save Malaysia but rather how you would like for us to want things to be saved?

JK: Thank you for this absolutely wonderful question—and the observations packed into it. It’s an honour to have those aspects of the work seen by others. I’m careful to make predictions, or worse yet, prognoses. I think the book certainly speaks for itself—its mistrust of electoralism unto itself, a mistrust even of heroes, not least of all the prophets whose rage can ignite nations. Part of the reason I was thinking of alternate titles is that, fundamentally, I do not believe Nabi Khidir in the book ever saves anyone. Ultimately he fails—it is only in the aggregate that any change occurs. But yes, I shy away from prescriptions. But if I, in writing, can make you want other worlds to be willed into being, then, I’ll count it a win.

DL: Amidst the deep sense of betrayal, disillusionment, and pessimism about Malaysia experienced by many Malaysians following the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan federal government, *HTMIG* serves as a stark reminder of the sheer inadequacy of the here and now, doubly so for those whose nonheteronormative desire excludes them from majoritarian belonging. It serves also as a reminder of the arduous journey ahead to realise the potentiality of Malaysia. As Mo Niang puts it to her lover’s grand-niece, Lydia, “You and I are too clever to pretend that the work is anything but beginning” (Kam 164). Hope is necessary especially at a time when summoning it seems masochistic or impossible. To compound the challenge, if we follow José Esteban Muñoz’s engagement with Ernst Bloch, the requisite hope is not the abstract kind akin to banal wishing but rather “educated hope” described by the former as “the kind that is grounded and consequential, a mode of hoping that is cognizant of exactly what obstacles present themselves in the face of obstacles that so often feel insurmountable” (Muñoz 207). Still, hope, even the educated type, “is always eventually disappointed,” although, arguably, the “eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process” (Muñoz 10). In relation to both heteronormative and nonheteronormative Malaysians, how do you see hope playing out in *HTMIG*, as a text and as a field of cultural production?

JK: Oh yes, we love a little *Cruising Utopia*. I think to be honest, I'm hesitant to answer this question. It's really up to queer Malaysians to decide if they saw hope playing out in it. As far as I know, in Anglophone Malaysian fiction, there has not been room yet for many novel-length works with queer religious characters whose liberation is bound up in the liberation of others. I'm not saying it isn't there, but I wasn't finding what I looked for in 2017. I don't know if my book gives hope—I don't know if it even gives educated hope to others who have been educated in the extended queerphobia of the state. But if the book opens room for newer, better, fiercer, more explicitly hopeful queer Malaysian things to hit bookstores safely, I think that in itself is a kind of hope for me. I don't need more.

I'm not sure if *HTMIG* gave hope to cisheteronormative Malaysians, and I'm okay with that. If anything, I think it's entirely possible I created a world that many cis-het Malaysians have tried very hard to bury, or prevent, or dissolve. And perhaps even in exposing where the wound is, we present the possibility of new worlds as tangible options, even in stirring up opposition to those same worlds. *Siapa makan cili*, as they say.

DL: Of all the characters in *HTMIG*, Khidir is arguably the one driven by the greatest urgency in intervening in the affairs of present-day Malaysia. As Khidir says to Gabriel, it is his job to hunt down the Mouth, the novel's arch nemesis whom he describes as "Distributed across a hundred bodies and forms and heads and faces" (Kam 55). He goes on to state that one of the forms of the Mouth is "Your minister – the one who jumped ship before the elections" (55). As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear to the reader that an impending war of cosmic proportions is brewing between the forces of good and evil, that "The world is quickening" (64), and that Khidir has returned to the land after a prolonged absence to "depose the corrupt ministers," "put in place new kings" (64), and guide them as he did before. Khidir, we are told, is also hungry to bring back the "old world" (65), a time before the natural environment became undone by human greed. We discover that the *wali* or divine "friends of God" like Khidir, Tun Teja, and Ling Mo Niang (a mortal form of Mazu) had been silently involved throughout the ages in guiding and protecting the people of the land now known as Malaysia, and that, until recently, they had largely been absent from "Malayan affairs since 1957" (163) — 1957 being the year Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaimed the independence of the Federation of Malaya. Disturbingly, we learn also that the *wali* had attempted to return "right around May 13 [1969, marked by race riots] but some were "hacked with axes in the woods" by the police under "ministerial orders" (163). Taking these moments into critical account, it becomes apparent that, despite the exhilarating fun adventures of the *wali* with Gabriel and Lydia in tow, there is a dark undercurrent in *HTMIG*. The novel seems to be intimating that much more is at play and at stake than is grasped by those who seek to understand Malaysia's struggles solely in terms of mundane party politics. In time, literary scholars would no doubt

seek to realise the rich interpretative possibilities of these moments. Meanwhile, could you share your take on the symbolisms here? Also, how do you view Gabriel’s literal and symbolic roles within the divine scheme of things? What does Khidir mean when he describes Gabriel as “The knife that cleaves Pahang, and possibly the world” (56)? And how does that square with the “voice [of the Mouth] from the radio” (53) saying to Gabriel that “You are the knife they have sent for my head. The ink in which the judgment is written” (54)?

JK: A Singaporean writer once mentioned—not at all unkindly—that Malaysian fiction was very much rooted in the immediate postcolonial. I’m sad to say, years later, that I’ve only reconfirmed this diagnosis of the state of our, err, nationalist writing. Still, I felt cognizant of writing a book that spanned a lot of things associated with our postcolonial past. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* as national epic *lah*, Merdeka heroes *lah*, the list goes on. I don’t know if I could escape postcoloniality as I was writing, and certainly not as I was editing, far from home in a pandemic trying to make sure everyone near and far I loved was going to be all right. I think, in many ways the dark undercurrents were there because I can to some extent, only write what I perceive. And to write about Malaysia as a nation state, it has to include all of it. The dark water, the knives in the dark, and one excoriatingly bright yellow sun.

I have thoughts on Gabriel’s role—it must be remembered that, as usual, the men are out chatting with demons while it’s femmes and women who do the heavy lifting. I don’t want to overstress Gabriel’s own role in the salvation of a fictional Malaysia, but I think his own theodicy runs parallel to the physical, tangible aspects of this particular revolt and liberation. Gabriel stands outside of the stream of political, historical, events—or so he thinks. He thinks he has not suffered. I think I wanted to write a character who encompasses, processes, even chronicles the griefs and grievances of others, who faces down evil specifically on those terms. Above all, Khidir and Gabriel’s half of the story wrestles with grief and defeat not as possibilities but eventualities. What if we lose? For surely that’s always been the question that prevents any sort of overturning or change. But if that question loses its meaning to a Khidir or a Gabriel, then, there lies in that a possibility—even a small one—that what is now powerful is not permanent.

DL: *HTMIG* features multiple LGBTQ main characters. They include the centuries-old man in green, Khidir, and his 26-year-old Indian-Malaysian Christian lover, Gabriel; as well as Mo Niang, the sea goddess, who (temporarily) gave up her divinity to be with the love of her life, Tan Toh Yun, a female English teacher who joined the communists to fight against the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in the 1940s. Like everyone else, they live, struggle, desire, flirt, love, yearn, believe, and hope, eliciting little controversy (so far) from readers. On Goodreads, for instance, where virtually all readers who posted

their reviews of *HTMIG* are from younger cohorts (as may be gathered from their profile images), only a handful find it somewhat “sensitive” that Khidir as a Muslim prophet is queered in the novel. The overwhelming majority seem unperturbed, as might perhaps be expected, given that the young of today generally value diversity and inclusion more than the previous generations. As far as you are able to tell, would you say that the majority of those who have read *HTMIG*, especially Malaysians, are from Gen Z (born between the mid-1990s and 2010) and Gen Y (born between 1981 and 1995)? Might that account for why only few eyebrows have been raised in encounters with the LGBTQ aspects of your novel?

JK: Honestly, I’ve no clue. I really don’t know about the demographics of my readership—if anything it seems like a healthy mix of folks of all ages. I’ll leave this to others to make assessments.

DL: In the aforementioned interview with TNBT, you noted that Asian queer people have been deprived of, and long for, queer ancestry, one that not only precedes the Stonewall riots (as a catalyst for Western LGBTQ movements) but is also distinctly Asian. You invoked the “forgotten” history of male-male marriages which were common in Fujian, China, in the seventeenth century, as one of several Asian examples of a queer past intentionally obscured, erased from mainstream historical consciousness. Against this background, you shared that in part you wrote *HTMIG* as a way of consoling yourself, and perhaps others, and that you did it by giving queer Asians equitable representation and inserting them into a recuperated queer history that stretches far back in time. The recognition you’ve given them is captured in the words used by Mo Niang: “Our kind was cutting sleeves and pruning peaches and tumbling in our silks like puppies before they [the West] even had names for this. It was always ours, even if no one knows” (Kam 101). Represented with sensuality and dignity, the queer characters in *HTMIG* are unapologetic about their sexuality, even if Gabriel is, like any gay man today, self-conscious about his body (154). Thus humanised, they are far from victims crippled by “woe-is-me” angst which queer figures were almost by default represented as in the past by not only straight but also queer people. To what extent would you agree with the proposition that the predominant way in which individuals and societies imagine and represent the queer figure is heavily dependent on, if not determined by, the conditions of possibility of the era that render certain ideas thinkable and others not?

JK: I mean, it depends on who’s writing them! I think with your back to the wall, you imagine outlandish figures, bloated like shadows on a firelit floor. I think the conditions of possibility in gay America are vast.

Gays here, gays there. Gays in the military. Gays in finance. Gays in Lockheed-Martin devising new bombs to unleash on the Third World.TM A great deal is thinkable, but I think in that lies the danger of growing less ambitious. I think queer writing often gets defanged with acceptance. I think we've written our most outrageous, furious, imaginative work as queer people when nothing seemed possible. When all channels of assimilation or acceptance were cut off and all we had was a torch and a white wall and some chalk to draw, what did Flannery O'Connor say, *Large and Startling Figures*? I think we write the most ambitiously when outraged, or at least, when we realize that cisheteronormativity—be it Western, Asian, what have you—can never be bargained with in good faith.

But you aren't asking about that. You're talking about the predominant way people inscribe queer people. That's a great question, and of course I agree. Dominant narrators are always going to be a few steps behind, trying to write queer characters who are accepted, or included, because that's really about the limit of their imagination, even if we might think of them as progressive. So in a sense, I agree—dominant writers of course are bound by the conditions of possibility they see. They are, after all, at best mirrors of the light they see. Which is perhaps all the more reason for queer writers writing for queer people to be lamps, torches, fire.

DL: Marco Ferrarese in a recent article for *Nikkei Asia* notes how your work and Zen Cho's similarly set themselves apart from other Malaysian and Southeast Asian fiction by bending narrative genres in their unprecedented mash-up "exploration of nonconformist sexual orientations and controversial episodes of their country's history." How would you respond to this way of differentiating your writing and Cho's from other Malaysian and Southeast Asian writing? Do you see your novel and Cho's fiction as new and unique contributions to Malaysian literature by a young generation of Malaysian writers? In your view, which other emerging Malaysian authors are changing, or have the potential to change, the face of Malaysian narrative fiction which has for the longest time been mainly mimetic? Also, how would you respond to the conservative view that speculative fiction is a lesser form of literature compared to literary fiction?

JK: If it hasn't been intimidated by my rambling about *pasemons* and *hikayats*, I'm an unironic traditionalist. In many ways, I don't see my queer writing as a break from tradition but a return to it, albeit one infused with the world I inherit and inhabit. I can't speak for Zen Cho or her work's true place in Malaysian literature, but I will say that it's been so much fun to read her work. Her writing is mythopoetic—it conceives and creates and rewrites. I think she's been pioneering in this work for a long time, and as usual, the boys are trailing behind.

Goodness, I'm still catching up on a lot of books in Malaysia. Any list I make would be a work in progress, but if anything, I'm looking to a lot of Southeast Asian neighbours who have been writing for a long time, along with those whose publications are just recently hitting shelves. Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto* is spellbinding. Sunisa Manning's *A Good True Thai*, a triangular novel of revolution in an age of despair. And, of course in poetry, Norman Pasaribu's ferocious, queer tenderness in *Sergius Mencari Bacchus*. I'm not saying we don't have up and coming Malaysian writers—I'm just catching up on the lit before I make claims. I am, however, utterly committed to encouraging Malaysians to be reading parallel works from our neighbours—I think that's where the real poesis begins.

DL: In the same Ferrarese piece for *Nikkei Asia*, you were quoted to have said that, although you thought “many Malaysians are okay seeing LGBTQ characters in stories,” they may still find it “subversive” to “really see queer bodies and queer people as holy, [meaning] as full of divine light as anyone else.” With reference to *HTMIG*, could you expand on this idea of queer bodies as sites of human-divine encounters? Were you approaching the topic of queer divinity from the perspective of a particular queer theology?

JK: I think queer people have always mediated the divine. Now whether that was strategic sleight of hand in precolonial Southeast Asia, or just how it so happened, I can't say. But I like to think that we continue to embody those roles in Malaysia, as in other places—not that we're particularly holy, but that we carry the holy; that queerness and its experience forces us to confront the spiritual and religious and the divine and include that in our calculation of what the world is. I'm not sure if I'd label any of that theology, but that might be all I can add to this one!

DL: *HTMIG* is religiously weighted on multiple levels. Aside from the wali and their divine intervention in Malaysian affairs, the novel also features mortal characters with connections to things religious, spiritual, or theological. There are, for instance, Gabe, a cassock-donning liturgics scholar who belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church; Lydia, a student of divinity in Wisconsin; and Lydia's father, Alvin, who converted to Christianity and underwent an intense, tearful, spiritual experience with the Pentecostal Methodists. Also invoked to tinge the text with the sacred, albeit in passing, are such Christian icons as John of Shanghai whose name is synonymous with a thousand miracles arising from his prayers; the elderly Elizabeth in the Bible who, through the grace of God, conceived John the Baptist, who then went on to foretell the coming of Christ; and Photeini, the Samaritan woman who repented her sins before Christ and converted to Christianity. And then there are the libidinally-

invested theological ruminations by Gabriel on whether “God is not dead, but wrong” (Kam 16) for having created a world in which innocent people are allowed to suffer, and whether one should not emulate Job in his handling of suffering. In the Bible, Job, who is made to suffer despite being blameless and upright, is awed into submission to God, not because he understands why God allowed him to suffer, but because he concedes that God in all His greatness is beyond human scrutiny. My reading of *HTMIG* is that it is precisely because Gabriel refuses to be won over by wonder and whirlwind, and insists on questioning, understanding, and rationalising God’s reasons no matter how futile that may be that he is indispensable to the wali’s divine plan to save Malaysia and possibly the world. How does this anti-Job reading of Gabriel as queer hero with a mouth to challenge the Mouth contrast with your own take?

JK: To be honest, I’m not sure I went that deep into it! I think that’s certainly one reading of the text—one I may not have explicitly intended, but one that certainly resonates. Perhaps all I’ll say is that I wrote Gabriel as a combatant not of God or even the Devil, but of grief itself. If he can take on despair and say, Pahang and the world are worth fighting for all the same, could I do the same? If he can take on defeat and not change any action, not regret any labour, could I also? Gabriel, of course, speaks to one kind of person—but I think if anything, the answer Gabriel and Khidir are looking for doesn’t reveal itself in the interrogation room they find themselves in. I’d argue that the answer is elsewhere—that is, with Lydia and Mo Niang. For them, the questions are far more prosaic. Where exactly is my dead grandmother? Is my lover safe? How am I going to explain all this to my Pa? And as usual, a very Malaysian sense of familial love keeps us pushing through some of the hardest things, the sort of work that undoes empires and colonizers and corruptors and bribes. If anything, alongside the labour, alongside the theodicy, there’s another current running through the story. Without Lydia and Mo Niang’s love, nothing else in the story would’ve mattered.

DL: *HTMIG* is a “busy” text with many at-times seemingly disparate things going on simultaneously: Gods, chief among them are queer, intervening in Malaysian’s heterocentrist politics serving as a front for a cosmic war against the “legion” (Kam 54) that is the Mouth described by Khidir as “Death larger than life” (150), an evil with “the stench of dying things” (148) coterminous with the capitalism-precipitated ecological crises which Khidir in eco-warrior mode seeks to redress with the help of gay-identified theologically-minded Gabe whose “strange, whirling mind” (56) and indomitable mouth that insist on questioning God’s motivations arguably serve as the ultimate instrument that saves the day. Upon further reflection, however, this intermingling of everything happening all at once actually makes sense; after all, biblically-speaking, all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, were created

through and for God, in whom all things consist. But let's for the moment focus on what has mainly been overlooked or under-discussed in Malaysia: the coextension of nature and God, which makes the former divine, the recognition of which should but seldom guides humanity's environmental stewardship, hence the very real environmental problems facing Malaysia and the world. What is your view on ecotheology, and its place in public discourse in Malaysia and *HTMIG*?

JK: Ecotheology! Honestly, I'm getting more utilitarian about all these. If it's a framework that gets you there, it gets you there, and in which case, I'm glad you're in the fight! At the same time, we are a religious country, whatever the hell that means, and I think using religious terms to articulate resistance to capitalist extraction isn't a bad thing by any means.

You said in the TBNT interview that, at least as far as *HTMIG* was concerned, you wrote for people who read books in English in Malaysia, and that this constituted your main audience, rather than American readers whose interests may differ from the subject matter you covered. A couple of years have now passed since the novel's publication. Have you found your novel reaching readerships that you may not have anticipated at the outset, and has your view on who you would like your novel to have a conversation with evolved in any way? For your next fictional piece, are you still "planning to do a story involving Southeast Asians in the American Midwest," as was reported in a feature in *The Star* (Toh)?

JK: I suppose I'm still surprised by my American audience, which continues to soldier through to read books from other places speaking to other times (haha, at last they're understanding my struggles for two decades with novels about pop tarts and bleachers and jokes about New Jersey!). I am still working on projects, but I'm keeping hush for the moment. Julia Fox has taught me well.

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