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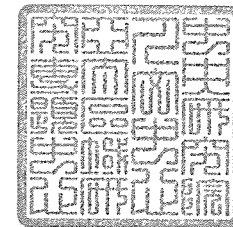
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Tamils and the Haunting of Justice

History and Recognition in Malaysia's Plantations

Andrew C. Willford

With the collaboration of S. Nagarajan



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For Rabin and Anisha

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Preface

A Note on Collaboration and Method

This research was conducted in collaboration with and through the aid of Dr. S. Nagarajan. “Naga” was with me for almost all the encounters described in this book. Thus I use the term “we” throughout to describe various encounters, observations, and events. I learned a lot from him over the years of this fieldwork collaboration. That said, the representations, language, interpretations, and theoretical interventions presented here are my own, with the exception of the opening vignette, which we coauthored in part. My own thinking and writing throughout, however, have been influenced by his detailed knowledge of the Tamil community in Malaysia. While this is very much a work of collaboration, Naga surely bears no responsibility for writing style (or lack thereof), errors, misrepresentations, mistranslations, or any analytic or theoretical misdirections this work may have taken. It is my hope that scholars of the Malaysian Tamil community (and of Malaysia more broadly) will read Naga’s own work carefully. I hope what I am doing here is complementary to his more detailed socioeconomic research on the same community.

On this point, and distinct from Naga’s work—though there are important things to say about political economy and history or socioeconomic conditions—this is an ethnographic and interpretive account. Several important, detailed studies have been done on the former, to which I am most indebted (e.g., Stenson 1980; Nagarajan 2004; Jomo 1986; Selvakumaran 1994; P. Ramasamy 1994). I am not trying to present an objective account of Tamil social or economic reality. Rather the aim here is to present, to the best of my ability, Malaysian Tamil understandings of their predicament. This does

not mean that these understandings are uniform or fully explicable within a cultural logic or a presumed rationality. Rather, some “understandings” subsist at the edge of reason, where desire, hope, anxiety, and fear reign. By that measure, what is said about the intentions of others, particularly Malays, is not to be misunderstood as factual or objective. Rather, I am trying to capture a dynamic in which the implications over a perceived injustice have possible, and perhaps necessary, ramifications for the nation-state of Malaysia.

In terms of method, Naga and I traveled to numerous plantations throughout Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Putrajaya, and Kuala Lumpur. We ended up focusing on Selangor, but even then there were numerous estates facing different stages of displacement and eviction. We consciously decided that it would be useful, too, to compare outcomes for displaced estate workers living relatively closer and farther from alternative employment. In addition to estates, we ended up spending a considerable amount of time in urban villages (*kampung*s), otherwise known as squatter areas, particularly in the Petaling Jaya Selatan, or the now infamous “Kampung Medan” area. We also visited newly transplanted residents in low-cost flats in several sites. In all the sites we visited, rather than conducting formal tape-recorded interviews, we tried to establish a more informal conversational rapport with residents. Sometimes we had referrals from lawyers, activists, and kin, which made our entry that much easier in the sometimes suspicious estate or squatter communities. To widen our scope, we would take walks in housing lines, sit in public areas such as temples and tea/coffee stalls, and generally strike up conversations with anyone who would speak with us. As we consciously wanted to observe a larger pattern of displacement and compensation processes and outcomes, we ended up sacrificing some ethnographic depth for greater breadth. That is, we ended up visiting numerous sites, only some of them repeatedly, but did not focus on a few key individuals or events, as is often the case in ethnographic writing. Therefore, in building a case for a larger pattern, I hope the reader will not mind the sometimes abrupt shifting of site or the sense of echo or recurrence, and will not miss the richness of narrative that emerges in individual life histories or the “deep play” of particular community dynamics. Where there is great value in the latter approach, and much of that can still be done in the communities studied here, I hope the reader understands the intent behind a desire for comparative breadth. The effect of numerous stories, I hope, will be as effective in convincing readers of a wave of collective sentiment as more individualistic or biographical approaches might. That said, we will meet some remarkable individuals in the pages that follow. It is to their spirit and resilience that this book is dedicated with gratitude.

In terms of language usage, interviews within the plantations were conducted primarily in Tamil, though some individuals did speak some English

and/or a smattering of Malay. Middle-class Indians tended to converse with us or myself primarily in English. Rather than use formal Tamil transliteration here, I have attempted to use spellings that were common in Malaysia. Thus, Taipucan became Thaipusam, for instance. Naga often assisted me with translations after our fieldwork encounters, or after I had written up my account, to assess the accuracy of statements and their translations. While my Tamil usage was functional, it could not grasp the subtleties in inflection and tone that Naga was able to perceive. Thus, in many instances I would have missed subtle and important meanings without his help. Lastly, we made a conscious effort to focus primarily on the nonofficial accounts and interpretations of everyday actors, rather than highlighting public documents, court cases, corporate representations, political speeches, declarations, etc. While there were some exceptions here and there, we felt it important to give voice to those (subaltern) voices most silenced, yet, as we hope to show, simmering with political restlessness.

Pseudonyms were used for most people quoted in this book with the exception of public figures or when media sources that were cited already identified the speakers by name.

Acknowledgments

This book owes so much to more people than I can possibly mention. But there are a few individuals who must be thanked. In Malaysia, I was led to this topic, and more significantly to S. Nagarajan, by the timely and friendly advice of K. S. Jomo. I thank the Malaysian American Commission on Educational Exchange (MACEE), and especially Kala Kovan, for encouragement and institutional support. I thank Raymond Lee, Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil, and Malini Ratnasingam at the University of Malaya's Department of Anthropology and Sociology for their interesting conversations, insights, and collegiality while I taught there as a Fulbright exchange scholar. M. Nadarajah, Dominic Puthuchery, and Paul Sinnapan were also wonderful interlocutors while I was doing field research.

Parts of this work were presented at the University of Michigan, Yale University, University of California Berkeley, Cornell University, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), the National Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), Bangalore, Dravidian University (in Kuppam), and the Australian National University. I am grateful for helpful comments and friendly encouragement from Webb Keane, Deirdre de la Cruz, Eric Harms, George and Kausalya Hart, Gaik Cheng Khoo, A. R. Vasavi, S. Carlos, Patricia Spyer, Jane Ferguson, Eric Tagliacozzo, Marina Welker, Lucinda Ramberg, Hiro Miyazaki, Tamara Loos, Deborah Homsher, Kaja McGowan, Sumit Mandal, P. Ramasamy, K. Arumugam, Carl Belle, Michael Peletz, Thak Chaloehtiarana, and Stan O'Conner, among many others.

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I thank the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Malaya for hosting me while I was a Fulbright CIES Fellow from 2003 to 2004. I am also grateful to ISEAS for hosting me during my sabbatical in 2008–2009. Important follow-up study, as well as timely research on Hindraf, was supported both financially and intellectually by ISEAS. I thank the then director, K. Kesavapany, as well as Johan Saravanamuttu, A. Mani, Ooi Kee Beng, Lee Hock Guan, Terence Chong, and especially Hui Yew-Foong for scintillating and spirited conversations. Yew-Foong generously shared his office with me as well.

Thanks with no reserve go to James Siegel and Rosalind Morris. Jim has been a continuing and astonishing source of inspiration. He always asks the questions that nobody else could, with his uncanny intensity and complexity of thought. And he has been a critical source of intellectual support and friendship over the years, reading draft after draft. Roz has been a most generous reader of my work ever since I was fortunate enough to befriend her many years ago. Her critical, detailed, and brilliant insights are incomparable. I owe her much more than I can ever return.

My family in Malaysia and Singapore—sisters, brothers, my mother-in-law, aunts, nephews, and nieces, etc.—were all helpful and generous with us during our stays in Malaysia. When going to the “field” is simultaneously returning home, one has the best of all worlds.

As is made clear in the preface, S. Nagarajan has been my invaluable research collaborator, colleague, and friend. This work could never have been completed without his integrity and commitment.

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I am particularly grateful to Pam Kelley at the University of Hawai‘i Press for her patience, expert editorial interventions, and confidence in the project. The two anonymous readers for the press also deserve a debt of gratitude. Both discovered things about this work that I only vaguely recognized. Indeed, I have never received such detailed, intellectually rigorous, and inspired reviews. The quality of the reviews made the revision process unusually enjoyable, indeed invigorating. Of course, they are absolved of any blame for the book’s various shortcomings despite their best efforts to steer me from the cliffs.

At long last, I must thank my family for their unending love and patience. I have certainly been an absent presence at times during the years it took to complete this project. My parents and sister have provided much love and encouragement. Vasantha, Anisha, and Rabin are the spirit in anything I write or experience. Anisha is an infinite source of joy, laughter, and sometimes tears. Rabin is my buddy in all things sports, movies, and music (and perhaps now anthropology). He possesses tremendous gifts he did not inherit from me. Vasantha is the source of all good things in my life. She continues to sustain me with her faith, endurance, and love.

Abbreviations

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
CDC	Community Development Centre
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DBKL	Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur
EPF	Employee Provident Fund
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
FRU	Federal Reserve Units
Hindraf	Hindu Rights Action Force
HRP	Human Rights Party
HSS	Hindu Seva Sangam
IC	identity card
INA	Indian National Army
ISA	Internal Security Act
JPJ	Jabatan Petaling Jaya (Petaling Jaya City Council)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MAPA	Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association
MARA	Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Council of Trust for the People)

MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MIED	Maju Institute of Educational Development
NDP	National Development Policy
NEP	New Economic Policy
NLFCS	National Land Finance Cooperative Society
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party)
PKNS	Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor (Selangor State Economic Development Corporation)
PNB	Permodalan Nasional Berhad
PSM	Parti Socialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia)
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party)
RSS	Rashtra Swamysevak Sangh
SILF	South Indian Labor Fund
SOCISO	Social Security Organization
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia certificate of education)
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Voice)
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

1 Introduction

The others, though vanquished, have won;
We, in our victory, have been defeated.

—*Mahabharata*

The Last Plantation in Kuala Lumpur

Community leader P. Palanisamy was a dejected man when Naga and I interviewed him in 2006. He had lost all hope of a just settlement in a dispute between former plantation workers of Bukit Jalil Estate and the local government. He lamented that the new generation of city hall officials had no knowledge of the plantation folk's years of hardship and toil, nor of their attachment to the land. They also appeared ignorant of promises made to the workers by their predecessors. "These new officials don't even realize that it is wrong to simply classify us as squatters and chase us away after we have slogged for decades in this place. They asked us, 'How can there be a plantation in Kuala Lumpur?'"¹ (*mana ada estet di Kuala Lumpur?*).

The sense of injustice and the perceived unreasonableness of city hall only increased for the Bukit Jalil residents when they compared their plight to what had happened to their neighbors in Kinrara Estate, which had been acquired around the same period by a private property developer. The Kinrara Estate residents were resettled in affordable "terrace" houses (townhouses) together with their temple, school, and community facilities on a small parcel of the plantation land. The arbitrariness of these two very different outcomes was clear for everyone to see.

A dispirited Palanisamy ultimately capitulated to the demands of city hall. The agreement he negotiated forced residents to rent newly built flats in Kampung Muhibbah, on the remaining parcel of plantation land near the current plantation housing. City hall also agreed to consider favorably the residents' "request" for a plot of land to relocate the Tamil school and temple.

Palanisamy incurred the ire of most residents when he informed the community of this agreement. The residents were upset with both Palanisamy, who was not literate in English or Malay and thus may not have understood the details of the agreement, and with the MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) leaders, who had not consulted with them before capitulating to city hall's offer. The residents rejected the agreement for several reasons, prominent among them being the lack of recognition for their rights as plantation workers and their desire to retain their sense of community, identity, and history. One more vocal resident strongly expressed his views at a residents' meeting: "We will not yield to the legal extortion of the authorities. We are not squatters who built a settlement on somebody's land or illegal occupants. We are residents and former workers of what used to be a rubber estate."

Housing was not the only problem they had to contend with. The residents also learned that sixteen hectares of the estate would be converted into cemeteries.² They were furious that under the proposed city hall plan, a new Tamil school and the relocated temple would be squeezed onto a 0.4-hectare plot inside the cemetery and next to a crematorium.³ The residents felt that by placing the school in the midst of the dead, city hall was symbolically humiliating the community.

The plantation temple was more than one hundred years old, we were told as we were taken to photograph it. Residents feared that the temple would be demolished in the near future, so our documenting of its historical presence was deemed important to the community elders. As the temple was a focal point of community identity, its potential loss produced great anxiety. In contrast to the dilapidated look of their homes, the temple was well cared for, and residents continued to celebrate festivals and conduct regular prayers there.

Residents expressed worry, too, about losing the "Indian" character of their more isolated lives in the estate. They worried about living together with Malays in low-cost settlements, worries perhaps colored by their frustrating encounters with petty bureaucrats at city hall, who were, after all, an arm of the same "government" that had just dealt them an unjust blow. Regardless of the source of this anxiety over the future, a nostalgia for the past had certainly set in. As Palanisamy put it, "We don't have the peace we used to when we lived and worked in the estate amongst ourselves." It is plausible to assume that their ethnic sentiments were increasingly shaped by the racialized landscape of Kuala Lumpur's development policies. The nostalgia for the time among "ourselves" was thus born out of a displacement, not just literally, but also in the negation of the psychological displacement that Indians themselves represent in the politics of development and race in Malaysia (Willford 2006a; Nagarajan 2004; Baxstrom 2008; Kent 2004).

City hall officials rejected the protests by residents of Bukit Jalil, insisting



The old temple at Bukit Jalil Estate. Photo by Andrew Willford and S. Nagarajan

that the residents were squatters and pointing out that they risked losing the resettlement offer if they did not move into the flats in the specified period. City hall argued that the government had compensated the estate owner appropriately when it acquired the plantation land. The onus, therefore, was on the former plantation owner to have settled all outstanding issues with its workers.⁴

Though unhappy and disillusioned, thirty families moved to the flats for fear that their situation would worsen if city hall carried out its threat to withdraw its rental offer and demolish their estate houses. Former rubber tapper Saroja, aged fifty-three, one of the residents who moved, found some consolation in the fact that the flats were still near her place of work, the temple, and Tamil school. She felt the community could remain intact so long as they were placed in the same block of flats. She also explained that her family could not continue to stay in the neglected and rotting wooden estate house. Living conditions there had indeed become unbearable. Roofs were leaky and in danger of collapse. "What is the use of repairing our houses with our meager income with city hall's demolition threat looming over our heads? We are poor people who cannot afford to take risk." As it turned out, though, a few of the families who moved to the flats had difficulty adjusting to the new environment and wanted to return to the plantation. But their estate houses had been demolished immediately after they vacated.

The remaining families in the last remnant of the plantation refused to be intimidated by city hall's threats. They presented evidence⁵ that city hall had employed them through private contractors to tap rubber between 1980 and 1995, after the federal government acquired the plantation. They argued that city hall could not absolve itself of responsibility by shifting blame to the former plantation owner when it itself had profited from their labor during the previous fifteen years. The residents ignored several eviction notices issued under the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance 1969 (Clearance of Squatters Regulations) by city hall. Their resolve to stay put was described by seventy-three-year-old Nyanameh Arsevathan:

They want to break down my house, let them break it. I will stay right here. For years, I have worked on this estate tapping rubber. My children grew up here. Now they can just easily tell us to leave. Where can we go? I've been staying here up to now, [this house] is mine. Are they going to give me a house? When I die, I'll die here. If they break my house, I'll build it again once they leave.⁶

The angry response, and its political significance, should be underscored. As another longtime resident observed, "Now, they say this is not an estate. They are squatters. How they came up with this label 'squatters' [for us] I don't know." But, ironically, politicians, she added, "recognize us" as estate residents when they come during election time and "seek our votes."⁷ There was clearly a sense of hurt and betrayal in the "squatter" designation. But the practical ramifications were real and increasingly conscious to the residents. Labeling a community as "squatters" allowed DBKL (Dewan Bandaraya⁸ Kuala Lumpur) to evict and demolish that community without negotiating compensation for the market value of the land, as displacing estate workers would entail.

The argument for compensation and the allocation of housing for these families was bolstered by the desire of city hall to avoid public embarrassment as it sold the last portions of the estate land to developers, by the knowledge among the residents that the speculative value of the land was high, by the knowledge that residents had toiled there for generations, and by the effective challenging through media scrutiny of the label of "squatter." This was the hardened mindset of the residents. In any event, the violence of the law, its arbitrary and performative quality, had been laid bare to the residents in a manner that allowed for its critique in the name of justice.⁹ Separating notions of justice from technical legality afforded a tool for political critique, though one not without risks.

The community's distrust of city hall was compounded when its eighty-year-old Tamil school was not included in the Kuala Lumpur Draft Plan 2020.¹⁰ Given the history of broken promises and the residents' distrust and suspicion of city hall, the residents organized a series of demonstrations and took their case directly to the federal government. It was not difficult for them to furnish evidence to the federal authorities that theirs was indeed a former plantation community and that they were not illegal occupiers of state land. Their persistence and protests yielded some results. The new education minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, visited the Tamil school and was apparently shocked to find an old run-down building that was cramped, stuffy, and uncomfortable and posed a threat to the safety of students and teachers. He announced an immediate allocation of two million ringgit for a new school building to be built on an adjacent 0.3-hectare plot of land.¹¹ Though the community was disappointed that the land allocated was not two hectares as stipulated in government regulation, it was happy that at least the school would not be built inside a cemetery, as initially proposed by city hall. The Human Resources Ministry also formally acknowledged that the residents were former plantation residents who were entitled to alternative housing and other benefits, and it informed city hall not to evict them till the Federal Territory Ministry and the Finance Ministry settled these pending issues.¹²

This could be perceived as a symbolic victory for the community, though many legal hurdles remain. At the same time, notions of compensatory justice were, we see, grounded in a desire for recognition. Residents increasingly felt that gaining recognition of their longtime presence was an important aspect of achieving political recognition. We were oftentimes told about the relative antiquity of certain temples or other markers of community during our fieldwork and were urged to take note and to archive these facts (as was the case for the temple we photographed in Bukit Jalil mentioned above). This kind of historiographic recognition, we came to realize, was a kind of compensatory justice given the rapid erasure of landscapes and their associated memories in the service of development projects aimed at bolstering Malay identity while silencing the non-Malay and, particularly, the Indian presence on the landscape.¹³ A recognition of the estate resident's longtime residence and presence in Kuala Lumpur was an important victory, the community felt, despite the lack of legal fecundity that such recognition afforded.

This opening case captures the essence of struggles faced by plantation workers in Malaysia. Arguably, all one needs to know about the predicament of Malaysia's former plantation laborers can be gleaned from this example. But the themes outlined in the story of the Bukit Jalil case will be examined more thoroughly in the series of ethnographic cases that follow. I will offer a closer

examination of the meanings that former laborers attach to their retrenchment and eviction in the context of a nation-state committed to development with an ethnic face. This, in turn, will help us understand how boundaries of imagined identity are forged within a very material topography.

Landscapes, Race, and the Nation

The majority of plantation workers in Malaysia, historically, were Tamil speakers that arrived from India in the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, first as indentured laborers and later as migrant labor. The above story, from one of the last plantations in Kuala Lumpur, epitomizes the frustrations and fears that descended upon the Tamil population as a result of a particular kind of developmentalism. The plantation industry, formerly the primary employer of Tamils in Malaysia, has restructured in ways that have negatively impacted the Tamil communities. Tamil laborers, and the entire communities they belonged to, were retrenched and displaced as plantations were either converted into more lucrative land developments or increasingly mechanized. This process continues as I write this. In the case of the latter, foreign workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh have been brought in to replace the retrenched Tamil workers to cut labor costs. Moreover, as the migrant laborers do not bring their whole families with them, the community structures (e.g., Tamil schools, temples, churches, community halls, recreational fields, etc.) that emerged within the plantations need no longer be sustained, allowing more land to be converted or developed. In short, the old, long-term, community-based model of plantation production that was introduced by British and French companies in colonial Malaya has been replaced by a model based primarily on itinerant labor, mechanization, and a subsequent gradual contraction of the plantation economy.

This book, based on more than seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in various plantations and squatter areas between 2003 and 2009, examines this fast-approaching end of a way of life. But I hope it is more than that. Rather, it will demonstrate how ideas of race and ethnicity are produced, imagined, and negated within a political, material, legal, and discursive field. Beyond this, I aim to show how notions of justice, as imagined by an aggrieved minority, complicate legal demarcations of ethnic difference in post-colonial states. In so doing, I examine the psychology of ethnic rationalization and its ubiquitous concomitant, a sense of victimization, an oftentimes volatile mix within multiethnic societies that are experiencing upsurges in nationalistic sentiments (e.g., Appadurai 2006; Hansen 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). In this sense, though this book directly addresses scholars and students of Southeast Asia and the Indian diaspora, its scope is hopefully broader, as

it examines how ethnic nationalism becomes embedded within capitalist logics of development, landscape refashioning, and the law.

Specifically, I describe how Tamils increasingly resent that lands that were developed and populated by their ancestors are now claimed by Malays as solely their own and, moreover, that the land-use patterns in these new townships, such as in Shah Alam, are increasingly hostile to the most symbolic vestiges of the Tamil and Hindu presence, the temples. Hindu temples are not only anathema to all that is Islamic and modern in the state-sponsored discourses of reform and orthopraxy, they are a reminder of both a pre-Islamic past that is always present in Malay culture and identity (but one that is always under siege by reformers) and of a more recent non-Malay presence on the landscapes that are purported to be Malay-oriented townships. The compulsive erasure of these sites, as perceived by Tamils, in other words is not only a land grab but is also fueled by a moralizing conscience. It is in the combination of demographic transformations and the political and economic marginalization of Tamils that accompanied them, coupled with the apparently amnesiac hostility with which Malays in the newly created townships show to (older) Hindu presences there, that draws the ire of the Tamil community. There is, in short, an upsurge of resentment. This in turn led to the dramatic “Hindraf” (Hindu Rights Action Force) rally in Kuala Lumpur that drew thousands of protesters to the streets in 2007. In addition to issues pertaining to land, however, legal cases surrounding religious conversion have exacerbated a sense of insecurity among Tamil Hindus. Though much of this book focuses on the anxieties of plantation workers facing eviction, the climax of the book is an analysis of the Hindraf movement and its aftermath.

This book intervenes in the studies of labor and land compensation in two ways. First, through its ethnographic breadth, it demonstrates which strategies, as enacted by local communities in conjunction with NGOs and legal advisors/activists, have been more “successful” in navigating both the legal and political system of ethnic entitlement, which is itself embedded within complicated bureaucratic structures that facilitate, and even demand, ethnic singularity in the midst of pluralism. Second, the very question of what constitutes compensation is complicated by ethnographic considerations of culture, history, and memory. I demonstrate in many cases that financial redress is only one vector in which displaced communities seek compensation. Oftentimes, other forms of compensation override financial interests. In several cases presented in the book, compensation is sought in terms of community recognition, which in turn indicates a desire to put into relief the historicized nature of the identity constructs that have been codified and legally empowered through an ethnonationalist development regime. In short, I argue that compensation also comes in the form of historicism, fantasy, and phantasm.

In some cases, where a sense of injustice is perceived to be extreme, Tamil notions of divine justice are revealed to be a form of compensation, albeit one grounded in a growing victim's narrative. Compensation grounded in victim's narratives, in turn, produces counterpatrimonial narratives of the nation, defined against the majority discourse.

As will be detailed in chapter 2, Malaysia's multiethnic society was organized around a paradox of nation building. While certainly a legacy of a colonial era, to some extent (Hirschman 1986) the measured separateness and differences in rights and privileges accorded to Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others were anything but inevitable or natural (Harper 1999; Noor 2009; Kahn 2006; Milner 2002), but rather were dramatically negotiated and enshrined in a constitutional document. While ostensibly recognizing the citizenship rights of all Malaysians regardless of ethnic origin, special provisions protecting Malay political supremacy became enshrined with the law. With this came an expectation of failure of hospitality on all sides. That is, the legalization of separate rights and privileges, but with guarantees of accommodation, provided a paradoxical and agonistic form of national consensus. Malaysian nationalism was built out of negative and dissonant discourses of the other that had to be held—indeed reinforced—by legal means and supplemented by a racialized political and cultural landscape. The institutionalized markers of ethnic difference in Malaysia, in turn, have supplemented and fortified the original violent acts of ethnic signification, as wedded to law. I am thus building on the problem of “bound” serialization that Benedict Anderson (1998) and others have called attention to. That is, in a civil-legal order established to sustain the serialization of ethnic types, accommodating gestures of multiethnic tolerance, hospitality, and civility are always already both founded on an act of violence, and in turn self-inoculating for a reciprocal expectation of violence. It is this specter that arguably sustains the ethnic-based political formula, as fears of domination by the other fuel allegiance to an otherwise untenable ethnic signifier. For example, in Malaysia, the specter of “May 13, 1969,” the date that marked terrible violence between primarily Malays and Chinese in Kuala Lumpur, has been consistently invoked by politicians to consolidate votes around a fear of potential further violence. The lesson, in other words, is that the expectation of failure (ethnic violence) produces the conditions of the multiethnic political coalition. This, what I call the negative and dissonant (Willford 2006a) form of the nation, has proven remarkably resilient. But in what follows, I suggest that as a sense of victimization takes hold among an aggrieved minority, in this case Malaysian Tamils, the “force of law” (Derrida 2002a) that marks and sustains such dissonance becomes more visible, indeed deconstructible. The disposition of the victim becomes one of seeking justice outside and beyond the juridical/civil

order. In the Tamil case, the call for justice becomes fused with a reckoning of that which exceeds calculability, reason, or logic and crosses to the divine or sublime. A reconstitution of law, however, is possible under such circumstances, I will argue, though it be tinged with the injunction of a higher power or an authority beyond the legal authority of humans.

The dissolution of old communities with a particular history, and memories associated with the cultural and social landscape, is producing fears and anxieties among Malaysia's working-class Tamils and very real challenges for those moving out to squatter areas or low-cost flats, the two most common scenarios. In this process of displacement, communities are necessarily fragmented, and perceived tears in a social fabric have appeared in the form of new social problems, identified in the media as “gangsterism.” Focusing on the state of Selangor, in Malaysia's industrial and symbolic heartland, where the former chief minister had earlier announced a plan to eliminate all plantations by the year 2008, I describe this final phase of retrenchment, community loss, and in many cases, resistance through legal challenges and squatting. In most instances, for example, compensation offered to displaced workers and their families was nominal. Coupled with the fact that as lifelong contract laborers they had no legal claim to their home, land, or community structures (including, in many instances, hundred-year-old temples and schools), this left them not only in financial hardship, but also demoralized and even traumatized. But, that said, we will witness success stories as well. In some instances, retrenched workers won concessions from the plantation management, or from the developers who purchased plantation lands, who wished to evict and bulldoze these communities and build housing, resorts, or other industries. In almost all cases I will describe, litigation between the increasingly politicized and mobilized communities and the management or landowners was mediated by the law's perceived ethnic biases.

Aside from analyzing the social, cultural, and psychological impacts of these economic transformations, there are important legal and moral issues that will be highlighted. For example, I will demonstrate the extent that moral claims to compensation are increasingly grounded upon the speculated worth of land after conversion or development has occurred. That is, as developers purchased land at one price and offered compensation based upon that figure, yet speculated much larger profits, community members displaced by this process of land speculation sought claims to greater compensation than was stipulated by the letter of the law. This was grounded in a moral discourse about Malaysia's history on the one hand and in a sense of growing injustice about the law's inability to recognize ethnic and monetary iniquities in speculative practices on the other hand.

Building on my earlier work (Willford 2006a), this book furthers an analy-

sis of the ethnic and religious face of development in Malaysia as perceived by Tamils. But going further than in my previous book, here I examine the critical nexus between space, landscape, and identity through a sometimes gritty look at the conditions facing those being displaced from plantations. Very often plantation lands were (and are) converted into luxury homes and townships marketed to a middle-class, primarily Malay bourgeoisie. Developers have built large and modern mosques, for example, in most new settlements in order to attract *bumiputra* (Malay) buyers (and as they are required to under government regulations). But, as mentioned, there were old temples in each plantation that held much emotional attachment for the displaced workers. Developers are often reluctant to allow these structures to remain in place, as they are associated with working-class Tamils, itself a racialized stigma in Malaysia (Willford 2006a; Baxstrom 2008; Nagarajan 2004; Kent 2004), and increasingly, within the workings of the state-driven ideology of Islamic modernism, are anathema to the projects of Malay-Islamic cultural nationalism. This is witnessed in two particular megaprojects that have displaced thousands of plantation workers: the development of the two cities of Shah Alam and Putrajaya (Bunnell 2004; Cartier 2002). Both herald the emergence of a successful Malay-Islamic modernity and provide symbolic reference for the cultural nationalist imaginary of the nation-state, yet both were built on former plantation communities. The struggles to save or destroy temples, or to provide low-cost housing reserved for Tamil estate workers in these areas, I argue, afford an important analytic window into the potential heightening of ethnic and religious tensions in the country.

This book also offers a critique of the development ideology of the state, with its implicit (and sometimes explicit) cultural nationalist, ethnic, and religious face. As numerous scholars have noted, the nationalist and ethnic face of development ideology often obscures the class interests within development projects, which more often than not cross-cut so-called ethnic or religious interests. But, as alluded to above, my critique is not limited to an analysis of interest, but rather explores the complex subjectivity of victimhood within a matrix of power. Ultimately, I suggest that analytic concepts such as agency, alienation, utilitarian interest, and hegemony remain unsatisfactory. While these concepts are surely useful and important, they do not capture the ambivalence and capacity for critique from within local systems of meaning. That is, to use a famous example from James Scott (1985), hegemony is only so “thick.” But unlike the more utilitarian response offered by Scott to a strong model of hegemony or false consciousness, I suggest an ambivalence always already recognized within a “spiritual” critique of human hierarchy. While Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Derrida, and others may be exemplars of this critical tradition in Western thought, similar aporias surrounding the

sovereign right to power versus the spirit of resistance to its capricious arche-violence are not lacking in Tamil and Hindu theodicies. That our theory is surely Eurocentric, of course, is still a problem (Morris 2007; Chakrabarty 2000). Thus, perhaps, one contribution that ethnography can make is to bring this Eurocentrism into dialogue with other critical traditions that parallel, challenge, or expand our understandings of language and culture.

Two more specific but related areas of concern that I address are, first, the social conditions of former plantation workers who have been relocated into high- and low-rise flats, and second, the fallout from a so-called racial clash that occurred in 2001 between Malays and Tamils in an area associated with squatters and low-cost flats. The clash left five Tamils and one Indonesian dead, and scores were injured. I interviewed victims and witnesses of this violent incident, and I offer here an ethnographic account of these events that analyzes the emotional salience of a Tamil victim’s narrative. A victim’s narrative is taking hold, both as a political resource and as a psychological compulsion. In this instance, I demonstrate that so-called ethnic violence is not generated from conditions of poverty or from intractable cultural differences, but rather is fueled by the arbitrary orderings of ethnic entitlement and how these are buttressed by legal edifices that have circular and pernicious, and sometimes compulsive, reasoning (Siegel 2006; Appadurai 2006; Malkii 1995; Hansen 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006).

The transformation of land usage in Malaysia has been inextricably linked to a politicizing of Islam and Malay rights. In short, the development of the prime industrial and subsequential residential heartlands of this nation have taken on an ethnonationalistic urgency, given the politics of identity in the nation. More specifically, the transformation of key lands in and around Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and the entire Klang Valley have not only been crucial for economic reasons, but have also figured large in symbolic intent. For these lands, formerly populated primarily by Tamils and Chinese (Kahn 2006; Gullick 2004), have become the symbolic heartland of a new and politically unified Malay identity (King 2008; Kahn 2006; Bunnell 2004; Baxstrom 2008). The developments of Putrajaya and Shah Alam, in particular, have been instrumental not only in creating a large urban (and suburban) Malay populace, a key goal of Malaysian developmentalism spearheaded by former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, but also in crafting the semiotics of a new Malay identity. This new Malay identity, as many scholars have noted, is crafted through an emphasis on Islamic modernism (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011) fused with nostalgic imaginings for past Islamic civilizations.

I hope what follows will contribute to our understanding of postcolonial developmental politics. Specifically, with a focus on how the increasingly ethnicized landscapes of Malaysia are produced within bureaucratic and legal

structures that appear to be heightening religious and ethnic divides, I demonstrate that the sharpening of boundaries between so-called ethnic groups is produced within a very material topography on the one hand, but is interpolated in the self-rationalizing discourses of ethnic entitlement on the other hand. This in turn addresses the growing literature on the anthropology of violence, as the mechanisms for psychic investment in singular identities over and against plural possible selves are illustrated through ethnography.

Law, Archives, and Victimization

At the level of theoretical engagement, my ethnographic focus draws me into critical engagement with the writings of Benjamin, Lacan, and especially Derrida on the question of law and justice. I suggest that Derrida, in particular, whose deconstructive reading of messianic divine justice, not to mention the “archive fever” that bedevils the historicizing impulse, finds its critical and uncanny analogue in Tamil Hindu theodicies surrounding tragedy and divine justice, which in turn motivate contemporary Tamil actors in Malaysia (Shulman 1985, 1989; Nabokov¹⁴ 2000; Ram 2013). Indeed, it is what might be called the “deconstructive” and antihierarchical side of Tamil thought (Shulman 1985) that led me to Derrida. That said, I suggest that the practical and theoretical relevance of Derrida’s writing for an engaged political anthropology has much to say beyond the confines of the humanities (Morris 2000, 2007; Siegel 1997). Allow me elaborate a bit on this now.

Throughout this book, inspired by works by Derrida (1995a, 2002a), I use the term “archive” and “archive fever” to understand the production of knowledge that authorizes, retroactively, both the Law and those subject to it. That is, truths are known through their effects, and in social life these effects are productions of culture and history. Through legal jurisprudence, we only come to know of justice in the law through, paradoxically, its application. In this sense, the notion of justice being grounded in the law is upheld through the supplement that is jurisprudence. If error or injustice occurs, it is at the level of application, upholding the illusion of impartial justice and the Law’s inviolability. Here we must distinguish “Law” as the site of recognition and source and guarantor of subjectivity, not to mention justice, with the “law” as a set of calculations derived from founding principles or injunctions. Similarly, the idea that writing potentially corrupts speech, as Derrida has argued in numerous books, effaces the violence and difference that already marks speech, and, by extension, the selfsame subject who has “mastered” their thoughts through its use (i.e., his well-known critique of logocentrism). The “pharmakon”¹⁵ (remedy) that is writing preserves memory (Derrida 1981), but not without risk. Writing is also contagious and constructs the very memory it seeks to

document. The sovereignty of the subject is always already threatened by the traces of the Other that is part of the individual’s own psychic archive, a powerful Hegelo-Freudian and Heideggerian insight elaborated in Derrida’s formulation. The pharmakon or archive, acting as supplement, simply renders this threat visible, thus generating a distinction between self/Other, and writing and speech. Thus “archive fever,” as Derrida (1995a) argues, represents a symptom that returns one to an essential Freudian insight regarding the essential transference and, concomitantly, its negation that produces the subject through the accomplishment of language and culture.

In my usage, and in a liberal application to ethnic politics, development, and statecraft, the relevance of this formulation to subject making and contested sovereignty, not to mention violent suppression, can be summarized as follows: In the case of identity politics in colonial and postcolonial settings (and perhaps elsewhere), subject making seems to require evidence of the authoritative archive to exert an aura of truth in the face of ideological absurdity, contingency, fracture, and domination. The greater the contradictions of power and ideology, the greater the “archive madness” to produce the illusion of truth that is established, in quite circular fashion, through the archive. This effect of power, this “madness” to objectify, racialize, and classify difference, buttressed by an archivable structure, is one of anxious mastery and rule, pointing to an inescapable limit to sovereignty. Or, as Derrida suggests, the greater the archive madness, the more spectral the archive becomes. In turn, those at the margins of history’s archive and culture’s seemingly dense web sometimes identify negatively and compulsively (e.g., Bhabha 1994; Hansen 2001; Morris 2000; Rutherford 2012; Song 2010; Spyer 2000; Willford 2006a), even hysterically (Gherovici 2003; Povinelli 2002), with the very lack they perceive in those who desire them to be the exception that defines the normative.

It is, of course, easy to critique dominant or hegemonic systems of truth through such a perspective. But the archive operates by similar principles among victims of contingent hierarchies (and of course they are never natural). This monograph investigates the case of plantation workers as they struggle for compensation and ultimately justice. Archiving the injustice also nurtures, I argue, a sense of victimization. The latter is more difficult to deconstruct for the simple reason that investigating the consequences of a victim’s narrative does not change the truth, of course, that the victims of various forms of violence—be it material, historical, and cultural—deserve to have their stories represented academically in critical historiographies and ethnographies (Morris 2010; Das 2007; Povinelli 2002). This academic work of amplifying the subaltern voice does not accomplish justice out of political failure, but it might conversely document an alternative “archive,” one that

imagines and authorizes a source of power outside the brute force of materiality. And while some might suggest that such imaginings are the stuff of alienation and false consciousness, particularly as they often express themselves through spiritual aspirations, I argue here that there is a critical, deconstructive function accomplished through these imagined futures and/or reconstructed pasts. These emerge immanently within cultural expressions, particularly through shared suffering. Shining the comparative light of continental theory remains, at least to this author, a useful act of cultural translation. Put differently, the critical workings of culture, in this case Tamil-Hindu critiques of hierarchy, anticipate and mirror the work of the continental theorists I take inspiration from.

To capture the complex workings of a victim's narrative and the political fecundity and risks it affords in a field of ethnic politics, I necessarily focus on subjectivity, ambivalence, and psychic resistance (Butler 1997; Hansen 2001; Gherovici 2003). Indeed, I argue that compensation often takes psychic form in the absence and/or failure of material success. On the other hand, this imagining of justice as a form of compensation also inspires a deconstruction of the Law and has inspired political action. A central tension that emerges in the ethnography, thus, is the extent to which the struggles for justice lead to a radical critique of the legal order and the rights and privileges it attempts to naturalize, more generally. Or, conversely, does an increasingly resonant victim's narrative nurture an archive about the Other, producing counterpatrimonial assertions of Law and a potential for further violence?

Here I am aided analytically by Lacan's (1992, 1993) revisiting of Freud's theory of hysteria. The hysteric's symptom, according to Lacan, enacts something that is desired by the person to whom it is revealed or for whom it is performed, and in that sense it carries a message. But this message is not clearly articulated, as it is ambiguously split between exposing the lack of the Other (the site of recognition, the Law, and authority) and a desire to shore up that lack, reconstituting the Other as being an all-powerful and idealized authority, a desire that grounds subjectivity and subjection. The "hysteric" gesture, in Lacan's sense, neurotically identifies an inconsistency or flaw in the authority or powerful Other (oftentimes a parental figure, though in this case a patriarchal state) and acts to fill that gap, and thus reconstitutes an idealized authority figure, the big Other, while also wishing to negate the source of perverse desire emanating from that Other's lack, which is inevitably displaced onto the hysteric subject in a dialectical relationship. To Lacan, "lack" is not perverse, but rather is foundational to the emergence of the subject. It is in the discovery of the lack in the Other, most importantly, the mother, that the individual can carve a space of relative autonomy through the acquisition of language. Without the space provided by lack, the subject

exists wholly to fulfill the Other's desire. The subject's own sense of lack, in turn, drives the chain of substitutions through symbolic mastery in an impossible attempt to compensate for the originary loss of a primary intimacy with the "mOther," which has been shattered in the discovery of her difference from the self (Lacan 1977; Fink 1995). Perversity in the Other's lack, however, occurs through the seemingly arbitrary violence of hierarchy, whence the Other enacts absurd and arbitrary injunctions and projects unacceptable desires toward its subordinate.

One might think of this latter displacement as the "archive" of difference that attempts to naturalize hierarchy and its violence, as Derrida has argued. In my study, Tamil attempts to critique the increasingly visible failures and perceived betrayals of the Malaysian state (the authority or Other) simultaneously resurrect notions of an idealized paternal figure, or the idea of the nation as just and hospitable. The critique, thus, acts as a supplement, preserving the idealized notion (Derrida 1974), while pointing to a lack or failure within the heart of the Law. It is this dual gesture that oscillates between radical critique or deconstruction and hysteric victimization.

While finding this Lacanian emphasis on ambivalent and simultaneous resistance *and* subjection, particularly in the face of a flawed or lacking authority, a useful analytic, we must caution, too, that it pathologizes the victim of authority, as Foucault has also famously argued (1965). The language of mental health produces its object as it popularizes and authorizes a repertoire of symptoms that gain traction within a shared public sphere, as it was in Freud's time. Here the distinction between hysteria and other culture-bound syndromes becomes blurry and scientifically untenable. What gets lost in the mental health model, of course, is the political message embedded within the culturally shaped symptom (Young 2007; Gherovici 2003; Ram 2013). And as Ram (2013) cogently argues regarding the "protest" within Tamil idioms of spirit possession, the gendered diagnoses of "hysteria," both historically in Freud's time and subsequently within anthropological analysis, diminish the critical phenomenology of experience in which such idioms of protest are sustained. Thus, ultimately, the culturally specific language of experience must be taken seriously—as seriously, at least, as the diagnostic language derived from psychoanalytic theory. The latter, of course, forms its own archive and authorizes certain truths about subjectivity that ironically become mute to the most radical discoveries of Freud regarding the instability of any archive (Derrida 1995a). And while this is addressing, sometimes obliquely, the problem of sovereignty, my principal concern here is to examine the relationship between a victim's narrative and the imagining of justice. Finally, while the subtitle of this book invokes "history," this is not a historical work. Rather, I examine a Malaysian Tamil sense of history, or emergent

historiography, through an ethnographic lens, and I suggest that the shape of history is forged in a narrative of justice and victimization. These theoretical predilections notwithstanding, it is my hope that readers with different analytical orientations and sympathies will find the more lucid ethnographic presentations useful for their own interventions and critiques of ethnic politics and development.

Outline of Chapters

The book triangulates between plantation communities facing retrenchment and resettlement, those who have ended up in “squatter” areas as a result of this process, and those who are finding themselves in low-cost resettlement projects. In this triangulation and trajectory, a recurrent motif of the state’s, and by extension the Law’s, betrayal is underscored, particularly as it gives fuel to a victim’s narrative among Tamils. This in turn opens up political possibilities, but it also arouses anxieties and hauntings about what form justice may take in the future.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief political history of Malaysia, particularly to the bureaucratization of ethnic politics in colonial and postcolonial periods. This is followed by a more specific analysis of the transformation of the plantation industry in Malaysia’s commercial heartland, primarily in the state of Selangor. The central issue in this chapter is to understand how the bureaucratization of ethnic entitlement affected the politics of development, which in turn had economic and symbolic consequences for Tamil communities experiencing displacement.

Chapter 3 provides a series of ethnographic encounters in several plantation (“estate”) communities within Selangor, the “ground zero” of plantation retrenchment and evictions. Here we come face to face with communities and individuals who express a sense of being shattered as their communities are literally threatened by demolition. We also witness the emergence of the plantation as a site of nostalgia. This nostalgia is seen to be growing in response to the threat of dislocation and displacement. The importance of documentation to plantation workers is described, both as a political resource and as evidence of victimization. The chapter ends with a dramatic Tamil-Hindu festival celebration on a plantation slated for retrenchment and displacement. The territorial and possessive powers of the gods are more fervent, I suggest, in the shadow of futural angst.

Through more ethnographic case studies from different plantations, a pattern of community resilience and resistance to the forces of eviction is made clear in chapter 4. Much of this chapter focuses on a growing sense of victimization among Tamils. In this, Tamils in the plantations are increasingly

coming to understand the state and its law as capricious and unjust. We witness how a sense of community is forged in the shadow of the Other and its purported capricious acts. In identifying with their victimhood, communities seek to reconstitute through struggles for compensation. We witness how the preservation of this sense of “community” through collective relocation, and through the salvage or relocation of significant landscape markers such as temples, groups, and individuals, exceeds utilitarian or instrumental interests. This chapter concludes with the case of a local Tamil “mystic.” His story of spiritual transcendence demonstrates the gradual interpolation of ethnic politics into the lives of plantation workers, as well as the important role religion plays in imagining a kind of justice beyond legality.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the protracted and multifaceted nature of compensation struggles, particularly as concerning focal symbols of community identity such as temples and Tamil schools. A fight for compensation was, in short, simultaneously a demand for recognition of a community’s place within a symbolic landscape. In chapter 5, however, the strategies of resistance are more directly assessed, given recent successes and failures in dealing with developers, the legal system, and the state. I look first to key activist leaders who have provided legal and intellectual assistance, including an analysis of leading NGOs who champion the rights of plantation workers. Of special concern is whether “progressive” NGOs understand and sufficiently reckon with the emotive, symbolic, indeed devotional, impulses that drive many Malaysian Tamil subjects to imagine a particular kind of divine justice.

Chapter 5 described, among other things, how an indescribable shock and disbelief in the aftermath of temple demolitions by developers had generated strategies of social mobilization. Ironically, destructions renewed faith and revitalized efforts to reconstitute sacred ground. At the same time, these efforts are increasingly grounded in a victim’s narrative as the ultimate cause of spiritual desecration by developers, town councils, and the racialized state. In chapter 6, I demonstrate, through attention to sacred shrines and ritual practices, that the problem of desecration is not only a challenge of faith, but a call to action. I show how the temple’s purported purity and immanence, its very power, is called into question after an act of defiling. Exploring this conundrum whereby the violence and despair of symbolic rupture fuels and oscillates with the reconstitution of recognizable forms of power and immanence, and hence agency and intentionality, is of critical importance. We witness this occurring specifically in the realm of shrines with unorthodox leanings in the Tamil context. These shrines are conduits of spiritual power—generators of both hope and despair, affording an oscillation between the sublime or incomprehensible powers of destruction and the fecundity of social power.

Chapter 7 examines what was described as the worst “ethnic rioting” in Malaysia in decades. In 2001, Malays and Indians clashed in an area known as Kampung Medan. Many analysts, academics, and politicians were quick to ascribe blame, drawing on ethnic “myths” or stereotypes. Others invoked the purported and “inevitable” frustrations caused by anomie and squalor in squatter areas. The recounting of the violent events by witnesses and victims demonstrates that the respective figures of the “Indian” and “Malay” increasingly silence complex exchanges and intimacies between the two groups. These figures, in turn, are also produced out of a particular developmentalism driven by ethnonationalist impulses. I examine, in conclusion, the symptoms of cultural and ethnic uncertainty generated by the bureaucratization of ethnic privilege.

Chapter 8 explores how former plantation residents have adjusted to life in low-cost flats as part of a government-sponsored relocation scheme. The creation of Putrajaya, the government’s new administrative and symbolic capital, was built directly on former plantation lands. The residents were relocated to a housing project in nearby Dengkil. Through interviews with residents in the flats, a sense of discontent and awareness of a state “betrayal” is made palpable. The chapter concludes with the story of a “miraculous mango tree” still standing in Putrajaya, as well as a relocated shrine associated with that tree, now located in a flat, that it is reunited with the tree through the magic of photography. I suggest that this reconstituted shrine, in the context of an inauspicious flat, provokes both the beauty of hope and the horror of the sublime to Tamils who gaze upon it.

Most of this book focuses on the plight of the working class. Physical displacement has produced the most visceral awakening to the violence within the Law. But a smaller and influential segment of the Tamil population is made up of professionals, which is the subject of chapter 9. A cultural displacement, as experienced by the Indian middle class, has produced its own narrative of growing intolerance within and betrayals of an idealized nascent nation that was subsequently hijacked by Malay “extremists.” This sense of betrayal among the Indian middle class is important because many important leaders have arisen from within their ranks, and because their narrative of victimization takes cohesive ideological shape in a form that disseminates to the working class through the work of activists, politicians, writers, NGOs, and lawyers. Through this, we see an important class dialectic within the Indian community that is divisive, as well as signs that recent legal decisions and events have exacerbated a sense of insecurity. A deep sense of political betrayal within this elite class is producing nostalgia for a nonracialized Malaysia on the one hand, and a consolidation of Indianness on the other.

In the concluding chapter I describe the remarkable events that marked

the Hindraf protests in 2007. I present interviews with the leadership of this movement, as well as rank-and-file followers who became invested in the Hindraf cause. By way of summation, the book concludes by making three broad claims about the Indian uprising that simultaneously sum up arguments made throughout the book. First, I argue that the Indian uprising, particularly as culminating in the Hindraf movement, gained resonance as an awakening to the Law’s capriciousness. Second, the transgression of the letter of the Law became a means toward realizing a distinction between legality and justice. Third, and related, I argue that an emergent sense of historicity among Tamils arose that articulated frustrations over increasing Islamization and the perceived de-Indianization of Malay culture. Ultimately, I argue that the capricious force of law and the violence of “order” was haunted by what it suppressed. Moreover, in Tamil Hinduism, notions of divine justice became fused with sometimes violent imaginaries of divine vengeance, which in turn are also haunting in their possessive force.

2 An Emergent Betrayal

Tamils and the Development of Selangor's Plantations

This chapter charts a brief history of some of the key developments that led to the rise and decline of Selangor's plantation industry. While some historical, political, and economic context is useful, I do not aim here to provide an extensive or detailed historical analysis. Rather, I wish to contextualize the expressions of betrayal and calls for justice that occurred between 2003 and 2007 among Malaysian Tamils, culminating in the rise of the Hindraf protests in 2007.

Contacts between South India and Malaya began well over 1,500 years ago. Early contacts were made when Indian merchant ships engaged in trade missions to Southeast Asia (Arasaratnam 1979; Sandhu 1969). During this period Hindu and Buddhist ideas, art, and customs, as well as Sanskrit, Tamil, and other languages, made an impact on the culture and language of the Malay world (Wheatley 1973). While these early contacts are not without political or cultural significance (Willford 2006a), this study concerns contemporary Indian and, more specifically, Tamil communities in Malaysia, particularly in Selangor. As my focus is ethnographic rather than historical, I will forgo a more nuanced historical analysis here.¹ That said, history, specifically a sense of historical consciousness, is of increasing importance to Malaysian Tamils.

A Brief History of Communalism

British interests gained political and economic control of most of the Malay peninsula in the course of the nineteenth century. Malaya was primarily useful for British companies interested in rubber and tin mining. By the latter half of the century, rubber production had been developed into a major cash

crop, and by 1920 Malaya supplied more than 50 percent of the world's rubber (Sandhu 1969). The plantations needed a large labor force. The British, having experienced some opposition from Malays as they consolidated political power, realized that it would be difficult to force Malay peasants to take up the work. Moreover, the colonial administration recognized the local Malay sultans as the legitimate rulers of their people. Thus, wanting to maintain cordial relations with these rulers, the British adopted a strategy of indirect rule. This policy, in effect, allowed the Malay community to remain partly autonomous from the colonial economy. As Hua explains:

The sultans were propped up by real as well as ritual authority within Malay society through the centralization of power within each state and the corresponding emasculation of the chiefs' authority. But even though the sultans had little say in the public policies which they rubber-stamped, the British Residents were careful to create an impression of seeking consultation with them, especially with relation to state matters and those affecting Malay customs and religion. . . . The increased status of 'Malay religion and customs' in the charge of the Malay rulers was meant to compensate for the loss of sovereignty. (1983, 29)

Local Chinese, who had been settling in Malaya for more than four centuries, had already established themselves in the commercial sphere. Commerce in the largest cities—Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang—was controlled mostly by the Chinese. There were also many Indian merchants and traders. British companies recruited Chinese for work in the tin mining industry. At the same time, the commercial success of the Chinese community aroused suspicion and fear among the British and, more importantly, among the Malays. A discourse about the dangers of the “cunning Chinese” was used to justify importing a third labor force to work on the rubber plantations (Sandhu 1969).

Tamil laborers from South India were believed to be the ideal “docile coolies” (Iyer 1938) for the repetitive and tedious work required in the plantations. Poverty-stricken, landless laborers from India were recruited as indentured workers (Iyer 1938; Rajakrishnan 1984; Arasaratnam 1979). It was believed that the Tamils were used to tropical heat, used to living in harsh conditions, and could be easily managed (Sandhu 1969; Parkinson 1996). Aside from providing labor to clear jungle and tap rubber, Indian-Tamils also served to keep the “ambitious” Chinese community in check by serving as a demographic counterbalance (Hua 1983). In direct response to the growing market for rubber between 1860 and 1957, four million Indians entered Malaya. During the same period, 2.8 million left or were repatriated for political

or economic reasons, while another 1.2 million died as a result of disease, snakebites, malnutrition, exhaustion, etc. (Hua 1983, 47). Though the entering and “exiting” numbers appear equivalent, many, of course, were born in Malaysia during this one-hundred-year history.

In addition to manual laborers, other Tamils were also recruited to work in an expanding civil service and to act as overseers of plantation labor. They were English-educated and came from higher-status backgrounds in South India or in the Jaffna region (Tamil-speaking area) of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). These overseers were responsible for daily operations and discipline. Violent punishment of workers was not uncommon, and caste-based rules were strictly enforced. Religious worship and housing arrangements were organized according to caste (Sandhu 1969; Jain 1970; Arasaratnam 1979). Thus within the microcosm of the plantation, traditional social distinctions were maintained and even strengthened.²

Physical conditions in the plantations were no better. In addition to the frequent flogging of workers, long working hours, and low wages, housing was often filthy and overcrowded. Malaria, tuberculosis, and dysentery claimed many lives (Sandhu 1969). Resentment of the Indian overseers grew as conditions worsened and expectations for financial betterment were frustrated. Most Tamil laborers perceived that their Tamil supervisors were more interested in pleasing their European masters than in looking after the interests of labor. Arasaratnam explains:

The Indian middle class at this time did not take much trouble to understand the problems of Indian labour. In fact there was a self-conscious attempt to stand aloof from these people, to show the other communities of Malaya that they were different and could not be tainted with the same ‘coolie’ brush. The people would use the word ‘coolie’ in the same derogatory sense as the European in Malaya. (1979, 88)

This attitude, whether actually expressed or merely perceived to exist, had a lasting and divisive impact on the Tamil community as a whole. Even in the sphere of education, the children of laborers were sent to separate Tamil-medium schools, while the children of staff often attended English-medium schools. This policy, partly a function of wealth, helped to reproduce social distinctions and also ensured the continuing presence of a laboring class (Willford 2006a; Nagarajan 2004). Tamil education had little economic utility outside of the confines of the estate.

Tamil laborers suffered greatly during the worldwide economic depression that began in 1932. With the demand for rubber greatly reduced, 50 percent of the Tamils were repatriated back to India; the remainder saw their wages

significantly reduced. Conditions were so bad during the 1930s that Pandit Nehru, then president of the Indian National Congress, requested of the colonial administration that labor immigration to Malaya be banned (Sandhu 1969; Iyer 1938). In 1938, further immigration from India to Malaya was stopped in response to Nehru’s request, to decreased labor needs, and to increasing Malay nationalism that opposed all foreign immigration (Stenson 1980; Harper 1999).

The Second World War also had an adverse effect on the laboring Tamils, as it did on most Malaysians. The Chinese in particular were harshly treated by the Japanese occupying force, and thousands were executed (Bayly and Harper 2004). The situation for the Malays and Indians under Japanese rule was more complex. The Japanese allowed the Malay aristocracy to maintain a semblance of authority, while at the same time using Malay peasants in their war effort. Elite Indians were given prominent positions in the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army (INA) (Bayly and Harper, 2004; R. Brown 1981; Stenson 1980). The INA, led by the charismatic Subhas Chandra Bose, a prominent Indian nationalist who had fled from India, was trained in Malaya and eventually led an assault against British forces on the border of Burma and India. At the outset, the INA generated much enthusiasm among Tamil laborers, who joined the army believing they were to be the liberators of the “motherland.”³ But tensions between the middle-class INA officers and the rank-and-file mounted as the tide of war turned against the Japanese. Those Tamils who refused to serve in Bose’s army or to support it financially were harassed (Stenson 1980; R. Brown 1981). In the end, thousands of Tamils died either in battle, along the trek to the front line, or working on the infamous Thai-Burma railway.

After the war and the return of the British companies to the plantations, the laborers were once again employed after a three-year gap. During the interim, most laboring Tamils had survived by farming and scavenging. Now, after the INA mobilization, many Tamils were increasingly radicalized. A number of unions committed to the improvement of wages and work conditions were organized. With the rubber companies eager to regain profits, “radical” unions were banned. A number of strikes were called among the Tamil laborers, only to be met with a violent response from authorities (Stenson 1980; Harper 1999; Ramasamy 1994). In one famous example, police opened fire on a meeting of laborers and union leaders in Dublin Estate in Kedah in 1947, killing a Chinese unionist and wounding seven Indian laborers.⁴ Many Tamil unionists joined forces with the newly formed Malaysian Communist Party, which received support from China and was headed locally by Malaysian Chinese. The party was banned and took its struggle underground, and more than eight hundred Indian union leaders were arrested. In

1948, an “emergency” was declared in response to the guerrilla tactics of the communists. In this climate of paranoia and fear of communist terrorists, only compliant unions were allowed to represent estate-labor interests (Stenson 1980; Brown 1981; Nagarajan 2004; Selvakumaran 1994). As a result, conditions in the estates did not improve much during the “emergency.”

After the war, increasing pressure from Malay nationalists, who were inspired by the Indian nationalist struggle, forced the British gradually out of Malaya. During this time, intensified anti-union and anticommunist efforts by the British served two related purposes. First, they prevented Malaya from falling into hands hostile to British companies, which intended to continue business in Malaya after independence. Second, they helped the unions and political parties who went along with corporate interests to gain considerable power and influence among workers. In the end, a communal strategy was used in the transfer of political power, a strategy that thinly disguised class interests as ethnic ones.

Initially, the British proposed what was to become known as the “Malayan Union” plan. In this plan, citizenship would be granted to all races living in Malaya. The Malay aristocracy, believing (correctly) that this proposal would weaken or even dismantle their feudal powers, rejected the proposal. Partly in response to the Malayan Union plan, Malay elites formed the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). UMNO leaders inflamed communal sentiments, and rallies were held to protest the plan, fueled by slogans such as “Malaya belongs to the Malays” (Harper 1999; Hua 1983). The British, in response, assured the Malay royalty and the leaders of UMNO that special rights and privileges for Malays would be part of any political settlement.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the UMNO-led Malay nationalists became the most influential political force in the country. Chinese business elites responded by forming the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). Leaders of UMNO and the MCA cooperated on a new British-sponsored plan known as the Federation of Malaya. The federation plan was enacted in 1948 and was accepted by both parties; it maintained some of the sultans’ powers while limiting the citizenship rights of non-Malays. Both parties cooperated in an explicit communal power-sharing formula, which was also pro-capitalist. With the communists now waging a guerrilla war from the jungle, there was little support for socialist-leaning political parties. Once the communal formula for power sharing fell into place, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) reluctantly joined the UMNO-MCA alliance. I say reluctantly, because after the war the MIC began as a socialistic party modeled after the Indian National Congress. In a political system organized along communal lines, being a submissive junior partner was the MIC’s only option

if it wanted to have any representation in the newly formed government (Muzaffar 1993; R. Brown 1981; Harper 1999).

Independence was granted in 1957. The ruling alliance was committed to expanding the production of rubber, tin, and palm oil, and at the same time industrializing. Though political power had changed hands, the basic structure of the colonial economy remained—including the presence of foreign companies (Jomo 1986). Existing inequalities and social divisions based on occupation continued. As Hua suggests, “Social inequality was not impaired at Independence, and continued to be interpreted in communal terms. The masses in all three main national groups still found themselves segregated in the same communal division of labour. Only in the white-collar occupations (the teaching profession, civil-service) was the division slightly minimized” (1983, 109).

Communal strategies were used to legitimize economic programs that clearly maintained the status quo. Malays, in particular, being the most numerous yet with a significant number living in poverty, needed to be assured that ultimate sovereignty rested in their hands. UMNO seized upon an ideology of *bumiputra*⁵ rights and privileges in order to appear to be the champion of Malay interests:

A noteworthy feature of the Alliance is that from its inception, there was never any doubt that UMNO was the dominant partner. This is linked to the special position of the Malay rulers in the colonial set-up, the predominance of the Malays in the electorate, as well as the state’s political strategy and ideology of *bumiputraisim*. This has been an important factor in subsequent state policies, and it has also facilitated the ascendancy of the state capitalist class from the traditional Malay ruling aristocracy. (Hua 1983, 109)

Nevertheless, the majority of Malay peasants and fishermen still lived in relative poverty. A strong Chinese business class continued to dominate the commercial sector, while Malay elites maintained political dominance and amassed wealth. Rubber and tin production were tied to global commodity prices, and wages were kept low in order to maintain foreign investment. The structure of the economy, which depended on foreign markets and investments, led many analysts to label it as a classic example of a “neo-colony” (e.g., Gomez and Jomo 1997; Hua 1983; Muzaffar 1993). In fact, by 1970, in spite of the government’s efforts to encourage Malays to enter business, *bumiputra* share ownership in the nation amounted to only 2.4 percent. In contrast, Chinese ownership was 22.5 percent, while foreign share ownership remained

at 60.7 percent (Gomez and Jomo 1997, 19). Indians owned less than 1 percent. The first decade of independence maintained and intensified these disparities:

Thus despite fairly steady and relatively high economic growth and low inflation for over a decade after Independence, income inequalities increased and poverty remained widespread. Inter-ethnic differences grew, especially among Malays. Between 1957 and 1970, according to one estimate, the lowest 20 percent of households registered an average fall in real income of around 30 percent. Among the predominantly Malay rural households, the decline (40 percent) was sharper compared to the mainly Chinese urban households (15 percent). (Gomez and Jomo 1997, 19)⁶

Malay discontent was simmering throughout the 1960s among the rural poor. In this period, Tamil laborers continued to be affected by shifting prices in rubber in the global market (Jomo 1986; Stenson 1980). A slump in prices during this period, coupled with an influx of factories and industrial parks, caused many of the large rubber corporations to sell or subdivide their plantations. This process, which has continued until the present, forced most Tamils to leave the estates in search of work in the cities and towns. Without strong unions or political parties, the Tamils were left to fend for themselves, taking jobs often as menial laborers (Arasaratnam 1979; Jeyakumar 1993; Nagarajan 2004; Tate 2008).

Due to pressures for housing and other developments, the process of plantation fragmentation accelerated in the 1970s, particularly in the rapidly expanding suburban areas of Selangor. With this pressure for land, many plantation laborers were retrenched in waves. One result of this was the growth of urban villages or slums in and around Kuala Lumpur. Tamils flocked to these in search of affordable housing and employment (Rajoo 1985; Nagarajan 2004). During the 1980s, too, the conversion of many plantations to oil palm from rubber also resulted in the retrenchment of much Tamil labor (Selvakumaran 1994; Nagarajan 2004). Oil palm production, more mechanized and requiring a less skilled labor force, relied increasingly on a new wave of cheaper foreign labor, primarily from Indonesia, but also from Bangladesh and Vietnam. With itinerant labor, costs were reduced for management. Schools, temples, and other community-based services tailored originally for the Tamil family-based communities were unnecessary for migrant laborers.

It is worth mentioning, in brief, two responses to the fragmentation of plantations that did occur. First, in response to the earliest stages of fragmentation, V. T. Tun Sambanthan, then president of the MIC and cabinet

member, formed the National Land Finance Cooperative Society (NLFCS) in 1964. It was formed with the idea that plantations could be owned by the workers themselves through cooperative membership. Shares were sold to workers, resulting in the NLFCS' ability to purchase estates in various parts of the country, the first being in Kedah (Arasaratnam 1979; Selvakumaran 1994; Nagarajan 2004). By the mid-1980s, the cooperative held assets estimated in the range of 350 million ringgit and was the largest enterprise owned by Malaysian Indians (Selvakumaran 1994; Tate 2008). Despite the relative success of the NLFCS, estate workers continued to suffer the effects of fragmentation and retrenchment during the last four decades (Nagarajan 2008; Tate 2008; Ramasamy 1993; Sivachandralingam 2012). As Nagarajan notes, "more than 300,000 Indians were uprooted from the plantations in the twenty year period from 1980 to 2000. When evicted from the plantations, they not only lost their jobs, but, more importantly, housing, childcare services, basic amenities, socio-cultural facilities and the community support structures built up over decades" (2008, 377–378). In rubber plantations alone, employment dropped from close to 160,000 in 1979 to around 13,000 by 2004 (Nagarajan 2008).

In response to the crisis brought on by fragmentation, the MIC authored an important document in 1974, the "MIC Blueprint for Action within the New Economic Policy." This document addressed several economic challenges facing the Indian community,⁷ but in the context of this study, I want to underscore only its attention to the problem of housing that lurked on the horizon. The MIC blueprint advocated home-ownership schemes for plantation workers. The idea, in short, was that laborers would make small installments on future housing while still acting as employees. This would protect them from future homelessness in the event of retrenchment occurring in the wake of fragmentation or other land-use transformations of estate lands, which was a very real possibility. Providing housing rights would, in turn, ameliorate the growing squatter problem in and around urban areas. While the blueprint could be modified to circumstances, one scenario had workers owning the very plantation housing they occupied. This, in turn, would lead to better living conditions in the estates as pride in ownership would improve the aesthetic quality of plantation life. When and if estates were sold for development, at least the housing (or more importantly, the land on which it stood) would remain for the former workers. As the then MIC president said in an address to the MIC general assembly in 1975, "The implementation of this scheme alone will go a long way to transform the environment in which estate workers now live and remove many of the handicaps they now face in the education and employment of their children" (Manickavasagam 1975). The plan purportedly met with approval by some government officials who rec-

ognized the future problems facing estate workers, but it was, alas, never adopted. But to this day, many older Indians in Malaysia recall that this forward-thinking plan, if it had been adopted, would have solved many of the woes facing plantations workers today. This is especially so given that Malaysia generally follows the Torrens system of land ownership that is established through registration of titles, rather than common law principles of continued or intergenerational use (Jomo 2008). As plantation workers never possessed said titles to the land they occupied, housing on retrenchment was never a legal entitlement, though, as we will see, it was sometimes obtained through struggles with developers. Reverberations of this aborted plan will resurface in the ethnographic narratives that follow in subsequent chapters.

Ethnic tensions erupted on May 13, 1969, after the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese-dominated party campaigning on a platform that challenged the communal alliance, scored victories in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Official narratives suggest that DAP victory celebrations in these cities precipitated fighting between working-class Malays and Chinese, leaving many hundreds dead. But it was rumored that “young Turks” in UMNO critical of prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman’s conservative style had instigated the riots in an effort to discredit him (Reid 1969; Kua 2007). A state of emergency was declared and Tunku’s deputy, Abdul Hussein Razak, succeeded to the position of prime minister and president of UMNO. In 1970, Razak instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP) and formed the Department of National Unity in order to deter further ethnic strife. To this end, the Rukunegara (national articles of faith) were proclaimed in the hopes of assuaging both Malays and Chinese. The Rukunegara looked to appease minorities (Chinese and Indians) with its call for a “liberal,” “democratic,” and “progressive” nation. But for the most part, the articles of faith further enshrined the special position of Malays with regard to “loyalty to the Supreme Ruler” (the king, or *agung*, elected from among the sultans on a rotating basis) and “belief in God” (the state support for Islam). In addition, a number of “reforms” were instituted to prevent the Malay masses from being “insulted” again by non-Malay “extremists” (i.e., the DAP). As Gomez and Jomo explain,

In the post-1969 period, the hegemonic position of the new, more Malay-oriented leadership in the Barisan Nasional⁸ was enhanced through amendments to the Constitution. It was, for example, prohibited, even in parliament, to question ‘ethnically sensitive’ issues, which included any reference to Malay special rights, non-Malay citizenship, the status of the national language, Islam, and the constitutional provisions pertaining to the Sultans. (1997, 22)

The riots, though instigated for political reasons, were also attributed to persistent poverty among Malays. The NEP was aimed at redressing economic imbalances, albeit strictly along ethnic lines. A quota system was designed for the public sector and universities, requiring four Malays to be selected for every one non-Malay. The NEP also set a target of 30 percent share capital ownership for the Malay community by the year 1990. To this end, a percentage of corporate shares was allocated to *bumiputras* who could demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills. A strategy of rapid industrialization requiring an influx of foreign companies was planned as the growth engine and job base for the nation. In addition to economic measures, the Malay language was promoted and made the sole language of instruction at the national university and the sole language of the government and judiciary. Citizenship laws were tightened and many work permits were not renewed. As a direct result of stricter laws and illiteracy in the Malay language, sixty thousand estate laborers were repatriated to India, most of whom had resided in Malaysia for decades but were ill-informed of their legal rights under the new legislation (Arasaratnam 1979).

Actual policies implemented under the NEP seemed to favor the growing Malay bourgeoisie. As Muzaffar argues, “the NEP is in reality a strategy designed to accommodate, entrench and extend the interests of the Bumiputra middle and upper classes. It is a policy whose actual aim is to enhance and expand the wealth and power in these classes within the Bumiputra community. For this purpose, the Bumiputra/non-Bumiputra dichotomy has to be maintained, indeed reinforced, at all costs” (1987, 24). That is, the ethnic or communal divisions were cultivated to further class interests, as many scholars have noted (e.g., Jomo 1986; Gomez and Jomo 1997; Crouch 1996; D. Brown 1994).

In order to maintain economic growth rates and to industrialize the country, multinational corporations were lured with the promise of weak unions, low wages, and disciplined workers. To this end, “free trade zones” were established around the nation’s capital. Foreign firms were given a considerable amount of autonomy (Hua 1983; Ong 1987). This policy paid dividends from the 1970s through the 1990s: American, British, and Japanese investment in Malaysia grew tremendously, sparking high growth rates in the GNP (Gomez and Jomo 1997).

Malay peasants were encouraged to take up employment in factories in the free trade zones. Malays were also given incentives to settle in cities and to join the industrial labor force. At the same time, inequality persisted in urban areas between the Malay bourgeoisie and working class. Rapid urbanization also produced a sense of alienation among the working class; they were exposed not only to other ethnic groups, but also to the “Westernized” lifestyles of the elites of all ethnic groups. Alienation and disdain for the perceived “corrup-

tion” of traditional Malay values, in part, fueled an Islamic resurgence during the 1970s and 1980s. The continued dependence of Malaysia on a Western economic and cultural presence inspired an Islamic critique in the opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which gained momentum among the working class and among the university students and professors (Muzaffar 1987).

PAS and the Islamic Youth Movement, or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) gained support among Malays, with the former appealing to peasants and the latter to college students and intellectuals. UMNO, perceiving a threat to its political hegemony, developed its own Islamization agenda while simultaneously attempting to discredit PAS and ABIM. Courses on Islam were instituted in universities and public schools. An International Islamic University was set up in 1983, attracting scholars and theologians from a number of Islamic countries. An Islamic Center (Pusat Islam) was also inaugurated to promote and oversee the “proper” dissemination of Islam in the country. Islamic banking and insurance schemes were also organized with government funding and support. A media campaign promoting “Islamic values,” featuring radio and television discussions by various experts, was launched (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011).

The government strategy was to insist that capitalist development plans were congruent with Islam despite the claims of PAS, ABIM, and other critics. UMNO leaders criticized Islamic movements and parties hostile to industrialization and capitalist development as “deviationist” or “obscurantist.” In the government propaganda, images of science and material power and prosperity were infused with Islamic meaning and symbolism. Hoping to shore up its Islamic credentials, the government also strengthened Islamic (shariah) laws for Malays and encouraged women in particular to adopt traditional “modest” clothing (*baju kurung*), and to cover their hair with scarves in accordance with Arabic custom (Peletz 2002). Some critics of the government were incarcerated under the Internal Security Act, which allowed for the imprisonment without trial of individuals and groups deemed a threat to national security. It was said that Islamic “extremists” were sympathetic to foreign terrorists and/or would provoke non-Malay fears and aggression.

The government in the 1980s and 1990s under the then prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, aggressively patronized Islam while also tightening its authoritarian grip on the opposition, the media, and judiciary (Crouch 1996; Khoo Boo Teik 1995; Gomez and Jomo 1997). Unprecedented economic growth in the 1990s and further liberalization and privatization of the economy created a new class of wealthy Malay entrepreneurs:

Thus the NEP’s 30 per cent Malay wealth ownership target (often invoked as an ethnic cudgel to advance particular Malay business inter-

ests), has enabled influential Malay politicians and businessmen with close links to UMNO leaders to amass wealth for themselves. NEP privileges—claimed in the name of the mass of ordinary Bumiputeras—have mainly been appropriated by the better connected in the Bumiputera community . . . a significant change in share ownership among Bumiputeras has occurred since 1980 with the private individual’s share of the Bumiputera stake increasing phenomenally from 39 per cent in 1983 to 68 per cent in 1990. This change is a reflection of the new emphasis on private Bumiputera wealth accumulation under Mahathir’s leadership. . . . The centralisation of political power among top UMNO leaders and the related rise of authoritarianism in the 1980s have contributed to the concentration of wealth among politically well-connected Bumiputeras. (Gomez and Jomo 1997, 53)

Critics argued that the government’s economic policies did little to help alleviate poverty among Malays. PAS continued to characterize UMNO as a procapitalist party of elites that strayed from Islamic principles of social justice and equality. They have also been accused of promoting “Western-style” consumerism and greed. Mahathir consistently advocated competitive capitalism and privatization as the best means to create wealth in the Malay community. A prosperous society, not an egalitarian one, he argued, was demanded by Islam. Gomez and Jomo (1997) quote Mahathir: “The best way to keep the shares between the Bumiputera hands is to hand them over to the Bumiputera most capable of retaining them, which means the well-to-do.”⁹

A new class of Malay businessmen prospered under the NEP and its successor, the National Development Policy (NDP), and the government’s policy of helping those who had already proven themselves as successful entrepreneurs. While the government did not extend similar privileges to Chinese or Indian entrepreneurs, it did not inhibit the private sector. Thus Malaysian Chinese business interests have maintained their economic control over the economy in terms of share assets. Many years of more than 8 percent GNP growth helped legitimize the government’s economic policies. A recession during the later 1980s, however, heightened criticism of the government by both PAS and DAP. Hundreds of the most vociferous critics of the government were arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act.

The NEP concluded in 1990, only to be replaced with the National Development Policy, which essentially continued its objectives with slight modifications (Gomez and Jomo 1997, 173). But in 1991, the government unveiled a strategic challenge to the nation through the prime minister’s “Vision 2020,” a plan to make Malaysia a “fully developed country” by the year 2020. This feat was to be accomplished by accelerating industrialization, eco-

conomic growth, and modernization. According to Gomez and Jomo, the policy advocated

a more competitive, market-disciplined, outward-looking, dynamic, self-reliant, resilient, diversified, adaptive, technologically proficient and entrepreneurial economy with strong industrial links, productive and knowledgeable human resources, low inflation, exemplary work ethics. (1997, 168)

On the other side of the coin, Vision 2020 had strong moral underpinnings, calling for greater national unity and a “society with citizens imbued with spiritual values.” To some extent, the moral side had already been stated in the Rukunegara, but explicit mention was made in Vision 2020 of the need to maintain religious diversity and interethnic harmony. In conjunction with the Vision 2020 plan, the prime minister also began to speak of a future “bangsa Malaysia,” that is, a future national identity that transcended the boundaries of the various ethnic groups. Non-Malays seemed to applaud such pronouncements from the prime minister. But on the other hand, the propagation of Vision 2020 through the media seemed to place a pronounced emphasis on a progressive and decidedly modernist Islam as the spiritual anchor of the rapidly modernizing nation (Hoffstaedter 2011). Intensifying the concerns of non-Malays, moreover, a continued prohibition was placed on non-Muslim religious programming on the television and radio.

The government’s Islamist agenda, which to some extent was stealing the thunder from the Islamic movements, in turn provoked a revival of non-Muslim religious practices, and with them assertions of cultural identity (Ackerman and Lee 1988; Muzaffar 1987; Willford 2006a; Loh and Kahn 1992; Belle 2008; Carstens 2005; Kent 2004). The 1980s and 1990s witnessed increasing interest in religious activity among Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. In a political system defined in ethnic terms, with restrictions placed on non-Malays, religion became an accepted avenue for community expression.

The Tamil-Hindu community was not only culturally marginalized in the government’s legitimization strategies, but for the majority who remained poor and working-class, the 1990s brought little economic or political betterment (Nagarajan 2008; Loh 2003; Tate 2008). The MIC attempted to create greater share ownership for the community in the early 1990s in an investment scheme, which failed due to mismanagement and/or corruption. Even Samy Vellu, then president of the MIC, acknowledged in 1990 that “Indians were more marginalised than ever before” (Gomez and Jomo 1997, 168). The MIC, on the other hand, was more successful in preserving the Tamil-language education system in Tamil schools and in the promotion of Hindu festivals

and temples. In particular, the festival of Thaipusam received MIC patronage and came to symbolize Tamil cultural identity in Malaysia (Willford 2006a; Collins 1997; Belle 2008).

With this sketch of modern Malaysian history, we now have a contextual frame for some of the specific transformations that have occurred in the plantation sector, particularly as they have affected the Tamil (“Indian”) community. Much more detailed and nuanced historical analyses, however, of these changes can be read elsewhere (especially see Nagarajan 2004; Selvakumaran 1994; and Stenson 1980).

Selangor and the Plantation Industry

While the brevity of the preceding historical narrative attempts to provide some context for a political landscape, and specifically for the relatively marginal role Tamils have come to play in it, it would be wrong to underscore the inevitability of present decisions and actions based upon a historicized understanding of the past. Indeed, one of the principal arguments I want to make is that the narrativization of history is itself a form of active archive making (Willford 2009), not only construed by those in power, but also by those excluded by it. Archivization and narrativization allows for an anchoring of the subject (Derrida 1995a), and this in turn plays a large role in imagining compensation for Tamils in Malaysia. In that sense, the standard narratives, while having some explanatory power, are often resources for the present. In the context of this study, how a history of betrayal is construed by Tamils will be of particular importance.

As mentioned earlier, the symbolic heartland for the unified Malay identity has been built upon a transformed ethnic landscape in Selangor and the Klang Valley (Kahn 2006; Gullick 2004; King 2008; Kahn 2006; Bunnell 2004; Hoffstaedter 2011; Cartier 2002). This is nowhere better epitomized than in the Islamic modernist architecture of Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam, as well as in the nostalgic Islamic architecture of Putrajaya (King 2008; Sardar 2000). On the one hand, we see the intense modernity of the Petronas Towers, at one time the tallest buildings in the world, and the pride for Islam and Malay identity that Mahathir Mohamad sought in their grandiose erection. On the other hand, we witness the neo-Indo-Saracenic splendor of Putrajaya, the new administrative capital, which also liberally incorporates Mughal, Arab, and Ottoman (King 2008) styles into what is supposed to be the centerpiece of a Malay icon of the nation. Musings about the alien and potentially alienating aspects of this architecture to Malays notwithstanding,¹⁰ the rarely heard story concerns the Tamil plantation workers,¹¹ who in particular have been dispossessed of their former lands throughout this process.¹²

As many scholars have noted, the “Malay” ethnic category is both defined and shored up through the Malay language and Islam. That there was no unified homogenous Malay culture or polity throughout the peninsula in the nineteenth century (or prior) is now common knowledge to students of history who recognize the plurality of groups and the *peranakan*, or mixed origins, of those who became self-identified as “Malay” (Kahn 2006; Milner 2002). What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which the census in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reveals just who was living in today’s heartland of Malaysia. For example, in Selangor, a former plantation heartland and the industrial center of Malaysia today, the census figures in 1911 numbered Indians at 74,067 and Malays and Chinese at 65,062 and 150,908, respectively. By 1931, Indians outnumbered Malays 155,924 to 122,868 in the state. All the more dramatic is that in 1884, only 17,856 Malays were counted as living in Selangor (Gullick 2004; Iyer 1938). The state, in other words, was settled and populated at the turn of the century as the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Klang were developed by Chinese tin mining and business, and through the growth of the plantation industries, which in turn were dependent on Indian labor (Gullick 2004; Sandhu 1969). This is significant, I suggest, because plantation communities, developed and populated by Tamils, date from this period (Gullick 2004; Nagarajan 2004) and are literally inscribed into the landscape in such a way that their descendants today, living in these same plantations (or “estates”), now facing retrenchment and eviction under the pressures of “development” and ethnic politics, have a growing sense of historicity and with it a growing anger (Nagarajan 2004; Sivachandralingam 2012). At the same time, however, this historicity increasingly takes the shape of a victim’s narrative among the Tamil poor and working class. Moreover, a compensatory narrative generates ethnic myths about a lacking and inauthentic Other, the “new Malay” (*Melayu baru*) that is the subject of state-sponsored nationalism. This Other, the ethnic subject of the law (i.e., the so-called *bumiputra*), is increasingly seen as lacking by Tamils as its claims are revealed as arbitrary, violent, and built upon disavowals of difference within itself. To skip to the punch line, the question that remains, and to which this ethnography investigates, is whether this recognition produces a deconstructive critique of the ethnic subject as constructed by the state, or whether Tamils, in identifying this lack, in turn identify with it and become subjects of victimhood.

Development politics have, in short, brought about a dramatic demographic shift in the ethnic composition of Malaysia’s industrial heartland. This was the intended goal all along. To develop the nation’s core identity, politically constructed around Malay ethnicity and Islam, the two being increasingly synonymous, Malays, it was argued, had to be united and strong—

particularly at the center. In addition to reforming and thereby policing Malay identity (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011), incentives and privileges created a culture of privilege and, concomitantly, increasing self-rationalization of these purported entitlements. The racializing of urban development, and its troubling potential, is summed up by Joel Kahn in this way:

[A]lmost exclusively Malay housing estates . . . are sprouting up. . . . In many cases this racial exclusivity is part of the design. One of the first new towns to be built was Shah Alam . . . built on plantation land. Its resident population of mainly Tamil estate workers was rehoused elsewhere, or simply evicted to make way for new, mainly middle-class Malay residents. Probably the supreme example of this is the new Federal Capital in Putrajaya. (2006, 156–157)

It would however be overly simplistic to state that this process is uniform in intent or circumstance. Indeed, the historical demographics of Malay vis-à-vis Tamil or Chinese communities vary tremendously within the Klang Valley alone. Still, the resentment felt by non-Malays has been tangible and growing, as have the overzealous rationalizations by so-called Malays (many of whom, being of recent immigrant status,¹³ are seen as undeserving by non-Malays), who guard their bureaucratically derived entitlements in the knowledge, perhaps unconscious, of their shallow historicity. In addition to issues pertaining to land, however, legal cases surrounding religious conversion had exacerbated a sense of insecurity among Tamil Hindus.

As Nagarajan (2008) argues, there were several important court cases that brought alarm to non-Muslims in Malaysia, as a “silent rewriting” of the constitution was being done in the name of Islam,¹⁴ but at the same time the judgment of prominent federal judges was increasingly revealed to be shaped by religious beliefs. I cite Nagarajan at length on this point, citing but two examples of judicial partiality with regards to conversion law:

[T] religious bureaucracy continued to intrude into the lives of the minorities. Islamic authorities forcibly separated V. Suresh from his wife, Revathi Masoosai, and their 16-month-old baby. Revathi was born to Muslim convert parents but was brought up as a Hindu by her Hindu grandmother. She was detained at the Muslim rehabilitation centre against her will while her child was handed to Revathi’s Muslim mother. In another case, P. Marimuth’s five young Hindu children were taken from their home by Islamic religious officials who said his wife was technically still a Muslim and therefore their marriage of twenty-one years was invalid. . . . This worrying trend of Muslim officialdom to

ignore the religious sentiments and the rights of non-Muslims only served to fuel more fear and unhappiness among non-Muslims. But they had an even more troubling impact on the Indian Malaysian psyche because most of the affected people are from the community. They not only lost their spouses, but their children were taken away from them and they have no recourse to justice. (2008, 390–391)

In another well-publicized case that we will hear echoes from in the ethnographic accounts that follow, Malaysian Mount Everest climbing hero M. Moorthy was given a Muslim burial in December of 2005 despite protests from his widow that he was a practicing Hindu at the time of his death. Indeed, nobody in his family was aware that he had purportedly converted to Islam in secret. But what outraged the Indian community most was that the civil court surrendered jurisdiction to the shariah court in this case. As his widow, Kaliaammal, was not a Muslim, she could not appear in shariah court to contest its ruling on Moorthy's conversion (Nagarajan 2008).

It is in this context that the actions of about fifty Malay protesters who were protesting a plan to relocate a 150-year-old temple in Shah Alam to Section 23, a "predominantly Malay area," can perhaps be understood.¹⁵ In August of 2009, the protesters marched to the Selangor state government Secretariat in Shah Alam to protest the proposed relocation of the old temple (which had to be shifted when the plantation had been converted to housing). The protesters, however, carried with them a severed cow head and several banners insulting the chief minister of the state as well as his executive councilor.¹⁶ The cow head was spat upon and kicked, which outraged the country's Hindu population and drew angry rebukes from several political leaders, including the prime minister himself. The plot thickened when the home minister and UMNO vice president, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, later appeared in public with the protesters and issued a statement that the protesters "felt victimized" and had only wanted their voices to be heard.¹⁷ Hishammuddin's implicitly siding with the protesters caused much controversy, as opposition politicians called for his resignation. UMNO leaders kept silent, worried that a rebuke of Hishammuddin would alienate Malay voters.

This incident, however, sheds light on the processes of urban change outlined briefly above. The offensive presence of the old Hindu temple in a new Shah Alam neighborhood is instructive. Shah Alam is a new city, built entirely on former plantation lands predominantly populated by Tamils. There are dozens of old temples that have been destroyed and are still slowly being destroyed as this development has continued. The long and drawn-out struggle by the temple devotees to have their temple relocated is a story for another day, but it demonstrates the enduring significance these structures hold for

communities that have since been relocated and dispersed after their plantation villages have been developed into other land uses. The emotional attachment to the temple runs deep within these communities, and the loss of potentially hundreds of these structures has produced great anxiety for Tamil Hindus. In a very real sense, the landscape where plantations existed is imbued with a sacrality that is now being defiled by the processes of development. On the side of the new residents in Malay-dominated townships, such as Shah Alam, the presence of the older Hindu temple arouses anxiety as well. The temple is a constant reminder of the "immigrant status" of recently arrived Malays to these former plantation areas, their purported claims to *bumiputra* rights and privileges notwithstanding.

The demographic evidence suggests that a large percentage of "Malays" are in fact recent immigrants from Indonesia (Kahn 2006) or have married into the community (*masuk Melayu*, literally "entering Malayness"). The fact that Indian and in many cases Orang Asli communities were displaced to create the symbolic Malay heartland for the nation is, one could imagine, troubling. Coupled with the need to erase, rationalize privilege, and silence a troubled sense of one's identity's recent history, the very vestiges of a so-called Indic or Hindu layer of Malay culture that is constantly and relentlessly being invigilated and purged by state religious apparatuses (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011) must also affect how the contemporary Hindu presence becomes an object of avoidance, an *objet petit a* in Lacan's sense, or that which blocks one's enjoyment or desire. Lacan explains that the "object a" comes to serve as a last vestige of a sense of unity or wholeness prior to the emergence of the subject in discourse, and with it the concomitant splitting of the psyche and birth of desire. In this context, the figure of the Indian allows for a fantasy of unity or wholeness dependent on a figure of displacement. One might even suggest that this becomes an inverse object of desire in this reading, or a phobic object that blocks the enjoyment of intimacy between groups.

But to qualify, it must be stated that my perspective comes from interactions with and observations of Malaysian Tamils. If this is a dialectical process of identity politics, I am primarily capturing the minority perspective.

To conclude, I will mention two other watershed moments for Malaysian Tamils in recent history that will be referenced several times by my ethnographic interlocutors. The first was the so-called Kampung Medan riots of 2001. In 2001, violent attacks by unknown Malay assailants against Tamil working-class males in an area known as Kampung Medan, a squatter area near Kuala Lumpur, left six dead and countless injured. The trauma inflicted by this sudden attack and by the media account of it as a "racial riot" generated much anger and concern in the Malaysian Tamil community. I will examine this incident and the role it played in mobilizing Tamil sentiments

in a later chapter. Second, and more propitiously, from the point of view of working-class Tamils, news of the “victorious” compensation settlement at Braemer Estate, near the town of Kajang, generated a sense of hope and momentum that, in turn, galvanized other communities in their own struggles with property developers.

The Braemer settlement came about after more than a decade of struggle between the remaining residents of this estate and a property developer, who wished to convert former estate lands into luxury housing.¹⁸ Though final termination of employment and eviction notices were given in 1993, these were resisted, as those who remained in the estate had received verbal promises of housing for their labor. Indeed, retrenchments had commenced almost a decade earlier as the plantation was downsizing for future property development. The negotiations were long and tedious, and those resisting eviction received assistance from activist NGOs. The tactical use of civil disobedience, especially the use of the media, worked to generate negative publicity for the developer. Eventually, in 2003 the developer relented, fearing a continued loss of profits, and agreed to provide free lost-cost “terrace” housing (townhouses) in addition to outstanding retrenchment benefits. Earlier, the benefits were being withheld, conditional on moving out of the estate. The developer also agreed to pay 120 ringgit in rent to the families until their houses were completed. Finally, compensation of 22,000 ringgit would be paid to the Braemer Estate Resident’s Action Committee for the legal costs accrued during its ten-year struggle with the developer. In sum, this was a fairly remarkable settlement and was celebrated as a clear “victory” for the former workers (Nagarajan 2004). As we will see, the Braemer story resonated with many other communities in their own compensation struggles, even though the settlement did not provide a legal precedent.

3 Plantation Fragments

This chapter introduces the problem of displacement through a series of ethnographic encounters in several plantation (“estate”) communities in or near Selangor, the epicenter of plantation retrenchment and evictions. Here we come face to face with communities and individuals who express a sense of anxiety and despair as their neighborhoods are threatened by demolition. At the same time, the sense of the plantation as a site of nostalgia and positive identification is seen to be growing in the specter of its demise. In this context, the importance of documentation and an emergent historicity is described as important to plantation dwellers as a political resource, as well as an archive of victimhood. I conclude by describing the increasing resonance and justice-seeking fervor surrounding a Tamil-Hindu festival celebration in a plantation slated for retrenchment and eviction.

Labu Estate

Kirby Estate in Labu, a small town between Seremban and Nilai, about one hour’s drive from Kuala Lumpur, was home to around fifty Indian families, a number that at one time was much higher. The estate (plantation) had recently converted production from rubber to oil palm, which allows for mechanization and thus does not require the particularly skilled labor that comes with tapping rubber. Consequently, here and in other estates most of the Indian family-based labor had been displaced in favor of cheaper itinerant workers from Indonesia. With migrant labor, the maintenance of schools, temples, and recreational grounds becomes an unnecessary expenditure.

The estate housing formed an “L” shape, extending about one kilometer.

Provision shops, a Tamil school, and a clinic were just off the main road. The housing appeared to be run-down, with little in the way of amenities, greenery, or playgrounds for children. Along the main road, one could see raggedly dressed barefoot Indian children playing, abandoned cars melting into rust, and elderly Tamil women keeping a mindful eye on the children. The elder men were harder to see, but when seen they seemed inattentive and lost in daydreams or fatigue.¹

Munnesamy, a laborer in his late forties, warmly welcomed my research collaborator, Naga, and me to his estate house. Sitting in his small living room, he explained that some workers from India had recently arrived, but that “discrimination in favor of Indonesian labor” by the Malay management of the estate had made it “intolerable for the Indians.” The Indians subsequently left the estate. The Indonesians, he said, earned up to forty ringgit a day (US\$10.50), whereas the maximum an Indian laborer could make was eighteen ringgit a day (US\$4.70). Overtime was never given to Indians, he explained, whereas Indonesians often earned it. Munnesamy explained that his earnings were between ten and twenty-five ringgit a day (US\$2.60 and 6.60), depending on the season. But as rubber was now being phased out, even these paltry earnings were no longer available. Munnesamy was brought to this estate by a daughter who was working there. He subsequently bought a low-cost house for her outside of the estate, but it was too small to house her family.

As was typical, the estate houses had two bedrooms, a living room, a small dining area, and a kitchen plus bathroom. Though not luxurious by any measure, the structures were intact. The interior was brightly painted in a light blue-green with simple ceramic Indian adornments and dried flowers hanging from the wall. The TV, however, was large, and the family had ASTRO, the Malaysian satellite TV provider. With this, the family had access to Tamil television programming from India. The two younger sons watched football (soccer) while we spoke to the father. We were served sweetened fruit drinks as we spoke. The women, two in their twenties and a teenager, remained in the kitchen out of sight. They worked the whole time on the evening meal and did laundry for awhile.

Munnesamy explained that he wanted to continue working, but at the age of fifty and with an injury (he walked with a limp), he would have a difficult time finding another estate employer, particularly when there was cheaper Indonesian labor available. Moreover, with Malay management, he explained, there was “little comfort” with Indian labor or the Tamil schools and Hindu temples that went with it. When I asked what would happen to the temples if the final Indian families were to move out, he said they had “no idea” what would happen. The temple was not registered,² so it could be “legally” destroyed once the Indians were gone. He was pessimistic. But a possible silver lining

came in the form of a “successful” case of estate resistance he himself had witnessed. The case in question concerned Braemer Estate (see chapter 2), in which a group of retrenched and displaced workers had fought eviction for years before finally being awarded low-cost housing as compensation (Nagarajan 2004). He had attended the Braemer Estate “victory celebration” and hoped that some compensation could be negotiated in the case of his estate as well.

Because he has worked in Kirby Estate for only a few years, however, his compensation would be small. Approximately one month’s salary, or twenty working days to be precise, times the number of years working in the estate was the legally accepted formula for compensation in Malaysia. His situation was desperate, but he hoped, that through a series of legal “injunctions,” as was the case in the Braemer struggle, the retrenchment and eviction of Tamil labor could be delayed. But it was not clear that Munnesamy understood the legal parameters of his struggle. He was not sure if there were legal grounds for their appeals. Therefore, other than appeals to morality and the open and defiant protest aided by media coverage, the basis of a challenge was daunting.

We will witness a similar pattern throughout the various case studies to be presented in this study. That is, legal arguments, though greatly desired, were not the sole basis upon which compensation struggles were being successfully waged by Tamil laborers facing the predicament of retrenchment and displacement. Rather, compensation struggles were grounded in moral terms, which in turn were anchored in a historicized understanding of the subject’s claim to the land. Thus the desire for documentation carried within it an excess of the legal order upon which it was grounded.

Munnesamy’s children all went to Tamil schools in the estate. They liked their studies, but when they went to the government (Malay)-run secondary school the “pro-Malay slogans” in the classroom were alienating. The Indian kids, in general, felt out of place in the secondary schools, I was told, and were more likely to drop out and look for work or, worse, get involved in gangs. Munnesamy’s relatives were spread out in different estates.

Leaving the estate, I paused briefly to photograph the old Murugan temple. As I approached the temple gate, a couple of older Tamil women walked past. The eldest, perhaps in her seventies or eighties, said, “*Velaikaran, enakku bayam*” (A white man, I’m frightened!). My presence was a shock to her, given the remote location of this estate and, perhaps, a memory of days past when European planters demanded a certain distance and/or certain infamous access to the women laborers.

Across the street from the estate we met the Tamil owner of a small auto repair shack. Sitting outside on greasy chairs, we chatted about difficulties facing Tamils. A friend, also of the same estate community, joined in the conversation. We were served canned drinks, much to our embarrassment

given their high cost, and they said that though they themselves had purchased low-cost housing, they wanted to stay in the estate and fight for compensation. They explained that “the Chinese” had legal rights to their “New Village” lands,³ and yet could work in the estates if they wanted to, and secondly that Malays had been given government land outside of the estate. Indians, in contrast, could not access land easily. They asked rhetorically, “What was there for the Indians?” Energized by the so-called Braemer victory, they felt something could be obtained by resistance. They did not care anymore if they were harassed by police, or even arrested. The Braemer settlement had clearly changed the equation and horizon of hope.

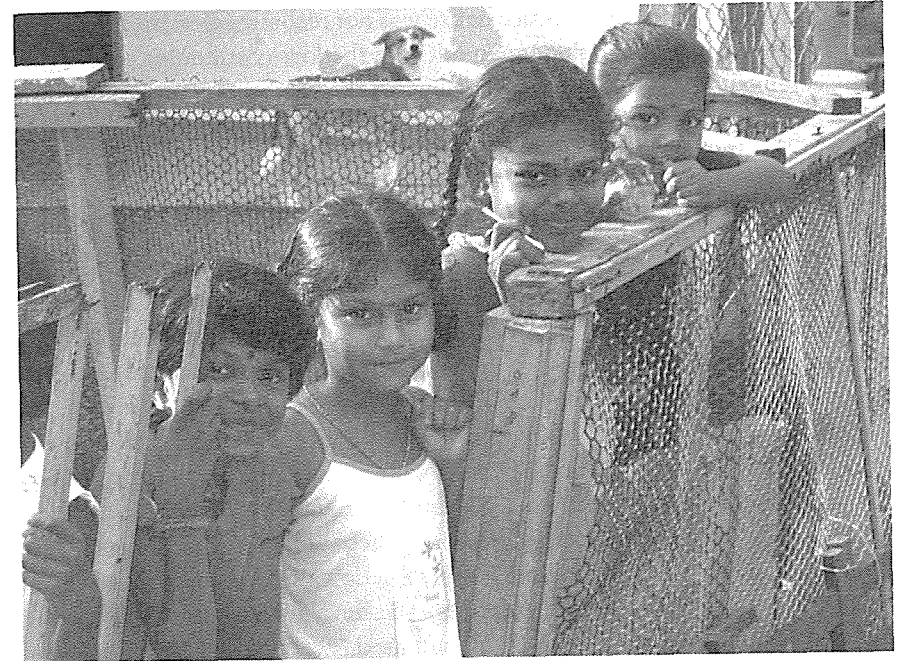
Midlands Estate

I visited Midlands Estate in Shah Alam in 2005, shortly before its demolition. The details of the case were complicated. I took notes that it was first managed by Barlow and was specifically held by Highlands and Lowlands Agency. A temple, evidently dated from 1864, had been pulled down in the early 1990s, I was told, which suggested this was one of the oldest estates (and temples) in Selangor.

By decree of the Shah Alam city council, I was told, there were to be no squatters in Shah Alam by 2007, and thus these displaced workers would have to be resettled by then. In 1968, the estate had contracted in size and in 1991 had ceased operations, and its 13,000 acres were gradually absorbed by the city of Shah Alam.

According to the gentlemen from the estate that we spoke with, a high mortality rate was only slowed by the arrival of quinine in the late nineteenth century. At its peak, this estate had about 350 families living in it. By the time of retrenchment, there were only 81 left. In 2005 there were only 38 families left living in estate housing, fighting with the developers for alternative housing as compensation.

When the estate ceased operations in 1991, Guthrie, the management company at that time, attempted to evict the workers. When they did not leave voluntarily, water and electricity were disconnected in an attempt to force them to leave. The Selangor state “exco” (state executive councilor), a MIC officer named Rajagopalan, fought successfully to have the water and electricity reconnected. At this time, most families were paid a retrenchment benefit of four to five thousand ringgit (US\$1,300 to \$1,600 at the time), as well. In 1998, Sumurwang, a developer, offered twenty-five thousand ringgit to each family to vacate. Most did not accept this offer because the temple and school were not included in the settlement and because they were holding out for housing.



Young residents of Midlands Estate

Sumurwang had offered to build flats for the workers, but the community was suspicious of flats. “We have seen what happened in Bukit Jelutong,” one man said (referring to a flat resettlement scheme described below). “Complete community disintegration, and a lack of cultural values.” As we spoke, we looked out across a soccer field in what was left of the estate, where in the early evening twilight the youths of the estate were playing a soccer match. As we discussed their struggles to obtain housing and compensation, one man spoke of his “fears of change” and the “difficult” times that lay ahead when a “close knitted” community was torn asunder by the processes of capitalism. An elderly woman described how her mother had also worked in the labor lines of the estate and how she herself was estate-born. This was the life she had known. She described how she had cared for ten in her family, yet had “nothing and nowhere to go.” She added, “*Eppadi vallerethe* (how to survive)? We are old and they will put us on a top floor.” Here she referred to the likelihood of having to climb stairs to reach her flat, as low-cost housing rarely, if ever, was equipped with elevators.⁴ Moreover, those awarded lower-story units were not necessarily chosen on account of age or health, but rather through political connections.

While the elderly, in particular, bemoaned the likelihood of low-rise flats, the chief negotiator for the estate workers, from the city of Klang’s Consumer’s

Association, argued that a “terrace house was not realistic given the real estate cost in Shah Alam.”⁵ The same man felt that the low-cost houses should not be rejected out of hand, as this was ultimately the best deal the workers could hope to achieve.

Bukit Jelutong

Entering Bukit Jelutong for the first time in November of 2003, one could see a battlefield of demolished homes and deforested plains. The palm oil trees had been removed and one saw roads and factories, not to mention flats and terrace houses, encroaching from every direction. Only the remnants of the oil palm estate were visible in the form of small groves of trees that were still left standing and in the still functioning Tamil school, temple, and church.

Naga and I first approached a woman who seemed surprised to see us. She took us from the *dewan*, or community building, actually a shack, to a row of other shanty-style shacks down a dirt road. These homes, Naga told me, were literally made of the broken pieces and sometimes even the foundations of the homes that had been demolished by the developer. I was told that the former plantation managers, Guthrie, had used “every dirty trick” to get the people off the land and had even demolished homes without the “proper permits” on several occasions. The estate had been sold to property developers, and while most residents had already left, about ten families remained and pledged to fight on. While they realized that the estate was no more, they wanted compensation that exceeded the offer of a low-cost flat that they would be obliged to purchase at a “reduced price.”

All the residents in the makeshift village courted arrest by their refusal to leave. But they had received legal advice that the developers were on shaky legal ground, so they decided to stay put despite the intimidation. Ultimately, they were fighting for better housing, the survival of their Tamil school, and for their temple and church.

We spoke first to an elderly man who appeared to be in poor health. He sat on the floor of his shack looking depressed or tired. He quickly rose from the floor to sit on plastic stools and talk with us. He explained how he had been forced to move around from estate to estate due to retrenchments and transfers and now had nowhere else to go. Complaining that the developers had simply instructed the residents to move to another estate, he suggested that they had no understanding of what that entailed. Moreover, he knew no one nor had any family outside this estate. His son lived with and supported him because he could no longer work. He showed us his badly swollen leg and claimed it was due to an injury suffered while on the job.

When asked about schooling for his children, he said they had stopped

early in their studies because they had no money for supplies or other expenses. At this point, his son came out to talk to us. He and another man, both in their twenties or thirties, described the “harassment” they had received from the developers and described how their belongings were thrown outside their houses before the bulldozers came. The local police, it seems, did much of the dirty work of evicting them.

There were many young children living in this broken estate. One could see garbage strewn about and, alarmingly, metal and concrete objects littering the land. Still children played around these potentially dangerous sites. One young girl, about five or six years of age, jokingly said, “Go away, the police are coming!” I took this to reveal what these young kids had endured as their parents fought for better compensation. Another girl asked if I was “*orang Cina*” (Chinese person), which suggested the degree of isolation their poverty induced. It was also possible that this association was made because the property developer, I was told, was Chinese. The girl’s question may have been intended to ask if I was from the developer’s team.

Most of the residents of the village worked in nearby factories, or in Klang, a city a short distance away. They were fighting for a plot of land and low-cost housing at or near where they were. Ideally, they wanted to move collectively as a community since they had endured much hardship together. Part of their fears about moving to a low-cost flat lay in the inevitable loss of community that occurred in housing projects. These projects were notorious, as we will see, for failing to provide a semblance of communal life that estate workers experienced for decades in the plantation villages. The transition to life in the flats, in short, could be anomic and painful.

The only surviving structures in Bukit Jelutong, save the shack houses, were the school, Hindu temple, and a Seventh-day Adventist church that was run by a man named Mr. James. The temple was situated beside the last remaining standing rows of oil palm trees, sitting picturesquely above a grove. It was a Mariamman temple of fairly simple design and had no *vimana* (spire over the sanctum) or *gopura* (tower at the entrance). Like other temples to this goddess in estates, the characteristic Vinayagar and Murugan shrines⁶ were off to both sides of the goddess, to the left and right, respectively. Situated in front of the temple was a smaller Muniandy shrine. This deity acts as a protector god for the village and temple, and it is here where animal sacrifices were traditionally offered.

Given that the community was now reduced to a few families, I was curious if the temple was active. I asked who will do *puja* (*yare puja seyvaange*). I was told that everyone (with the exception of the Christians) would do *puja* there. But there was no full-time *pusari* (priest) left at the estate. The temple was basically run by the remaining families.

By 5 P.M., the resident males arrived home from work in nearby factories to speak to us. Two men in their late forties or early fifties sat on rickety plastic chairs and asked that we be served coffee, despite our protests. These elder males told a story about Guthrie's heavy hand in attempting to chase them out of the estate. They seemed energized by their legal consultations with an attorney named Pathi (whom we will meet in chapter 5), who was behind the "good settlement" at Braemer Estate. One man held a Tamil newspaper (*Malaysia Namban*) and showed us the article on the Braemer celebration. In that case the developer, at the end of a long and protracted struggle with workers who refused to leave their houses, was forced to pay each family compensation of twenty-five thousand ringgit in addition to a free terrace house for each family. This settlement, though not setting a legal precedent for future cases, had provided hope that similar compensation could be obtained through similar tenacity and protracted struggle. Naga explained that the previously subservient estate dwellers, through the experience of police harassment and NGOs coming in and educating them about their legal rights, had become emboldened to fight. No longer fearing arrest because they knew they would be "cut loose" within a day or even a couple of hours, they no longer were as reluctant to fight as they may have been in the past. It is worth quoting at length from this encounter, as it captures the sense of anger and betrayal felt by these individuals, as well as narrativizing their predicament from their precarious vantage point:⁷

Why are they doing this to us? The default judgment dated June 6, 2002 stated we must vacate our houses within 14 days of receiving the notice. They didn't deliver the notice to us at all. They just came on June 26, pinned the notice on our doors and tore down our houses before we could even take down our belongings out. They knew if the notice had been given to us two weeks earlier, we would have had time to consult a lawyer. The lawyer tell us what they did is illegal because they should have got a court order to demolish the houses. *We are not refugees or animals* to be shooed from one place to another. We have toiled on this land for several generations and made the country and Guthrie very rich. It is the fourth place they want us to move to. First, they moved us to this place from Bukit Jelutong and Rasak estates in 1979. When we were retrenched, *they promised* to build low-cost houses for us here. Look, it is so clearly stated in the plan⁸ that 31 per cent of the houses to be built here should be low-cost units. We didn't ask for free housing. We didn't ask for big bungalows. All we wanted were low-cost terrace houses at affordable prices. We were eagerly waiting to buy the houses. But later, when the price of land appreciated, *they changed their mind*.

They didn't want to sell the low-cost houses to be built here to us anymore. They said we must move to Subang Estate, which is 15 kilometres away. We cannot move to Bukit Subang. There are no employment opportunities or proper transport facilities there. The retrenched estate people have found work nearby as cleaners, gardeners and factory workers. Many are old women and don't know how to ride motorcycles. How are we going to commute to work here and earn an honest living?

Aside from the practical concerns being raised here about employment and distance, questions of sovereignty and animality are interrogated. The "rich" and powerful Guthrie derives its power precisely through disposable labor, and thereby through a failed reciprocity or betrayal. The Tamil laborers are the ones who have toiled and made Guthrie rich (and by extension, the Malaysian state). But Guthrie breaks its promise precisely as a disavowal of its obligation. Its sovereign act, buttressed by law, belies an impossibility of separation from its obligation to reciprocity. They do so only with "changed" minds and broken promises. Animality and sovereignty, thus, remain intimate partners, recognizing one another in mutual disavowal (Derrida 2009; Hegel 1977). To continue the narration:

A few months ago before our houses were torn down, they came and demolished our kindergarten, tuition centre, and library without giving any notice. It is a *very cruel* thing to do. We want our children to get a good education and to progress in life. We are not rich people, but still we make a lot of effort to get more reading material for our children. We sought the help of the Canadian High Commission for sponsorship. The Canadian government donated books and teaching aids for our children. But one day, the Guthrie people came with the police and Shah Alam City Council enforcement officers and demolished the building, just like that, without giving any notice. They said they have the right to do that because the land and the building are theirs. Most reading materials were damaged.

These Guthrie people have been bluffing us a lot. Read this letter.⁹ They agreed to allocate four acres of land to build the Tamil school in 1997. Later, they said no. They want to give only 0.7 acre for the Tamil school. Even that is not certain now. Their new proposal is insulting and makes us angry. They want to shift the Tamil school to the open space on the ground floor of the low-cost flats in Bukit Subang. You know the place where the flat residents park their motorcycles, use the walkway and sometimes throw their rubbish? They want to partition the open space with plywood and conduct classes there. Of course, we

got very angry and asked them if they would even think of such a proposal if it were a Malay school. When the white men managed the estate long ago, they were not so bad. They gave a proper place in the estate for the Tamil school. Now, the new bosses want to shift the Tamil school near the rubbish dump of the low-cost flats. Why are they treating us like dirt? How can we tolerate this? When they realized that we were agitated, they said, 'no, no, it is only a proposal. It will only be a temporary arrangement until the new school is built'. But why can't our children continue attending classes in the present school until the new building is completed? Actually, they are trying to cut the electricity and water supply to our houses so that we will be forced to move out. They know we are getting electricity and water supply through the school and temple. We don't trust these Guthrie people anymore. They have lied to us so many times. If we agree with the temporary arrangement under the low-cost flats, they may make it a permanent Tamil school site after a few years just like how they have reduced the land offered from the original four acres to 0.7 acre. We are not going to give up our struggle for decent houses, and new Tamil school building, a temple and a church in Bukit Jelutong itself. The first time they demolished our homes, *we were shattered, were in shock, and didn't know what to do. We felt like we were in a graveyard.* We have picked up the pieces and rebuilt our houses in the same place. We are better informed of our rights now. We have also learnt from the victory of our friends in Klang's Bukit Tinggi Estate against the Guthrie people. We won't give up. (Nagarajan 2004, 128–130).

Here we see several key themes that animate their own archiving of evidence. In the "shattered" state after destruction, where dreams and forms of mutual recognition lay dead, like a "graveyard," the consolidation and recovery of an identity for these people who feel violated comes precisely through an identification of betrayal by the Other. Identifying in the shadow of, and in contrast to, the Other's lack (those that lie, betray, and cannot be trusted anymore), the archiving of the Other's wrongdoing, allows for the reconstitution of recognizable humanity given the dehumanizing conditions that they perceive themselves to have been subjected to. That is, by figuring the unjust as cruel, the victim emerges as fully human by contrast.

In Lacanian terms, the identification with the Other's lack is a "hysteric" form of discourse that seeks to tighten social linkages while also addressing the Other with a question that interrogates its desire. The symptom of identification through this lacking Other, in other words, attempts to realize or enact something that is desired by the person to whom it is revealed or for

whom it is performed, and in that sense it carries a message. But this message is not always clearly articulated, as it is ambiguously split between both exposing and shoring up a lack, and reconstituting the Other as being an all-powerful and idealized authority. As Gherovici explains, "The hysteric produces a powerful Other while attempting to depose it again and again" (2003, 9). Moreover, this demand to become the object of the "master's" desire is provocative and critical, gesturing violently to the lack in the Other. Lacan argues (1977, 1992) that identifying with the flaw in the authority or powerful Other (oftentimes a parental figure) acts to fill that gap and thus reconstitutes the idealized authority figure, while at the same time wishing to negate the source of perverse desire emanating from that Other's lack, which is inevitably displaced on the subordinate and "hysteric" subject. In this sense, a Tamil discourse of victimization interrogates asymmetrical power relations between Tamils and Malays, as perceived by Tamils, and as enacted through the Law. The subordinate subject, as a racialized social symptom, in turn becomes the impossible thing of desire—the object *a*—that shores up the inconsistencies in the lacking and more powerful Other.

On the other hand, the resurrection of a less lacking and more transcendent idealized Other emerges through the working of the spirit, as we shall witness. Not only does this archiving desire allow for the reconstitution of the victim as a subject vis-à-vis the aggressor/perpetrator, it also provides hope in the mirroring of other documentary sources that are in circulation. In this case, we see that the cases of Bukit Tinggi (which we will discuss shortly) and Braemer have been invoked as models to emulate. The emulation, in turn, takes the form of documentation.

Why the fervent documentation? There is the possibility and hope of replication at work through the invocation of iterable types. There is the principle of legal precedent, which, while still escaping the systematic codification necessary to be effective, is ultimately a major source driving the desire for archivable truth, or what Derrida might call the "archive fever" for a "lithic order," or that which gives authorization to knowledge (1995a) or, more broadly, to the subject's sense of sovereignty. In this sense, the founding principle of Law, as Derrida suggests, is an act of establishing a proper name, which in turn is an arbitrary and violent iteration requiring, subsequently, continuous supplementary evidence in order to efface its original performativity and violence. Archive fever burns brightest when the Law's inherent violence (or the subject's inherent contingency) is rendered partially visible. The archive thus allows for a recovery of illusory origins when in fact the "lithic order" is retroactively constructed through supplementary acts of calculable decision making.

Legal precedent, and hence the Law's inviolability, is in other words es-

tablished only in the calculable determinations of application, a form of supplementation, which retroactively construct reason within the Law, or a “calculating apparatus” in Derrida’s (2002a, 250) terms. This is the phenomenal source and power of authorization. That is, it covers, supplements, and effaces an originary violence. In another sense, we also see the principle of types emerging through, and dependent upon, the discourse of documentation. Notions that Guthrie, for instance, deploys certain tactics against the workers it wishes to retrench, or conversely that one can effectively stonewall Guthrie through certain tactics, fuels a desire for archivization. Also, a sense that as Tamils, and specifically as *non-Malays*, resonates through the prose at critical junctions. We note this specifically with regard to the issue regarding the Tamil school, but also in the subtle inflection of a racialized sensitivity that can be detected in the phrase “*we are not refugees or animals.*”

Animalization has, in fact, occurred in the blatant racialization of the Law, which in turn represents the ethnic subject compensating for his lack. In Agamben’s terms (2005), Tamils perceive themselves increasingly as the exception—a site of displacement in which the anomie at the heart of the Law is plugged through their exceptionality. Here the racialization of the law serves as its supplement—that is, the perversion of law that allows the ideal of Law to efface its originary violence (Derrida 2002a). But going beyond Agamben’s more static reading, Derrida’s understanding of the law and the archive suggests that both the logic of victimizing and victimization are driven by archive fever. This both destabilizes and proliferates the law’s reach (Morris 2007, 361, 367–368). In this instance, the implication, of course, is that by telling the story of animalization and victimization, and by having it documented carefully, the truth will be revealed that Guthrie (and by extension, the racialized state) has treated them as both less than Malaysian and less than human. Both imply a heavily racializing undertone and thus point to a lack or violence in the Law. But the threshold between sovereignty and animality is never clear or absolute, as witnessed by the feverish symptom that is the archive. The social message in this symptom returns us, contra Agamben, to a key Freudian insight regarding the political and transference identifications at the heart of the so-called hysteric’s symptom. By extension, a higher Law is simultaneously conjured, one beyond the calculable, transcendent and divine. On this I will have much to say at the end of this chapter and in subsequent ones. But for now, I turn to a more blunt assessment of the lack in the Other.

Demolition by Guthrie was scheduled for May 5, 2004, but the remaining families filed a memorandum with the prime minister and had a hearing on May 17 regarding the default judgment that had sided with Guthrie and indicated they would have to leave. James, a Telugu man who spoke Tamil,

reiterated what he had said a year earlier: “We will fight. If they destroy our homes, we will rebuild.” They continued to demand that forty-two houses be built in the area for them. Realistically, however, they understood that they would likely receive an offer for low-cost flats: “an offer for flats will be rejected because there will be many problems (*pretchenai*) in the flats. There is no church; it is very far, about 25 kms from the school, and from our jobs. Also, the flats are too small (*romba chinaatu*). I will pray to Jesus to ask for guidance (he repeated this phrase twice). What is his will, we must accept. We are very annoyed at Guthrie. They have given notice on the Church House but not on the church.”

There was a small house adjacent to the church, which was a Seventh-day Adventist Church. On one occasion, about twelve individuals, mostly women, were sitting on the veranda of the church house, while the men talked in front of the church building. Seventh-day Adventist churches are rare in Malaysia, much less in estates. This was obviously a missionary outpost, where several estate families had been converted. It was a Saturday evening, and so this was in preparation for the evening prayers. Vegetarian curries were being prepared in the church house while the men talked about the future struggles of the community.

Adjacent to the church was the Tamil school and Hindu temple. The school was still functioning at this time, with fifty pupils, many of whom came by car, as most families did not reside in the ramshackle dwellings that remained. Nearby, across a short embankment and clearing of what used to be oil palm trees, was a large Malay school in Shah Alam. Next to this was a large and gleaming new *masjid* (mosque). Beyond this one could see row after row of middle-class houses as the ever-expanding suburbia of Shah Alam slowly enveloped the last vestiges of the former estate lands.

The residents (particularly James) were eager to have us document this fight. There was a general belief that documentary forms of evidence would be useful in the court appeal process, particularly when the judgments of particular judges were variegated. But more than this, there was a faith in a reckoning of truth that could reconstitute what was shattered in the terminated discussions with Guthrie that were followed by the abrupt and inhumane, from the community’s point of view, treatment meted out as their homes were demolished. Documentation was also a narrativizing exercise for the ethnographer and interviewee. In the structuring of the narrative, as we will also see in subsequent stories from the estates, the parameters that organize understandings take form in a story of betrayal and victimization.

James pointed out the PSM (Parti Socialis Malaysia) flags and slogans painted or hanging outside their homes. The PSM was at this time actively involved in labor agitations and estate worker rights but was not a legal politi-

cal party. He pointed out proudly that Dr. Nasir supported their struggle (the president of PSM and a Malay socialist). We noticed one Keadilan (opposition party) flag flying as well. Children posed for our cameras, playing with their bicycles or toy rubber tires. James remarked at one point, looking across the horizon at the encroaching development of Shah Alam, "They want this to be a wealthy Malay area . . . *they don't want Indians around.*"

The last statement bluntly revealed the perception that Tamils living in and around Shah Alam have of development's ethnic face, and concomitantly of the demolition of the plantation lands and their symbolic structures that lie upon the landscape. In framing their understanding of their predicament in these terms, their struggle was one of documenting their history to produce an alternative sense of historicity to the one being crafted in the halls of the city hall planners, as they imagined it. This historicity may or may not have had legal ramifications, but, irrespective of this, the documentation of struggle and the insistence on narrativization provided for a moralization of their effort vis-à-vis an Other increasingly perceived as morally lacking. Moreover, Tamils were increasingly compensated here and in subsequent cases through the sense making these narratives of victimization provided. On the other hand, these archives and the historicity they conjure sometimes acted as a prosthetic for memories lost or imagined (Derrida 1995a), while producing a hope and futural aspiration for recognition. They also, however, produce an "anarchic" or destructive counter to the Law, more sublime in its restless agitation (Gasche 2003) before symbols of totality, figured as divine justice. The latter, indeed, can be produced out of the auto-deconstructive tendencies of the former. This is a point I will turn to in the conclusion of this chapter, when I describe a collective ritual of possession.

As Nagarajan (2004) points out, Guthrie, for its part, claimed to have fulfilled and even exceeded its legal obligations to its former workers in terms of compensation paid out and in providing alternative housing. Moreover, in negotiating a resettlement for the school and temple, Guthrie claimed it had been more than humane to the community and its aspirations. But as we have seen, conflict had arisen precisely because there was a firm belief among those former workers that Guthrie had broken promises that were made on all fronts regarding housing, the Tamil school, and the land for the temple and church. It was both a sense of betrayal, coupled with the hardened resolve born of the experience wrought by the trauma of repeated demolitions, arrest, and general harassment, that had shaped the Bukit Jelutong community's resolve and characterization of Guthrie. Guthrie, in turn, was increasingly seen as an extension of the government, particularly in its localized form in Shah Alam, where "development" meant the creation of a new city catering to a middle-class Malay clientele, with all its necessary transformations of

the symbolic landscape. Among other things, as the Tamil poor saw it, they (Guthrie, the government, the residents of Shah Alam, Malays, etc.) "don't want Indians around."

Part of this perception probably arose from working in nearby Shah Alam and dealing with everyday forms of subtle ethnic discrimination. But certainly much of these sentiments were born of experience in the struggles against Guthrie. In Nagarajan's account (2004, 132–133), we see that the Bukit Jelutong residents were promised housing in the late 1970s, while the company was under British management. In fact, many of the families that resided there had moved to this estate because of a promise by the then British managers that permanent housing would be allocated for the future needs of the estate workers there. That is, a house ownership scheme was offered to the workers in exchange for relocation. Indeed, during the 1970s, several home ownership schemes were being discussed as a long-term solution for the perceived problems of homelessness facing estate workers when plantations were to be subdivided or converted into other land uses. But after the government partially took charge of Guthrie in 1981, the new owners, under Malaysian management and aided by the government, shelved or annulled the housing schemes. This was seen as the first betrayal.

Then as Shah Alam became a key development site, real estate prices soared, making Bukit Jelutong, a mere five kilometers from the city center, a valuable piece of property. Guthrie sold the plantation to a developer in its own corporate group in the early 1990s. In 1997, the workers were retrenched, and thus began their struggle for housing. The management, as mentioned, offered them low-cost flats fifteen kilometers away. These flats were rejected by those who decided to stay on. It was thought that the flats, each 650 square feet, were too small for their families and that they were too remote, given the transportation systems available in that area. They wanted the original promise for low-cost terrace housing in Bukit Jelutong to be kept, but Guthrie refused their demands and instead initiated eviction proceedings. In February of 2002, Guthrie demolished the kindergarten, damaging the books therein, and by March of that year began the demolition of houses. Though the residents had hired legal counsel, this did not prevent Guthrie from using the Kuala Lumpur High Court to obtain an eviction notice. The first complete demolition of homes was completed on June 27, 2002. The residents, as Nagarajan points out, were incensed, as the proper fourteen-day warning was not provided, and they "alleged the demolition exercise was . . . carried out without a court order" (2004, 137). Within days, those made homeless had gathered their belongings and constructed makeshift homes. Within the next year, Guthrie, the Shah Alam City Council demolition team, and the police worked in collusion to demolish their homes three more times (see Nagarajan

2004, 138–140). The residents also faced arrest and a threat that their legal compensation would be lost entirely were they to persist in their “pointless” struggle.

By May of 2004, forty-two families from Bukit Jelutong were still residing in their makeshift homes, hoping that their day in court would come soon. There was still what I have called a documentary hope—that is, a hope to document the veracity of their experience and, conversely, what they saw as the absolute duplicity of Guthrie. Though they understood that the courts in Malaysia were not always swayed by moral arguments and moreover that the judge may have felt bound to observe the letter of the law, there was a sense that the evidence produced the context in which the spirit of the law could be correctly applied. Moreover, there was a profound faith—in their own growing sense of historicity—that out of their historical experience would eventually come recognition by the Other, in this case the state-owned developer. This was the compensatory logic that animated their sacrifice, a sacrifice that allowed them to court arrest, live in the discomfort and poverty of a shanty, and face the seemingly hopeless series of negative legal judgments. But against this hope, as well, there was an anxiety that the calculable or archivable documentation of their struggle would only confirm the constructiveness of the law itself, and hence its inherent deconstructibility (Derrida 2002a). That is, the founding violence of the law would be revealed through the legal failure of the archiving struggle in a court of law. In this way, the law would be seen as separate from justice.

As Derrida argues, “Law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are as necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (Derrida 2002a, 244). If justice is infinite, it is so because it defies objectification and categorization. As in the Kantian notion of the sublime, the pleasure experienced by contemplating justice occurs in the aporia where reason has met its limit. As Gasche explains, “The feeling of the sublime, along with the complex satisfaction that it brings, can basically be defined as follows: it is the satisfaction of being able to apprehend in one representation that which defies objectification in the first place, that which is definitely adverse to form as such” (2003, 127). Similarly, the aporia of justice must reach beyond the calculative order of the legal apparatus yet still agitate or move the mind toward a sense of higher or more encompassing law. It is for this reason that justice becomes impossible, incalculable, and divine, as we will witness in several instances to come.

Another demolition order was put aside on May 14, 2004, offering a small

ray of hope for a settlement. A hearing to decide on a default judgment, which gave Guthrie the right to demolish yet again, was to be scheduled. The residents hoped that in the context of a full hearing the broken promises of Guthrie could be brought to light in a courtroom. They imagined that a sympathetic judge would hear the case and pressure Guthrie, threatening them not only legally, but also with bad publicity. Guthrie itself was apparently tired of fighting with the residents and wanted to find an avenue to settle and develop the land. Yet all it offered were flats in Bukit Subang, far from the workplaces of most of the residents. Moreover, their offer did not yet cover the Tamil school, temple, and church. The fight to save those as part of any settlement was critical to this community. The residents continued their resistance awhile longer and finally achieved a settlement whereby they were offered low-cost flats to purchase at a reduced fee, compensation for past demolitions of their homes by the developer, land to relocate the temple, and fifty thousand ringgit to help build the new temple. The estate’s Tamil school was also rebuilt by Guthrie on another site.

I was told that the MIC, at the eleventh hour, attempted to siphon off part of this fifty thousand for its own use although it had little to do with the settlement agreement. While the settlement was not everything that the residents of Bukit Jelutong had striven for, they were able to relocate the temple and received compensation for their many years of struggle. It should be noted, however, that their settlement occurred outside the letter of the law, which would allow them to be (repeatedly) evicted. Rather it was their campaign of civil disobedience that garnered public support, as well as several specific tactics of seeking legal injunctions to postpone their evictions, that frustrated the developer, causing it to gradually lose profits. This, in turn, led to a stronger incentive to settle with the residents rather than to rely on the instruments of the law. But more consequentially, the moral foundations of resistance always already compensated the victims vis-à-vis the victimizers by providing a meaningful narrative, one that cast the struggle for the spirit—as represented by the temple (and perhaps the church)—against the violence of the developmentalist state and its ethnic agenda.

Bukit Raja Estate

Bukit Raja Estate was located outside of Klang, a mid-sized city near the straits of Malacca. It was once a large estate with five divisions, covering twenty-six thousand acres. Over time, it was subdivided and the land was developed into housing. When I visited in 2006, the last labor lines still existed in one of the divisions, but the estate was no longer functioning. The management’s quarters lay in ruins, the swimming pool a ghostly echo of an

opulent past for the white men who managed from their spacious bungalows. Those remaining were fighting against their eviction notices, rejecting a recent offer for low-cost flats.

As recently as 1999, the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) had collected one hundred ringgit per family as a down payment for a low-cost terrace house at Bukit Raja. Sime Darby, the management, had evidently offered to pay half of their retrenchment package upon termination, saving the other half for the “promised” terrace houses, for which the union had been collecting funds. But in the end, upon retrenchment, flats were offered at a “reduced” price of thirty-five thousand ringgit, which infuriated most the residents. Out of fear, two hundred families accepted the offer and moved to the flats. But one hundred other families rejected it and stayed on, becoming *de facto* squatters in the management’s eyes as they fought eviction, claiming the right to the “terrace houses” at a reduced price of sixty to seventy thousand ringgit.¹⁰ At one point, water and electricity were cut from the families’ estate homes in an attempt to force them out.

As I sat in the living room with a couple of families in their estate house, I could see the anger welling up in their eyes as they recounted the suffering they endured without water and electricity throughout this ordeal. Rather than succumb to this pressure, however, they filed a police report and were able to have the utilities reconnected, particularly once the story of their plight was carried in one of the Tamil newspapers. The heavy-handed tactics of Sime Darby had garnered the company bad publicity and had led to the resumption of services, though the efforts to drive the families out continued unabated. Indeed, in 2007, utilities were once again cut in an attempt to evict the families, but this was again unsuccessful.

I was told about heavy-handed tactics being employed by Sime Darby to intimidate those remaining, including the employment of “thugs” to vandalize their homes and belongings. At this stage, the remaining families were being asked to pay for their utilities. According to Sime Darby’s own legal brief, which was presented to the remaining families, these families were squatters and should pay for electricity, water, and rent now that they were refusing to leave their houses. They had refused to acknowledge their eviction notices as “an obvious delaying tactic,” the legal brief claimed. That one could become a squatter in the intergenerational home in which one had contributed labor for a wealthy company of nonlaborer shareholders was an irony lost on management and their legalistic approach to disposing of retrenched labor. From their perspective, once former employees were no longer employed, their rights to housing were terminated as well. Common law principles of long-term residency as pertaining to land rights “were not entertained,” I was told by legal advocates for the workers. This violence in the law was becoming

visible to this community in the threat of its enforcement. It must be recalled that home ownership schemes for plantation laborers were already established in the 1970s and sometimes implemented, but had become increasingly rare at the end of the 1990s.

The residents I spoke with mentioned a recent case in Kuantan, a city on the east coast of Malaysia, that had inspired their hope. There, evidently, a Hindu temple was spared demolition after a judge, citing English common law, ruled that because the temple had existed prior to the land sale that jeopardized it, it could not be moved or destroyed. This went against the heart of compensation formulas and private property laws as they were normally implemented and practiced in Malaysia, which, following the Torrens system, require that titles of ownership be registered. Their hope was that this case would set a precedent for future decisions, providing the documentary evidence needed to legally anchor their otherwise moral claims against developers.

The “fever” for the archive was growing among those communities fighting eviction for obvious legal reasons. But the hope invested in this documentary form of evidence outweighed its legal fecundity in the Malaysian context. As we have already seen, most material compensation issued from a logic outside of the letter of the law, following instead the developer’s concern over a loss of profit due to possible delays in construction brought about by civil disobedience. Moreover, bad publicity might reduce prebooking of units, lowering the speculative value of a real estate venture. This in turn motivated some developers to exceed what the letter of the law required in their compensation packages with former estate workers. These patterns notwithstanding, the logic of the archive, and what it supplements, drove a fantasy of evidentiary proof in the hearts and minds of communities seeking justice and recognition. In this sense, we must understand compensation as always already an impossible demand for recognition—one that squares the accounts, fixes the truth of exchange, and thus marks the inscription of one “lithic order” (i.e., Law, Derrida 1995a) on another. In Lacanian terms, a submission unto Law, or a fixation on the symbolic, is forged under feelings of lack, or under the recognition, precisely, of the Other’s apparent lack. Supplementing this, through a fixation on an alternative “lithic order” that locates patrimony outside the gaze of the big Other, but in the shadow of another (less lacking) Other, is one mechanism of feverish or hysteric negation. “Archive fever” (Derrida 1995a) materializes a hope for an authorized knowledge and truth claim. But its fever burns to silence the contingencies that come with the recognition that the speaking “I” is beholden to an Other, its addressee and source of its desire, as in a Hegelian understanding of consciousness (1977). In cases where a “fever” for truth takes hold, this Other becomes a lacking Other to be supplemented through neurotic identification and disavowal, which completes

or supplements the Other's lack. We must underscore here the feverish documentation of the Other's betrayals coupled with a fervent hope for recognition and reciprocity by the Other.

Translated into this compensatory context, the truth of history, that which will prove the Other's wrong and the truth claims of the victim, will somehow disentangle the subject from this lacking Other, while also compensating the subject for its inadequacy vis-à-vis its subjection to this Other. In this sense, that which fuels this drive for documentary proof exceeds the material quality of compensation, instead taking pleasure in a truth of being. But beyond a dialectic of recognition, in which law, like the logic of the gift, is locked in reciprocal and calculable modes of intelligibility, there is a notion of justice that lies beyond reason. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, "The gift is not outside the economy and expenditure that is the regulated violence of the law but operates entwined with and sometimes indistinguishable from it. In this sense, law can be given and received only as gift. But beyond law, where there is 'ideal justice,' in the indeterminable future, the structure of the gift can function in a different way, not as other than or in a different sphere of violence. Violence gives time." (2005, 70).

Grosz proceeds to discuss feminist critiques of the refused gift and what it generates. Following Irigaray, she suggests that the refused male reciprocity for nurturance (a debt to the maternal body's gift) is generative of the repressive phallic law in much of society. Similarly, one could argue that a failed reciprocity (a disavowed recognition), in these Hegelian terms, is generative of a repressive apparatus of reactive and restorative laws, in this case couched in racial privileges. This simply effaces or displaces an earlier violence. But beyond the Nietzschean "bad conscience" or Hegelian "unhappy consciousness," that in this repressive model of the ethics produces the law, we will also witness a haunting of justice expressed in Tamil Hindu terms that is possessive, perhaps punitive, and at the edge of reason and order. Moreover, as we will see, it is the goddess who signifies and objectifies the form of arbitrariness or sublime within the Law. This is not merely a sliding of gendered notions of violence into the language of ethnic hierarchy, though arguably the increasingly phallicentric law in Malaysia denies (or suppresses) intimacy across ethnic lines. Rather, as Ram (2013) suggests, sacred and possessive power in Tamil culture arises from a refused intimacy with the goddess, and women more generally, as a result of the iniquities caused by the patriarchal system of hierarchy. That the "hierarchically dominant group can and does overstep the limits of justice" (Ram 2013, 101) is countered by the ubiquity and power of the goddess' vengeance in Tamil culture. As the book proceeds, we will see that it is precisely the defilement of the goddess within her sacred landscape that produces the haunting call for justice.

Returning to the case at hand, even the local MIC state assemblywoman, Kamala Ganapathy, was said to have made a remark that angered local residents. She was said to have told a group of her supporters that the people of Bukit Raja were obstinate and that "they need to be given a kick."¹¹ This evidently came in response to the rejected offer of low-cost flats that had been arranged in part with the MIC's assistance. One man, completely disgusted with this politician, sneered and said, "They come at election time for our votes, but then they treat us like this." He added, "We are not squatters; we have worked four generations here. The flats are meant for squatters and are sold to them at the same price!" This referred to the so-called reduced price of thirty-five thousand ringgit, which was indeed the rate squatters often received for low-cost flats. He was drawing a clear distinction between the estate worker and the squatter. In fact, many squatters were just one step removed from their former lives in various estates, though he did not see the larger picture at the time. He added, "We are willing to pay for terrace houses at sixty to seventy thousand . . . [but] there are many problems in the flats."

Clearly, the remaining families wanted to live in terrace houses, realizing that in flats their sense of community would be altered. This was a ubiquitous sentiment, expressed in nearly every case under discussion and in many others. Flats were notorious for shoddy construction standards, poor design and layout, and a general lack of amenities. Those facing the prospect of resettlement after many years of estate life (in some cases, a few generations) were generally frightened and wished to live together if at all possible. To this end, they were willing to pay more, but they had a tough time realizing that the cost of real estate in this part of Selangor outpaced their dreams. Terrace houses, for example, in the Bukit Raja area would likely exceed 160,000 ringgit in cost.

I made plans to visit the community's old, atmospheric temple on a Saturday evening. Upon my return, and to my surprise, what looked like the entire community turned up that evening in the temple to discuss their situation with me. Clearly, they felt their story needed to be told, and hopes ran high that I was actually some kind of journalist who could bring some publicity to their plight. To reach the temple at twilight we were met at the edge of the estate by two young men on motorbikes. We climbed aboard the bikes and sped off onto the bumpy dirt roads into the estate's interior. Passing the ruins of the manager's bungalow on a hill and with old oil palm trees all around us, the coolness of the evening in the midst of lush and overgrown surroundings gave one a false impression of the estate's continuity. After about one mile we came to the small Mariamman temple in a clearing just off the dirt road. The temple itself was not impressive, though it had a fairly well-crafted *vimana* (sanctum tower) and some nicely painted artwork. In the



Bukit Raja Estate

night, however, and situated in the midst of the estate, the antiquity of the temple, which I guessed to be about one hundred years old, made it very picturesque. This was made all the more so by the flickering lights that illuminated it as day gave way to evening.

Within the temple the residents of the estate had gathered to answer my questions, tell their story, and to listen to their elders. The *pusari* (priest) of the temple spoke with the most authority (and the most frequently). He mainly recounted the history of the estate, but also spoke of the current problems being faced.

The *pusari* told me and the others about a first rubber tree being planted in this estate in 1889. At the outset, he said it had been called “Lakshmi Estate,” and then Bumiyan Division of Bukit Raja Estate. Originally it was 12,000 acres, but now was only 6,000 acres. According to the Selangor Planters Association Annual Report of 1968, this Bukit Raja Estate was owned by Seafeld Amalgamated Rubber Co. It was 26,869 acres in total, divided between 15,711 for rubber and 11,009 for oil palm and 119 for coconut, with the remaining acres for subsistence cultivation.¹² The *pusari* said that the process of conversion to oil palm began in 1961 and was finished by 1992. By 1992, he said, there were 450 families left living in the estate. At its peak, there were six divisions and 700 families.

Within the large divisions there existed five temples. The NUPW collected ten dollars a month in dues from each worker and was thus a “powerful

union.” The union, he claimed, used “fear” and “frightened many people to go to the flats” when the retrenchment process began. Initially, 120 families left for the flats. There were, however, problems in the flats. For one thing, the consolidation of temples caused frictions and hurt feelings as the temples’ committees and statues (of deities) from several temples had to merge. This inevitably led to the privileging of one statue or one temple committee over the other. Moreover, the land allocated for the temple was only eight-tenths of an acre, insufficient for ritual celebrations, processions, or even a large congregation. The flats themselves had small bathrooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. As the *pusari* put it, “How to manage with five children? The union [i.e., NUPW] supports, but not possible [*sic*]. . . . Malays are also there.”

It was perhaps a bit surprising to hear such a strong anti-Malay sentiment coming from a plantation-residing Tamil. In my experience, more vocal anti-Malay feelings were sometimes expressed by those residing in flats or in low-cost housing estates, where the sources of political patronage and the subsequent rationalization of ethnic privilege were already highly ethnicized and increasingly polarized in the landscape of contemporary Malaysia, as we will see in subsequent chapters. But increasingly, a consciousness of the “Malay,” figured in stereotypical terms, was being expressed in estates by those who felt the pinch of retrenchment and displacement.

The priest then complained about the land that had been traditionally used by the community to grow vegetables. This land, which lay at the boundaries of the estate, was considered neutral land. In the past it had been used by Indians for subsistence crops to help sustain them, given their meager earnings, but recently the land had been “given” to Malays, who were now using it for farming and cattle. Of course, given that the management wanted them out, it was hardly surprising that their subsistence land was being taken from them, especially since it was only granted through a tacit agreement between management and laborer. But to these former laborers, a deeper transgression of morality and historical rights had occurred. This was a theft of traditional land, usurped by Malays for their own use, indicative of their sense of entitlement and ultimately of their moral lack. Conversely, this boundary land, which was “traditionally” utilized by plantation workers to supplement their wages, served as a kind of physical document for the ethnographer to record evidence of the crime, the criminal act, and the victims of this theft. Those possessing the truth of tradition had history as their witness. Their compensation was already figured and fueled by sensations of moral outrage, which in turn was produced by a documentation of history/memory.

The *pusari* was born on the estate in 1959. He was trained at the Gurukkal (school for Hindu priests) in Kuala Selangor, a city on the west coast, under a Sivachariar (Saivite priestly authority) who was quite well known in Ma-

aysia. He was particularly angry with Samy Vellu (MIC president) and Sivalingam, the state executive councilor (exco) for Selangor, and he expressed a deep sense of betrayal by the MIC. He claimed that after retrenchment, work was given to Indonesians in the factories and estates at the expense of the Indians. "Who said we do not want to work?" he said with exasperation. But, ruefully, he added, "It is cheaper to hire Indonesians." This was the first betrayal from the politicians. But it was not the last.

According to the NUPW-MAPA agreement of 1998, *mandores* (supervisors) were supposed to receive contracts from estate management. But they exceeded this mandate and acted as NUPW heads locally. A man named Thamadurai, a former state exco, evidently promised forty acres of land for the local community. At this point, the NUPW and MIC negotiated with management and in so doing kept half of the retrenchment compensation for down payment on the future house to be built on the land. Then, "lo and behold," in 2004 Samy Vellu phoned Sivalingam and asked him what happened to the forty acres. Sivalingam evidently told him that the "flats are ready." According to the *pusari*, they were then "simply told to go to the flats." Because of the fear generated by the possible loss of compensation, 120 families left for the flats at that time. In other words, the accusation of bait and switch was made at the very least, and at the very worst the implication of political corruption was intimated.

The *pusari* said, "The flats are not possible for us. We want to live as one community. There are squatters, Malays, and people from other areas. There is lots of fighting . . . people want to run away." As he spoke, several elders and middle-aged folks nodded their heads and listened sympathetically to his commentary. I deliberately looked at the faces of others, hoping this would prompt more spontaneous conversation from the rest of the community. But most were content to let the *pusari* speak for the community. A few of the teenagers sat eyeing one another in the background, seemingly less interested in the discussion. Another man finally spoke out. He complained too about the surrendering of alienated land to Malays, as well as the difficult climb up the stairwell he expected to experience while living in the flats. He said, "Our knees are not so strong, and they want to send us to the flats where we must walk up. . . . The rooms are small. The bathroom is impossible to enter."

At the end of our conversation, we took a walk over to the manager's abandoned bungalow. Now, at dusk, it appeared haunting. We had to climb through overgrown weeds and vine, and the jungle had fast overtaken the estate paths. Upon reaching the house, we could see that the once proud interior had been turned into a hangout for drinking, drugs, and perhaps other vices. The walls were full of graffiti, some of it politically charged, some of it pornographic. Nothing of value remained. It was simply the skeleton of

a bygone era. One could sense, however, a certain sadness in our guide's eyes as we toured the ruins of the estate. It was an all-too-real reminder of what awaited their own houses down the hill below. The estate that was Bukit Raja was living only in the memories and valiant struggles of these last few families who resided there. Nurtured by feelings of betrayal and the specter of an ethnic other, the residents sought to chronicle their plight in hopes that the letter of the law would be superseded by its spirit. In many cases, however, this supersession of the spirit comes not in the legal domain, but in the possessive force of religious ritual, whereby community is cathartically and sometimes ecstatically re-enacted. We will conclude this chapter on this subject.

Glengowrie Estate

Glengowrie Estate was near the town of Semenyih, about a forty-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur. Upon entering for the first time, I was struck by the high percentage of Indians still living there. Indeed, many estates I visited had a fairly high percentage of Indonesian laborers, perhaps as high as 50 percent in some cases. The housing row, or what is called the "labor line," was made up of about twenty houses. The homes were all bathed in a freshly painted yellow color and were flanked by the dark green of oil palm trees. Rubber trees could be seen off in the distance. This, like other estates around the area, was gradually converting to oil palm due to the increasing demand for vegetable oil and biofuels. Here, as elsewhere, young Indonesian males were being hired to replace the Indian workers. But here only a fraction, perhaps a fourth of the labor force, came from Indonesia.¹³ The local union leader, Ms. Shanti, a woman around fifty years of age, explained that there were thirty-eight families left in this estate, but that they expected it to be sold off to a property developer fairly soon. They were "bracing themselves," she explained. The short-cropped hair she wore was unusual for a Tamil estate worker and might have been the result of visiting a pilgrimage spot, but I never asked, worried that it could have been the more embarrassing but fairly common malady of lice. She and her neighbors joked about the difficulties they faced there. Both explained that the men were trying hard to find work outside the estate and that most had indeed left tapping rubber behind. The oil palm labor was only attractive, from the management perspective, to young and strong males. The middle-aged tappers were of little use in the heavy labor of lifting palm fruits. During a good month, she explained, they made only three hundred ringgit tapping, which was clearly not enough, as they needed to save for education, housing, and living expenses. From a purely financial sense, they were not particularly attached to the estate life, but they did not know what awaited them outside, as this was the "only life they had

known." Her neighbor, a woman perhaps in her forties, asked us to speak with her grandmother and mother, who had resided in the estate for more than fifty years.

We walked over to the mother's house, on the edge of the labor line bordering a badminton court and trees. There we were met by two elderly women who were mother and daughter. I asked what were the "memorable events" in the estate that they recalled over such a long period of time. The older one said that festivals such as marriages and *tiruweelas* (festivals) for Mariamman (the goddess), Ponggal (a harvest festival), and Deepavali were very memorable events. These were some of her best memories. She had come in 1938 to Perak from India to work in an estate but had moved to nearby Bandar Rinchong shortly thereafter. Then she came to Glengowrie Estate, where she had lived for more than fifty years.

When I asked whether they would prefer to stay in the estate or leave, the elder one said that "estate life is peaceful and trouble free. The young can play sports, and we know they are fine. Out in the *taman* (town) and city, we don't know what the young are doing, and don't know who to trust." While estate life is not what it once was—for example, they told us of the days when the *veleikaran* (white man) would attend their festivals and even donate to the festival fund (also see Jain 1970)—there were few problems today in estate life. The youth, they said, were still respectful and honest. When we asked, however, about the MIC and whether they had done much to help the estate dwellers, they became a bit uncomfortable with the topic. This was even more apparent when we asked what were the specific problems that they faced. They seemed reluctant or unable to express any strong grievances, perhaps not knowing what our true intentions were. They did, however, say that the MIC generally "only showed up at election time." Also, "during Deepavali, the MIC representative would appear, and might even make donations. Before an election, they might give twenty ringgit to each family and provide a van to help estate workers vote (for them)."

Though they were unwilling to complain or elaborate on any controversial aspects of estate community life, or politics more broadly, they did say that they worried about leaving this way of life behind. Moreover, they recognized that it was possible in the estate to grow part of one's food and spice, whereas in the *taman*, or town, everything had to be purchased, even the curry leaves (*karrupelai*) that are such a staple in Indian cooking. Therefore, the income required to live outside the estate was much greater. This mother and daughter were the fortunate ones. They had managed to buy a low-cost "government flat" for twenty-five thousand ringgit. This was not easy to obtain without some connections, as these were reserved primarily for Malays. This perhaps indicated MIC connections or patronage, which would have explained their

reluctance to make any negative assessment of politics and estate life. If given the choice, however, they preferred to stay where they had resided for most of their lives, in this peaceful and serene setting, where they had witnessed generations of relatives married, festivals celebrated, and school achievements noted. Moreover, in the face of this future, the past was nostalgically recalled in a manner that almost certainly suppressed memories of hardships experienced in a life of plantation labor.

Upon returning to the estate a couple of months later, I learned that the estate workers had been retrenched. The end had come quicker than expected for some. But a few we spoke with were relieved because the wages were becoming so low. They were obtaining poor yields of rubber and tapping a mere sixteen hours or so per week. Most of the estate had already been converted to oil palm, and much of the labor on it was now being performed by Indonesians. A small subsection of the estate had rubber trees where the Indian tappers still worked, but the yields were, as mentioned, small. The NUPW, we were told, was negotiating for the laborers. "The union will probably sell them out," one cynic of the union observed. "They probably get perks for selling out the workers . . . plus their salaries and bureaucracy is bloated, thus they are more interested in preserving the union." In cases such as these, the union would ensure that the standard compensation procedures were observed, guaranteeing that plantation workers received what they were entitled to under law. But there was suspicion among some that union leaders were unwilling to fight developers and management on behalf of labor, as they obtained good salaries, not to mention opportunities for kickbacks and other corrupt practices, when they facilitated a settlement in the interests of the developer.¹⁴

Shanti, the local union branch leader, said that there was much infighting in the estate over temple management and over the norms surrounding the annual festival to be celebrated every August. Groups of former residents who had since moved out were claiming authority over temple matters, pointing to their historical ties to the temple, whereas the current residents claimed that they, as those who were residing in the estate and part of the contemporary worshipping congregation, should have control over the temple. The infighting had larger implications than just the festival's celebration. More broadly, those who moved out often clashed with those who remained behind over questions of compensation, settlements, political patronage, and loyalty. When some, for instance, accepted a settlement package and moved out of the estate, others who remained behind resented these people for "selling out" and weakening their collective bargaining hand, if not their resistance to attempts at eviction. By standing united, in other words, there was a sense that they might have achieved collective ends. On the other hand, the pressures

exerted by the developers and union to settle were sometimes too much, as compensation packages were seen as the last and best hope for a new beginning. Standing resolutely brought with it the risk of ending up with nothing. From management's perspective, if a community could be divided, half the victory was won, as the rest might lose hope and slowly begin to dwindle in numbers and bleed in resolve. Therefore, one often heard stories from those who stayed on to fight that enduring coercion through intimidation was one the hardest aspects of their ordeal.

In this case, we also see the tensions and, dare we say, the inevitable recoil and resentment experienced by those who chose to stay and fight but who now faced challenges to their temple and its festival by those who had left but had not relinquished their moral claim to them. It is perhaps a natural sentiment to desire reconnection with the place one has left. The estate temples afforded an opportunity to maintain a personal connection to the home that was lost or that people believed they were forced to leave. On the other hand, those who remained sometimes felt that those who left relinquished their rights and privileges within the local community, particularly if their actions weakened the political hand of the community in its negotiating power with the developer or management. Temples were, thus, focal sites of unity and community aspiration; but they also sometimes generated tension and disunity.

Semenyih Estate Temple

I approached the temple for Mariamman (the goddess), near Glengowrie Estate, in the evening as prayers were being conducted in the summer of 2004. Previously, I had visited this temple during Ponggal (a harvest festival) celebrations in January of 2004 and had there met a *pusari* who had, just weeks prior to this second visit, passed away suddenly and tragically. This temple, which was still part of a nominally functioning estate, had an active body of worshippers and was attempting to carry on with its daily activities as well as plan for annual temple festivals, and it drew increasingly larger crowds associated with the estate's past and present. On this occasion, there were only four women conducting prayers in the shrine at the time of *puja* (worship, adoration) and *arati* (waving of flame), at 8 P.M. One person led the prayers, taking over for the late priest although he was not a priest himself. After prayers, *arati*, and *puja*, *prasadam* (sanctified food) was served to the handful of people who were there. A few children had joined the original four, arriving in time for a *devaram* (sacred song) class to be conducted in the temple and led by one of the women. Twelve children sang *devaram* at dusk as the temple lights flickered and attracted a ball of insects.

Speaking with the *talaiivar*, or leader of the community, just outside the temple while the devotional singing was going on inside, he explained that the current status of the community was uncertain. Though the workers were, or just about to be, retrenched, they were determined to fight on. He was working with the NUPW and the CDC (Community Development Centre, an NGO) in tandem to demand houses and a space for the temple and school. The developer, a Malaysian Chinese man who was building housing where the estate line now lay, offered flats to the workers. "We refused. . . . If it was a Malay developer . . . *pretchenai maddum* (only problems!). We will fight!" Indeed, the mood had changed after the publicity surrounding the Braemer settlement (in which low-cost terrace houses were given in compensation) had spread like wildfire throughout the estates. At the time there was, through the counsel of the CDC, a growing consensus that if they fought eviction collectively, there was hope to gain more than the legal entitlements that were stipulated by law. Upon meeting with the *talaiivar* again a few weeks later, he remarked, "We are fighting to save our temples and get housing. The Tamil school has over three hundred students, and we have been promised (by the developer) that it can be kept. The temple has not been promised. Developers are offering low-cost flats that we would have to purchase. We have rejected this on the advice of the CDC. Since the Braemer case, we are energized and want terrace houses together in one development." Workers in most estates, having seen the Braemer residents receive low-cost terrace houses, refused to settle for flats. Flats, as will be seen in a later chapter, were feared for a number of reasons. For one, they were cramped. Second, they did not possess elevators, which would create a hardship for elderly and injured workers living on the top floors (they are normally four to five stories). Third, they did not allow for gardening, an important supplementary source of household food. And fourth, the social environment in flats was believed to be unhealthy,¹⁵ leading to "gangsterism," alcoholism, and a host of other social ills among the youth.

Nottingham University's external branch campus was being built in Semenyih in 2004, and it was believed that this would drive up real estate prices well beyond their present value. The estate lands were close to where the university was being built, and the estate residents hoped that the university would provide opportunities for their children and perhaps jobs for them in the short run as well. But the land it would take up was also impacting the pace and urgency of the dislocation process. The speculation in the housing market that was being created in anticipation of housing needs would certainly force the laborers to vacate their estate houses sooner rather than later, and it could mean that their temple and school would be demolished. At the same time, the urgency of development, given this speculative economy, could

give them a firmer bargaining chip in their fight with developers, provided they were willing to fight whatever heavy-handedness was thrown their way. In the first instance, the letter of the law was certainly stacked against them.

Balau Estate, down the road from Semenyih Estate, felt much more remote, separated by a lonely winding road and nestled between large oil palm trees. This oil palm estate was also likely to be demolished in order to make way for the new university. Entering the plantation, I noticed that there were few Tamil families. When I asked, I was told that there were only five families left. Most Tamils had left in 1982, when the estate had converted to oil palm from rubber. After the conversion, cheaper labor was commissioned to replace the Indian labor. Indonesians, Bangladeshis, Nepalis, and again Indonesians from Lombok had come and gone since then. We noticed quite a number of Lombok Indonesians at Balau Estate and assumed that they constituted much of the labor force at the time. But to my astonishment, we met a 102-year-old Tamil man who had lived in the estate for most of his life! I imagined he would provide a fascinating perspective on plantation life. But as it turned out, he complained mainly of the *"kudikkaran"* (drunks) in the estate. His daughter smiled and said his memory is "not so good now." Later, the significance of the old man's comment became clear when his granddaughter told us that her father, the grandfather's own son, had died of alcoholism.

The old man's granddaughter, who ran a small sundry shop on the estate, maintained a sliver of hope for the future. She thought the new university might represent change for the better. Stating it matter-of-factly, she said, "we will leave at that point. We would rather stay in the estate, but we know this way of life is ending." The university, she thought, would provide better-paying jobs and opportunities in education that had been denied to her before. Sadly, I thought to myself, and my fellow researchers later concurred, she did not realize how expensive a private university would be, nor did she understand how the competition to gain entry would be stiff for most working-class Tamils. Her husband, who was there at the time and did not read Tamil, was having his children learn *devaram* (sacred songs) through a romanized script. Unlike many Tamils in other estates or in towns, they did not have Astro (satellite TV), and relied on VCDs (video discs) for their entertainment.

The husband spoke bluntly about the life on the plantation frontier, and he particularly mentioned how the politicians took selective notice of their needs. He said, "the MIC will come once every five years, just before elections. They make lots of promises but nothing ever follows." "Why vote BN (Barisan Nasional)?" we asked him, to which he replied, "What choice do we have?" This sense of futility was common. His frustration with the MIC was palpable, but then again he felt that once every five years was better than never. That is, at least some of their needs could be addressed every now and

then. Because there was no other Indian political party of consequence at the time, he saw no reason to think outside of the established communal formula. In this more remote estate, anyhow, the activism of NGOs such as the CDC, or parties such as the PSM, had not made any headway. He added, "We make three hundred per month. It is very hard to find work nearby. I'm not angry, but worried for the future. The university will be good so our children will get an education." Again, he, like his sister, did not realize that the costs of a private education would be prohibitive with his low income, which was well below the poverty line.

Within this estate, the temple was run by volunteers, as was the case in Bukit Jelutong. There were no remaining priests (these required salaries that these people could ill afford). Though he deemed the MIC "useless," he had little reflection upon the *"arasangam"* (government) as a whole. He stated that their lives were consumed by *"pratchenai maddum"* (only problems) that await them in the future and envelop them in the present. There was, in this remote estate, little of the "ethnic" dimension, anger, or sense of betrayal that we heard where the proximity to national politics was more direct, such as in the Bukit Raja, Midlands, and Bukit Jelutong cases discussed earlier. The ethnic face of developmentalism was felt more directly in areas where suburban planning was predicated on an influx of a Malay middle class.

When asked about all those families that had left, as this estate at one time had dozens more Indian families before the exodus in 1982, both the brother and sister said the remaining families had largely lost touch with those who had left. Unlike other estates and temples, there was no annual migration back to the temple for the grand festival. Occasionally, the neighboring Semenyih Estate, discussed above, joined for a festival, but that was about it.

Leaving Balau Estate, I sensed that this community had long since died. The remaining five families had simply stayed on for reasons of necessity, personal tragedy, and perhaps nostalgia. The ties that bound the community had already been cut. With this process of slow splintering, the effect of retrenchment and dislocation that had so polarized sentiments in Bukit Jelutong, Bukit Raja, Midlands, and to some extent Semenyih was absent here.

Semenyih Estate Festival

On August 9, 2006, a hot, blistering day, between 150 and 200 devotees gathered in Semenyih Estate to celebrate the annual festival to the goddess Mariamman. It was a poignant celebration because the estate was facing imminent destruction¹⁶ and because of the sudden death of the *pusari* a year earlier. The twenty-two families left in this particular estate were insisting on terrace houses for compensation, but they knew all the while that this was an unlikely

outcome. Rather, they knew they would have a long and hard struggle with the developers to achieve concessions beyond what was stipulated by law.

They had performed the *kumabhisekham*¹⁷—after remodeling and painting the structure—on the temple a mere two years earlier and yet had no clear idea what the future held for their temple. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam (a body that oversaw and coordinated Hindu temples) had been contacted, and help had been requested in the joining of temples and worshippers from Glengowrie Estate (essentially moving the latter to Semenyih). The Hindu Sangam, however, reportedly refused, noting that they would not participate in the move of a still-functioning temple. But there was a strong likelihood, I was told, that in a final settlement for the temple, the Glengowrie and Semenyih temples would be consolidated in one structure on a new piece of land.

Two separate *pujas* occurred simultaneously during this festival. On the one hand, the new *pusari* of the Mariamman temple conducted prayers and *arati* (waving of the camphor flame) and led a group of *karaga*¹⁸ dancers that was performed for Mariamman in the main shrine. A procession of devotees dressed in yellow, signifying their status as pilgrims, and prayed in and around the main temple.

Another group, made up of young men dressed in red and invoking Muniandy or Madurai Viran, protector deities in Tamil villages, walked to a small clearing under a tree about one kilometer away. There they bathed in a makeshift tank of water and slowly went into a trance through the accompaniment of intense drumming. Possession came slowly and rhythmically through the rocking of the body forward and backward. In the process of falling into a trance, *cheroots* (a tightly wound cigar) were smoked, signifying the presence of the burly protector gods, and alcohol was offered to the deities. Alcohol and tobacco are not considered acceptable offerings in either the Mariamman temple or in other temples dedicated to major Hindu deities. But these protector deities accept and even sometimes require meat, liquor, and tobacco as offerings. Moreover, animal sacrifice was still commonly practiced in Malaysia to these gods. Tamils in the estate sector, particularly those of lower social status, would participate in the sacrificial feasting of goats to Muniandy, Madurai Viran, or sometimes even to a dangerous manifestation of the goddess deemed less orthodox than Mariamman has become in Malaysia (Lee and Rajoo 1987). On this occasion, no animals were sacrificed. The feasting, which was to come later, brought all members of the community together and would be vegetarian, as per the instructions of the community priest.

As Shulman cogently argues in his analysis of “bandit” heroes or guardian deities, as epitomized by the myth of Madurai Viran, there is a strong rebellious element to their cult and personage (Shulman 1985). These heroes are quintessentially transgressive, hailing from “untouchable”¹⁹ backgrounds but

seducing Brahmin daughters of nobility and exhibiting excessive sexuality and violence. In so doing they gain power from a transgression of the boundaries of purity and impurity, the laws or order and disorder, that are so rigid in South Indian life. They, in a Derridean sense, are “anarchivistic” (Derrida 1995a) harbingers of death, or a representation of the Freudian death drive, in that they destroy the world-making propensities of historicized reason (see Ram 2013). They are uncanny figures, as they reveal the ordered and ontic (e.g., the law) as illusory, and historically derived (and thus requiring the supplementary prosthesis of the archive to efface an originary violence). In that sense, the possessive power of these deities stands at the edge of reason, shattering the order of the known. In this case, as Shulman demonstrates, these demigods destructure royal and brahminical authority, pointing toward an ostensible antinomy that in reality is a permeable and transformational identity of equivalence. While for Heidegger a philosophy of Being is the essential task for thinking, in Tamil ritualism a partial “destructuring” (Heidegger 1996) occurs through the possessive violence of the divine. But the quintessential dangerous heroes, such as Madurai Viran or Muniandy, while “endowed with a perilous plenitude of power than cannot but spill over the paltry limits set by society” (Shulman 1985, 359), are also made powerful through the acts of injustice that generate divine power. The hero must usually suffer an unjust fate and a violent death, always pertaining to brahminical notions of the divinely ordered and hierarchical world (Ram 2013).

A link between the law and justice, in the Tamil context, is inextricably conjoined to notions of tragedy. Again, as Shulman explains, “The ‘tragic apotheosis’ deserves a closer look. In its simpler forms, it embodies a protest, an angry refusal to make peace with tragic loss or injustice, and at the same time, an oddly persistent faith in the accountability of the ordered world. Human tragedy is thus somehow recompensed by the victim’s translation to divinity; the painful sacrifice now borders on meaningfulness and expresses the positive action of a logical causality” (1985, 361). And while Shulman’s work pertains to the textual analysis of the folklore itself, the resonance of these key themes continues in ritual practice today. That is, just as the hero becomes powerful in the story through his tragic fate, so too his devotees, unjustly at the receiving end of society’s inequities and laws, become powerful through their victimization. Divine justice is also theirs (Ram 2013). But, paradoxically, just as the divine “bandit” hero must atone for his sin, renounce his desire (usually for the forbidden sexual fruit of the brahmin female), and accept his death willfully as a sacrifice, so too must the devotee renounce his or her transgressive desire, and even symbolically “decapitate”²⁰ it (Nabokov 2000). “The hero’s final translation to divinity requires his death in a spectacular self-sacrificing fashion,” as Shulman states (1985, 361). This dramatic “gift of death,”

as Derrida argues, not only reveals the possessive force of the Law in all of its violence, but also points to the irresolvable problem of ethics.

As Derrida argues in his analysis of the biblical sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, there is nothing more frightful than the demand of the absolute and wholly Other, God:

In both general and abstract terms, the absoluteness of duty, of responsibility, and of obligation certainly demands that one transgress ethical duty, although in betraying it one belongs to it and at the same time recognizes it. The contradiction and the paradox must be endured *in the instant itself*. The two duties must contradict one another; one must subordinate (incorporate, repress) the other. Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights . . . the absoluteness of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law (1995b, 66).

This “monstrous” or most frightful (1995b) demand for sacrifice, translated in terms of the divine bandit hero, requires a renunciation of not only desire, but also of the anarchic ethical impulse that sought to transgress, and thereby render visible the cruelties embedded within order, and the incessant hierarchy-making that supplements it. In capitulating to the demand, the divine powers that accrue come at an ethical cost: the reinscription of the Law. One might read this as an acceptance of servitude, albeit one that generates its own powerful freedom,²¹ a “cage of freedom,” as I have argued before (Willford 2006a). But, on the other hand, unlike Derrida’s Abrahamic sacrifice, which involves a terrifying demand from a wholly other Other—“God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn’t give his reasons, he acts as he intends. . . . Otherwise he wouldn’t be God, we wouldn’t be dealing with the Other as God or with God as *wholly other* [*tout autre*]” (1995b, 57)—the self-sacrificial logic of the Hindu bandit hero retains an element of calculation. Gods, demons, and humans are not wholly other, though the violence of possession might suggest otherwise. Indeed, the goddess can also figure the sublime or the “unpredictability” in which human bodies can be “overtaken by malign forces” that escape morality and reason (Ram 2013, 129). Achieving divinity, or more accurately divine power, even through the apotheosis of self-sacrifice, is calculable, and the act creates a “controlled imbalance in the cosmic reckoning; it demands recompense at a higher level” (Shulman 1985, 361). Sometimes the

gods themselves intervene to check the powers obtained by the uncouth or demonic devotee (Shulman 1980). As Shulman suggests, this sacrifice is double-edged. On the one hand, there is indeed an alignment to the “renunciatory” ethics of the king or priest, and thus a fatalism with regards to the bandit’s position in life. On the other hand, the king or the kingly order (the Law of man) is exposed by the violence experienced by the tragic hero. This paradox, I would suggest, has the power to possess contemporary subjects grappling with the looming disaster of displacement and desecration. Let us return to the ritual.

“*Om shakti*” was vigorously chanted in the heat. A few male devotees were possessed by a dangerous goddess, Kaliamma, as suggested by the eyeliner and long wigs they wore. This was not Mariamma, but rather a dangerous and unwed (and thus disorderly) manifestation of the goddess with hair strewn wildly about. Some whipped their own arms in feats of self-mortification, while others had sharp hooks inserted into their backs attached to ropes, which were then pulled from behind. A few danced with abandon while this occurred. During this god-intoxicated²² dance the entranced devotees were aggressive in posture, suggesting the potential for violence. They grabbed clubs and swords, only to be controlled by the ropes that were guiding them from behind. Much of the aggressivity was performative or self-controlled, I gathered, as nothing happened other than a display of tongues and a series of shrieks. One might say that there was a release of tension and a reversal of the everyday and all the suppression that comes with being a poor, low-status Tamil male in Malaysia.

The visible rage and masochistic pleasure of the celebration suggested a temporary collapse of the symbolic order, whereby the Tamil youth from the decidedly lower rung of the working class (among the estate dwellers) (see Sinha 2006; Willford 2006a) were drawn to this part of the ritual, as opposed to the more orthodox *pujas* going on simultaneously in the main temple a kilometer away. They had broken the bonds of the paternal order. That is, the hierarchical ordering of Hindu orthodoxy was temporarily rendered problematic and chaotic as the jurisdiction and location of immanent power was let loose in the sphere of the ritual space. Yet at the same time, the rejection was not rendered articulate, but hysteric, in Lacan’s sense, in that it identified the Other’s lack in a rage of ironic appropriation. In embodied symptoms, such as self-beating and enacting subservience, or the oscillation of exaggerated phallicism and femininity, the ordering of gendered relations was not simply rejected, but only cathartically yet hysterically re-enacted. But reducing this performance in a sweeping Lacanian gesture, as I have suggested above, is problematic in that the possessive power of the trance possession re-enacts the hero’s own self-sacrifice or rebirth of the goddess, a symbol of justice

against the patrilineal order. Self-mortification, as sacrifice, is more than irony, but rather is generative of divine power. Bearing witness to the collective power of the trance, and the transcendence of the corporeal that it achieves, is the apotheosis of the devotee's identification with the tragic hero. Achieving this identification, in turn, is an ethical act of devotion, as well as an act of transgressive religiosity vis-à-vis the more orthodox and higher-status ritual participants. Divine power was theirs.

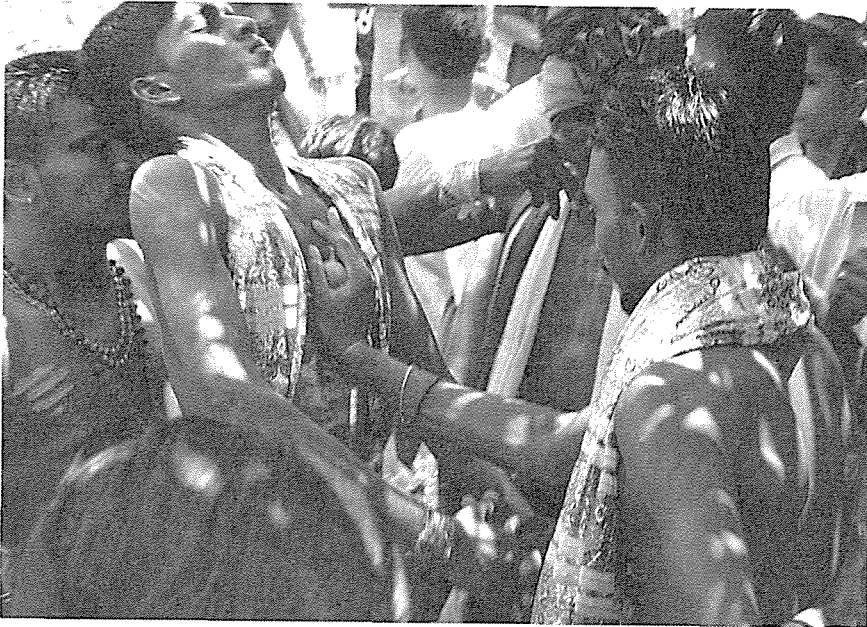
But on the other hand, a reinscription of the orthodox law occurred as the festival unfolded in time. Disordered order gave way to a reconstituting of boundaries. As the devotees processed, entranced, toward the main temple, they rejoined the pilgrims of higher status who had been conducting their own separate rituals. When the convergence occurred spatially within the temple grounds, those possessed by the guardian or hero deities, Muniandy or Madurai Viran, were sequestered to one area, away from the activities of those praying to Mariamman. Eventually, all devotees received Mariamman's blessings, but the devotees of the guardians received their blessings and *prasadam* (sanctified food) last and bowed to the higher authority invested in her and her priest. But the marginal and lower-status members of society, that is, those excluded from polite society, infused "the ordered sphere with a necessary vitality and power" (Shulman 1985, 366). For those assembled, witnessing the possessive powers of the guardian deities animated the restless and agitated call for divine justice, infinite and against the calculable terms of legal recognition that doomed Tamil plantation workers in Malaysia to a future they feared. It is not that these rituals and beliefs do not predate (indeed, Shulman's analysis takes us to classical Indian society) the sense of crisis enveloping the plantation communities, but rather that their resonance has an added urgency and political valence under the shadow of an accelerated and racialized form of developmentalism.

In a broader and political context, the ritual intensity increased in recent years, I was told, given the specter of displacement that loomed on the horizon. More and more former estate workers would converge in the estates for festivals, given that many were now living outside the plantations. Evictions, retrenchments, and voluntary migrations had dramatically lowered the Tamil presence within many estates. But all the same, the symbolic importance of temples and shrines, particularly at festival times, had become more significant. Perhaps paradoxically, the focus on festivals and temples as key symbols for the Tamil plight had unleashed a logic similar to that of the tragic hero outlined above. That is, not only were the Tamils increasingly indentifying themselves as victims in search of redress through divine means, but the shrines themselves were increasingly at risk of being desecrated by development. The violence against the hero and/or the goddess, in this case the de-

molitions of shrines and temples, became an impetus for the possessive and assertive regeneration of sacred power against this force of the Law, a point we will return to several times. Indeed, this is a strong motivating factor behind the Hindraf movement and its attempt to both archive and protect the Tamil sacred landscape in Malaysia (see chapter 10). At the same time, the very possessive and agitated force that drives this desire for archiving victimhood is also a force of divine destruction, vengeance, and justice beyond calculation. The longing for divine justice is a step away from the politics of recognition, the archive, and hopeful futurity, in that sense. But rather, against calculability, divine justice deconstructs the Law itself by revealing its inherent violence. Madurai Viran or Kali Amman exposes a core of violence at the heart of the Law. Like "phantom limbs," the presence of these demigods "that inhabit the Tamil landscape mark the vital presence of injustices that will not fade" (Ram 2013: 105). On the other hand, ironically, the renunciatory power of a higher and perhaps more incomprehensible Law uncannily returns with the hero's self-sacrifice. The devotee's sacrifice or enactment of servitude achieves a certain power, but in recognition of a transcendent order that encompasses his or her acts of challenging the order.

In addition to the locals from the estate who had attended, many of the 150 or so attendees were outsiders who had returned "home" for the festival. That is, I was told that the festival was an annual homecoming that afforded a chance to reconnect with friends and family still in the estate, as well as to celebrate a spiritual bond with the temple and landscape that existed in the memories of those who left. It was a working day for many, I was told, as otherwise there would have been many more people attending. Most of the school kids, for instance, came in uniform as they returned home from the local Tamil school.

Observing the ritual dances and drumming, I saw several instances of spontaneous trance. Those who were observing dancers already in a trance, and listening to the intense and resonant drums in the midday heat, were especially prone to fall into a trance themselves. The infectious nature of trance, especially in the estate context, was a marker of community trust as well as a siren call to divine justice among those experiencing the anxieties over an uncertain future. But it was also a testament to the overwhelming and contagious sensations experienced before the presence of these "dangerous" deities and the disorder they represent. That there was great comfort and safety felt among members of the greater estate community, past and present, and that this was felt during the pilgrimage atmosphere of the annual festival, was apparently conducive to making trance communicable and infectious. But against a *communitas* understanding of trance, whereby hierarchies are merely leveled during a liminal period, what unfolded was an agitated, aggressive,



Falling into a trance, Semenyih Estate Festival



Procession to temple, Semenyih Estate Festival



Devotee possessed by goddess, Semenyih Estate Festival

and restless yearning for recompense through the divine presence. The hysteria, to employ the loaded Freudian and Lacanian term, behind the possession appeared quite palpable, but the politics behind the hysteria (as all desire, in Lacan's terms, is found in the discourse of the Other, and thus hysteria is a social and political symptom) was located in the recognition of the Law's ultimate lack, in this case the refused reciprocity of the Tamil laborer.

One man who had left ten years earlier came back and explained that he attended each and every year. Another woman said, "We feel very good to come back and celebrate together. We used to live here as *all Indians together*. At that time we celebrated Ponggol without any difficulty because we are all Indians living together. In the *taman* (township), we worry the Malays won't be happy with our celebrations, and we can't have this. In the *taman*, life is stressful and noisy. Here it is peaceful and calm and we are happy. We send our children to this Tamil school, where we were educated and where our parents were educated." She indicated with a gesture pointing to the estate school, which was still functioning but which also faced an uncertain future.

Here we witness a nostalgia for the estate lifestyle, which had been left ten years earlier. This nostalgia, too, must have driven much of the anxiety that we heard in the voices of those now facing the prospects of life in the *taman*.

Throughout this chapter we have heard this anxiety expressed in terms of a preference for the peaceful and ordered life of the estate. Moreover, the theme of Indian exclusivity, versus living alongside Malays, in particular seemed a recurring motif. That Tamils would begin to fear living outside the mono-ethnic environment is a concern that I will continue to address in subsequent chapters. Principally, we are led to ask whether this fear was born out of a general ignorance of the Other caused by the relative isolation of plantation life. Or, as I have intimated in this chapter, was the understanding of the Other, and indeed the polarizing of sentiment that seemed to have emerged, due to particular political and economic conditions (and policies) that affected the pace and intensity of interethnic interactions?

4 Tapping Memories

Plantations Are Not a Workplace

This chapter focuses on a growing sense of victimization among Tamils. We witness how a sense of community, nostalgically formed in the shadow of the Other and framed in the terms of victimhood, seeks to reconstitute itself through a struggle for compensation. Methods of civil disobedience, aided by NGO activists and legal counsel, are witnessed in some cases. But given the choice of employment elsewhere, cash, and/or the preservation of “community” through collective relocation, groups and individuals will be seen to often act against utilitarian interests. The chapter concludes with the case of a Tamil “mystic” in a plantation. We see through his story of spiritual transcendence the gradual interpolation of ethnic politics into the lives of plantation workers, as well as the important role that religion plays in mediating politics.

Batang Bertunjai and Sinnapan

Paul Sinnapan greeted me warmly and said he had heard about our “group,” which I believed he mistook to be an international NGO. A gregarious man, articulate in English and Tamil, Paul was the head of the Peoples Cooperative Credit Society in Batang Berjuntai, a district of Kuala Selangor. This part of Selangor was formerly dedicated to plantation cultivation. Paul and his support staff occupied three desks in a clean, air-conditioned building. A young Tamil woman busily answered phones and did paperwork, while a more senior staff member also answered phones and collected materials, which were being shown to me about the cooperative activities and assets.

Though youthful in appearance, Sinnapan had to be in his fifties based on the life experiences he described. Sinnapan was Catholic but was raised to be

“tolerant of other religions,” and he pointed out that the cooperative was “nonsectarian.” He explained that as a student in secondary school he began to question the disparities he noticed around him. First, he noticed the homes and other privileges that the estate managers enjoyed compared to the laborers. He also noticed the “difficulties” faced by families who “struggled to survive.” He and his friends began to organize and teach workers about their rights and to explain the teaching of “reformers and socialists.”

Sinnapan, under the influence and scholarship of Jesuits, went to the Philippines to further his studies. There he became interested in liberation theology. The Jesuits taught him the grassroots methods of credit union cooperatives, and in May 1969, in the wake of Malaysia’s worst-ever race riots, he helped form the Peoples Cooperative Credit Society. They had engaged in numerous projects of education, local finance, scholarships, and sometimes outright protest. They had forty ongoing projects at that time that were distributed primarily among plantation and factory workers, but also among squatters and Orang Asli (indigenous groups). They were involved in community training and worker education, and they also addressed issues of “gender and development.” He said they eschewed any particular ideology in favor of working from within the values of the community. He specifically singled out “radical feminism” as “impossible” in Indian contexts. Rather, he spoke of the need to recognize “Indian values.” Similarly, when concerning religion, though his missionary friends disagreed, he thought conversion was a mistake and even prescribed traditional *amma*, or “goddess worship,”¹ as a social and cultural good for the community. In 1985, he founded the People Service Organization, a free legal aid center. It helped displaced or soon-to-be displaced laborers fight for compensation.

Regarding the sale of estates and retrenchment of workers, his group worked with the coalition that included the previously mentioned CDC and other NGOs. Within plantations and within the private sector, they had mobilized on the issue of monthly wages and fair compensation. Sinnapan often criticized the NUPW for not fighting harder for workers, and he claimed they were “bought off” by developers (a charge we also heard earlier). He mentioned that since housing allocation was state controlled, the laborers had little recourse, as “Indians,” to obtain housing land when estates were sold. Rather, he said the workers were often given an ultimatum: “Transfer or leave.” An allowance for future housing, when it was available, was often based upon a scheme in which a deduction from the worker’s salary was collected monthly. We witnessed this method of “compensation” and transfer in several instances in the previous chapter. One grievance was, as we will recall, that deductions for promised future housing were, at the time of eviction, used for low-cost flats, not for ground-floor terrace housing, much to the

workers’ chagrin. A sense of betrayal was often expressed as a result of this bait and switch.

Sinnapan said that Indians were fast being replaced in the estates by Indonesians, the same story we had heard from numerous estate residents themselves. Most Indians were struggling to find work in factories and to obtain housing, preferably together with their estate community. The cooperative, working with the legal rights NGOs, had, as he put it, “A three-pronged approach. First, need is determined. How much credit does the individual need; how much have they saved; what was their Employee Provident Fund (EPF)² status? Second, what are their legal rights? Third, what alternative buildings (for housing) can become available? In some cases, the cooperative, working with a community, can obtain, in bulk, a series of low-cost houses, insuring that some of the community is maintained.” This final point was important, as it underscored that compensation struggles required thinking about community as opposed to being conceptualized solely through the logic of individual property rights.³

Sinnapan suggested—and I heard this repeated by many other laborers fighting for housing and monetary compensation—that they would reject financial compensation or alternative housing if it meant rupturing the social fabric of the community. That is, plantation communities conceived of compensation in communal terms, in many instances rejecting individual settlements or arrangements that would disperse the community. While worker rights were individual, in a legal sense, compensation struggles, I found, were framed in terms of community. In a calculative sense, the law dealt explicitly with the minutiae and the computation of formulas. These were written into law and applied to individual worker entitlements. But compensation, as we have seen, exceeded the legal definition of the worker subject and focused on abstractions of community, as linked to notions of incalculable and inalienable justice, oftentimes linked to sacred power. In cases where the dispersal of community was unavoidable, I observed the ever-greater significance attached to focal signs of community, particularly temples and to a lesser extent schools. That is, when it was not possible to retain a community, the temple or school came to metonymize it, becoming a focal point in the struggle once the battle for housing had been resolved. We already touched on this incalculable aspect of communal sacred power at the conclusion of chapter 3, and this chapter will further examine this point.

With regards to education and workshops, Sinnapan explained that when youths were given responsibility, they responded well. The cooperative specifically brought in youths that were involved with gangs in order to empower them and give them a sense of responsibility. Gangster crime, most commonly the collection of protection money in the schools, was a problem in the squat-

ter and low-cost housing areas. When I asked if the gang leaders could speak of the perils of gang life to the youth, he said they often did “warn the young” at these workshops.

Sinnapan showed me numerous academic papers he had written on the economic challenges facing the workers. He also displayed the educational materials and newsletters their organization used to inform workers of their rights. Moreover, the pamphlets and materials often suggested that the political system was riddled with corruption and collusion between politicians and developers. The papers also highlighted broken promises made by developers, agencies of the government, and estate management. For an organization that was nonsectarian and, he also stated, not aligned with any political party, it was explicitly critical of the political process. Moreover, it appeared to align with Parti Socialis Malaysia,⁴ at that time an unregistered political party.

Sinnapan mentioned that there were 9,300 Indian rubber tappers left in Malaysia, down, he claimed, from more than 100,000 at its zenith. He further explained that the perimeter lands around the estate were reserved for Malays through the Malay Land Reservation Act.⁵ Thus Malays could work inside a plantation, but live outside on their own property. Most Indians did not have that luxury.

Twice, once in 2004 and again in 2005, Naga, myself, and Sinnapan took a drive out of town to see the principal estates left in the area. Formerly under Socfin, a French company, these plantations were formerly rubber, but had recently been converted to oil palm. A few rubber trees could still be seen, but even fewer were still producing latex. Driving past a man-made lake, we entered a bumpy paved road. We stopped at a tollbooth, which, Sinnapan said, was to keep a record of those leaving and entering, particularly so as to “control the activists” and their activities. He joked, “If there is a strike tomorrow, they know it was me.” The first estate we came to was very large, possessing a large Tamil school, at least two temples, one for Murugan and one for Mariamman, as well as a Muniandy shrine, a protector deity for villages, and several rows of both staff housing, which resembled the terrace housing seen in townships. Finally, there were several lines of worker houses. We drove around the estate and saw school buses dropping off secondary school children who went to the town (Batang Berjuntai) for school. The second plantation along the same dirt road was primarily occupied by Indonesians. There were only seven Indian families left living there. The school only housed five Tamil children, though the structure could easily accommodate sixty. The estates had well-manicured recreational sport fields, in addition to green schoolyards. It was clear that maintenance of these facilities would engender some cost, and thus replacement of the Tamil workforce by an itinerant foreign workforce would be economical. Indonesian workers were generally

young, single males. Schools or recreational fields were not required for this workforce as they had been for the self-reproducing and family-based, inter-generational Tamil labor force.

The large first estate we toured also had two rows of shophouses, selling various household provisions and groceries, and appeared to be a self-contained town. The worker housing, made of plaster, cement, and wood, appeared solid. Some of the homes were well maintained, while others were full of holes and dilapidated, and still others were abandoned. One did not see socializing between the Indonesians and Tamil residents. Many children, especially the younger ones, ran around barefoot, and many elderly women could be seen keeping a close eye on them.

Sinnapan described his experiences growing up in one of the estates we toured. He mentioned the hardships one faced in cutting palm fruit. Evidently, one had to collect any fruit that had fallen into the gorges and valleys. This area was particularly hilly, with steep, fifty- to one-hundred-foot climbs in some places. Without trails, and with the ever-present threat of snakebite, collecting the fruit was arduous and risky. He had married a girl in an adjoining estate he had met when visiting it during his activist youth days. They had fallen for each other, he chuckled, calling it “estate love.” This, of course, was more than humor. It pointed to the density of social life within and between estates. These were not merely places of employment, they were communities interconnected by love, marriage, and a religious landscape.

While many in the community had dispersed, Sinnapan spoke of the festivals that brought all back to the estates during annual celebrations. Mentioning Thaipusam, he said that processions between neighboring temples were common. Visiting with one family in Nigel Gardiner Estate in 2005 together with Sinnapan and Naga, I spoke with the matriarch and her family about the future that loomed. She, a seventy-year-old woman living in a two-bedroom house with her children and grandchildren, underscored the importance of returning to the temple during the festival times. Though many families had already left the estate and retrenchment had already occurred, the necessity of celebrating “Thaipusam” and other important festivals in the estate temple were paramount. She said this was especially important given that she could not know “how to know the future.” And while she expressed anxiety about the life of the “*taman*” (township), as compared to the peaceful life of the estate, she mentioned that returning youths at festival time who now lived in the *taman* often caused “gang fights” during festivals, bringing a new and undesirable outside element into the estate. In short, estate life had already irrevocably changed. But this family told me that their biggest problem was practical: how to obtain housing. This required that they stay put in the estate, despite the decline in living standards being witnessed all around

and despite the disintegration of the estate's social fabric, the result of which was that youths had no direction, supervision, or discipline. This fabric, this family maintained, had been derived from organized sports, schools, and temple- and church-related activities.

Though the festivals were important attempts to reconstitute what was being lost, these too were also being altered by these disintegrative forces. Still, this family told me that they liked living in the estate and enjoyed the Thaipusam festival, when their kin returned to the estate to celebrate together. Moreover, the family had remodeled their home, extending the kitchen in order to carve out a third bedroom. They had also created a "wet kitchen" (for frying) outside their kitchen. There were lots of vegetables and herbs, as well as flowers planted around the house—luxuries they would miss if forced to move to a low-cost flat. But the commute to work must have been inconvenient for the older son at this point. This particular estate was far from convenient connecting highways or towns, making the residents materially poor in comparison with estates closer to major roads and towns. The overall condition of many of the estate houses, the way people dressed, and the physical condition of the people I met in the Batang Berjuntai Estates appeared less robust and more severely touched by poverty than in other areas.

The displacement of Indian labor, as in the case of other plantations, was affected by economic considerations. Sinnapan explained:

Youths end up in squatter areas when they find no more work in estates . . . disintegration is due to the gradual unplanned nature of movement out of the estates. Loans are hard to get, and our microcredit is there for education, but not for business. The management is allowing conditions to deteriorate so that people will move out. This is so that they will have fewer houses to provide in any final settlement. Also the Berjaya Group (management) has no long-term plan to maintain the estates, but rather are stalling other developments in light of business. First the crisis of '97–98 affected the pace of development, and second, palm oil is doing fairly well in the global market (this is due to biofuel demand). So the workers were asked to stay on for now. But this staying on is halfhearted from the management's perspective, because they did not mind if Indian labor left. Contract labor from Indonesia is cheaper. And so when the Indian moves out of the estates this is just less compensation in housing that must later be arranged by the developer, not to mention, less complication when the estates finally end production.

In this statement we witness a cold, hard, economic assessment of the Tamil worker's plight. The alienation and dispossession of Indian labor ultimately

had economic ends, which in turn were shaped by the contingencies of the global economy. This repeated patterns that had occurred earlier in the twentieth century (Stenson 1980; Jomo 1986) in which retrenchment and even repatriation occurred over the global price of latex. Here we see little of the sense of moral betrayal or outrage that we witnessed in the accounts of others, a rationalization enabled by Sinnapan's training in sociology and economics.

I was struck by the scope of organized microcredit activity Sinnapan's cooperative agency had been involved with in the area. The results of his work, though hard to assess objectively, were hinted at in the writings of Jain (2000), who pointed to some success stories coming out of these plantations most affected by the cooperatives. When meeting Sinnapan, however, I was also struck by the sense of inevitable suffering that he sensed awaited the estate workers in the future, despite all of the combined efforts of NGOs, activists, and cooperatives. The large social transformations that lay ahead, and that were already under way, would be difficult for the Tamil community to weather. It was a sense of urgency, partial dread, and hopeful earnestness that exuded from a driven individual. That he worked tirelessly for a goal that he knew was just kept Sinnapan youthful, inspired, and indeed hopeful, despite the mounting challenges he anticipated.

When we met Sinnapan in Batang Berjuntai again in 2005, he repeated several of the themes from the previous year, but he was also more direct or pointed in his critique of current predicaments. He complained of problems facing youths today as they left the estate life behind, which led to the "disintegration" of community life. This, of course, had a lot to do with the search for employment, once retrenchment and outsourcing of labor had begun to take effect. His microcredit cooperative attempted to mitigate this transition by offering small loans for business and education. But this was never enough. And as loans were difficult to obtain, the problem of outward migration to cities and away from local communities was acute.

While touring the surrounding estates again, we stopped to see a large new mosque outside Nigel Gardner Estate. The mosque was labeled "Kg. (short for Kampung) Gardner Masjid." Sinnapan made it a point to show this to me, and he mentioned that there was no *kampung melayu* (Malay village) in the vicinity. The building of the mosque and the labeling of it was with the future in mind. Clearly, as he explained it, as the estate was terminated, a new housing estate (*taman*) would be built that would include a high percentage of Malays. The sparkling new mosque would serve the needs of this planned community. Ironically, the hundred-year-old temples that served the estate community of Nigel Gardner for the same period would likely not endure this transformation of land use. In this sense, the transformation of

land use was also an ethno-religious transformation of the landscape, its historical memory, and its future orientation. Those, like Sinnapan, who grew up shuttling between the estates of Batang Berjuntai, found this troubling to say the least. Here his rational and economic reading of development met its limits. No, this was not just about profits; it was about the violence of the nation, and at its core a project of ethnic land transformation, coupled with a concomitant erasure of a prior history of settlement.

Paul Sinnapan, though a poor child from the estate himself, received a scholarship to study at a Catholic university in the Philippines. He then received another scholarship from the University of Nova Scotia, followed by another fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He “has been appointed as a consultant on microcredit cooperatives in the Southeast Asia region.” He also “advised on rural development issues in Sri Lanka, India, Burma, Nepal, and Bangladesh.” In 2005, Sinnapan was fifty-six and told me he was “semi-retired” for “health reasons.” Still, he appeared youthful, and when I told him that, he said it is “because I live a life serving the people.” I asked him why he did not join a large international NGO or agency. He replied that he did not like “international agencies” for their “wastage of money in conferences,” and that he prefers “living simple.” He described attending one conference overseas in a five-star hotel. It seems he became so uncomfortable in his “luxury room” that he left it and found some friends staying together across town in a cramped space and preferred to sleep on the floor with them.

This brief account of Paul Sinnapan is interesting for several reasons. For one thing, the strategies he deployed appeared to have borne fruit. Though it is not clear that legal rights were enhanced by his activities, microcredit had enabled individuals and communities to transition as they faced termination of their labor. Related, the notion that communities sought resettlement as communities, and saw their compensation in communal terms, is reiterated by Sinnapan. Sinnapan’s story demonstrates that the logic and success of the cooperative culture is premised upon a collective sense of justice, one in which compensation is never merely financial but is recognized in terms of community preservation. Moreover, his diagnoses of the Tamil community’s plight was particularly interesting given that he came from the inside out, so to speak, as someone born and raised in the plantation and its culture. In that sense, his remarkable success made him an exception among plantation Tamils.

Sinnapan’s unassailable optimism and ecumenism were fueled by his religious faith as well as by convictions guided by progressive politics. Yet we also witness through him a creeping sense of the law’s violence. That he was “tolerant” suggests his growing sense of intolerance. And the planned dispos-

session of Tamils for political reasons as opposed to his academic and economic interpretations suggested a growing sense of the arbitrary and the unreasonable in Malaysia. That a new mosque, obviously intended for a new Malay-dominated housing estate, labeled itself with the very name of the plantation it was erasing, resignifying it as a “*kampung*,” only underscored the ways in which “archive fever” (Derrida 1995a) supplements or effaces an originary violence at the heart of the Law. That is to suggest that further acts of historical revisionism (in the name of the imagined Malay community) would inevitably follow. Finally, Sinnapan’s discomfort with luxury suggested an ambivalence surrounding his own success, particularly in the ethnicized environment in which he operated. His identification with and efforts on behalf of the Tamil poor allowed him to “live simple,” not corrupted by the system he found himself necessarily living within.

Taman Ladang Glenmarie

Though it was uncommon, one could find housing estates where former plantation communities had been resettled together. As we have seen, this is what most communities aspired to in their compensation struggles. In some lucky cases, this housing lay near or adjacent to the plantation lands where they had once lived, allowing them to preserve not only a semblance of community life, but the actual temple, school, church, and marriage halls where many of the poignant memories of family and community life were made. Taman Ladang Glenmarie, in Shah Alam, was one such settlement. This particular housing estate was well connected to major roads that traveled between Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam, and thus made it easy for residents to commute to jobs in nearby factories.

The housing itself was initially built in the 1980s and finished in the latter part of the decade. The original plantation that surrounded the housing was terminated, with labor retrenched, in 1983. It was owned by Harrison and Crossfields, a British firm, but was bought by a local Malaysian Chinese owner in 1962. Until its closure, it was managed and owned by the local owner and management. After closure, the residents fought for housing, the school, and the temple. They resided in temporary “longhouses”⁶ for some time as they negotiated with management. After a period of negotiation, 121 houses were offered, though 126 were actually needed, so not everyone received a home. In this instance, the MIC and NUPW stood united with the workers in their fight. The state government, I was told, wanted to impose a standard NEP quota in the housing settlement, reserving 30 percent for Malays, although only one Malay family had lived in the plantation. Here, however, the quota was not met, and common sense prevailed. On the other hand, six

Chinese families did live in the estate, and these six ended up living next to one another in the new *taman*.

I met with the former NUPW branch leader for the plantation who had helped negotiate this settlement. He himself had settled in the estate, and due to his position in the union had earned a corner lot in the *taman*, which was desirable for its larger yard. He, in his mid-sixties, spoke first of the plight of those today who were not being offered a settlement similar to his community's. Referring to the nearby Bukit Jelutong case (discussed in chapter 3), he said, "People are pushed here and there like dogs, no? (*nay, illaiya?*). Once they are pushed into Bukit Subang [a squatter area], then when that land is wanted, they will be forced to move again."

The houses in the *taman* were purchased for twenty-five thousand ringgit. In the mid-1980s, this was considered a fairly substantial sum for low-cost housing and reflected speculation that this would become prime land. Terrace homes in Shah Alam were generally selling between 300,000 to 750,000 Malaysian ringgit (approximately US\$75,000 to 200,000 in the mid-2000s), if they were not considered low-cost housing. The dwellings in Taman Ladang Glenmarie, while clearly not modern middle-class homes, were a step above the low-cost houses that were built, for example, in the oft-cited Braemer settlement. In the case of the NUPW chairman, his house had three rooms, a shrine in the driveway dedicated to Muniandy, and a small yard. Though simple, it looked like a typical Malaysian terrace-style house in all respects. He lived together with his children in reasonable comfort, by his own estimation.

The branch chairman reflected on estate life, offering this observation: "Life was at its happiest when we lived in the estate. Now we have to get up early and take a bus at seven and return at night by seven. Before, the day would finish at 2 P.M. and we had plenty of time for socializing." Though his settlement and housing were essentially what all the current compensation struggles strove to achieve, he was still nostalgic for the life of a plantation worker or, at the very least, of living in the plantation. As in other cases I encountered, the themes of simplicity, a life without the hustle of the commute, and the freedom of open afternoons and evenings in the tranquil and lush surroundings of a plantation seemed to overshadow memories of hard labor, work injuries, low pay, and anxiety about job security, given the gradual retrenchment of plantation workers.

He then excitedly told me about the planning of a temple for the *taman* that would replace the current temple that existed there. They had plans, he insisted, for a "beautiful temple," and he proclaimed that "construction is ready." But the "Selangor state government has not given [*sic*] permit. We hope permission comes next month." Naga thought that perhaps the permit

would be issued from the Shah Alam Town Council rather than the state government, but he concluded that these entities were certainly merged in his mind. In a material and bureaucratic sense, these entities were overlapping, though the town councils had jurisdiction over much town planning. On the other hand, temples were increasingly falling under state jurisdiction, leading to the confusion expressed here.

Regardless of the highly ethnicized nature of Shah Alam, particularly in the town-planning realm, where it was explicit (Nagarajan 2004; Bunnell 2004; Kahn 2006), the former NUPW chairman had a warmer appreciation of Malays than he did of the Chinese, his former employers and with whom he successfully negotiated this settlement. He maintained that "the Malays are more respectful than the Chinese. [I] would rather have Malay boss than Chinese [*sic*]." Perhaps, ironically, the Malay bosses of the government-linked companies (GLCs), or PNB (Permodalan Nasional Berhad),⁷ estates were offering generally less in their settlements with workers (Nagarajan 2004). In this case, the Malaysian Chinese management allowed this particular *taman* to be built with a predominantly Indian demographic, made up exclusively of the former plantation workers. Moreover, the original school and temple were also saved and upgraded. In effect, the community remained intact and *in situ*, merely moving from labor line houses and into terrace houses built where the old housing lines had previously been. Their relationship with the land, its temple, and its school remained intact, though most of the plantation trees were removed.

When I asked him about social problems, particularly new challenges faced by those who moved out of the plantation and into the housing estate, he replied, "There are not much problems here. There are a few troublemakers, but mostly very small things. Before, when we first moved, there were more problems because the young were unemployed. Once they had found jobs things improved."

In contrast to their relative ease of adjustment, those in flats, particularly those from Bukit Jelutong who had been sent to Bukit Subang flats, "are having problems. They are far away and poorly built. There are problems in some heavily Indian *kampung*s (squatter areas), too, but not here."

Comparing past largesse with present difficulties faced by those being retrenched, he seemed to place some of the blame on the shifting attitudes within the MIC. The current leaders are not doing as much for the workers as were the earlier leaders: "In those days, the MIC, especially [Dato] Kanthan [a leader in the 1970s], was very helpful to the workers." In a sudden shift, he commented on the purported "lazy" nature of Malays, and thus why Indians were necessary for estate work to begin with, and in turn why foreigners were still recruited today. He claimed that "Malays can't do heavy estate

work . . . *mudiyatu* (impossible). Lazy! (*sombaeri!*)” The reiteration of this colonial-era stereotype, I should add, was not uncommon. This was a ubiquitous refrain, suggesting the extent to which at least one generation of workers was indoctrinated in the racializing politics of the plural economy.

Conversation turned to the process of obtaining loans to purchase the homes in the 1980s, when at that time the former laborers had few assets and the price of twenty-five thousand ringgit was not inconsequential for most families. He said that it was indeed difficult to obtain loans but that the MIC and NUPW were helpful in getting the bank to approve loans for families. In contrast, in the mid-2000s it was not easy for estate workers to qualify for loans to purchase homes for seventy-five to one hundred thousand ringgit, which allowing for inflation might be the approximate analogue. More broadly, in looking at compensation struggles elsewhere, I did not encounter home loan programs for home purchases being underwritten or sponsored by the NUPW or MIC.⁸ Rather, the more common scenario, as we have seen, was the offer of low-cost flats, which were negotiated at a “discounted” rate through the assistance of the union and party representatives.

Walking through the neighborhood, one could perceive a sense of a continuity within the community. Some houses had been renovated, with new windows, gates, covered parking, and facades. Gardens were more extensive in some than in others, but all houses had some room for small gardens, continuing the practice from estate life of small subsistence farming.⁹ The neighborhood was distinctively “Indian” and Hindu in orientation as marked by the small Hindu shrines in most of the home’s driveways, as well as the pictures hanging in their doorways of one of the main deities, either Ganesha (Vinayagar) or the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. I witnessed a vibrant social life in the streets, with neighbors engaging in conversation in the road, similar to what one might have seen in plantations. This differed from the relative isolation one might see in more ethnically mixed *tamans*, particularly closer to urban areas. This place, on the other hand, was quiet, with little traffic, and was surrounded by considerable green foliage, adding to the tranquil atmosphere.

The residents here, in sum, were sheltered from the more abrupt and traumatizing displacement that other retrenched plantation workers experienced. In a sense, they were able to make judgments about the relative beauty of their current lives, as compared to what was once theirs or what was suffered by others (e.g., Bukit Jelutong). They could hope for the future, noting that their past was not an experience of betrayal, shattered hopes, and destruction. Rather, they had built on the past to imagine a future that was explicable, not the sublime shard of incommensurability that was witnessed in other shrines attesting to the *mysterium* of sacred power and immanence in para-

doxical ruin. We may illustrate by recalling the frenetic intensity of the ritual that concluded chapter 3. And more will come in subsequent chapters on this theme of transcendent power at the moment of horrific destruction. In the case of this *taman*, the community’s plans to build a new temple on the old seemed organic and hopeful; the aesthetics, memories, fabric of sociality, and icons of community remained intact, though they were made more complicated by changes in the economic modes of production.

Across the road a new *taman* catering to Malays had recently sprung up. There the homes were comparatively expensive, ranging from three to four hundred thousand ringgit. The shops and restaurants across the road were accordingly aimed at the Malay and Muslim clientele with their growing purchasing power. Even the ubiquitous “Indian” restaurant was a “*mamak*” shop (Indian Muslim, and thus *halal*) catering mainly to Malays. There was a large *masjid* nearby, adding to the several newly built ones in Shah Alam. Shah Alam was said by government officials to be a “smart, Malay and Islamic city.” Although it was built on the lands once occupied by plantation workers, it had little place for the symbolic artifacts of this past on the newly crafted Islamic landscape. The newly arriving middle-class Malay residents that were finding employment through the NEP-aided bureaucratic structures created by the government, and profiting from lower-interest loans and university quotas, were not interested in the lived histories of this land. Soon the Indian *taman* that was the remains of Ladang Glenmarie would be surrounded by a burgeoning settlement of middle-class housing. Given the property boom and expansion of Shah Alam, the current neighborhood would look increasingly odd and anachronistic in the hyper-modern and Islamic smart city. But the residents of Ladang Glenmarie were lucky to have negotiated for housing just prior to the rapid expansion of Shah Alam. This partly explains why the residents of Bukit Jelutong were given a harsher deal than was this community two decades earlier.

Bukit Tinggi Estate

In October 2001, Guthrie retrenched the final forty-nine workers in Bukit Tinggi Estate, in the city limits of Klang. They subsequently ordered the eviction of the families from their plantation homes. Compensation as stipulated by labor laws was settled. In addition, the NUPW, the Labor Department, state executive councilor Sivalingam, local MIC assemblywoman Kamala Ganapathy, and Selangor chief minister Dr. Mohamad Khir Toyo met to negotiate additional compensation payments for the retrenched workers for the loss of their housing (Nagarajan 2004, 162). Initially, out of this negotiation, Guthrie offered a subsidy of 7,000 ringgit to be put toward the

purchase of low-cost flats located about twenty kilometers from the estate, which were priced at 42,000 ringgit. They also offered additional “gratuity” payments of 250 ringgit for each year of service. While some accepted, many did not and chose to fight for free housing on the grounds that the profits that Guthrie stood to make on the sale of the estate to the property developer, Harum Intisari, made their compensation package seem penurious at best. Despite efforts over a two-year period to evict the workers, those who stayed fought tooth and nail by blockading all access paths to the section of the estate where construction was being carried out. By bringing construction to a standstill, the workers forced the developer to eventually see the necessity of settling the dispute with the workers. The developer offered free flats to the remaining twenty-nine families and eight individuals, and it offered 19,000 ringgit per family for relocation costs and rent for two years until the flats were ready for occupation. This was a major victory for those who had resisted their evictions, though they had initially sought terrace houses. Still, it was undeniable that their refusal—in the wake of police and “thug” harassment, threats of arrest, and being told by their own elected MIC officials that their demands would lead to nothing (Nagarajan 2004)—had produced a dramatic reversal of fortunes. In addition to the free housing, the residents were given a brand new Tamil school as well as land for the relocation of its temples.

The impetus to settlement in this case, as in many out-of-court settlements elsewhere, came with the realization by management that with each passing day of stalled project development came the risks of damaging losses in profits. In this case, the luxury housing being built in the area was not only going to make Guthrie a huge profit,¹⁰ but also a profit for its sales partner, Harum Intisari, who in turn would develop Ampan Botanic, an up-market housing community.

Adjacent to the plantation, across a main road, part of the former Bukit Tinggi Estate had been sold to another developer, Gemilang Waras, which took over from Guthrie in 2000. Gemilang Waras discovered that cattle were being raised on the land it had purchased and sought to prevent this by posting notices and eventually by placing barbed wire around their construction sites. They went as far as breaking down the cattle sheds that housed dozens of cows. These cows were an important source of milk for the estate community, and raising cattle had traditionally been a part of estate life, particularly in Bukit Tinggi. By 2000 the livestock in this estate alone numbered close to 700, with 150 goats as well. After retrenchment, no provision had been made regarding the cattle operation, which had become a critical part of their local economy and diet. The cattle rearers, for their part, felt entitled to use the land for cattle rearing, regardless of the legal status of the land. As a result of this continued use, the cattle sheds were torn down by Gemilang

Waras and subsequently rebuilt by the cattle rearers, with some loss of livestock. Trees and foliage on the land were cleared, leaving a barren landscape that also reduced grazing land for the cows.

The cattle rearers confronted the developers, and vice versa, which led to several tense standoffs. According to Nagarajan (2004, 167), there were more than a hundred police reports filed by the two contesting parties. The cattle rearers were arrested, but not deterred. The cattlemen claimed they were subjected to abuse from the developers and from the police, who purportedly sided with the developers and who demeaned the cattlemen in lockup with “vulgar and racist remarks” (Nagarajan 2004, 268).

This case involved resistance in the face of intimidation and coercive force. In the end, after many years of constant struggle, the developer settled with the former residents of Bukit Tinggi Estate and provided low-cost housing, saved the Tamil school, and offered land for a temple. Those who were still technically “squatting” were raising cattle on the land, as they had done for generations. At one point in their postretrenchment struggle, there were three hundred cattle housed in a shed, which provided a good income in daily milk deliveries to local housing estates.

We met with two of the cattlemen. They were rough and tumble and had not shaved recently, and they had weathered a few fights against so-called gangsters hired by the developers to drive them out. The police had repeatedly arrested these men for trespassing. Upon demolition of these men’s former homes and retrenchment of their plantation employment, these lands, which were originally given as unused land at the fringes of the plantations, were claimed by the developer as private property, and thus also had to be vacated. The cattlemen, on the other hand, maintained that this land lay outside of estate boundaries, was fringe land that went unused, and therefore could continue to be used by the simple right of “continued use.” We witnessed a similar argument about such “fringes” in the Bukit Raja case in chapter 3. Indeed, the men maintained, “*if we were Malays*, we would have been given land.”¹¹ Their perception of an ethnic dimension to land allocation was acute. Still, after being threatened with one year of jail time, fines of up to ten thousand ringgit, and threats of violence from “gangsters,” they still fought on, hoping that their cattle shed would be relocated, as this was their only source of livelihood.

As mentioned above, twenty-nine families and eight individuals were given housing in a rare “victory.” They marched, blocked access points for tractors and bulldozers, and even nonviolently withstood police pressure. The developer, in turn, hired “gangsters,” they claimed, to chase them out with threats of violence. Those who persevered were finally given housing in a nearby low-cost flat. The lesson, while not setting any legal precedent, was that effective

strategies that stall projects primed to make large profits, particularly when large investments have already been made, are more likely to meet with success in bringing reluctant developers to the negotiating table. In this case, the compensation they knew they should be getting far exceeded what was stipulated by the letter of the law. They knew this through the speculative worth of the land after development, which all but promised to reap huge profits for the developers. Indeed, the fact that compensation was calculated on the real estate value of the land and not on its speculative value, whereas the impetus to buy and develop the lands was premised on the speculative value of said lands, was increasingly not lost on the dislocated and disenfranchised plantation workers.¹²

In this case, they recognized the value of the land—which they had imbued with the value of their labor—and refused to yield to the demands of legal compensation. Here compensation had to be paid based on another principle: that of the speculative worth of the land, as well as the emotional bond to the land that existed between the workers and the land. This was nowhere better epitomized than in the milk-yielding properties of the cattle, who grazed and nourished themselves for years on the land that produced their milk. Refusing to yield the ground that had connected the cattle rearers to the mother that had nourished and fed them for generations, they were willing to risk everything, including their own freedom and safety. Nagarajan cites one individual as saying, “We would be insulting the memories of our ancestors if we didn’t fight back” (2004, 172). This is a powerful statement, one that animates an attachment to the land that exceeds instrumentality. But the ancestors were also a living memory through the means of livelihood that was carried on and the rich symbolic resonance of the cow and milk in Hindu and Tamil society. One could say that to these cattle rearers the hardships faced by the cows (death, loss of foliage, loss of grazing ground, etc.) had only reanimated the necessity of protecting their ancestral home at all costs. It imbued the struggle with the charge of a sacred task. For this, a powerful and divine agent stood as protector and ally.

A small shrine was nestled near the cattle shed. It resembled a termite and tree trunk mound forming a natural *lingam* (symbolic icon for the god Shiva). I was told it was a cobra’s nest around a tree trunk. Despite the imminent eviction and demolition of this shrine, a more-than-temporary shrine was constructed with a paved floor leading up to the trunk of a tree. Daily offerings of milk and eggs were offered at this shrine to the *nagas* (snakes), who in turn guarded the cattle from harm. There was great fear that the cattle would be harmed by gangsters or by “drug addicts” who frequented the area.

Regarding the powers of the shrine, the cattlemen said that the developers had tried to remove the shrine already but had witnessed their trucks and

bulldozers breaking down. Now, we were told, the developers also believed that the *nagas* were protecting them. Out of respect and fear, the Chinese developer—which of course was significant, as Malays were thought to be less likely to respect the gods—was working around the shrine, careful not to offend its powerful and supernatural host. In this sense, the continued flow of milk had been aided by the recognition of powers immanent in this shrine, but at the same time the powers of flowing milk had arguably made possible the elaboration and evolution of the immanence of this shrine. The symbiosis between shrine and the continued practice of cattle rearing on the ancestral lands re-enacted a desire to see a particular historicity recognized by the Other. The sense of justice and stewardship, if not ownership, was not solved by the mere acquisition of property, the letter of the law notwithstanding. In this sense, the memories of the plantation exceeded those of a “workplace,” as identification with the land and its attendant memories was heightened by feelings of betrayal. Moreover, there was an excess of identification forged out of these memories. In that sense, we cannot understand their struggle through economic categories of “compensation.”

As in the identification with the tragic hero, as discussed at the conclusion of chapter 3, the ancestral, indeed genealogical, connection to the landscape is imbued with sacred power at the moment of injustice—that is, when violence is rendered visible. The death of the sacred cow, this very dispossession, tore asunder the law from its everyday normalcy, rendering violence visible. In turn, the land, cattle, and the sacred guardians, the *nagas*, became awesomely powerful in the act of transgression. This was the very reason that developers and union leaders were meeting earnest, if not risky, refusals from retrenched laborers who were so animated and undaunted. And as Ram suggests, “suffering at the courts of the goddess points to other, more primary experiences that lay the basis for experiencing nonreciprocity as injustice” (2013, 220). That is, they were possessed by an idea of justice understood through the devoted love of the mother and “ancestors.” To not fight back would be “insulting their memories.” Still, one MIC leader was purported to have said to a Bukit Tinggi resident, “The land has been sold. You have been paid for your labour. You have no right to be on this land anymore” (Nagarajan 2004, 169). This mentality among politicians, developers, and bureaucrats was structured through the law to silence these webs of associative meaning and deep familial ties that existed among plantation workers.

Considering Bukit Tinggi at a macro level, where profits are won and lost, the future housing estate itself was up-market. It was to have a large man-made lake in its center, a jogging track, and large “bungalow-style” (detached) houses. Most units were initially advertised for around five hundred thousand ringgit, and advertisements featured pictures of mainly Chinese buyers.

Because of the huge investment this developer had made and the large anticipated value of the property in the future, the urgency to settle with the former laborers was great. Though their legal standing was not necessarily greater than those in similar other cases, their collective and aggressive stance toward the developer slowed down the work schedule significantly enough to delay, and thus threaten, profits. Moreover, measures such as strong-arm tactics used by the aforementioned “gangsters” was risky and could potentially backfire in the court of public opinion and harden the resolve of residents. Perhaps the developer also became frightened that if details became public, the sales of units could be affected. In any event, the logic of profit, not the sudden recognition of the worker’s investment in the land and its history—and hence of the worker’s sense of historicity—most probably prompted the change of heart. But for those who risked and won it was something, though certainly not everything.

Sungei Buloh Estate

Sungei Buloh Estate was about an hour’s drive from Kuala Lumpur, near the town of Kuala Selangor. Stopped by security at the entrance, we were questioned as to why we wanted to enter the plantation. There was concern about outsiders entering because social activists were thought to stir trouble among the workers. We explained to the Tamil security guard that I was a foreign researcher from the University of Malaya¹³ conducting research on plantation culture and customs and wanted to speak to people inside about “their way of life” and “customs” (*valkkai, palakkam, panbathil*). The estate was primarily staffed by Indian labor, though a few Indonesians worked there as well. It was an oil palm plantation.

The estate seemed to be fairly well maintained and had a mid-sized temple that appeared to have been recently renovated. Later that afternoon, we witnessed much socializing among residents: children playing in the road, small businesses such as flower stalls selling *malas* (garlands) for the temple, and tea stalls filling up as the labor lines emptied out. The estate community came to life with social activity, resembling an Indian village in many respects. Even the homes had adopted color schemes that made them look more village-like, with pastel blues and greens traditionally used in rural Tamil Nadu. Naga and I approached a few of the workers resting under a tree. They were apprehensive when we walked toward them, but they quickly began to speak freely. When it was explained that we wanted information about the current situation of the estate, whether it was going to close, and what sorts of challenges they faced, we were told that they faced “lots of challenges” (*neriya pretchenai*). Many men had been forced to look for work in factories or other

estates, as their labor contracts were not getting renewed. This was due to “cheap labor” from abroad, primarily Indonesia, and the management’s desire to abandon the estate altogether and develop the land for other uses. While men worked outside, their wives, by working in the estate in some capacity, enabled the families to remain eligible to stay in the company housing and reap the benefits of not only free housing, but also electricity and water. But many women were approaching retirement age, and once retired they would be asked to vacate their homes. There was, as was often the case, no provision for future housing as part of their retirement package. With few job skills and in many cases no relatives living nearby, they expressed worries about the future. “Where will they go to find work?” one man said. Another added, “Why can’t she [his mother] have a low-cost house?” referring to the lack of any housing plan for the retiring and soon-to-be-displaced workers.

Without job skills or kin nearby, there was little hope of finding employment or housing. Thus the workers who faced retirement were forced to rent low-cost houses that should have been allotted to the poor workers to begin with, according to the people we spoke with. One of our interlocutors offered to take us to a housing project the state had built near the estate in the town of Kuala Selangor. The 150 houses, we were told, were purchased for about thirty thousand ringgit each. These terrace-style homes were basic and had few amenities. Even the ceilings were unfinished, offering just a tin roof over a concrete floor. This was hardly an improvement over an estate house, and in some ways it was worse since there was little land for cultivation and little space between units. Nevertheless, to secure the units, the workers had to pay, we were told, “5K to the MIC” in order to secure the house. This was not a down payment; it was a bribe. The MIC, we were told, were given the allotment of housing and could distribute it as they saw fit. The MIC “state exco” had, we were told, used the allotment to reward his constituency from Bandar Shah, a nearby township. Those people were not from the nearby estates and should not, local residents told us, have been given the units to purchase. But this was the benefit of political patronage. In turn, the new owners were renting to those actually displaced from the estates.

One of the renters in this *taman* was named Sundar, who had been hurt in an accident while working in the plantation and was no longer able to work. He, his wife, and his ten children all lived in a tiny, cramped house in this new development. The walls and the hard cement floor in the poorly constructed house were both cracked, and they lacked a ceiling fan to cool the house. For this, they paid two hundred ringgit per month, roughly equivalent to what the mortgage would be if they were the owners. They said they were applying to buy one of the units, but, alas, did not have close ties with the MIC leader who was said to disburse the units as favors to those he patron-

ized.¹⁴ Moreover, it turned out that there was a delay in selling many units (indeed many units were unoccupied) because there was a quota law that stipulated that a certain percentage of houses must be sold to *bumiputras*. We were told that although most Malays did not work in the estate sector and had Malay reserve lands of their own, there had to be a certain percentage of Malay owners even in the low-cost housing designed to help former estate workers! This was one of the factors making it possible for MIC-connected individuals to buy the homes as investments.

Sundar lamented, “We are poor people; why can’t we buy the houses?” The family was not earning well, given Sundar’s injury and the large number of children. The wife was doing some odd jobs, as was Sundar, but they saw no road out of their relative poverty. As we spoke, the children played with a bicycle tire outside, running barefoot through the street.

Our guide from the estate then took us to see another housing settlement called Taman Rajawali. In contrast to the bad conditions and possible political injustice we had witnessed in Sundar’s neighborhood, this *taman* had the look of a community that was moving upwards. Many of the homes were remodeled and extended, while new cars could be seen in the driveways of many. This area, too, was predominantly Tamil, but the *taman* had been established in the 1960s, under a home ownership scheme that had been adopted by Sime Darby, a major British-owned plantation company in Malaysia at that time. Tan Siew Sin was chairman of Sime Darby at the time and was very impressed with MIC proposals to establish worker homes that could be purchased at a reasonable rate from the company.¹⁵

This *taman* was one of the few success stories. Of the 150 homes sold, almost all were Tamil occupied, with the exception of four “*Malaykaran*” (Malay) families, who also came from the same estate. Many of the workers were from the same estate, and the sense of continuity was there, as these same families had lived side by side for at least a couple of generations. I noticed strong support for Barisan Nasional (the ruling coalition) on display in front of several homes. This was shortly before a major election.

Upon visiting one family, I was told that for years requests to pave a road had fallen on deaf ears, but “lo and behold,” the asphalt machine was working hard a few days before the election. This was a political “gimmick,” I was told, and plenty of cynicism about the MIC and government was expressed. But all seemed to agree that it had worked well for the people in this *taman*, whereas the estate workers of today had a tougher time in their struggles for compensation, housing, and job opportunities. One man we spoke with said he had paid 23,500 ringgit for a house in 1984, though the houses also sold for 34,000, depending on “who you knew” and the size of the unit.

After visiting this housing estate, we headed back to the plantation. Our guide for the day mentioned a troubling story. He claimed that a youth from Taman Rajawali had slapped an important Indian politician when he visited the *taman*. The youth was unhappy about the state of affairs and thought this politician had favored his own constituents over the local laborers. A couple of weeks later, the youth was murdered, we were told, by a “gangster” hired by an influential politician. While we had no way of testing the veracity of his statement, his anger at the politician seemed palpable. He went as far to say that the leaders were “crooks” and “thugs.” A deep cynicism and a venomous sense of betrayal spilled out with his words.

From the vantage I had, which was admittedly limited, the sense of despair that came with what was perceived to be betrayal led to this total demonizing of the (political) Other. We witnessed this to some extent in Bukit Jelutong, but here a criminal element was emphasized. Not only have betrayals occurred, but the betrayers are murderers and “thugs,” not fully human, and thus explicable as embodiments of evil, lacking even the capacity for empathy. This perception heightened a victim’s identification, whereby the anxious struggles for basic needs were humanized as a moral battle between the community and the personified forces of evil, symbolized by the politicians and developers. Not only did this give cosmological shape to a painful and uncertain predicament, but as we will see in more intimate interethnic encounters, it set the stage for more dramatic forms of othering and boundary production in Malaysia’s imaginary ethnic landscape. It is important to underscore here, however, that the violence in this instance was not specifically racialized. Tamils here were victimizing other Tamils in the context of a wider structural problem of ethnic preferencing. Indeed, we might note that one symptom of ethnic preferencing, ironically, was increased intraethnic divisions and accusations of betrayal (Willford 2006a; Baxstrom 2008).

Klang and Beumont Estate

Beumont Estate was under Malaysian Chinese ownership in the 1960s. Located a few miles outside Klang, it was closed down in the late 1960s or early 1970s. At that time, housing lots costing between one to three thousand ringgit were offered to the former employees. The estate community pooled their resources and purchased several homes. The area became known as Kampung Tangavelu and comprised ten acres. Forty families originally pooled resources and bought sixty lots. The neighborhood did not look like a former estate, as families had gradually built up their homes from scratch. This was not a squatter area, nor did it resemble one. Many of the homes had satellite televi-

sion, air conditioning, tiled roofs and floors, and paved driveways. Moreover, judging by the cars parked there, most of the residents had reasonable incomes in the postplantation economy.¹⁶

The housing was surrounded by trees and tropical foliage, and the homes had fairly large backyards with fruit trees. We noticed a temple that was shared by several houses, situated between them. In general, the physical environment of this Indian housing estate resembled that of a plantation, though the houses were much larger, and the ownership of property had obviously given the families the collateral needed to engage in businesses. Therefore their incomes far exceeded that of plantation workers.

Indeed, talking with a few families who resided there, I discovered that they had done quite well, relative to other former estate workers, because the housing and land had been affordable. Because the city of Klang was near and several factories and businesses had emerged nearby, economic opportunities existed. While some had clearly done better than others, I saw no dire hardship or dilapidated homes in the housing estate. The one noticeable problem, however, was that the sewage and drainage system was poor. A stagnant stream ran outside the housing area, along the main road. We were told by one family that “dengue fever” had claimed one woman’s husband at an early age. “Village” conditions persisted, despite the modern housing, in that regard. On the other hand, dengue is often an illness of affluence in Southeast Asia, striking where people have potted plants, decorative gardens, etc. In this case, however, it was clear that their storm drains were inadequate and clogged with stagnant and mosquito-breeding waters.

One family told me that their grandparents came from “Trichy Ur” (Trichy, a city in South India) and had settled in the same estate with other relatives. These “relatives” had purchased these homes and were the third generation from that group. When I asked if they were related, one elderly woman said, “*Sountakaran maddum*” (we are all relatives). They had found work outside the estates at the time of retrenchment and had purchased their homes at that time.

Though the temples within the estates could not all be saved, the residents brought the statues from the temples and installed them in the neighborhood shrine and thus were able to retain their sacred connection to these temples. Even the large annual *tiruveela* (festival) occurring in April for the Munneswaran (a guardian deity) shrine was not interrupted after relocation. Indeed, the temple to Munneswaran now connected the homes as they intersected. In a manner, an innovation befitting a classical Hindu city or village was recreated in the new *taman*.¹⁷ That is, the temple was situated at the heart of the neighborhood, surrounded by all the homes. Each home had a back door from its yard that entered the temple’s perimeter alley. In this way the temple formed the nucleus of the neighborhood and was a junction whereby

all of the homes were interlinked. The temple served not only as a place of worship, but as the village center where meetings could take place. The people told me that during the annual festival they would sacrifice many goats to the god, after which the animals were feasted upon together.

Mariamamma served sweet soda drinks after inviting us into her home, which was relatively large, possessed an extended kitchen and several rooms, and was even air conditioned in certain rooms. She ran a provision shop (i.e., a small market with foodstuffs and basic household goods) nearby in the small business park across the road. Her lot had been purchased forty years earlier for some 1,250 ringgit. She then subdivided the one-acre lot with her brother. The family was originally from the town of Karuvuru, near Trichy, India. This was an extended household, with two younger daughters, both married, living at home. The grandchildren lived there as well. One little girl kept trying to hit me, much to the older woman’s embarrassment. I joked and said, “*Avalukku velaikaran pidikilee*” (She doesn’t like white men), to which they laughed in agreement. When we inquired about kinship relations within the village, I was told that marriages occur mostly from within the *kampung*, suggesting a degree of endogamy given their close kinship ties to a specific town in Trichy as well.¹⁸ When asked about social problems or worries for the future, however, they offered a fairly optimistic assessment of life in Malaysia. After all, they had successfully transitioned from the estate to a settled suburban “village” lifestyle, finding employment along the way.

The key to their success and confidence seemed to be the earlier policy of allotting lots of land for home ownership. Under this policy, a community with little or nothing in the way of savings (such as a plantation labor force) could, with the equity and security that comes with land ownership, venture into businesses, risk jobs in factories that required new skills, take small loans, etc. This was made possible when housing retention was not critical. On the other hand, when one remained chained to the estate house, options for mobility, risk, and equity were limited. We recall from the previous story how estate housing was dependent upon one member of the family retaining employment in some capacity in the estate. That factor alone certainly curtailed mobility and job access and inhibited a worker’s horizon of employment. But the earlier policies of the 1970s that were beginning to be implemented with apparent success, such as in this case or in the case of Taman Ladang Glenmarie, discussed earlier, had given way to a more hopeless and fiscally hard-edged form of compensation negotiation. This in turn seemed to be linked to the ethnic dimensions of landscape transformation in Selangor.

Clearly, Kampung Tangavelu was a success story, particularly compared to the struggles faced by communities facing eviction in the early 2000s. This illustrates the importance of housing ownership in making a successful transi-

tion to postestate life. In the 1970s, real estate in this part of Klang was not all that costly, but by the 2000s, the land was quite valuable, so in one sense they were lucky to have been retrenched when they were. We have seen, based on other cases, that estate workers were rarely given such an opportunity to buy affordable housing in the real estate market. Much of this, as suggested, was due to the value in land, but this may also reflect a change in attitudes among estate management and ownership, particularly in those PNB companies that answered to their Malay shareholders. The latter did not seem as generous to the Tamil worker as the British, French, and even Chinese managers had been in an earlier era. That is to say, part of the problem facing Tamil plantation workers in prime real estate areas, particularly in Selangor, was related to the development plans for these areas. It was not simply a financial question, but a question of nationalized development plans (Bunnell 2004; Nagarajan 2004; Gomez and Jomo 1997; Bunnell, Nagarajan, and Willford 2010) predicated on *bumiputra* share equity goals that began under the New Economic Policy. Tactical and symbolic constructions, as well as erasures of previous settlements, used to buttress these goals were ubiquitous and oppressive to working-class Tamils.

The landscape was literally imbued with political and social significance through the building of places like Shah Alam and Putrajaya (Bunnell 2004; King 2008; Kahn 2006), which were built on former estate lands (Bunnell 2004; Nagarajan 2004), with their many Indian and Hindu spaces. Temples and homes were (and continue to be) destroyed in this process. In this sense, in building up one national imaginary, the collective and practiced landscape memory of another was being destroyed, erased, and suppressed. In this context, the owners of Malay-owned plantation companies (the GLCs or “PNB” companies) were less interested in permanently settling Tamils into small townships in and around the plantations where they once lived. This would be a reminder of their historical links to the landscape that was once theirs. Instead they were to be moved, relocated, sent to low-cost flats away from the place where they had sunk their roots. To have a Beumont Estate, with its annual festival right in the middle of Shah Alam, would be anathema to the modern Malay Islamic identity being crafted by planners and politicians. This vision of a Malay and Islamic future, as many scholars have noted, sutures the contradictions and gaps that exist between differences in so-called Malay groups and communities (Kahn 2006; Hoffstaedter 2011; Peletz 2002; Milner 1998, 2002), providing the sense of homogeneity that is otherwise lacking, except through ethnic displacements and symbols of unity that silence difference.

At the same time, it is important to remember that in Tamil folklore and religion, hope and aspirations for justice are often linked to an experience of

tragedy that befalls a heroic figure. Many sacred shrines (particularly those of tragic heroes) have assumed, thus, a focal importance in the shadow of the transgressions by developers and by extension the state that facilitates their plans. The yearning of the incalculable, a cry for justice, is inextricably linked to the experience of destruction and erasure.

Klang

A local Tamil businessman in Klang took me to Jalan Tengku Kelana, the “Little India” of the city. There he ran a crate and shipping company and was also working to bring computers into local Tamil schools. I asked about the ownership of the businesses in Little India. He said that they were all Indian-owned and not leased from Chinese owners, which was often the case in Malaysia. “Samy devotees” (Samy Vellu, then MIC president), he claimed, had control of the business community, and I presumed his patronage was pivotal. But I met another businessman running a garment and gift shop that seemed to say otherwise.

One shop owner, a man in his fifties or sixties, employed Indian nationals as clerks. His shop was much like the shops in other “little Indias,” or Chennai, for that matter. It sold prayer items, images of deities made of bronze and brass, and paintings, as well as prominently displayed oil lamps gleaming at the storefront door. The bulk of the store, however, was dedicated to traditional Indian clothing. He reflected a deep cynicism when he said that “in Malaysia, money means you are smart. . . . We have a gangster for our leader; he paid fifty million to [Prime Minister] Badawi for his election. Badawi was broke because Daim¹⁹ did not give money to UMNO this time around. . . . Now Badawi won’t touch Samy.” Political leaders, however corrupt, are believed to be shielded by the semblance of law and buttressed through purchased electoral victories. The news of the day—that S. Subramaniam (a former MIC deputy president) was being “sacked” by Samy Vellu, his rival, and not being given a seat to contest in the election (effectively barring him from the cabinet)—was met with anger by this businessman, who often spoke in Tamil aphorisms from the *Thirukural*, the ancient Tamil book of ethics, in order to emphasize his points about political corruption. He said he went with a delegation of “Subra” (Subramaniam) supporters to Badawi’s mansion in Putrajaya. Badawi listened patiently, but then said that this was an internal MIC matter and not for him to get involved.

The owner of the crate company discussed above took me to see his operation outside Kampung Jawa, near Kampung Tangavelu, described above. He said that the home-ownership schemes that had been offered in the earlier era were indeed better because with this capital they had been able to borrow

from the banks to venture into various businesses. This man, also in his fifties I surmised, hired workers from India to work in the factory making crates for container ships. When I asked him if it was difficult for him to hire Indian nationals for manual labor jobs like this given the government's restrictions on job permits for non-Muslims, he answered with sarcasm, "In Malaysia everything is possible. Immigration work permits are granted with a fifty-dollar bribe." Race-based politics was circumvented by cash, or so it seemed, and the corruptibility of civil servants worked to the advantage of the enterprising Indian businessman. In this sense, everything was possible, and race or racism was no absolute obstacle nor was it paramount in day-to-day decision making. On the other hand, he pointed to the difficulties Indians faced that were not faced by Malays, who had various government assistance programs behind them.

That another Malaysia might be possible (Nadarajah 2004) seemed not to enter into his mind. Rather, it was the Indians who themselves had to rise up and work the system to their advantage. The success of Indians in and around Kampung Jawa was a result of initiative and hard work, despite discriminatory policies. Both Naga and I noted later, however, that the experience of that generation was still quite different from that of the generation facing eviction from the estate or squatter area today. Their ability to work the system and not be held back by discriminatory policies owed much to their ability to secure a home and land, something unavailable to those forced to buy low-cost flats that had no investment value. The capacity to hope on a daily basis and not fall into cosmological thinking about the betrayers and the betrayed, which ultimately casts a struggle in moralizing rather than pragmatic terms, was premised on the relative experiences of success, however contingent and limited. The shop owner we met here was relatively successful, yet possessed strong, categorical views. But in his case, the criminal element at the heart of power was supplemented, indeed completed, by Indian acts of criminality—the purported "gangsterism" of the Indian political leadership. In this sense, it is Indian criminality that completes and corrupts the impotent figure of Prime Minister Badawi. But as we recall from our discussion of criminality among guardian heroes, their acts of transgression and illegality expose a flawed moral order and reveal the violence and hypocrisy upholding that order. Here one might say that the logic is different; Indian criminality is the supplement that allows the discourse of legal governance to retain its imaginary ideal, despite strong Indian misgivings about the racialization at the heart of the Law. In the final two examples from this chapter, we witness an intensification of both the racialization narrative as well as the relative difficulties faced by estate workers facing retrenchment today, especially in contrast to the earlier cases discussed in the previous section.

Brooklands Estate

Near the town of Banting, about a half-hour's drive from Klang, was Brooklands Estate. When entering the estate it was clear that management had abandoned its upkeep some time ago. The homes appeared severely dilapidated, there were overgrown weeds along the roads, and there was no guard at the entry gate as would be the case in a functioning plantation.

The estate homes, though not exactly ramshackle, were in disrepair, though they were still occupied. The foul scent of stagnant water and the sight of uncollected rubbish suggested neglect and hardship. Workers here had been retrenched in 1995, I was told, and had subsequently sought employment wherever possible in factories or as guards, gardeners, or other low-skilled jobs in nearby towns of Banting or Klang. The *talaivar* (leader) of the sixty families who had refused to leave the estate and who for ten years had been leading the fight against their eviction and their demands for alternate housing, relayed a story of struggle. It resembled stories I heard in several other estates where communities were fighting their evictions. But a resolute and confident disposition revealed a changing perception of justice and the law among Tamils.

Siva, the leader who was negotiating on behalf of the others, said he was offered a "bungalow" by the property developer if it would stop his efforts. He refused the offer, explaining, "How can I take [*sic*] when I'm representing the whole community?" Accompanied by two other more senior males, Siva explained that in 1977 the estate management and the MIC had arrived at an agreement which would allow workers to purchase "terrace houses" on estate land, protecting them, in effect, from the possibility of displacement in the event of retrenchment. Unfortunately, this apparent "deal" never came to fruition and was, in Siva's words, "sabotaged" by the NUPW (the union).

Siva said the "British manager took care of us well." In addition to planning for their housing needs, I was told about the "British" manager's participation in community life—his attendance at weddings, festivals, and other special events. This strangely ubiquitous theme was heard throughout my research in various plantations. The purported benevolence of European management as compared to Malaysian, and specifically Malay, management was often underscored. While estate life was certainly no picnic, and racial segregation (from Europeans) was common under European rules (Sandhu 1969), workers seemed to remember, perhaps with oddly placed nostalgia, the benevolent patron of the community, its temple, school, sports field, wedding hall, etc. (also see Selvakumaran 1994). They contrasted this with the "Malay" manager, who they claimed refused on religious grounds, to participate in community life or to contribute to the temple or festivals. The Tamil laborers often im-

plied or directly stated that the “*Malaykaran*” (Malay) stayed away from the Tamil as much as possible, refusing to enter into their lifeworlds, their sacred spaces, and their intertwining of the sacred within the landscape (Shulman 1980). This represented a ruptured intimacy and a “refused gaze” that fueled a cry for justice (Ram 2013, 218). To the new Malay manager, the landscape possessed no social fabric, no spirit or mystery intertwined with the social and natural, but rather was simply standing reserve for the achievement of profit. This, they often told me, sounding oddly Heideggerian, was much different from the way “authentic” Malays in *kampungs* would interact with Tamils in an earlier era. Indeed, *kampung* Malays, I was often told, participated in Hindu festivals and invited plantation workers to their own festivals and weddings in the *kampungs*. These complex and multiple exchanges were unproblematic, given a shared cultural substructure and derived from centuries of cultural interaction. In recent times, however, the purging of Malay culture of things deemed “Indic” or “Indian,” coupled with the discourses of racial exclusivity and privilege, had disaggregated these intertwined and intimate exchanges, upsetting the more fluid and protean boundaries between Indians and Malays that had once existed.

Brooklands residents were fighting for the right to buy low-cost “terrace” houses, as promised to them originally in 1977. They argued that because they “worked the land,” they deserved a housing concession. Ideally, they desired the homes that were for sale on the very same estate land—those to be sold for between M\$59,000 and M\$69,000—and asked that they be allowed to purchase the cheaper units at a cost of M\$42,000, or at a discount of M\$17,000. As one of the men I was speaking with put it, “Why can’t we buy these at 42,000 discount? The Malays get a discount and we worked on the land for generations.” It might be noted that the “*bumiputra* discount” in all housing for Malays is generally no more than 10 percent. In asking for this reduction, the workers were requesting more than that. For this reason, they realized they would not be given homes at this price. The request, therefore, was a moral claim and not a “practical” expectation.

More realistically, they hoped to buy low-cost homes for M\$35,000 and were even prepared to accept flats, provided they were well made. This would be a difficult compromise, as they wished for homes on the ground (“terrace”). In fact, a state executive committee member of the MIC had advised the community to accept flats and had, together with the NUPW, negotiated the purchase of flats for the workers at the “reduced” cost of M\$35,000. Each family had been asked to contribute funds as a commitment to purchase, and many had done so. I was told that this politician had scolded families, telling them “it is not your property; just take what they (the management) give you and get out.” The workers, in turn, were not happy with the MIC or NUPW,

as they expected them to fight on their behalf as the previous state executive officer evidently had done in the late 1970s. The flats were, in the end, nearly completed, but had to be abandoned due to their shoddy construction on unstable ground. I was taken to see the ruins of the abandoned housing. Even had they been completed, it was pointed out to me, the floor plan, bathroom size, and layout was so terribly designed they would have been virtually unlivable.

One elderly man pointed out that he had an injured hand from estate work and now depended on his children for support. He said, “We are poor people . . . we need houses because we have nowhere to go.” He then explained that their struggles would have gone nowhere were it not for the efforts of the CDC (Community Development Centre) and a certain Mr. Siva, who while not “taking a cent” had taught them their “legal rights.” The strategy the CDC advised was for the residents to request housing for M\$35,000, preferably low-cost terrace homes. If they were successful, this was to be followed by a campaign to recover compensation for their ten-year legal struggle for housing. I will return to the strategies of the CDC in chapter 5.

The management had used “tactics” to force the residents out. I was told the police were used to “intimidate us” under their instructions. They also cut the water lines and closed the plantation Tamil school, forcing children to ride public transport, private car, or motorbike to the nearest Tamil school. With some negative publicity as a result of the water cut, a temporary line was re-established. The leader was emphatic about his contempt for the Lion Group’s (the developer’s) local management. “How can [*sic*]? Where can we do business, where can we go?” He gestured to the poor drainage and said there was now a real problem with mosquitoes and flies due to stagnant water and a lack of sanitation service.

Though conditions were bleak, a surprising confidence was expressed that the management would ultimately offer housing at a reduced price, despite ten years of frustration up to that point. Moreover, after the fiasco of the aborted flats, there was hope that the next negotiated housing would be of better quality. In the meantime, they were content to stay put in the estate despite the physical hardships they faced.

A fabric of community life still continued in the estate; a temple for Mariamman, the goddess of smallpox, was still used by the community. A small provision shop and canteen acted as a meeting place. There was, in short, no rush on either side for a settlement. The developer was advancing the project so that the estate housing would be the last affected area. But the residents resolved to fight on and were energized by the other public cases that met with “success” for estate workers. Their sense of motivation, in this case, came from their pragmatic need for housing and from their belief that they were

victims, unfairly dealt with given their years of toil on the land that generated profit for this company that now disposed of their labor and their homes.

This case, similar to others we encountered, suggested that hope was born out of a sense of justice prevailing in the end, a hope that was predicated on a belief that the Other would ultimately recognize their claim. The recuperation of the Other, its redemption, was a ubiquitous theme in victims' narratives. One might, following Lacan, call this a form of identification with the Other's lack, involving a deposing and resurrecting of an authority figure. The question that remains, however, is whether such identifications, whatever their political fecundity, allow for the realization of complex identities and the kinds of blurred lines of identity through cultural exchange that the Tamils lament a loss of, or whether they harden into cosmological, polarizing, and ultimately exclusive or excessive identity making.

Semenyih Estate Bangi Division

Bangi Estate was hidden behind a railway station. One entered via a dirt road and past a Malay *kampung* with a sizable mosque before entering the plantation. Rubber production here, as elsewhere, was now being replaced by palm oil. The Tamil workers were retrenched in 2000 and a standard compensation package was offered, but it was made conditional on their vacating the estate. The residents refused, noting that they could earn money in jobs outside in the nearby towns of Bangi or Kajang²⁰ and remain in their houses until low-cost or alternative housing could be provided. The CDC and NUPW informed the workers of some of their legal entitlements, most importantly that their legal compensation could not be made conditional in the manner that Golden Hope, the management, had attempted. Now, energized in part by CDC and the recent success of the Braemer case, where terrace houses had been given in compensation, the residents wanted to fight for free housing in addition to the standard labor compensation formula.

The Golden Hope company retrenchment letter was misleading, I was told, as it claimed that the company was forced to fire the workers because they "would not work." In actuality, the workers wanted to work but were told they could not. Cheaper Indonesian labor was recruited for palm oil harvesting. While this commenced, the residents remained quiet so long as they could remain in the housing. They also paid their own utilities and so were not threatened with power or water cuts as a form of eviction pressure, as was sometimes the case elsewhere. Moreover, they were able to earn "good incomes" outside the estate working in the nearby towns. In some cases, the workers were tapping rubber on land rented from Chinese and Malay smallholders outside the estate for higher earnings than they had as estate workers.

For example, they might rent the land for rubber cultivation for a few hundred ringgit per month, but earn anywhere from five hundred to two thousand ringgit per month in latex earnings. This could compare favorably to salaries of three to four hundred per month as estate workers.

Though the residents preferred to stay, the Golden Hope company had not offered any scheme for home ownership, a failure that technically violated Selangor state policy. Though not legally binding, the state's official policy was that management should offer the possibility of home ownership to estate workers. As this policy was not law, home-ownership schemes were rarely offered without a lengthy struggle by the retrenched workers. Many Tamil activists I met believed there was an implicit "racist" dimension in this in that it was precisely the hope of the company not to have Tamil Hindus making permanent settlements, with their temples, Tamil schools, etc., in areas where Malay townships were being developed for the future. Areas such as Bangi and Shah Alam were prime examples of this trend. Moreover, the importation of foreign labor, aside from generating more profit through lower wages, also took the pressure off the management to provide better housing and amenities for existing workers. The desired eviction thus had an explicit and implicit ideological function in a racialized development policy.

Naga and I spoke with a gregarious woman named Arati in the estate. She told us that her two-bedroom house housed fifteen people! There were three generations under one roof. She had severe economic problems to deal with after losing her life savings (M\$12,000) to a failed housing development. She opened up to us while keeping an eye on her grandchildren, who were playing all around the house. The little ones threw sand at one another, which earned the mother's wrath, briefly interrupting our conversation.

Arati had five children of her own, and her husband worked outside in a factory. She spoke fondly of the past and of her memories of estate life, but now she worried about her eventual eviction. She and her husband were formerly rubber tappers in Bangi Estate. She earned about M\$900 per month when she did "double tapping" (worked two shifts) and the yield was good. Her husband was now working in a factory in Bandar Baru Bangi (new Bangi township) while she stayed at home and took care of her six grandchildren. Estate management had stopped providing the "crèche" facility after they were retrenched. Earlier, the estate had a strangely discriminatory policy. Her son's children could be sent to the crèche but not her daughter's children. They could be sent there only if the daughter was working in the estate.

As mentioned above, fifteen people were staying in the small estate house: her husband, five children, a daughter-in-law, a son-in-law, and six grandchildren. One daughter was married and living in Johor. Her two adult children and their spouses were working in factories in Bandar Baru Bangi and

contributed to household income. She explained that she would have problems if she were to be evicted from the house. They did not own any house outside the estate. About seventeen years ago, she and her husband had withdrawn M\$12,000 from their EPF savings to buy a house in Cheras, a section of Kuala Lumpur. Unfortunately, the housing project was abandoned, and they were unable to recover their funds. If evicted, they would be forced to rent a house.

Murugan, a worker in his late forties or early fifties who had lived in the estate for thirty years, feared leaving the estate, though he had housing lined up outside the plantation. He preferred the “peaceful life” in the plantation. He continued to tap rubber while also doing odd jobs in the nearby town. For his thirty years of service to the company, he was offered compensation of thirteen thousand ringgit provided he move out of the house. Although very gregarious, he also seemed keen to hear what advice he could obtain from others. He was born in an estate near Kajang in 1955 on a plantation that has since been developed into an industrial area. When he was seven years old, his family moved to a plantation in Meru. Two years later, they moved to Bangi Estate, where his parents worked as rubber tappers. He continued the tradition and joined the estate as a rubber tapper.

His wife was born in an estate on Carey Island, off the coast of Klang. Her family moved to Bangi Estate later. She and Murugan met and married in Bangi Estate. His elder brother lived in another house in the same estate. After tapping rubber each day, Murugan still had a lot of free time, which he used to earn extra income by setting up tents during functions such as weddings and engagements. After he was retrenched, he worked as a truck driver for a while but gave up the job a few months later because the job paid poorly and he had to work long hours. He had now leased six acres of rubber trees from a Chinese landowner nearby and would start tapping soon. He expected to earn more than one thousand ringgit a month from tapping.

Murugan had bought a low-cost house in Bangi for twenty-five thousand ringgit a few years prior and was renting it out. But he “likes life in the estate.” It was “peaceful, secure and everybody knows each other.” In the Bangi house, “even neighbors do not talk to each other.” So he did not want to move to the house. He hoped, rather, that the plantation management would sell their workers’ present houses to them at reduced costs. Indeed, most people I met at Bangi Estate wanted to keep their house in the estate, and they hoped against Golden Hope for a settlement that would allow them to keep their homes, their temple, and the sense of community that came with both. This hope, while not grounded in legal logic, was driven by a sense of justice that was, one might say, divine. That is, a presence on the land implied more than a moral power, but rather a spiritual force that bound the community together through its temple congregation, as we have witnessed in preceding cases.

Murugan had five children. One was still in school, and four had already completed their schooling up to SPM²¹ level. Three were working in factories in Bandar Baru Bangi and one, a daughter, was a clerk in Kuala Lumpur. She traveled to the city by commuter train from the estate. That was another reason he wanted to stay there; the Bangi railway station was within walking distance from their house.

The management of the estate, Golden Hope, had still not paid the workers their retrenchment benefits in 2004, though they had been retrenched in 2000. It would only pay, it said, after the former workers vacated their houses. But the former workers went to labor court, and court ruled that retrenchment benefits and housing disputes could not be linked, and therefore the company had to pay the workers. Golden Hope, however, appealed this decision to the High Court.

The Temple

Puja in the estate’s Mariamman temple one Friday evening was attended by twenty-two people, all but two of them women and children. The younger women wore Punjabi dress, but the old women wore simple sarongs and blouses. *Puja* in the insect-filled evening was reserved and solemn. There was no music, only the ringing of a small and piercing bell. To arrive at this Mariamman temple, which also housed shrines for Murugan and Ganesh, the sons of Shiva, one had to walk under the highway and pass through a tunnel. The tunnel did not have lighting, which made the walk precarious during the rain and at night. The *pusaris* (priests) were employed by the residents to care for the temple and do *pujas*. As is usual in Malaysia’s smaller shrines, they were not orthodox priests, but locals who took it upon themselves to care for the temple and conduct prayers. On special occasions, such as festivals, the *pusari* would come from a neighboring temple in Broome Estate, with its larger congregation, to help officiate.

We spoke to one child in the temple who had lived in the estate her entire life. She traveled to school either by motorbike or by walking forty-five minutes. She spoke a little Malay and English in addition to her native Tamil, which she learned in school. The school was also in Broome Estate, the nearest plantation to this one. When I asked her about movies and TV, she mentioned that she did not have TV in her house, but that they rented VCDs and videocassettes. We did notice, however, that several estate houses did have satellite dishes on them. Most homes had at least one car, and the general physical conditions were better than in many estates. Moreover, most homes had well-tended gardens and trees. The two or three houses holding Indonesian workers, in contrast, were in worse condition and lacked gardens.

Itinerant workers, not surprisingly, seemed to treat it more as a dorm than as a home.

CDC (Centre for Community Development) activists from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (or UKM, the National University of Malaysia) organized a series of Ponggal²² festivals in the plantations in Selangor. The aim was to raise awareness of cultural heritage and promote estate worker rights. While the aims of social mobilization were mentioned by one CDC member, a young man from UKM, the event itself appeared to be mainly cultural. Arriving in the afternoon, the four university students, two males and two females, organized a *kolam*²³ competition. The *kolam* designs were intricate and large. On the temple floor, about six groups of youths from the estate drew their respective *kolams* with chalk. After designing the *kolams*, they used rice and flowers to decorate and ornament their designs. Between about 5 and 7 P.M., the decorations were added to the *kolams*. At 7 P.M., a *puja* was conducted for the goddess of the temple (Mariamman) and a game was played in which people were blindfolded and asked to strike a clay pot (Ponggal pot) suspended from a line off to the side of the temple. The object was to break the pot, which was full of sweets, much like a piñata. Around twenty-five youths and children from the estate community participated in this event. There were few adults supervising or watching. This was a “fun event” designed to bring the young into the temple. The temple, it may be noted, was quite active in bringing youth participants into its *devaram* (sacred songs of praise) singing on Friday and Tuesday evenings.

The temple had some dedicated teenager volunteers. One girl, the daughter of one of the influential leaders in the estate community, helped organize and lead the singing of *devarams*. In this Ponggal event, too, she played an active role in involving the youth of the estate in the games and *kolam* competition. The celebration lasted into the night, when the *kolams* were evaluated and judged. I was even asked to vote for the best one, which proved an unenviable task.

At one point, a fire was created outside the temple floor, in which milk and rice were cooked in the traditional Ponggal²⁴ way. When the rice-milk began to boil over, all shouted “Ponggal, Ponggal.” It was a light-hearted and joyous moment. The *ponggal* was then distributed. At the moment the milk boiled over, all were invited to throw a handful of rice into the bowl.

The significance of the Ponggal festivals, as sponsored by the CDC, and as realized in various estate communities, was hard to estimate. I witnessed and heard firsthand about a “revival” of this festival, in particular within estate communities in Selangor as a result of activist efforts by the CDC and others. This sense of revival, in turn, may have been making estate communities more conscious of the importance of their temples in their respective

communities. I had heard, for instance, that Ponggal was more of a household festival in earlier years, but that in recent years it had become increasingly organized around temple activities. This, while not an explicit politicizing of the festival, was a changing of its nature toward a more collectivist and identity-based expression of Tamil and community unity. This was significant, perhaps, given the social and political context of retrenchment and perceived Islamization we have been discussing. That the temples had come to metonymize community, imbuing them with a divine and immanent power, was highly relevant. Indeed, as we shall learn, it was the potential and real demise of temples that ultimately led to the most dramatic awakening of Tamil consciousness in Malaysia since independence. For now, it is important to underscore how community aspirations coalesced around the divine protectorate of the deity and her congregation. It is the temple, too, that provided the archive of memory through marriages, annual festivals, and countless rituals, themselves evoking a timeless presence on a material landscape. This iterative sense of ritual, or historicity of this archive in public consciousness, appeared to coincide with the threat of dissolution and community erasure.

Upon meeting Murugan again on a subsequent visit, I was eager to clarify some important points regarding the predicament of this community. Coming straight to the most pressing issue, Naga had produced a letter that explained, in Malay language, Golden Hope’s position regarding the retrenchment of workers. It was stated that the workers were retrenched because they were “unwilling to work,” and this, of course, was what the community took offense to. But Golden Hope did offer to transfer the individual families to other estates, effectively dispersing the community. Murugan did not know much Malay and needed some help with the translation. He understood that they were offered transfer to another estate, but the community did not want to “break up” in that way. They were firmly “local” in their livelihood now, working in rubber as freelance tappers. Some had even purchased houses outside the plantation with savings, and therefore their squatting, if one could call it that, was also out of principle. They felt entitled to the land and house after their years of service to the company. If nothing else, the residents wanted to move together as a community, not as freelance individual laborers.

Murugan told me he never went to temple, though he supported it financially and otherwise. He explained that it was not an opposition, but a lack of interest in religion on his part. His wife, however, was a regular in the temple, as were most of the women in the estate. This was generally true in other estates, too. The immanent power of the temple (*shakti*) was produced through female devotions, and the most important and powerful shrines were dedicated to the goddess. When I asked her what temples she was familiar

with in Malaysia, she could not name any. I then asked her if she went to Batu Caves during *Thaipusam*.²⁵ She said, "Why pray elsewhere? God is as One everywhere (*orai ondraba*)." In other words, she was claiming that the estate temple could satisfy her religious impulses and that any emergent Hindu pilgrimage center did not capture her interest. While she did not know of the Hindu publications in Malaysia, her daughter mentioned that *Sakti* magazine (a local publication) was available in town (Bangi) and that she read it sometimes. The mother added that "proper prayer" was not conducted in Batu Caves. This suggested that she did indeed know of other shrines in the country, but felt more comfortable within her own temple and community, the place where sacred space was conjoined to memory and the intimacy of community. She added that the government needed to support estate workers, as nobody else would help them in their plight. This surprised me to some extent, as many others were becoming cynical about the Malaysian government and its capacity or willingness to broker housing solutions for Indian estate workers. That she still held out hope, if even a faint one, for a government intervention struck me as quite different from the sentiment I heard in most other cases. This hope for a redeemed or restored reciprocity, however, was resonant in many cases we will witness.

Bangi Estate and the "Siddhar"

We met with an elder gentleman from Bangi Estate on the front porch of his estate home at twilight. This gentleman, perhaps in his early sixties, invited us to join him amidst the mosquitoes that seemed not to bother him in the least but had me swatting at the air while focusing on his words. This man, unlike many other former laborers, was most eager to tell us of his religious views and experiences. He, like many others, had moved from estate to estate in his youth. His parents were from India and had lived in Puchong before coming to Bangi in 1969. His father had come from a village in North Arcot district, near Vellore, Tamil Nadu, and his maternal grandparents and mother had also come from a village near there. He explained that many of his kin were recruited by a *kangani* (labor contractor) and brought to Malaya in the late 1920s. His grandfather died after a bomb attack on the infamous "death railway" in Burma during the Japanese occupation.²⁶ His grandmother had broken contact with her daughter after disagreeing to the marriage. This man's parents worked in two different plantations before they settled in Bangi Estate.

This gentleman, who fashioned himself as a *siddhar* (mystic), worked for several years in the estate. His kin were spread around the country, but many also lived within this specific estate, as well as nearby in various parts of

Selangor. Like Murugan, he had managed to educate his family, and they had purchased homes outside the plantation but still preferred the communal life within the estate. He spoke with passion about his fears for the future. Explaining to us that children experience troubles in the city and town, he suggested that the sense of belonging and community would be lost if they were to move out of the plantation. Like others, he said the politicians had failed them and that they were prepared to struggle on their own through NGOs and lawyer activists. He also felt that the estate management had not looked favorably upon Indians, in part because of their religion. He mentioned the worsening relations with management after the government had taken over the estate.²⁷

He said that most of the estate residents were "good, decent, and hard-working people" who had endured "much hardship in life" and did not want their children to face the same difficulties. They tried to provide the best for them, but now the parents were "working outside." Many of them, he explained, were working long hours and coming home late, spending travel time they did not have to spend when labor was estate centered. As much as they wished the best for them, their children were left unattended while the parents worked. Therefore, the children fell into "bad company and pick up bad habits." They also ended up in gangs, he surmised, which provided a sense of solidarity and expressed a yearning for empowerment or agency in their otherwise marginalized lives.

This was the problem of transition. Bangi Estate was not functioning anymore. Another member of the estate community had mentioned that when he and his wife were rubber tappers, they went to work at about 4 or 5 A.M. and were back home by 2 P.M. After that, he explained, they had a lot of free time to spend with the family and community. Now, however, he said he rarely had any leisure time. With new work patterns, he and his wife had to leave early and would only return home after 8 P.M. Sometimes, if forced to work overtime, he would come back as late as midnight.

The other point both the *siddhar* and Murugan made was that in the estate lifestyle youths were involved with temple activities. If the temple was gone, or if people scattered after they moved out, this cohesive sense was lost. The *siddhar* feared that the problem of "*tani*" (literally water, but used here as a euphemism for drinking alcohol) would affect those who were displaced from the estate. He spoke of the MIC's impotence, claiming they would only make their presence felt before election time. During elections, they would say (he demonstrated by putting his hand on Naga's shoulder), "Don't worry, we will take care of you," only to disappear until the next election. He said he was prepared now, after many broken promises, to "back the opposition, even if it is Keadilan or PAS," which were perceived to be Malay-dominated.

As mentioned, this man had mystical, or *siddhar* yearnings. I asked him about the temple in the estate. He told me he was not particularly interested in temple worship, calling it a necessary but “lower stage.” Instead, he was involved in “meditation” (*dyanam*). He followed a particular *siddha* or mystic path taught by a guru in India via “astral travel.” When I asked if others followed his path in the estate, he said that he was the only one and that the others did not understand what he was saying when he tried to explain to them his religious beliefs. He then gave a detailed description of Murugan (the deity) iconography, particularly describing the *vel* (the deity’s invincible lance) as a symbol of the spinal column. In turn, this icon helped illuminate the various *chakras* and spiritual centers upon which the *siddhar* meditates. He said, with conviction and enthusiasm, that he had found the path to happiness (*santosham*) and love (*anbu*). He even described meetings with a powerful *siddhar*. As he explained it, this was an adept who traversed time and space. He conversed with the *siddhar* while meditating in the jungle in Kerala, India. He traveled once a year to meditate in India and had, up to that point, experienced two visions of the *siddhar*. He said the *siddhar* could be in several places at the same time, including the North Pole, the equator, and India. Still, this follower of the *siddhar* donated to the temple and supported its activities, telling us that temple worship helped the community stay together.

Returning to the *siddhar* in 2006 after a spate of temple demolitions, as mentioned at the outset, his mystical inclinations now included an element of accusatory wrath:

All the religions teach love but Islam. They want to force it, but that will not bring people together . . . it is not working to convert, which is why they are using other means like the IC cards [referring to some errors in religious identification, that Tamils suspected were manipulations by the government] and the Moorthy case [the Hindu Mount Everest hero who was claimed to be a Muslim, post-mortem, despite his family’s protestations. The IC card and Moorthy case will be discussed in chapter 10]. The future is very bad in Malaysia (*romba mosamakka*) because Islam is intolerant. Denison²⁸ must have struck a deal with Malays to say what he did about Kg. Medan. Look at what Islam did to Buddhism statues in Afghanistan. The Malays were happy with this. UMNO youth [the youth wing of the governing party] will protest Israel actions [*sic*] in Lebanon, but will they even look at how Muslims treat non-Muslims in these places, or even here? If Islam is such a great religion, then they should behave more magnanimously—not smashing other people’s temples or forcing conversions.

You go to the shopping complex here and you see the housing preferences given to Muslims—to Arabs and even Indonesians. Preferential treatment for them. But for us, nothing! Buddha taught the way of meditation and love. Christ taught way of love. *Anbe Sivam* (Siva is Love). But Islam—they just pray five times and act like hypocrites!

The way of the *siddhar* is *above all other faiths and forms* which are but simple and primitive forms of the deeper meaning (*artham*). Modern physics can split the atom, but the *siddhar* can split the atom in one hundred ways. Astral travel is also possible.

Indeed, at our first meeting, the *siddhar* of Bangi Estate had described his soul travel, miraculous visions, and meetings with the great *siddhar* masters in the astral plane. Though he clearly possessed a historical consciousness about the sociosymbolic reworking of the landscape and the ascendancy of the Malay vis-à-vis the Tamil Hindu in the national imaginary, his desire was precisely *not* to identify with the specificity of the land, its temple, its rootedness to community, though he was agitated at their demise, which provoked his uncharacteristic outburst against “Muslims.” The transcendence he aspired to—a sublime self-consolidation, though oddly disembodied, in the face of the unfathomable powers of the “split atom” and “astral travel”—suggested a fantastic surmounting of the symbolic order and of a material reality. But in the terror of the inexplicable—of the radical contingency of the symbolic order itself—a glimpse of the Real in Lacan’s sense, the path of the *siddhar* provides a comforting narrative of transcendence “above all other faiths and forms,” but without complete dissolution, consolidation in the face of the recognition that the symbolic order is indeed a function of the cunning of reason and thus inextricably linked to death (Lacan 1992). Or to underscore Lacan’s Heideggerian reading, it represents both a fleeing from an authentic relationship with death into the categories of the known (the ontic). This, as Derrida (1995a) suggests, following Freud, is the reason why archives work against themselves, ultimately revealing their feverish engrossment as driven by, paradoxically, a drive toward dissolution.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have witnessed the sense of community that animated struggles for compensation in the face of retrenchment and eviction. Given the choice of employment elsewhere, cash compensation, or preservation of a semblance of community through the collective relocation and salvaging of important markers of symbolic significance, the residents in the case studies we have examined in this chapter indicated a strong pull toward the latter over

the former. When and where this movement was not feasible in real terms, the transcendental surmounting of contingency through the animus of spirit was another theme that emerged. We also witnessed how differences in housing policies for retrenched workers in the 1970s and 1980s compared with that in the mid-2000s. It was shown how through the simple achievement of home ownership, economic and social doors were relatively open, which provided for a more hopeful outlook on the future. In the next chapter, we look toward “successful” strategies of resistance but also see how the spirit’s locale—its immanence—proves vital, or offers vitality, in these collective struggles for compensation. The compensation, of course, may not always be material in form. Indeed, we have begun to witness ways in which compensation may be refigured as a call for justice over and above the law. Just as land speculation rendered problematic notions of property value to estate workers given the prospective earnings that operate against labor’s interest, legal compensation formulas rendered bare a logic of violence against similar temporal renderings of land occupation and usage, be they prospective or retroactive, as was often the case with estate workers in this chapter. That is, the archiving of the plantation landscape through ritualization and memory, particularly as made focal in temples, worked to refigure employment lines as a kind of organic communal life. Ironically, this was the strategy adopted by colonial plantation companies to start with (Sandhu 1969; Arasaratnam 1979). That is, turning plantations into communities or villages would mask, in part, the calculative or profit-seeking enterprise. Now, however, when the time came for retrenchment, the efforts to close labor lines and employment privileges was countered by a retroactive memorialization of community. This archiving process effaced, through the nostalgia it generated, this harsher reality of plantation life. On the other hand, it rendered compensation formulas problematic, revealing a violence at the heart of the Law.

5 Interruptions, Insurrections, Strategies

In several of the cases we have looked at thus far, the struggles for compensation by communities facing eviction have taken a protracted and multifaceted form. We have seen that compensation cannot be treated in its merely material sense. It does not address the community, memory, and hopes to alleviate anxieties over an uncertain future that lay at the heart of the desire to resist resettlement, eviction, or even the “legal” compensation offered by developers and plantation employers upon retrenchment. Though we encountered some early “success” stories from the 1970s and 1980s, when housing was made available to retrenched estate workers, enabling a relatively less traumatic transition to postplantation life, the other cases of “successful” transitions that have been discussed were achieved through long and hard-fought battles with management and developers, using the court system and media and facing much hardship along the way. This was the lesson learned from the Braemer case and exemplified by the Bukit Tinggi settlement. In the latter, we noted that the protracted and multifaceted nature of the struggle included a demand not only for housing, but also for those other key symbols of community identity, the temple and the Tamil school. The struggle, in other words, was hardly utilitarian, but communal, and indeed moral in nature. Fighting for a right to exist (as a community) was also a call for recognition of the community’s contribution to the symbolic landscape of the nation, though this was not always clearly articulated.

In this chapter, I turn more directly to strategies of resistance, assessing their aims and effectiveness given recent successes and failures. I look first to a few activist leaders who have provided legal and intellectual assistance outside of the normal political parameters of the MIC-NUPW-brokered

settlements with developers. I then conclude with an examination of a few cases that were (or are) still pending but were inspired by the efforts of these activist voices and methods in recent years. I also suggest, however, that success and failure is hard to measure in material terms alone. Indeed, themes of betrayal, redemption, and ultimately justice take us to the heart of Tamil notions of the divine, beyond juridical or economic calculation.

Pasu Pathi

Entering the law office of Pasu Pathi, located in a luxury high-rise in the heart of downtown, I was struck by the all-Indian staff. Pathi, a balding but fit-looking man who looked to be in his early fifties, was generous of his time, although he was running a very busy law firm. At a couple of points in our conversation, his receptionist called to tell him that his next client was waiting. Pathi, however, gave the impression that speaking to Naga and me was a higher priority, as he told the client to wait for some time.

Pathi described the recent so-called Kampung Medan violence, in which five Indians were killed and dozens more injured at the hands of Malay youths (to be discussed in great length in chapter 7), as an opportunity for a “developer.” With the “violence,” there was every excuse to develop flats and clear squatter areas, he argued. He implied that much “development” was linked to political patronage and afforded politicians important financial kickbacks.

Conversation turned to a couple of cases that Pathi had been involved with. Most significantly, in the case of Braemer Estate, where a settlement was reached that ultimately won housing for the workers, Pathi had played a key mediating role. In Braemer Estate, after the sale of the estate, fourteen families had refused to move out. Pathi took up the case without remuneration (he never, it seems, accepts any fees from the Tamil poor¹) in order to delay the evictions through the courts for a couple of years through various legal technicalities. Through negotiations with the property developer and his agent, who it turned out was an Indian, twenty-five thousand ringgit was obtained in compensation for these families, which was much better than the legally stipulated amount. The land, in this case, was primed for lucrative development, and the developer was eager to get started rather than lose more money with legal delays, various stay orders, and the possibility of outright protests, which did in fact occur.

As discussed in chapter 4, residents resisting legal compensation became increasingly aware of the prospective or speculative value of their lands (through activist interventions), as opposed to the current market value that was partly used to determine legal compensation. That developers were willing to extend benefits beyond what they were legally obliged was evidence of a specu-

lative economy built on investor confidence. Indeed, the prebooking of units within new development schemes was a lucrative business in and of itself. Models of future housing were often all it took to obtain a 10 or 15 percent deposit on a future lot and home. Property developers depended on this speculative economy to see their projects reach profitable fruition.²

At the same time, the developer, acting in consortium with other developers and agents, worried about setting a legal precedent with the settlement, which would have wider repercussions since many estates were facing similar transitions. This, ironically, led to the more generous (extralegal) settlement. That is, a settlement without legal precedent allowed the development to go forward without formalizing the compensation for the dozens of other cases that were pending. Even before the case could go to trial Pathi advised his clients to accept the settlement. But even better, the families were given free “terrace houses” each, in addition to the twenty-five thousand ringgit in cash compensation. Moreover, the houses were adjacent to one another on the former estate land, which was a great moral victory for the families who dreamed of retaining a sense of community on their former land. While their trees and gardens may have been erased, this was as good as they could have hoped for.³ In this sense, though the “victory” was great, Pathi suggested that it was not setting any legal precedent (not based on a judgment), and thus one could not surmise that this was the first of many settlements for Tamils facing eviction. On this point, we then turned to the question of Bukit Jelutong, discussed in chapter 3. Knowing of his success in Braemer, the residents of Jelutong had also requested his legal representation. But he seemed less optimistic about the prospects for settlement in Jelutong given the details of the case. It will be recalled that in Jelutong the Guthrie Corporation was not averse to using the courts to achieve legal eviction notices or even demolition orders, in contrast to the Braemer case, in which the developer sought to avoid courtroom delays. Guthrie apparently felt confidence in the legal merits of their case (and apparently was less concerned about bad publicity), though in the end they did compromise with the remaining families.

Turning to problems of political representation, Pathi claimed that the MIC, when they saw that a settlement was going to be reached through the efforts of an NGO or pro bono legal work such as he offered, would often add the names of their party members to the list of families who were to receive compensation. In this sense, they were “interfering” with the legal and NGO work but “wanted credit for the victory.” In addition to the corruption implied by this charge, he also claimed that the party attempted to take political credit for negotiating successful compensation deals, even when it had nothing whatsoever to do with the settlement offers.

Pathi then gave an overview of the NLFCS (the land cooperative) and

NUPW (the union) and their involvement in estate communities. He claimed that the NUPW generally tended to advocate a quick settlement with the developer without protest. The NLFCS, he said, started with good intention but had become an opportunity for some to make money. In general, the sale of estates to developers, while supposedly providing income for all those who purchased it together (the cooperative shareholders), actually favored those NLFCS officers who brokered deals and those who could afford to own more shares. In a pending legal case, the NLFCS in Kedah had sold an estate and evicted its residents despite resident protests and desires to continue living there. Many residents had given money to the NLFCS as cooperative members and therefore believed their estate was community owned, and they now felt betrayed by the same organization that was set up to help them. The present NLFCS leaders used the sales income from the estate land to make lucrative earnings from eager developers, according to Pathi.

It is interesting to note here—though it is a point made previously—the combination of legal and extralegal tactics employed in the service of immediate and not necessarily legal-precedent-producing ends. Probing the limits of the law proved to be an extremely important strategy in two senses. First, temporary victories could be obtained using the technical machinery of the law. Even a delay could prove immensely useful, as it could cause a loss of profit, which in turn generated momentum toward an extralegal settlement. Second, and a larger argument of this book, the lines between the juridical-legal and justice come into view when the law is laid bare. Both of these points converge in the following cases.

Jeyakumar and the Launch of “Speaking Truth to Power”

The historic building of the Selengor Chinese Association Community Hall in old Kuala Lumpur impressed me with its wood molding and mammoth wooden doors. The Victorian-era building was used to house exhibits, rallies, and book launchings. This launch and rally was sponsored by Dr. Jeyakumar’s political party, the PSM, or Parti Socialis Malaysia. Entering the room, one was struck by the red banners and posters that were everywhere, displaying a fist defiantly raised upward in the universal symbol of worker resistance.

Those attending were mostly Indian activists and PSM members, though a few Chinese individuals were present as well. The moderator was the president of the party and former ISA (Internal Security Act) detainee Mohammad Nasir. Datuk Dominic Puthuchery, a former parliamentarian from the Gerakan Party (whom we will meet again later in chapter 9) was also on the stage. A Chinese veteran socialist and ISA detainee was also there, as was Arumugam, a prominent Indian activist, educationist, and lawyer. Aru-

mugam spoke first, offering a critical view of socialism, noting its failures elsewhere. Then Puthuchery spoke of his experience discovering a more humane way of life, less materialistic and with “love for others through socialism.” He spoke of reading certain works of Catholic socialists who blended Christianity with humanism. He also praised Jeyakumar as an old friend and comrade. Nasir, who mentioned Arumugam’s critique, noted that because the latter spoke out of grassroots struggle, his words were heartfelt and sincere, and that the movement was committed to grassroots dialogue and was not dogmatic or ideological nor had any allegiance to a foreign socialist party. Jeyakumar himself then spoke, speaking of the need for a nonsectarian and secular nonethnic response to the Malaysian Barisan Nasional model of development. When responding to a questioner who doubted whether socialism had any more ideological capital left given the history of the twentieth century, Jeyakumar stated that abuses had occurred in the past and that he was not going to defend the abuses of Cambodia, the USSR, China, etc. He maintained that socialism, loosely defined, offered a necessary critique of capitalism. He then spoke of the need for confidence and optimism, despite the obvious hegemony of Barisan Nasional and ethnic politics more generally. Still, he maintained, his book was about hope and practical action that all could take to achieve proximate victories against developers and capitalists. Indeed, he claimed that in most cases concessions were possible to obtain when fighting injustice. More often than not, “there are victories to be won where the will to stand up is there.”

Jeyakumar then spoke of the “teamwork aspect of NGO work,” claiming that his book should not be “hero-worship of his struggles,” but a record of what “grassroots coalition building” can accomplish. Jeyakumar, articulate and English-speaking, was less fiery than confident and self-assured. I spoke to him after the public event, and he advised me to travel to Ipoh to see the work he and his activists were doing there. His NGO, Alaigal, had mounted campaigns to raise public awareness about the plight of plantation laborers.⁴ Jeyakumar even ran against Samy Vellu for his parliamentary seat in Perak state several times, but he lost, claiming “phantom voters and intimidation.” He eventually beat Samy Vellu in 2008 and became a parliamentarian.⁵ Jeyakumar’s book, launched at this event, chronicled his work as a medical doctor and political activist. In it he described Orang Asli displacement and Indian labor problems in plantations and squatter areas. As a good socialist, however, he relentlessly criticized those who turned Indian problems into a “racial issue,” arguing instead that socialism should take us to the systemic class-based determinants. In that sense, the marginal of all ethnic groups, he argued, could be understood as suffering from the ethnic divide and rule policies promulgated by the government.

Some Indian activists and scholars took a critical view of Jeyakumar's and by extension the PSM's views on race, noting that racism was always a factor to contend with in Malaysia in any struggle for housing and concessions. Some claimed that class analysis would not allow recognition of the racial and ethnic dimensions of development in government policies toward the Indian poor, be they conscious or not. The socialists, of course, argued (and still argue) that racialization is simply a symptom of underlying structural or class problems. The critics pointed out, however, that getting to the heart of racial othering through class analysis was itself academic casuistry at best, removed from the day-to-day discriminations that occurred on the ground. While such debates may seem arcane, the implications of socialist intervention versus other forms of intervention are not to be underestimated. As we have seen and will see, transgressing the ancestral ways—particularly the culturally recognizable obligations to the temple, the gods, and the landscape orientation that facilitates this form of sociality and interaction with the spirit—carried with it the potential for conflict, confusion, and the possibility of unrecognizable compensatory logics entering into consciousness (e.g., Robbins 2004; Keane 2007; Ram 2013). But I leave this line of inquiry aside for the moment.

For now, let it be underscored that some among the Tamil activists argued that “Indian” community mobilization required the symbolic and cultural addition of “Tamil” identity politics. Without a pro-Tamil platform, mobilization was lukewarm at best, they argued. Jeyakumar understood this argument but countered that this was precisely the kind of polarizing and racialized thinking that Barisan Nasional exploited by promoting an ethnic-based party alliance. The PSM activists and Dr. Jeyakumar argued that the MIC had certainly run on a pro-Tamil platform and had achieved its support through this ideology, without much effective structural critique of the underlying root causes of Tamil marginalization.

SUARAM and Arulchelvam

The offices of SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia, or Malaysian People's Voice) were awash with literature on human rights abuses in Malaysia and elsewhere in the world. Its members worked in a small and slightly run-down office in the “old town” of Petaling Jaya. It was clearly not one of the “entrepreneurial” NGOs that have emerged in Malaysia through access to government and foreign funding (Weiss 2005).

Arulchelvam (Arul) was one of the leading activists in SUARAM and was also involved with the CDC (Community Development Centre).⁶ He explained the tactics used by his organization in representing various estate

communities in their struggles for compensation. At the end of the day, Arul explained, SUARAM often advised clients to accept settlements that were less than what was originally demanded. In the case of Midlands Estate, for instance, touched on in chapter 3, when twenty-six thousand ringgit in compensation was offered, SUARAM advised the residents to accept even though the residents' original demands were for free terrace houses. But, as Arul explained, the main strategy in obtaining any concessions from developers was in achieving unforeseen delays that might frustrate the construction or development schedule. Through a series of “guerrilla” court tactics, he explained, a “stay of eviction” could sometimes be obtained. If the developer attempted to evict when a stay had been granted, this could embarrass the developer, particularly through the aid of the media. Arul and his group became media savvy through these tactics. In the first instance, then, one played by the rules of the court, but stretched these to the limit through every technical loophole allowed in slowing down the eviction and ultimately the demolition process. In stretching the rules, the limits of the law were also laid bare, that is, its inaccountability to justice. Thus, the law ultimately became deconstructible through its manipulation and transgression.

A more general strategy would be to shift the grounds of the dispute from being one of labor to one of land. In the labor court, the formula for compensation was straightforward, though not generous or protective of estate workers' land rights. According to the Employment Act of 1955, the minimum compensation that must be paid to retrenched workers is twenty days per each year worked. If retrenched plantation workers appealed through their respective unions, the NUPW and MAPA (Malayan Agricultural Producers Association), they would only have grounds to obtain this compensation in their respective settlements. The developers and plantation ownership, therefore, wished these matters to be kept within this arena when they retrenched and evicted workers. In their minds, once workers were let go, the only legally binding obligation was to pay them the compensation accorded by the Employment Act. There was no legal obligation to find alternative housing, provide compensation for lost land or revenues from the use of the land, or preserve the schools and temples that were part of the land owned by the private company that managed the land.

This land had changed corporate hands from colonial to postcolonial times, and these communities, their temples, marriage halls, and schools, not to mention homes, were a series of contiguous communal spaces that had existed for a century or more. The more recent management that wished to develop the land for alternative use and thereby evict the laborers, however, felt no obligation to compensate for this past history of land use and landscape mak-

ing. To the new management or developer, retrenchment and taking possession of plantation properties was simply a labor dispute to be resolved through the country's labor laws.

To the ex-laborers, and through their counsel with SUARAM, on the other hand, it was a land dispute, indeed a human rights case. That is, the violence in the law was itself at stake. Arul explained that the land's speculative worth was driving development and along with it the liquidation of labor. The plantation management, for instance the partially government-owned Guthrie and Sime Darby, were creating hardships for plantation laborers in order to subsidize a particular kind of development that would benefit its shareholders but not its laborers. This, of course, was based on a calculated market-risk speculation on land value. As the terrain of land speculation was foremost in the estate management's mind when it retrenched its labor, SUARAM felt that with some judges, and certainly in the court of public opinion, sympathy for laborers would emerge from the argument that land use was being capriciously driven by a real estate market created, ironically, by the labor of those being displaced by it. That is, SUARAM's strategy was to hope that sympathetic judges, perhaps grounded in older principles of English common law, would understand the implications of this argument. Under those principles, longtime residents in old communities were granted limited land-ownership rights, if not titles, even if they were not literally in possession of said titles while working for generations under the control of various employers.

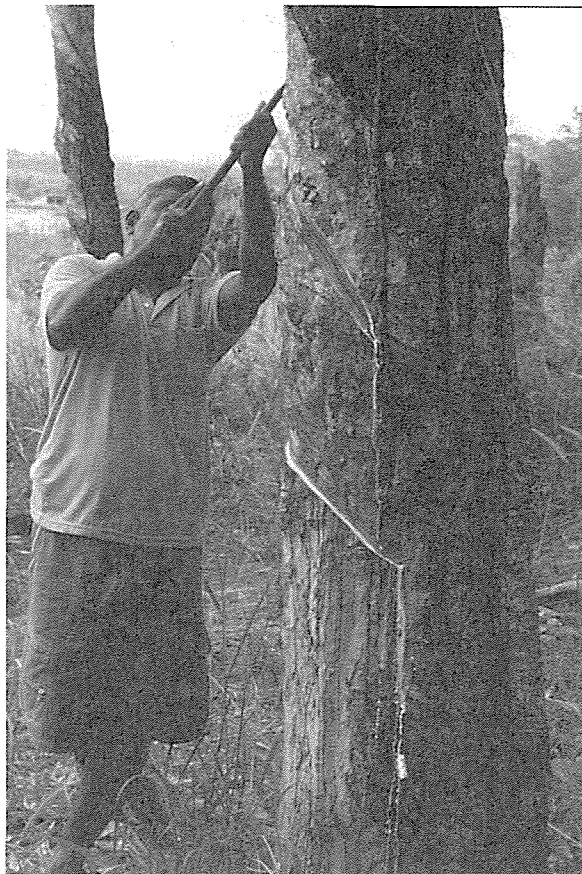
SUARAM wanted to argue that plantation workers in Malaysia in many instances qualified for such consideration because they worked *in situ* for generations, possessing the same houses, temples, and schools for generations. In addition to this argument, which was moral in nature and not legally binding in Malaysia's interpretation of land law, the argument regarding speculative value may also have been of consequence in the strategic actions of SUARAM, as well as other activist groups. The discourse deployed in each case may have varied, but the overall message was that Tamil plantation workers had, through their labor, contributed substantially to the financial and material development of the nation and should not be displaced as squatters without adequate provision for housing. Moreover, the very same lands upon which development was proceeding at an unprecedented pace in the state of Selangor were driven by a speculative value that far exceeded the minimal compensation required by law for retrenched workers. The activists felt that once the public became aware of such practices, this imbalance would be seen as a horrible iniquity in the eyes of many Malaysians. That is, if luxury condominiums built on estate lands led to the enormous profits of a property developer, and the homelessness or abject conditions of displaced Tamil

workers was profiled in stark contrast, the public would be rightfully outraged, provided the media offered coverage. Thus activists such as Arul advised their clients to feel emboldened, confident in the knowledge that their options were not exhausted once the NUPW and MAPA or the MIC had finished brokering an unsatisfactory settlement with the developer. That is, as was becoming clear, legality was not necessarily the arbiter of justice; but rather, exposing the violence within the legal apparatus became the means to compensatory justice. In so doing, both a prospective and retrospective imagination was required.

Sungei Rinching Estate

Sungei Rinching Estate was near the town of Semenyih, about a forty-five-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur. Though they no longer lived on a functioning plantation, a few families resisted eviction and continued to live in their estate homes, hoping for a better settlement with the developer, who was slowly but surely developing the estate lands into a large housing project. Though workers were retrenched in 1994, many of the residents had refused to accept the NUPW-brokered settlement of three hundred ringgit per year of work. Others accepted the compensation and moved out. Those that refused argued that due to their low wages they had nowhere to go; moreover, they were entitled, they claimed, to low-cost housing provided by the developer at nominal cost. Local residents formed the Sungei Rinching Estate Residents Committee, which was advised by CDC and PSM activists in their negotiations with developers (Nagarajan 2004).

I visited the estate several times with Naga, meeting specifically with a husband and wife who were centrally involved with the residents committee and also active in the PSM. Their house stood out from the others, with its red PSM flags flying outside their door. Inside their house, one could see the normal accoutrements of a working-class Tamil family: a small shrine, television, and a well-organized use of space, necessary because estate homes were not particularly large and because the couple had two teenage children living at home. The father now worked as an ice cream salesman and the mother also sold small household goods. Both also tapped rubber in a thirty-acre perimeter of rubber trees that was in the immediate vicinity of the estate housing. They both explained that tapping rubber, even in such a small grove of trees, was fairly profitable, allowing for up to 150 ringgit per day on a particularly good day, far above the wages earned tapping in a functioning plantation. Given these earnings, it was no wonder that the residents were in no hurry to vacate, despite repeated pleas for eviction from the developer of the housing project. The developer, a Malaysian Chinese man, had offered an



Tapping rubber, Sungei Rinching Estate

additional seven thousand ringgit and had recently upped the ante by offering an additional ten thousand to each family if they would voluntarily vacate.

Clearly, the developer was eager to complete his housing project, but he wished to do so without having to involve the courts or, perhaps more importantly, without having to incur the media scrutiny that would ensue if demonstrations were staged. The developer realized that the PSM and CDC activists had advised the residents to stand firm in their demands for housing and to resist all attempts at forced eviction. Knowing that residents were being mobilized and politicized in this manner and knowing that the media (particularly the electronic media) could be used, the developer felt pressured to offer some sort of settlement beyond what was legally required of him (Nagarajan 2004, 197). He had already offered an alternative site for the estate temple and seemed willing, based on his previous offers of compensation, to produce

a settlement that would include provisions for low-cost housing that would enable the community to move together.

As in other cases, the strategies advocated by the PSM and CDC seemed to be effective in, at the very least, stalling evictions. In this case, there was also a likelihood, as in the Braemer and Bukit Tinggi cases, that the developer would want to settle out of court, which was likely to be to the Sungei Rinching Estate Resident Committee's benefit. Under the letter of the law, it was unclear whether they had any legal options left that would provide greater compensation than that which was already offered through the brokerage of the NUPW. But given the eagerness of the developer to maximize his profits and convert land usage, he might have been more flexible in his dealings with whom the law considered squatters. Knowing perhaps that because in the eyes of a sympathetic public notions of justice and legality do not always align, the last thing a property developer could afford was bad publicity that might harm investments. In this sense, property speculation forced developers, and not just anthropologists, to rethink the meaning and logic of compensation for retrenched and evicted laborers.

Many Tamils suggested, too, though I do not have strong quantitative evidence to support this, that Chinese developers were more flexible than were Malay developers in relocating temples, Tamil schools, etc. They were said to be not as "anti-Hindu," and by extension "anti-Indian," as the new breed of Malays were in the planning of new townships in Selangor. This was anecdotally reported from cases like Bukit Tinggi and Sungei Rinching, but it cannot be taken at face value. It was, however, a general perception that I noted from the various cases in Selangor. Several cases we have seen have been suggestive in this regard too. In particular, when we have witnessed partially government-owned, or PNB, corporations such as Sime Darby or Guthrie, the investment in legality was more principled, though arguably less just. I mean principled in the sense that the investment in *bumiputra* politics was explicitly linked in these cases to a transformation of landscapes. And with this, as I have argued, the erasure of a Tamil cultural and physical presence in the service of nation building (from an UMNO perspective) was perceived by Tamils as being part of a grander design. That, in turn, was the violence at the heart of the Law, as Tamils were coming to perceive it. Thus, and not surprisingly, grounding this violence in secondary or supplementary forms took a feverish and legalistic turn (Derrida 2002a, 1995a). Therefore, though I cannot quantify "flexibility,"⁷ both my samples and argument align with this perception.

Although the PSM and CDC activists were effective in mobilizing workers, they also spread a gospel of socialism that included, among other things, notions of Marxism that were antireligious. Though not all PSM activists

were antireligious, many cadres, evidently, did attempt to re-educate workers into “correct thinking” and away from Tamil and Hindu superstitions. In this case, the aforementioned husband gradually came under PSM influence and began to move away from the duties of his ancestral family shrine, which lay just outside the house. In this case, the family shrine was quite elaborate, involving several separate little shrines that were linked together via a cement path. This pathway of shrines was built by the family and would be lost when the houses were demolished. The *kula devam*, or ancestral shrine, had existed in its present location for more than a generation, which was yet another reason why the family was reluctant to move from its present location. Moreover, with many important (animal) sacrifices having been offered there, it was believed that the shrine harbored certain powers that should not be disturbed. To simply abandon the shrine would bring potential harm to the family, which was the reason the wife was so greatly distressed by the husband’s newfound indifference to matters as grave as religious duty to the *kula devam*. We might speculate that his indifference helped soften the blow, psychologically speaking, of what was quite likely to occur in the near future—that is, the transgression of spiritual space in the most disrespectful of ways, by the bulldozer. But this brought anguish to his wife, who shared his political commitments but not his newfound Marxist outlook on life. She explained to us that her husband no longer tended to the family temple or sacrificed goats to the family deity (*kula devam*) during the festival times. This was a sin according to the culture she grew up with in the estate. “We cannot give up the slaughter of goats; we are sharing our food with the poor, what is wrong? My husband doesn’t believe in god anymore after CDC/PSM training or indoctrination. Now he doesn’t want to honor *kula devam* and causing friction [*sic*] in the family.” Her question, “What is wrong?” may have been directed both at the socialist outlook espoused by the PSM cadres as well as at the reformist pressures directed at practices such as sacrifice by Hindu reform organizations, which were increasingly wary of the images of these practices being associated with Hinduism vis-à-vis the overarching presence of a modernist Islam in Malaysia (Willford 2006a).

On my last visit in 2006, the developer had offered land for the estate temple as well as low-cost flats nearby at a reduced price. But at that time the residents still wanted to save the present temple, and they were still opposed in principle to the idea of moving to flats. Their fight for low-cost terrace houses continued.

We can clearly see some of the contradictory elements in compensation struggles in this case. On the one hand, mobilization and resistance had produced several desired material ends. First and foremost, those that stayed on and resisted eviction managed to eke out a reasonable living by tapping

and doing odd jobs while organizing themselves through the aid provided by the PSM and CDC. This period of latency while other parts of the developer’s project went ahead bought the workers much-needed time to save resources and rethink their strategies. During this period, the housing development had encroached upon what was left of the estate, which produced some urgency in reaching a settlement. This, in turn, allowed the residents, as advised by the PSM activists, to drive a harder bargain with the developer. But divisions also emerged in this process. Some who had left earlier and taken compensation settlements from the developer, made claims on the temple management committee (Nagarajan 2004). Moreover, the very meaning of compensation took on a new hue in light of PSM and CDC Marxist orientations, as interpreted by local residents. This produced some anguish and confusion within families over the very goals and aspirations of the struggle. For some, it could equally have been about preserving the spiritual legacy of an ancestral shrine, whereas for others, having irrevocably transgressed the ancestors, they were driven by the need to silence their inner doubts and fears through the true belief of ideological commitment.

Ebor Estate Temple

Naga and I approached the remnants of the Ebor Estate temple by passing a mostly deforested area of land apparently soon to be developed into housing. The ruins of a recently demolished temple could be seen. The Kalamman temple was situated in a green clearing near a highway and final grove of oil palm trees. It was an idyllic setting that belied its stormy future. After being warmly received by five men, four women, and a couple of children, I was told about the event that changed their lives. Without any notice, on June 14, 2003, the temple had been suspiciously burned. I was shown a scrapbook of media coverage surrounding the event. Even Samy Vellu had visited the destroyed temple and had reassured the residents that he would look into the matter. A police report had been filed, though no arrests were made. I was told that the police had actually covered up the fact that some members of their force might be involved in the arson, either hired by a property developer to do the deed or to turn a blind eye to those who did. One man, a middle-aged retired worker who had grown up with this estate and its temple, said that the MIC “had done nothing,” and in fact Samy Vellu had suggested that the residents pray at a temple “several kilometers away.” Emotions were still raw and a suppressed rage on this man’s face was palpable as he spoke about the betrayals of the police acting in collusion with the developer—who never met with them personally or offered any notice of temple eviction or relocation—and the MIC, who after promising an inquiry had merely suggested that they

“move on” and forget that site despite its emotional and historical significance. The same man told me that several former residents traveled quite far to pray at this temple and had forged deep attachments to it. Even the priest, who still worked regularly in the temple, was employed from outside the area and thus came a long way by car to the temple. I was also shown the Shah Alam master plan, obtained from the Shah Alam town council, which showed the future housing estate that was to be built in this area.

The master plan for Shah Alam clearly marked how schools, *dewans* (community halls), and *masjids* (mosques), together with parks had been planned for. Conspicuously absent, however, was any mention of plans for a Hindu temple. I was told that a certain percentage of Indians was required for the allotment of land for a temple and that the planners clearly hoped to develop the township for Malays, obviating a need for a Hindu temple. That is, the Indians who were clearly attached to this place would not be given priority in buying into the future housing estates or *taman* being built, ironically, upon plantation lands once mainly populated by Tamils. That is why, I was told, there was no provision for a temple. This was, yet again, another instance of ethnic landscape refashioning.

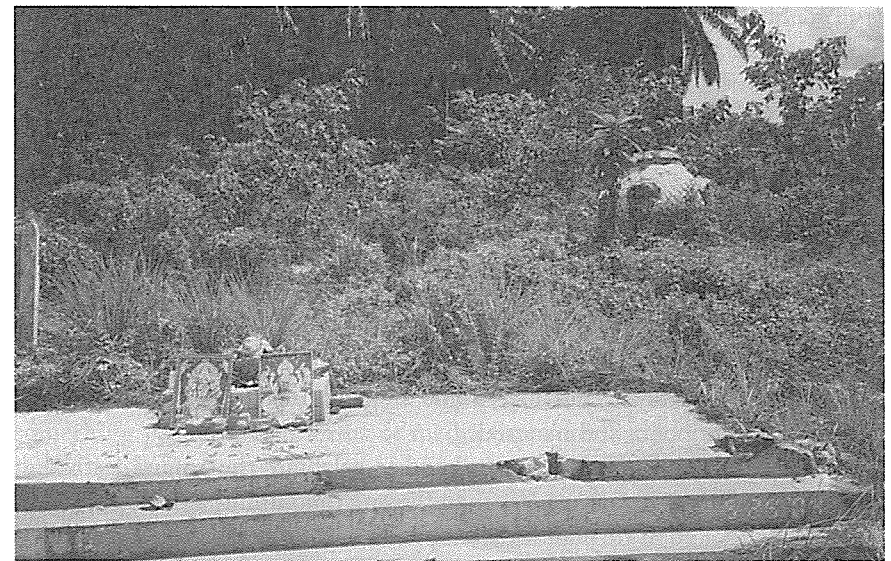
We were served *prasadam* (sanctified food) in the temple—fried noodles cooked Chinese style—after which the group gradually dispersed. In the evening, a group of four young males arrived with drums in hand. They were preparing to accompany devotees during the Thaipusam celebrations and had chosen this temple because it was far away from any housing.

At a second meeting, this time at twilight in the temple grounds, we discussed further the destruction of the Ebor Estate temple. The temple committee head believed that the local police acted as accomplices for the developer (Sime Darby), though they “were dressed in plain clothes,” he claimed. On the previous visit, I surveyed the destroyed temple and took pictures of a toppled *vimana* and the continued prayers on the base of the shrine that was now destroyed. The main temple itself was temporarily rebuilt out of corrugated tin and was again being used by the former estate community of worshippers. It was a temple for Mariamman. The temple community was fighting now for a piece of land to relocate their temple. Originally, they fought to save the original structure on the land where it stood, but by now they seemed to have accepted the fact that they had to relocate. This was the sad irony wrought by vandalism. The very act of sacred transgression had, on the one hand, outraged the worshippers and emboldened them in their legal struggle against Sime Darby, the police, and by extension, the state. On the other hand, the destruction of their old and historically significant building had made it easier for them to contemplate the relocation of their temple. Indeed, the Sime Darby negotiators considered the makeshift temple

that was rebuilt as being only “one year old”(!), now that it had been created out of necessity.

The head of the temple committee, a middle-aged man who walked with a limp that he sustained as a plantation worker, explained that devotees of the one-hundred-year-old temple were considered to be “trespassers” on the land and temple they had been devoted to for decades. He expressed clear outrage as he explained this to me.⁸ He also produced a document to certify his justification of outrage. An archival moment that clarified the moral claim to possess the temple came in the form of a letter from the state government of Selangor requesting that Sime Darby provide land for the temple. This letter had been delivered to Sime Darby two days before the demolition of the smaller Muniandy shrine. This demolition, I was told, was carried out illegally. The document only underscored the illegal and immoral nature of the act, showing blatant disregard for the state government’s appeal. If we take the state government’s request at face value, it is interesting to note the apparent divisions of interest between the government and the partially government-owned Sime Darby corporation. This was left unexamined by the residents, it seemed to me. Rather, they seemed to consolidate colluding interest groups under the banner of an unjust Other.

Preparations were under way for a large festival in the temple on May 30 that was expected to draw a thousand people. This, the annual festival, would bring lots of former residents home to their temple and would also attract the



Destroyed Mariamman temple at Ebor Estate

media, who would be invited to cover it for the local papers. The hope was that with the plight of the temple and the large festival turnout being covered in the papers, the MIC would be forced to lobby harder and win concessions from Sime Darby. As drumming groups practiced in the temple grounds, the temple committee sat and ate *mee goreng* (fried noodles) and drank sweetened rose water. We all examined, at some length again, the newspaper scrapbook coverage of the temple demolition and vandalism, including Samy Vellu's official visit in the aftermath of it. His picture of concern belied the lack of action following up his visit, according to the now disillusioned committee members. At first they had held out the hope that his visit and response would yield both an investigation and, ultimately, assistance in rebuilding the temple, or at the very least secure an alternative land site elsewhere. Since then, however, the MIC had been largely silent, to the Ebor devotees' dismay. But the scrapbook served as an archive of injustice, allowing the community to contemplate together the injustice of their predicament. This in turn was the catalyst for spiritual conviction.

At one point, the head of the temple committee said that "they just don't want a temple in this *taman*," referring to the housing area that was being built on the immediate estate surroundings. He added that "*there are masjids everywhere!*" Naga added, "If it is a one-hundred-year-old *masjid*, then the government will scream about heritage." This was an oft-repeated sentiment among Tamils in Malaysia. That is, the notion that in new townships, particularly where there was likely to be a Malay majority—which was certainly true in Shah Alam, designed to be an Islamic city (Kahn 2006; Bunnell 2004)—there was a deliberate and sustained effort to discriminate against Hinduism and Hindu temples. One might think this a fantasy, but one that inverts the unwanted presence into a space of intrusive power. That is, the temple is unwanted, in the Tamil Hindu eyes, because its offending presence, if left unsuppressed, asserts itself so powerfully in the life of Malays. As mentioned earlier, I have called this in my earlier work (Willford 2006a) the countertransference of Malay desire. But here one can see the ubiquity of the sentiment emerging in relation to development practices and exclusions occurring in the physical landscape of Selangor. That this process is simultaneously generative of a symbolic and phantasmic landscape is indeed significant, but clearly not always reducible to one single principle that collapses the phantasmic, symbolic, and material.

A few hundred devotees were on hand to celebrate the annual festival at Ebor Estate. It may have been less than the one thousand that were expected, but it was still a good turnout for a temple that had already been demolished and which existed through memories for estate workers who had long since moved out. Prayers and *pal kuddam* (milk pots) were being offered to the

goddess all morning. *Puja* (worship) and *archenei* (praise) went on until a lunch of *prasadam* was served to all present. Food was served in orderly shifts under a tent that had been rented for the occasion. Food stalls selling drinks and *murukku* (savory snacks), *laddoo* (milk sweet), and *jelebi* (fried sweet) lined the paths around the temple, which now stood in a hard-to-access place, situated off all main roads and lying close to construction sites. Still, upon reaching the temple, the remnants of oil palm trees fringed the backdrop of the immediate vicinity, allowing one to forget the construction nearby.

It was the annual reunion for the former residents, as also witnessed in other festivals described earlier. But in 2004 it was more. Given the recent vandalism and demolition, it was also a chance to come together and celebrate as well as assert their sense of community. A petition was passed around for signatures that asked that the *menteri besar* (chief minister of Selangor) require that Sime Darby heed the "state government's advice," referring to the earlier document that had been ignored before the demolition had taken place. In effect, the petition asked the state to enforce its own advice. While this was an unlikely outcome, documenting the discrepancy between state policy and legal obligation was a critical strategy. If state policy was grounded in notions of fairness and justness, and, by extension, if the aggrieved could document their victimhood, the sheer amorality or violence of the law was being pressed to its limits through such actions. At the very least, this allowed for a consolidation of sentiment in the community of believers in the shadow of the recent catastrophe. That which was inexplicable (the breaking of sacred space) was given narrative shape through these acts of documentation (e.g., the scrapbook and the petition).

A cultural performance occurred in the temple, and *bharata natyam* (classical dance) was featured. Some also spoke about the fight for the temple. Two youth activists explained to me that "this kind of problem" was "basically racism in Malaysia . . . the color of our skin." One added that the Special Branch (secret police) was present in the audience taking notes on everything. This was significant, he added, because I had just been urged to speak and had begrudgingly agreed, touching on the need to "protect the culture and temple" and "how important this occasion was." I was embarrassed to receive both a small trophy and garland for my clumsy speech in Tamil. Perhaps there was hope in the eyes of the temple committee that my research would yield something productive in terms of media exposure. Sadly, I commanded no media resources.⁹

The 117-year-old temple, if nothing else, was clearly still an important community icon, despite its physical demise. Indeed, its destruction had actually galvanized a sense of community—a rebirth, in a sense, out of destruction. Fresh offerings were made as well at the site of the damaged smaller

shrine for a guardian deity adjacent to the main temple. While the temple committee was full of rage, they were not without hope. As we will see in the remaining chapters, the theme of rebirth, or the denial of destruction, was a ubiquitous and potent motif. In this process, we witness a notion of justice that exceeds juridical calculability. For at the heart of the law, be it colonial, brahminical, or postcolonial, there is an inherent violence. Paradoxically, divinity exceeds destruction and the Law, yet in terms of its witness or containment, a form of documentation is utilized to make its claim or to reveal the transgression against it. Hence, the history of a shrine is critical, despite its apparent capacity to withstand destruction. In this sense, one might say that the divine is supplemented by its archive. Yet the undetermined (by the reason of humans) powers of divinity always exceed and overwhelm any attempt at a consolidation of meaning (or historicity). The divine must be infinite and total, having no history. The paradox, as we see, animates community struggles but also agitates reason, pointing toward what we might call a rupture in the politics of recognition.

6 The Locus of God's Power

The Faith of Spirit and Its Incomprehensible Shattering

As witnessed at the end of the last chapter, the fire and demolitions of the Ebor Estate temples caused shock and disbelief among the devotees of that community. The shards of disbelief were also the propellants of renewed faith, however, and they revitalized and politicized efforts toward a reconstitution of sacred ground. We also witnessed that forging a victim's narrative as to the ultimate cause of calamity was an important mechanism of psychological compensation, anchoring the subject vis-à-vis a lacking Other. On the one hand, the faith in the system and in intercommunal relations more broadly was erased overnight by the acts of vandalism and demolition. But equally important, the challenge to faith that ensued when a sacred site was desecrated cannot be overestimated. Though devotees would not consciously acknowledge this, the temple's immanence and purity, its very power, was called into question when it had been defiled and damaged. This chapter explores this conundrum whereby the abyss of symbolic rupture oscillates with the reconstitution of recognizable forms of power and immanence, and hence agency and intentionality. We witness this occurring in the realm of shrines and temples, particularly those with unorthodox leanings in the Tamil context. Let us consider these conduits of spiritual power as generators of both hope *and* despair, an oscillation of sublime or incomprehensible character.

Munneswaran

Along the way to Bangi, a half-hour away from Kuala Lumpur, lay an old Munneswaran (a village "guardian" deity¹) temple. It was formerly part of Broom Estate, but that plantation no longer existed. The temple, however,

remained. Among former estate workers in the area the temple had a reputation as being quite powerful. The power of the shrine came, it seems, from the regular performance of animal sacrifice that occurred on its premises before the main deity.

I decided to pay the temple a visit in 2004, on a day when about three hundred people came in shifts for the *puja* (worship), sacrifice, and feasting, which occurred at noon. Six goats were sacrificed at 6 A.M. The *pusari* (priest) performed the actual killing of the goats. As per tradition, this was done by decapitation.

The main shrine was simple and featured an image of Munneswaran. A corrugated tin roof covered what was a barely paved platform, where the deity rested. Beer and cigars, in addition to milk, were offered on the elevated shrine to Munneswaran. A trail of blood was seen around the shrine, in the same route that circumambulating devotees might follow.

The *pusari* told me that the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, an umbrella organization with links to the government, had advised him to substitute limes for goats, but that they “resist” this advice. According to Hindu reformists, animal sacrifice was not permitted in orthodox Hindu practice. The priest said, “Mariamman [the goddess] is a vegetarian,² but we must offer goats to the protector god. . . . This is our protector god.” The substitution would potentially weaken the power of the shrine, he implied. That is, the sacrifice was paramount in that it opened up a creative power, or a breach in order, through the taking of a life. Concomitantly, life created life, or powers that could be harnessed toward new ends (Shulman 1980).

I was told by one of the devotees that such feasts and sacrifices were common at this site, as “the temple is famous because people think it is very powerful. People come from all over Malaysia because of its power.” In this logic, the creative power of sacrifice created a rupture in the order of things that, in turn, attracted and demanded more sacrifice. That is to say, wishes were granted, but also, and equally, a further demand was made of the devotee who entered into this contract with divine power.

The Malaysian Chinese owner of an adjacent factory owned the land on which the temple existed, and at least for the time being allowed it to continue without interference. One of the devotees told me that “the owner of the land tried to remove the temple,” but two workers who were involved in the apparently aborted demolition “had died.” So, he claimed, the owners decided to leave it alone, fearing the god’s awful power. Devotees of this temple, I was told, “have no problem” because the “land is private.” By this, they meant that the Chinese landlord did not, after the previous disastrous and aborted demolition, interfere with the rituals. In contrast, the government, one devotee said, had plans to widen the main road, which would certainly affect the

temple. There was faith, however, that the government’s plan to widen the road at the expense of the temple would not succeed. As a devotee told me, “They won’t succeed in moving or expanding the road, as the temple is *too powerful*. Next week there will be twenty goats sacrificed.” A clear equation of power with violence existed in this formulation. At the heart of divine Law, too, was a core of violence (Derrida 1995b; Ram 2013; Shulman 1985).

The *pusari* of the temple interjected, “We have applied for proper facilities, water and electricity, but the town council will not approve.” In this statement he implied that the exclusive Malay control of the town council was the root of their concerns. Because of the temple’s ever-growing popularity, however, more space was needed. The priest then nodded toward some of the youths attending and said, “Some youths don’t pray properly, or even remove their shoes.” At this exact moment a group of youths were circumambulating the muddy shrine with their shoes on, careful not to step on the elevated shrine, but walking nevertheless with their shoes within the temple grounds. The demarcation of sacred space was not being recognized by the youths. This, a startling moment of orthodox-inflected propriety, was invoked although just moments prior, the priest himself had derided those orthodox reformers in the Hindu Sangam who did not understand the necessity of animal sacrifice in sustaining the temple’s creative power. This paradox of hierarchy within antihierarchy, and vice versa, would replicate.

Though this temple was not registered (legally protected), the temple committee required both Hindu Sangam and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) patronage and recognition as leverage against redevelopment plans. But seeing as the Hindu Sangam “won’t agree” with the sacrifice of goats, they were placed in a difficult position vis-à-vis the authorities. A local MIC representative, who had attended as a kind of “VIP,” said to me, “I come now and then, but don’t really enjoy the sacrifice and killing. But I support the temple when invited to come . . . a lot of people who used to live in the estate return to this temple.” The MIC representative then turned to the issue of the local government, nationalist ethnic politics, and the predicaments faced by the Hindu Tamils: “Muslims won’t come. But in those days, before Mahathir [the former and long-ruling prime minister], Malays came and feasted. Now because of Islam they don’t agree with sacrifice of goats. . . . Malays are growing narrow and fanatical because of the government’s Islamization efforts.” He pointed out that a Chinese man and a local Orang Asli (from an indigenous community) had come for the temple feasting on this day. “Haram [for Muslims] to come [*sic*]. Things are very difficult for a small minority when everything is done for Malays. Islam has got into their heads now and they don’t want to mix anymore. Town council and planners are also involved . . . one township/town or municipality is allowed one temple.” When I asked about *surau*s

and *masjids* (prayer rooms and mosques), he replied, “Oh, that is different, everywhere they will put a *surau!* . . . Tamils are saving their culture in places like this in spite of the government and Islamization efforts.”

As in the narratives we have already encountered from various estates in various stages of dissolution, the town councils, wedded to the state project of Malay-*bumiputra* rights, were insensitive to the memories of communities being erased and dispersed. The Hindu reformist organizations, moreover, were not sympathetic, having distanced themselves from working-class expressions of religious power (Willford 2006a). Their reformist pressures were perceived as patronizing and geared toward both distancing the enlightened Hindu from the “backward” Tamil, and the (reformed) Tamil Hindu from the modern Malay Muslim (Kent 2000). The Malay town council and Hindu (reformist) elite insensitivity also negated the power of the shrine. This was evident in the analysis offered by the *pusari* himself: “I learned from my guru in Subang [a nearby township]—the prayers and all. . . . My guru studied in India, but I did not. Guru has become a *sāvite* [Siva worshipper] and no longer believes in sacrifice [of animals].” But he explained, “Munneswaran is a bachelor. He has no wife. We used to chop goats at the Mariamman [goddess] temple in the old estate, but it is no longer existing because the Hindu Sangam put a stop to it [the sacrifice of animals]. If we stop sacrifice at this temple and only serve rice and *puruppu* [dal], this temple will not be powerful anymore.” Here we witness an admission that the shrine’s immanence could indeed be lost without the replenishing and creative powers unleashed through sacrifice. But there is also an admission of hierarchy. Siva does not demand sacrifice. Rather it is the heroic bachelor, Munneswaran, who, due to the limits of his power, requires a life in order to bestow power. The inherent calculability in the economy of sacrifice was therefore a source of ambivalence. One might imagine that the limits of Munneswaran’s powers were uncomfortable to contemplate, revealing a sovereignty built upon a kind of animality (Derrida 2009).

There was also ambivalence in this resistance to the efforts to reform and uplift Hinduism in the eyes of the Other—the big Other, which in the eyes of Tamil Hindus was Malay-Islamic modernism. Indeed, it was the frightening power of the god, his destructive and regenerative power in violence, that held part of their fascination. The undomesticated, unmarried, virile force demanded and demonstrated an awesome power. This was the power to reverse tractors, plows, and the plans of developers. There was perhaps a transgressive power, too, in the ludic quality of inverted hierarchy, in which meat, violence, liquor, and tobacco were valorized offerings (Stallybrass and White 1986). Built into the practice of Munneswaran devotion is an anti-hierarchical impulse (Sinha 2005). One need not be subservient before hier-

archy. The story of Munneswaran, like that of other bandit heroes and guardian deities in Tamil Nadu, is one in which the contingencies of brahminical order are exposed and hierarchy is challenged (Shulman 1985).³ On the other hand, the guru was correct when he appealed to principles of substitution and Saivism. The *pusari* held his guru in reverence: he studied in India, was pious, etc. He almost implied that he was *not ready* to be like him, though he was an ideal to aspire to. In this sense, reformist and orthodox notions ultimately hold sway, even when ostensibly negated in the insistence of the sacrifice. The uncouth manners of some youths, too, in the need for proper reverential behavior, suggested an internalized orthodox propriety or logic of Hindu ritual in the *pusari*’s mind.

Perhaps most importantly, Islamization, wedded to ethnic politics, was the backdrop to the political dimension of this spiritual event. Islam, as part of a discourse in town planning, bestowing ethnic rights and privileges, served to focalize this ritual, as supernatural power surmounted the political weakness of the Tamil Hindu community in Malaysia.

The *Samiyar* of Kampung Medan

Kampung Dato Harun was named after a Malay politician who helped build this community for his Malay constituency after May 13, 1969. Dato Harun, I was told by sources independently in the area, pushed to take land that used to belong to the Chinese in Petaling Jaya Selatan (South) and turned it into a Malay settlement. Prior to the riots, this area had been primarily populated by Chinese and Indians, I was told. Only a few Malay families lived and worked in the tin-mining industry (also see Nagarajan 2004). Chinese ran shops, whereas Indians mostly worked in the mines. But in 2004, in all of what was loosely considered Kampung Medan, Taman Dato Harun was one of the most developed areas. It had a nice *dewan* (community hall), a wet market, a large mosque, and well-paved roads. But as one moved away from the main road one entered into the crowded lanes of a slum. There were many poor Malay families mixed together with Indonesians. There were also poor Indian families living alongside them in the slums.

One such family was that of Muniandy and his parents. Muniandy was a young man of twenty-eight. He had a reputation as a *samiyar* (spirit medium) who could work miracles for clients who came to see him with a variety of problems. I was intrigued to hear that Muniandy claimed to have Malay clients, too, from this neighborhood. Approaching Muniandy’s house from the main road, I waded past a Barisan Nasional polling station, a hair salon, and several informal Malay food stalls. I had to walk along a dirt road, muddy from rain, off the main road for about one hundred meters before I came to

a small set of buildings, including a *vimana* (shrine) that was covered in part by a curtain drawn to cover the main deities within. The shrine opened up into a small reception and seating area, where the devotees gathered. Surrounding the house and shrine were Malay houses. All, including Muniandy, were squatters and would be forced to relocate in time.

The first time I met Muniandy, he was inside his house speaking with other youths his age, while some hard rock music played on the stereo. He looked not unlike many working-class Indian youths at first, but upon seeing us (Naga and myself), he came out and warmly greeted us with a high-pitched voice. “Yes, anything I can do for you? Any problem?” Upon telling him of my interest in religion, he asked if I needed his assistance. He meant, I think, that he was happy to provide spiritual counsel. By this time he had motioned the others to turn off the music. I then asked him when he treated his clients or when he went into a trance. He said he had a certain time each month and that we were welcome to come and witness “the trance.” I noticed a shrine room inside the living room upon which were several important Hindu (and other) saints from the twentieth century, including Mother Teresa, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, and Gandhi, in addition to Babaji, from Paramhansa Yogananda’s diaries. It was an interesting and surprising turn to me, though I had experienced the orthodox inflections in unorthodox rituals before (Willford 2006a). Still, most *samiyars* in Malaysia did not emulate great personages, but rather focused their iconography on key gods and goddesses of Hindu iconography. This also turned out to be true in worship and possession, as we will see.

Muniandy gave me his cell phone number and asked me to call before coming so that we could talk freely. He also said he would notify us when a special *puja* would be held. Before leaving, though, I asked him if his temple was registered or safe from demolition. He surprised me when he produced a temple poster that showed Samy Vellu’s wife (Datin Indrani) as a patron of the temple. He said she was a “big patron” of his temple and had found a new piece of land to move the temple to once they were forced to leave the squatter area. He added that a local Malay assemblywoman from UMNO was to appear at the temple’s annual festival and greet her Indian constituents. This same assemblywoman, as we will see in chapter 7, made controversial remarks directed at the Tamil community in the wake of the so-called Kampung Medan riots between Malays and Tamils.

Arriving the night of a festival that was celebrated at the temple, we expected Muniandy to go into a trance. But this event, the first night of a three-day festival, turned out to be worship only, without the trance and clients. Still many came to witness and pray. Judging from appearances, most of the devotees were locals and all appeared to be working-class Tamils. The

puja began around 8 p.m. and lasted until almost 9:30. Muniandy appeared from the prayer room with the aforementioned twentieth-century saints dressed as a swami, in ochre or slightly reddish robes. He wore a large garland of *rudrakasha* beads, a *savite* gesture of orthodoxy. The principal altar, now revealed, belonged to the goddess Kali in a fierce pose. There were also nine Durga or goddess statues that were adorned with *malas* (flower garlands). Muniandy appeared, helped by a brother, who carried a parasol over his head as a sign of reverence. The audience of twenty-five to thirty devotees observed him carefully. Despite his young age, he was regarded as a holy man by his followers. As he began his *puja*, one could see in the compound the presence of dogs, chickens, and birds. The dogs were tied up by ropes and occasionally barked at sounds from outside the compound. The surrounding homes belonged to Malays. To my disappointment, however, no Malays came to the festival, though I had been led to believe by Muniandy himself that this might happen.

Off to one side, a second shrine for Amman (the goddess), Muruga, and Ganesha were visible. In a slow and deliberate manner, the *mantirams* (sacred chants) and *puja* were conducted before each deity. There were also several lamps, perhaps one for each shrine, that were used for *arati* before the god/goddess. Some of these lamps were quite elaborate, with multiple flames. Muniandy offered *arati* before each icon, but before doing so chanted memorized *mantirams* in Sanskrit and sprinkled holy water (*abishekkam*), sandalwood, and *vibhuti* (sanctified ash) (the latter two were put at the shrine’s base). Flowers were also offered. Muniandy impressed me by concentrating on his chant for one hour, and he appeared single-minded in his devotions. Discounting the low statuses of the participants, it appeared to be a relatively orthodox event through the use of Sanskrit and in the format of the worship. At the culmination of the *puja*, the *arati* flame, *vibhuti*, sandalwood paste, and *kunkumum* (red ochre powder) were offered to all devotees present. Muniandy then took a brass crown/helmet to bless all in attendance by placing it on the tops of our heads briefly. A temple flag was then installed off to one side to signify the first day of the festival. *Prasadam* was then served, some sweet rice *ponggal*. After the worship, Muniandy took us into his prayer room, where he explained the saints on the wall. I asked him, “When did you know you were different?” He said that maybe at around ten or eleven he started to have “feelings” and “spiritual longings.” He claimed that he is moving in the direction of the saints and eventual renunciation of the world.

Muniandy, from an early age, began having trances and vision states, which his parents interpreted as a divine gift. He was encouraged to cultivate this talent. He and his family lived in a squatter house, and most of the residents around his home were Malay, though there were also Tamils living

there. The house appeared to be two homes joined together, forming an L-shaped courtyard. Within the house, in the front room, Muniandy prepared for each session with meditation and chanting, accompanied by music. This room had pictures of Jesus, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, the K'aba in Mecca, Subramaniya Swami⁴ (whom he regarded as a personal guru), Paramhansa Yogananda, and Babaji.⁵

Muniandy was eager that I witness his "trance." He called my cell phone one day and personally invited me to come. As mentioned earlier, when meeting him for the first time, he told me he had patronage from Samy Vellu's wife and that some Malays from the local *kampung* came to him for spiritual counsel. He seemed to suggest that he was welcome in the predominantly Malay environment despite his frequent *pujas*, which involved bells, incense, and large groups (thirty to forty) of Indian visitors and devotees. While certainly striking a more harmonious tone than many others I met, his case was perhaps unique, if indeed he enjoyed patronage from influential political figures. This patronage would not be lost on local Malays. On the other hand, and if we take his claim of Malay clientele seriously, there was reason to believe that Tamil and Hindu religious specialists, particularly from the working class, did not altogether repel Malays. This claim would be supported by the vigilant policing of Islam and all that it protects on the government's side (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011). That is, the ever-present threat of religious and ethnic permeability in Malaysia, particularly within the intimate cultural and historical contact zones between Tamil and Malay communities, proves impossible to suppress through the rationalized governance of serial identification (Anderson 1998). We will return to this theme briefly at the conclusion of this chapter. At the very least, the desire to negate this separation on the part of Tamils, be it fantasy or not, was suggestive of a Tamil reading of Malay desire, or what I have called the countertransference of Malay desire (Willford 2006a).

There were more shrines in his *puja* area than was usual for a spirit medium. Indeed, his temple, he maintained, was "registered" (legally protected) with the aid of Indrani Vellu (the wife of the former MIC leader). "Datin" (honorific) was a devotee, he claimed, and was arranging to have his temple moved to a new permanent location. Like other areas in the Kampung Medan area, this particular *kampung* was now said to be in its final year or two before demolition. The government's target was to have all squatters moved into flats and low-cost houses by the year 2006. But Muniandy, unlike many others I had met, did not seem too concerned even though it was clear that he and his family had put a lot of effort and funds into creating this fairly elaborate shrine.

At the front of the temple, from the perspective of those sitting in the arranged chairs, one faced four representations of the goddess, expressing

different aspects of her divinity. To the far left was Muthu Mariamman. Next to her was Mahakali, followed by Angalaparameswari, and finally Durga. These were bronze images, probably from India, and fairly large ones at that. Muniandy himself described what each image was before he began his process of going into a trance. Adjacent to this shrine, and to the audience's right of it, was a shrine dedicated to the Saivite deities: the first one represented Vinayagar, and in the middle was a Siva lingam and an image of the goddess that Muniandy called "Vedkalamman." Adjacent and perpendicular to the earlier described four goddesses, and closer to those seated, was a shrine with large adorned images of Badhrakali, Pechiamman, Madurai Veeran, and Chamundeswari. In front of Chamundeswari was an image of the lion. To the left of Madurai Veeran were the Navagrahas, or nine planets. Before the lion was a large and ornate *kuttuvilakku* (oil lamp). The images were covered by a *vimana* tower that carried a saffron flag.

Muniandy prayed in saffron-colored clothes, first performing an elaborate *puja* for each and every image on his shrine. He offered oil, flowers, *arati*, and sandalwood and followed this with a more elaborate *arati*. Several different *arati vilakkus* (oil or camphor lamps) were waved in front of each deity. At the culmination of this, the *arati* flame was waved before those attending, but no one rose to touch the flame or to take *prasadam*. The key exchange of sacred substance was to occur still, after completing the *puja*, which resembled something very orthodox (he chanted in Sanskrit and Tamil throughout and presented himself as a model of priestly knowledge).

The seeming exactitude of Muniandy's performance impressed me. I did not see any hesitation in his memorized performance. He was clearly experienced, though young, and quite confident in his priestly authority. Not knowing Sanskrit myself, however, as I presumed was true of the others in the audience, I had little means to evaluate his priestly exactitude.

In the audience this evening were about twenty-five to thirty devotees. Some obviously had come to him before and seemed to be on friendly terms with Muniandy's family. Muniandy's brother, also a young man around the same age, assisted in the *puja*. His parents also acted as assistants. Judging by the volume of flowers that were involved in the *puja*, each event would cost a fair amount of money, and moreover *ponggal prasadam* (consecrated savory rice, in this instance) was served to all afterwards. The expenditures, I assumed, were offset by the food and floral offerings given by devotees.

Muniandy stood in front of Vedkalamman (a particularly fierce form of the goddess) when preparing to go into the trance. After a few minutes he quietly turned, changed into all red clothing, put on a *veshti* (silk sarong), and draped a shawl around his shoulders as well as *salangai* (bells) on the ankles. Then, in a more dramatic display, he walked on shoes of nails.⁶ With the aid

of the brother, father, and one other person, he leapt to and fro over three large swords (associated with gods Muniandy or Madurai Veeran). The blades did not look particularly sharp. Still, Muniandy attempted to walk across the swords, though his balance was not terribly smooth given that it was difficult to hold the swords firm. His movement over the swords struck me as cautious. He followed this by lying down across the swords, and he also sat and rocked back and forth on the swords.

He was now apparently entranced and ready to speak to clients. As he sat down, he was brought a *cheroot* (cigar) and beer, both of which are associated with Munneswaran and Madurai Viran. These burly guardian spirits are thought to demand these offerings.

The first “client” was a sickly looking boy. He was brought to the now possessed but seated *samiyar*. Muniandy poked him with a small dagger in his hand. He used it as a sort of diagnostic device, or “healing” talisman. In each case he would gently press the dagger in different spots in response to the comments given by each person. He sucked on the boy’s chest, producing a red, blood-like substance, which he proceeded to spit out. The child’s parents had tears in their eyes and appeared grateful to Muniandy—now as the god Munneswaran or Muniandy⁷—for healing their son. After completing this, he simply said, “*nalla arukku*” (it is good) and motioned for the parents and child to go away. His voice now sounded deeper than his usual speaking voice.

No Malays came that night. Whether my presence played a factor in this I cannot say, but I had been led to believe that Malays in the *kampung* would come. If my presence dissuaded them, that might suggest a concern over religious surveillance that scholars of Malay culture have noted elsewhere (Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011). In one case, Muniandy asked a man to remove his shirt and used his small dagger to heal the man’s foot ailment. The patient/client seemed genuinely relieved. In another case, one man scolded Muniandy, or the deity within him, by asking why it is that he suffers so much when he is a loyal devotee who has done no real harm to anybody. Muniandy, as best as I could decipher, would alternate between a gentle rebuke—sometimes augmented with a brusque scolding voice of the hero—and a reassuring language that all was being looked after by god. Occasionally, he would take a gulp from his beer bottle. It was striking to see him drink and smoke after the orthodox inflections of the earlier worship. His often repeated complaint to those coming before him was “why you only come to Amma in times of difficulty?” This was almost a refrain. Though not possessed directly by Amma (the goddess), he was the intermediary, and as such expressed exasperation with several people for neglecting Amma except in times of crisis.

The parents urged me to stand before Muniandy and ask him anything. I

could not think of something to ask, so I only bowed to him. Muniandy gazed at me aloofly, carrying the disposition of the tough demigod, and simply said “*nalla arruku*” (it is good), and then wiped *vibbuti* on my forehead.

It was an awkward moment in that I felt he and his parents were seeking some recognition from me. Muniandy’s aura of otherness—that is, his voice from beyond the everyday—came from the recognition that was bestowed upon him by devotees who witnessed his miracles. With my own doubts or lack of faith revealed, the sense of disappointment was palpable. But was this disappointment my own, or was it the parents’, or even Muniandy’s, who had invited me to witness this trance as evidence of his sacred power? Seeing the limits of his power in the lack of my faith, or the apparent unwillingness of my partial faith in seeking an authentic *samiyar* but not granting this full recognition to him, Muniandy, as the embodiment of this, produced this odd moment of discomfort with the application of *vibbuti*. But in risking my non-recognition of him, his invitation to me that evening had provoked a sense of anticipation—a desire, one might say, that I witness his power. The awkwardness stemmed from my inability or refusal to recognize it. In this moment, I could have doubled for the state, or more broadly for the forces of contingency, that threaten to undermine the sacrality (and sovereignty) of Muniandy’s identity, if not his precarious shrine.

Indeed, within a few months, his shrine was demolished to make way for low-cost housing. I do not know if his patronage by political elites helped him find an alternative site for his temple. Moreover, I wondered what impact the demolition of his temple had on his devotees, who were convinced of his divine powers.

Kampung Gandhi: The Mariamman Temple Pusari

Kampung Gandhi was part of the so-called Kampung Medan area of Petaling Jaya. At the time of my fieldwork, this area still housed hundreds of squatters, though ethnic violence in 2001, directed mainly at the Indian community, accelerated the process of squatter relocation into low-cost housing in the area. Kampung Gandhi, in 2004, still had a functioning temple, several homes, and a large population of Malays and Indians.

I first visited the temple one evening during a festival celebrating the repainting of the *vimana*.⁸ The temple was crowded with many devotees, though a group of youths stood outside the structure, socializing in the street. When a young female dancer performed in the temple, I heard joking and catcalls directed at her from the youths. It was not a hospitable environment. At that time, too, I noted that motorbikes regularly crossed the path of the temple, including those driven by Malays who had to cross the Indian area to access

the Malay-occupied side of the *kampung*. The narrow streets and cramped houses struck me as dangerous at the time, though I was later told that ethnic relations were generally fine, despite the awful violence that was associated with the place since 2001.

Though some of the Hindu youths were devout, participated in temple activities, and seemed to take this *puja* very seriously, the majority of them seemed less interested in the worship, preferring to watch the young women who participated. The women, as a whole, were more involved with the worship than the youths. At the conclusion of the *puja*, which appeared to be conventional, there was a mini-*raddam* (procession) around the temple, which took the goddess into a narrow back alley and to the smaller shrines for Muniandy and the planets. Following this, *prasadam* was served. The meal was vegetarian *nasi lemak* (coconut milk rice with chili sauce) and *payasam* (sweet-milk-and-rice-based pudding). Following this, a semiclassical dance was offered by two young women.

Naga and I returned several times to this temple between 2004 and 2008 and met with the outspoken *pusari* on most occasions. The Mariamman temple itself was quite old⁹ and possessed a shrine for the goddess, for Vinayagar, and for Murugan, as was typical of Amman temples. It also had a Nataraja (Shiva as the cosmic dancer) shrine off on one side. Arriving there one evening as the priest was sweeping the structure, we approached him and introduced ourselves as researchers with the University of Malaya.¹⁰ As we spoke, I noticed small children playing tire and stick games in the middle of the road in front of the temple. Later they sat down and played a homemade board game with stones and sticks on the ground. The priest said there were twenty families left in Kampung Gandhi, at least within this subdivision of the village. The residents had been told that relocation was inevitable, but they were dismayed, he said, because they had made down payments on a property development seven years earlier. But the developer went bankrupt during the financial crisis of 1998, and now the apartment building lay abandoned. They had filed a legal appeal on the grounds that they did not have anywhere to go, given that their funds were locked into the failed venture.

This *pusari* had come directly from Bukit Jelutong, an estate in Shah Alam (see chapter 3), where he had been a laborer. He came, though, to work as a priest in his spare time. Born in India, he had learned much ritual practice and was devoted to learning about his religion. As a priest, he earned two hundred ringgit per month from the temple committee. His duties included performing daily *pujas* and cleaning the compound. He was also provided housing, though it, like the temple, was unregistered and therefore not legally protected against demolition.

Much of his religious training came from books. But he went to a *gurukkul*

(religious school) in India to learn how to conduct and interpret religion "properly." He memorized "Sanskrit mantras" and preferred to pray in Sanskrit because the "people prefer Sanskrit over Tamil." But he did not understand the meaning of what he chanted, he admitted. The magical power of words worked whether he fathomed their meaning or not. Thus, his own intentionality or sincerity mattered less than the precision of incantation.

The *pusari* told us of the social problems he had witnessed in Kampung Gandhi over the years. This became a common theme in his chats with us over the next several meetings. He described how he had witnessed drug dealers fighting in the streets. The police were directly involved in the local crime scene, he claimed, and would not crack down on certain criminals because they themselves were "paid off by local gangsters." Sometimes "youth gangs bother young women who are trying to pray in the temple," he explained, adding a critique of his own constituents. Similar to the teasing of young women I had witnessed in the festival, he claimed that women were not respected in his temple by gang members.

The *pusari* often turned to the question of Malay-Tamil relations in his neighborhood. In this *kampung*, as mentioned earlier, there were several Malay households, some adjacent to the temple. His neighbor and friend, a Malay, was married to a Tamil woman. The man, though not participating in temple life (nor was his wife), was friendly. The wife, however, would rarely step outside and would not socialize with her Hindu neighbors. The Malay neighbor was on good terms with the *pusari* and spoke to him on a regular basis. The Malay man, too, blamed the government for the predicament facing the poor. This Malay was also loathe to move to the flats, but said that "being poor, what choice did I have?" The man saved all his money for several years and performed the *hajj* in 2004 while I was there. In this instance, the degrees of separation we witnessed elsewhere were absent because of the marriage and a shared intimacy of residency in the *kampung*, chaotic though it was. The phantasm of types, or the serialization of identities, had not taken root completely.

The *pusari* then spoke directly of the violence that had occurred in 2001: "What they [the Malays] did was wrong. They attacked indiscriminately, even children, using glass." He did not implicate any of the Malays in the vicinity of the Kampung Gandhi, but he did add, "They drive so close." Indeed, the temple was at the end of a road that bisected the Malay and Tamil housing. I witnessed several close drive-bys, generally Malays on motorbikes who would pass within a couple of feet of the temple, in the same space used by the devotees to circumambulate the temple. Even a congregation gathered outside the temple would be interrupted by the stream of motorbikes ambling through the temple's front entrance. When I observed this, the bikes would slow

down, but it was still hair-raising to witness. I could not help but imagine what might happen if a worshipper were to be struck by a motorbike driven by a Malay so soon after the violent events of 2001.

The priest also reflected on a “lack of respect” toward a house of worship. If Indian youths came this close to a *masjid* (mosque), there would likely be friction, he surmised. But, and especially in the aftermath of the attacks, Indians were too timid to raise objections about Malays and their motorbikes.

The *pusari* faced many personal challenges. For one thing, he had five children and worked for low wages. To my surprise, two of his children were in college. To accomplish this, he had taken personal loans from Samy Vellu himself! “*Pratchenai maddum!*” (so many problems!), he explained with exasperation to justify his need for personal loans from the MIC leader.¹¹ The *pusari* also worked with the knowledge that Kampung Gandhi would soon be leveled and that the temple, which was currently unregistered, faced almost certain demolition. Though not yet served a demolition notice, he was ever conscious of the future challenge. In the many times I met with the priest, I often found him meticulously cleaning the temple, conducting his worship, and studying religious texts, regardless of his audience or lack thereof. His religious calling and quiet demeanor seemed resolute.

Kampung Gandhi Tiruveela: June 8, 2004

The Kampung Gandhi temple was not likely to survive much longer when I conducted my research.¹² Each time they celebrated their annual festival could have, in theory, been their last. There was hope that a new site would be made for the temple, but the likely scenario would be that out of the twenty or so shrines and temples in the Kampung Medan vicinity, only one would be rebuilt. The consolidation of shrines into one larger structure seemed inevitable. But such a scenario was not appealing to the members of each temple, given their attachments to each particular site, their relationships with the specific *kampung*s surrounding it, and the community memories attached to both (see Rajoo 1985).

The year of 2004 was poignant not only because half of Kampung Gandhi was bulldozed just before the festival began, marking the end of community in the most palpable of ways, but also because this was the first time the procession (*raddam*) had taken place after the attacks of 2001. Police had banned all processions, fearing they could spark violence.

I asked the *pusari* about the procession, which I unfortunately had missed. He said that about two hundred people joined in it, circumambulating through Taman Medan, Kampung Medan, Kampung Lindungan, and ending up in Kampung Gandhi. There were no incidents, he said, though he

made the point that lots of Malays watched with interest. When I naively asked if any Malays “went into trance” (*arul nadanta*), he said it was “not possible” (*ille, mudiyatu*) for them. What was not clear in his statement, however, was whether this was due to religious prohibition or lack of spiritual attainment.

In preparation for the *kavadi* and *timithi* (firewalking), devotees prepared with three days of fasting and vegetarian diet, coupled with abstinence. The priest explained that they must “have faith” (*nambikai*), or it is impossible to walk on fire (“*nambikai illai, nadukku mudiyatu*”). There was no pain, he maintained, but “it is impossible in bigger temples because one cannot control or train the devotees properly. It is a test of faith.”

I observed the festival day's celebrations. A few devotees carried *pal kud-dam* (milk pot offerings), and others carried *mayil kavadi* (the peacock feathered cage-like arch). Some also pulled ropes that were hooked to their backs and pulled from behind. This was called *mulle kotta* by locals. The whole atmosphere was charged in the midday sun and heat, as several youth groups wearing uniforms played *tavil* (a kind of drum) and other resonant drums along the path to the temple. As one came toward the temple, in the heart of what was left of the village, one could see a fairly large assembled group that had come for the festival. There were *taneer pandals* (drink stalls) and *prasadam* (sanctified foods from the temple) being sold along the roadside. Though small in scale, it was similar to the Adi Puram, or even Thaipusam celebrations witnessed elsewhere in Malaysia (Willford 2006a; Rajoo 1984). *Karagam* dancers also made their way to the temple and danced in the main shrine.

Two deeply entranced youths pulled ropes that were hooked into their flesh. A bloody looking substance came from their mouths, but it was impossible to tell if it was blood, food coloring, or ochre. The ropes were pulled from behind. One of the pullers appeared to be acting less than human—perhaps as a beast of burden, based on his facial gestures. Two troupes of youth drummers played loudly along the way as the procession moved along the dirt path. At one point, the rope pullers were doused by devotees. It appeared to be more than merely a cooling off, but instead resembled the *abbisheckaam*, or sacred anointing. One “Chindian”¹³ woman, who was married to an Indian, spontaneously went into a trance herself upon dousing a rope puller. She fell to the ground and held her hands in the air. Her hands were stiff, but also in a pose that resembled the *mudra* (symbolic gestures) poses of the goddess. In her trance, she wept, and the rope puller before her became animated, communicating with her through facial and hand gestures. They interacted for a few seconds without words through their shared trance experience. The form of recognition that transpired was mediated through their bodies, and the

language was enacted through it by the agency of the spirit. Eventually, the woman regained partial (self) consciousness when her husband held her back and the rope puller moved on. This suggested the degree to which witnessing the language of the trance—that is, its physical manifestation—was opening oneself up to contagion or mimicry. This, as I had witnessed in many other rituals of possession, suggested a barely suppressed collective set of symbols that could be compelled to appear through recognizing its manifestation in another person (Kakar 1982).

Along the way, the entranced gave counsel as devotees approached them seeking advice. An older, heavy-set devotee, wearing a white turban and carrying the sword of Munneswaran or Madurai Veeran, walked on fire with apparent ease. He held children, blessed them, and spoke words of advice or prophecy from within his deep trance. All the while devotee onlookers repeated the chant, “*Om Shakti.*”

The Malay man, who as mentioned earlier lived adjacent to the temple and was married to a local Tamil woman, did not come out to view the procession. We were told that his wife was now “frightened to come out” without *tudung* (headscarf) and would not participate in the festival at all. They watched from their doorway for a brief moment but did not mix with anyone or join in the feast. That which was forbidden in Islam was not entirely without interest. Perhaps his wife, as a convert to Islam from Hinduism through marriage, might respond to the festival at some emotional or unconscious level, given her Hindu upbringing. The vestiges of that cultural intimacy was perhaps the source of her unease. Wearing a headscarf gave her protection in two senses. Nobody would mistake her for a Hindu and invite her participation. And, perhaps equally importantly, wearing it supplemented her newfound Islamic identification, providing a symbolic and material buttress to an identity impossible to fully embody. In miniature, this suggestion about the converted Tamil Muslim woman replicated a logic I have outlined regarding the perception by Tamils of an intimacy between Malays and Tamils more broadly. That is, the symbolic, legal, and bureaucratic buttressing of ethnic difference has, among other things, called attention to a more fluid and intimate boundary between now serially identified Malays and Tamils (Anderson 1998; Willford 2006a). Ascribing “fear” to a lacking Other who now fails in its reciprocity of cultural recognition is indeed a sentiment we have heard in many of the cases we have discussed.

Firewalking occurred right at midday after the *kavadi* bearers had arrived and performed their offerings to the goddess. The temple itself buzzed with activity, as devotees would make their offerings to the goddess within. Milk and fruits were offered. The *pusari* had to perform the rituals associated with these offerings while also offering *prasadam* and *arati* to those attending.

While the crowd must have numbered less than three hundred, and only about half of that in and around the temple, the narrow streets and cramped housing in which this temple was situated made it difficult to navigate. Getting close to the temple, and to the firewalkers, involved weaving in and out of a crowd of onlookers.

There were only a dozen or so people offering *kavadi* or *karagam* or pulling ropes. The majority came to watch and feel a part of the community. The goddess herself sat under a parasol facing the temple. She was still not reconsecrated in the shrine, as she had been taken around on the procession (*raddam*). The firewalking took place just in front of the temple. The semi-paved road was torn up in order to dig the fire pit, which was about fifteen feet long. The heat adjacent to the asphalt was oppressive because of the tight space and the crowd of onlookers, who were especially interested in witnessing the firewalk. At the end of the trench a pool of water was dug. Several devotees walked across the hot coals, which had been raked and judged to be of correct temperature by the youth volunteers and by the priest himself. Some ran across, whereas others walked calmly. I saw a couple of instances where children were carried across the hot coals by their parents. The priest was asked to carry a baby across at one point. He quietly did so. Others were more exuberant.

As the firewalking was completed, the priest began bringing people out of their trances with *vibhuti* and the chanting of *mantirams*. The effect was almost instantaneous. Some still entranced danced with abandon inside the temple, but once the proper words were said and the proper substance applied, the trance possession would stop. As in Tamil folklore, even the most aggressive forms of the god or goddess, coming for instance in the role of guardian spirits or iconoclastic and antihierarchical “bandit heroes” like Munneswaran or Madurai Viran, had, in the end, to submit to and obey brahminical authority as symbolized by the use of Sanskrit and *vibhuti*, considered a “pure” substance (Shulman 1985).

Lunch was served, but as there was little room to sit, devotees went in shifts. The temple was colorfully decorated for the festival with customary banana trees, as was customary, which we had had witnessed a couple of youths hoisting up before the front of the temple a day prior to the festivities.

Later the priest said there was a Muniandy shrine behind his temple, a few houses away, where goats were sacrificed. There, however, the practice was linked to the search for “winning lottery numbers.” He added, “I do not like it (*enakku piddikule*), because I do not have faith in this (*nambikai illai*). They take alcohol and act crazy [the *samiyars* who go into trance], and expect payment. But I believe in genuine grace (*unmai arul*) when the devotee is earnest.” Here we see the priest making an orthodox distinction between his

temple and that of the site where blood sacrifice occurs, where meat and alcohol are combined with “crazy” behavior exhibited by “*samiyars*.” From the perspective of higher-status practitioners of orthodox Hinduism in Malaysia, the Mariamman temple festival described above, with its *kavadi*, possession trances, and moments of ecstatic trance, would be anathema to orthodox Hinduism. Yet to the priest, this is the “genuine” *arul*, or the presencing and witnessing of spirit, the immanence of the goddess in the locus of this temple. But caught in the rails of belief and doubt, this presencing does not manifest equally in all sites, therefore he does “not have faith” in the adjacent shrine, where more instrumental means and aims are utilized and pollutants to the genuine and immanent spirit (*unmai arul*) are present.

Kannan

Kannan lived right next to the temple in Kampung Gandhi and was one of the rope pullers described earlier. He told me that he prepared for the ritual for twenty-one days by eating only vegetarian food and bathing only with water from the temple. During this period, he also took a vow of silence. The twenty-one-day period had to be repeated if he spoke or violated any of his preparations. Kannan said that he must ignore “all distractions,” particularly “women” (meaning sex), during this critical preparatory period. This was the “most difficult part,” he explained.

He learned the practice of going into a trance and pulling ropes from his uncle, who came from an estate background before settling in Kampung Gandhi. His uncle was a religious adept of sorts and would offer counsel to others. The feeling of grace, or god’s presence (*arul*),¹⁴ “comes slowly,” he explained. As Kannan performed this ritual only once a year, it had to be done with utmost care. He said he “cannot speak” (*pesa mudiyatu*) during the trance experience, and this following the twenty-one-day vow of silence. Though the pulling of ropes that are hooked to the flesh looked painful, he assured me that “there is no pain.” This assurance also asserted the authenticity of *arul*, or that it was indeed *unmai arul* (true grace, or immanence). Kannan claimed not to remember the actual event of pulling the ropes, as his mind went blank during the trance, which, he explained, was profound and deep. He said he feels the *arul* of Mariamman, who possesses him. He underscored that he had “no memory” of the possession. When I observed him in his trance, it appeared that his eyes were glazed and that he did not experience any obvious pain, as he suggested. But Kannan remained quite serene and calm throughout the ritual, unlike some others I had observed in a trance, many of who became energetic and danced with stylized abandon.

The purpose of this act of devotion, according to Kannan, was for the “health and prosperity of the family.” His uncle taught him the practice, but this uncle was more involved in it than he was. The uncle would also get possessed in his own house and treat clients in a manner similar to the case we encountered earlier in the chapter. He was, in other words, a *samiyar*. Kannan was not. He held a regular job and had this profound experience just once a year. There was nothing otherworldly or ecstatic about this man. He was quiet and soft-spoken and more than a bit surprised that I wanted to know more about his trance experiences. He could not read or write Tamil and knew very little about orthodox Hinduism.

When in a trance, he explained that he could not recognize people. When asked what this experience made him feel, he said that at the conclusion of the ritual he felt “healthy and strong.” His appetite increased, and he felt a sense of well-being. The emphasis on strength and physical wellness surprised me slightly, but then again the purpose of the ritual, by his own account, was to produce health and prosperity for the family. In this sense, the potency or concatenation of power that occurred with the experience of *arul*, at least for one day a year, produced a dramatic reversal of the marginality, poverty, powerlessness, and impotence experienced by this man and his family as they faced the prospects of losing their village, their home, and ultimately the source of their (temporary) empowerment, their Mariamman temple. One can only imagine the depth of his trance and the silencing of contingency, including the faces that make up the recognizable world around him, during this moment of departure from everyday reality. And while some might diagnose this state of nonrecognition, or blankness, as a culturally controlled form of dissociation (Obeyesekere 1981; Kakar 1982), leaving aside questions of its ritual fecundity as too metaphysical, it is clear that an effect was produced. It is possible to argue that the dissociative state of possession has poorly understood neuropsychological effects that, among other things, can be experienced as reinvigoration (Kakar 1982). As hinted above, it is equally possible to suggest that through the experience of ritual empowerment, a reworking of hierarchy (and control of contingency) was effected within the psyche of the devotee, producing a much-needed sense of well-being. But, and in line with what has been argued already, I would also suggest that the overwhelming and indeed uncognizable powers of the divine are experiences of a kind of sublime or near-death. This overpowering of the self by an awesome and divine presence is tantamount to the self’s sacrifice, in Tamil Hindu terms, and subsequently its ritual rebirth at the conclusion of the ritual (death). From this little death, or sacrifice of the devotee, comes divine power and rebirth (Shulman 1980, 1985; Ram 2013). It will be important for us to bear this in

mind when contemplating the theodicy induced by the demolition of sacred space. We previewed this problem at the conclusion of chapter 5, but we will return to it in our conclusion. For now, it is interesting to note the interesting contradiction we have encountered: Within the estates, memory has been deemed crucial for compensation struggles. As such, we have seen the feverish documentation or archiving of community, land, and experience as a kind of prosthetic to memory, as well as serving as evidence of injustice. Hence the archive was seen as critical to political action, both within the parameters of the law and in chronicling and cultivating a sense of injustice. That is, the archive was that which nurtured a sense of betrayal and victimization. On the other hand, through the possession by the divine power, memory and thought were immobilized, rendered inconsequential and contingent. In Derrida's (1995a) terms, like the Tamil Hindu's, an anarchivistic impulse destroys the law and its archon-like authority, revealing a radical contingency in the heart of sovereignty while simultaneously giving creative power to humanity to remake their law.

The End Is Near?

A year after the festival, I returned to see whether the temple was still standing. It was. Although there were only two months left until Kampung Gandhi was to be demolished, no news about the fate of the temple was forthcoming. I was told about the *tiruweela* (festival) that had taken place the month prior to my arrival. Evidently six hundred people had participated, according to "Moorthy," a resident of Kampung Gandhi and an active temple member. When I asked whether the fact that this was likely to be the last time it would be celebrated in Kampung Gandhi had anything to do with the large turnout, Moorthy said, "Maybe so." He said a lot of those who came were former residents. There was, once again, firewalking, *kavadi*, and a large vegetarian feast, as there had been a year earlier when I had witnessed it.

Moorthy spoke of the problems facing the final residents of the *kampung*: "All Malays are moving out, getting units in the flats first. Many in Kampung Gandhi are having problems getting the flats. Though each house is supposed to get one unit reserved at the price of 25,000, when the title changes after the father or mother dies, some reregistering of names is necessary." Moorthy said that when he went to register and book his flat he was told that the name had to be changed, as his father had died. This involved going to the JPJ (Jabatan Petaling Jaya),¹⁵ which took about two weeks to process. Upon returning with the correct documentation, he was told that there were no more units left. All had been sold. The developer said to him, "I am a developer, and I need to sell the property." This seemed outrageous to Moorthy and

perhaps illegal, as the residents were guaranteed units. It seemed plausible that politicians and their benefactors were obtaining additional units for resale or rental profits. Moorthy planned on fighting this outcome, but he felt that there was both corruption and Malay preference to deal with in the Petaling Jaya city government.

Regarding the temple's future, the priest had this to say: "Sivalingam (former and late Selangor state executive officer) has promised space for the temple, but no confirmation. Housing has been promised for seven years but the flats are not finished. They lie abandoned." He pointed to the horizon, where a high-rise flat stood unfinished. The flats were unfinished because the developer went bankrupt after the financial crisis of 1997. Several residents had made down payments, and they were now wondering when these payments would be honored, either by refund or with the resumption of construction.

Aside from the questions lingering over the temple's survival, the priest had a serious visa problem that affected his family's status in Malaysia. His daughter was born in India. The immigration department, therefore, did not want to grant her a Malaysian identity card, despite his status as a Malaysian citizen. He said, "I'm a Malaysian. I can't leave my daughter in India." He struggled for twenty years and finally "appealed to the Prime Minister's Department, after which time, she was finally given a Malaysian IC [identity card]. For awhile I was going back and forth to Singapore with her."

He reasoned, "I see Indonesian children very easily getting IC in Malaysia, and if a Malay child is born overseas, there is no problem obtaining IC, but since I'm an Indian, *they want to deny me*. . . . Samy Vellu couldn't help me, either." Here the priest's sense of victimization over racial discrimination and accusation of preference for pseudo-Malays, that is, "Indonesians," provides grist for the mill of not only anger and resentment, but the spirit's power to stand against all that is unjust in this locale. We can decipher this in the following statements of anxious hope and faith:

A youth who grew up near Kampung Medan, and who felt a strong attachment to the temple, explained his hope and fear about the temple's future, which echoed that of the priest's. When I asked him how he felt about its probable destruction, he said that he "doubts that the temple can be broken." When I pressed, he explained that he had "some feeling" that the goddess would not allow this particular shrine to be destroyed. It was "just a feeling he had." But alternating with this optimistic feeling was the realization that dark times lay ahead. "I just want to leave Malaysia," he lamented. Indeed, he had sought education overseas and wanted to work outside of Malaysia in the future. This young man volunteered in this temple and had found the *pusari's* counsel helpful over the years. He told me that he "has seen plenty" in the *kampung*—referring to police profiling, social problems, gang fighting,

etc.—and would like to leave. On the other hand, he was optimistic that the future would be good for this temple. It was a contradictory assessment, reflecting a cognitive dissonance. In a similar contradiction, he thought the MIC had helped negotiate good housing alternatives for most of the residents; on the other hand, he was upset that one temple would replace the number that existed at that time. Moreover, he was demoralized about the police force and their conduct during the attacks of 2001. Though having “seen plenty,” he was not present during the attacks and was spared the worst. But he was told of police indifference and had witnessed police harassment of youths in the area. He knew well, and said as much, that Indians were profiled and racialized. On this particular evening he said, “There is no future. It is depressing.” The oscillation between hope and despair, like the one between empowerment and powerlessness experienced by Kannan, was focalized on the metonymic point signified by the temple, the locus of hope, and conversely the anxious reminder of an inevitable loss of “future” that is indescribable and terrifying, and becomes in some sense sublimely experienced as the calm power of immanence before the storm. That is, the near-death produced its own sort of reserve.

Another man standing with us during this conversation said he votes for “PAS (opposition party) in the Parliament, but BN for State Assembly.” He laughed as he said this. The apparent contradiction had to do with the kinds of patronage one needed at the local level, which required local MIC connections. Therefore, the practical solution was to back the powers that be in the most cynical of calculations. On the other hand, this man had a “backstage transcript,” precisely in James Scott’s (1991) sense: the government, while being voted for in one instance, has been seen for what it is, and therefore a vote for PAS was a little voice of resistance, a cynical realization that the games the government played, particularly the MIC component, did not benefit their constituents in the long run.

The *pusari* concluded, as he often did, by proclaiming that nothing really mattered as far as the political machinations of the city council were concerned. The temple, he maintained, was protected by a higher power and would continue to be so. He would often express this, but he would also explain that the “alternative site” was still being obtained from the MIC or the city council, etc. There was, in short, a battle being waged in his own mind about the future inevitability of demolition. This must have weighed heavily upon him given the daily devotions he carried out dutifully within the temple. He said, however, that “it does not matter if we are given land for the temple or not. It is where we have prayed, and *the temple cannot be destroyed because the power is there in it.*”

Throughout this chapter, we have seen the realization that sites of imma-

nent or sacred power are threatened with demolition. This itself produces a crisis of faith and hence its counter, the notion that the shrine is omnipotent and can surmount the contingencies of development, politics, nonorthodox practices, orthodox critics, and Islamization. But with the realization that immanence of spirit is not enough to ward off imminent demise, the displacement or deferral of power or the miraculous into another realm of manifestation is perhaps inevitable. Retribution for transgression was one such possibility in such instances. Another possibility was displacement into the non-material realm of spirit. Destruction, in a Tamil Hindu sense, can be reinterpreted as sacrifice that generates creative power. That is, what we might call the rationalization of failure takes on new and spiritualized forms (Miyazaki 2004). In chapter 7, we will encounter a further instance of this sublime problematic.

Under the Highway in Kampung Gandhi

Nothing can be built on reserve lands. This was the abiding “hope” for a small temple built on federal reserve land under the highway in Kampung Gandhi. The owner of the temple had since moved to a terrace house, as his home was broken in Kampung Gandhi, but he still performed the sacrifices of goats there. He would not try and register the temple because of the Hindu Sangam’s opposition to animal sacrifice. He simply hoped the land would be left alone. In addition to the shrines where he prayed, which were immaculately cared for, there were small plots for vegetables. By keeping his gardens neat and productive he hoped that “Malays will not start gardening there.” An Indian *samiyar* used one shrine in his compound to offer prayers for Chinese, Indians, and, he claims, even a Malay “*dato*” (honorific title, bestowed by a sultan) who came to pray for “special things.” The shrine was simple, but it did feature the *kris* (Malay dagger), a Chinese-looking deity, perhaps Metreya Buddha, and some Indian prayer items, including a Shiva lingam (Shiva represented as generative power). The “*dato*,” he felt, offered protection for the shrine, perhaps shielding it from a city council that might otherwise want to beautify the underpass by eliminating an “illegal” temple, particularly one that practiced the sacrifice of goats. More significantly, the power of the shrine attracted both the patronage and devotion of the Malay, which, in terms of the residents of Kampung Gandhi, signified a hope for recognition, not to mention an acknowledgment of the power of their gods and their temples. This was a powerful hope, given the politics of Islamization and the rapid rate at which temples were being demolished at the time throughout Malaysia, especially in squatter areas and estates. As we saw in the case of the *samiyar* earlier in the chapter, the desire for Malay recognition was mani-

fested in claims of patronage. This hope for a futural return to imagined past interethnic intimacies—or a blurring of that which has made the law, with all its ethnic preferencing, pernicious to working-class Tamils—was itself a kind of compensation, helping to anchor a subjectivity of victimhood, without total dehumanization directed at an Other. Indeed, what emerged from this was a splitting of the Malay figure. There was the true Malay, who shared an intimacy and cultural recognition with the Tamil Hindu, and there was the constructed or inauthentic Malay, understood as an artifact of the Law. It is to this theme and the potential for violence that we now turn.

7 Ethnic Riots and Other Myths

If intimate friends do some painful thing,
Take it either as a piece of foolishness
Or privilege of friendship.
—*Thirukurral*

In March 2001, in what was described as the worst “ethnic rioting” in Malaysia in decades, Malays and Indians clashed in an area known as Kampung Medan. Though I have alluded to this event in previous chapters, here we address the implications of this incident in the context of plantation retrenchments, ethnic politics, and landscape transformations and the imaginaries that these processes engender. Near Kuala Lumpur, the densely populated Kampung Medan was associated with urban poverty, squatters, and problems of “gangsterism,” alcoholism, and drug abuse. Analysts, academics, and politicians were quick to ascribe cause and blame, some in racialized terms, while others invoked the “inevitable” frustrations caused by anomic conditions and squalor within squatter areas. Through a recounting of the violent events by witnesses and victims, this chapter suggests that the monstrous figuration of the “Indian” squatter and the “Malay” extremist silences not only more complex exchanges between the two groups, but is also produced out of a particular nationalist imaginary that is linked to specific development discourses and practices. The so-called ethnic clash, and the stereotypical figures of cultural and religious difference that presuppose its explication, is shown ironically to be symptomatic of cultural and ethnic uncertainty.

Understanding the phantasmic force of ethnic imaginaries in Malaysia has turned me analytically toward Freud and Lacan, particularly with regard to the impossible demands of, and hence neurotic attachment to, the ego-ideal in the production of desire and uncanny or monstrous feelings (Žižek 1993; Lacan 1977; Freud 1997; Gherovici 2003; Willford 2006a; Hansen 2001), but the social, in this case the bureaucratizing of what might be called the letter

of the Law, turns my analytic gaze also toward Weberian insights regarding the encaging of the subject within bureaucratic reason, and the potentially volatile limits therein (Peletz 2003). Finding, in conclusion, a critical analogue to Weber's critique of bureaucracy in Heidegger's essay "The Age of the World Picture," I suggest that the alternating and oscillating imaginaries that anchor the subject within structures of meaning dependent on the metonymic displacement of ethnic stereotypes are produced within a material topography. In turn, this exacerbates the rigidity of the structuring narrative, or emergent "mythico-history" (Malkki 1995) of ethnic difference. I begin by outlining the official representations of this incident. Second, I provide an ethnographic account given by victims and witnesses of the event. That is, I show how this event was meaningfully structured, as well as identifying incomprehensible experiences that defied myth making. Following this, I elaborate on a particular Indian imaginary that took hold and that nurtured a particular narrative of Indian victimhood structured in opposition to—and one might say in recognition of the lack of—the perceived Malay-Islamic subject. Finally, I speculate on what tipped the scales toward a more categorical and structured othering in this instance, as compared to the mere stereotyping we have already encountered in other cases, and what broader comparative implications might be considered from it.

The Attack and Its Representation

The facts of the incident, as best as can be ascertained at this time, have been meticulously investigated and recorded in Nagarajan's recent study (2004). I will summarize briefly what transpired, followed by the media accounts of the events. Then I will turn to interviews conducted with witnesses and victims. I aim to show that the "myths" that circulated about this incident were structured by stereotypical understandings of the urban poor, particularly as pertaining to ethnic relations. The myths I see emerging in victims' accounts, or in the Indian imaginaries of this event as mediated by class and status, are equally structured, but in a way that anchors or protects a particular truth, within which even lies can subsist.¹

On March 4, a minor disturbance broke out in Kampung Semarak and Taman Lindungan Jaya, a Malay housing estate adjacent to this squatter area. A Malay wedding was occurring a few hundred meters away from a Tamil funeral. A Tamil youth riding a motorbike was obstructed by the wedding party, which had blocked the road. Evidently, the youth on the motorbike kicked some chairs or a table to clear a path. In retaliation, some of the Malay attendees of the wedding seized his motorbike. The youth returned with a machete and reclaimed his motorbike, but in the scuffle that erupted, a Malay

man was injured slightly. Shortly thereafter, a group of about thirty Malay youths gathered outside the funeral house and stoned people or threw Molotov cocktails at the house. They had presumed, following the Indian youth's direction of travel, that he had taken shelter in the house. But upon discovering that the gathering was for a funeral and was not where the youth had gone, the crowd dispersed. The incident caused some minor injuries and property damage and was reported in the media the following day.

All was quiet for three days, but this was shattered when a different Tamil youth accidentally broke the windshield of a van being driven by a Malay driver. Though the matter passed without incident, later that evening an argument broke out between Tamils who were negotiating the cost of replacing the broken windshield. The van driven by the Malay was actually owned by a Tamil living in the area. When the Malay driver intervened in the argument after returning home from his evening prayers, he was "roughed up in the heat of the argument" (Nagarajan 2004, 288). Though nothing serious occurred, other Malays who witnessed this thought the driver was being attacked by Indians.

A short while later, groups of armed Malay men were seen attacking Tamils at random along the main roads and arteries to the housing estates of the area surrounding Taman Medan, popularly known as Kampung Medan. For the next five days, Tamils, particularly men, were ambushed as they attempted to enter or leave their residences. In many instances, they were returning from work. Malay youths, in groups as large as one hundred, attacked Indians at intersections, often pulling them off their motorbikes or surrounding their vans and cars, forcing them out of their vehicles. The attackers used *parangs* (machetes), knives, catapults, chains, steel pipes, maces, batons, and axes.

By March 12, six people had been killed in the attacks and thirty-seven had been injured, with twenty-six of them in the hospital. Out of the six dead, five were Indians and one was an Indonesian.² Of the thirty-seven injured, thirty-four were Indians and three were Malays. At least in one instance, a Malay sustained his injuries while trying to strike an Indian with a homemade weapon.

Though four hundred police officers had been deployed to curb violence on March 9, the attacks continued, sometimes in broad daylight, for three more days. Though the deadliest attacks had subsided, a few more instances of Indians being slashed and beaten at random continued until March 23. In the last recorded instance, a Tamil Muslim man pleaded with his attackers that he was "*a Muslim just like them*" only to have his pleas rejected, being told by his attackers that he was "lying" (Nagarajan 2004, 293).

The police response, or lack thereof, as we will see, became a special object of concern in the accounts of the events. Indians accused the police of indif-

ference, inaction, or, worse, of siding with the attackers. For now we can simply note that attacks occurred in busy intersections, despite a purported police presence as early as the 9th of March. It should be mentioned at the outset that the police were (and are) predominantly Malay.

This event received global media coverage, as it was the deadliest so-called racial violence to erupt in Malaysia since May 13, 1969.³ On that date, around two hundred deaths occurred when Malays clashed mainly with Chinese. It is worth briefly considering how the media covered the so-called Kampung Medan attacks. On the whole, while politicians were quick to deny that this was a “racial clash,” the media presented a racialized picture of the events. A leading national daily, *Utusan Malaysia*, published on its front page on March 10 a picture of the chief minister of Selangor, where this attack occurred, consoling a Malay man with bandages on his hand (Nagarajan 2004, 295). While the overwhelming majority of victims were Indians, the impression created in the government-controlled mainstream media was that Malays were victims of Tamil gang-related aggression. Significantly, none of the major dailies published pictures of Tamil victims, though their injuries were far more serious. In part, Malay political leaders, while ostensibly denying this was a racial clash, hinted that this was a “gang fight,” implying that Indian gangsters were the root cause of the conflict. “Gangsterism” is stereotypically associated with Indian youth in squatter areas. According to Abdullah Badawi, deputy prime minister at the time, and later prime minister, the clashes “began when a Malay man tried to settle a fight involving a group of Indians” (*Yahoo! News Asia*, March 12, 2001). Implicitly, though the attackers were Malay, the focus in the media became Indian provocation. Though the deputy prime minister dismissed suggestions that these were “racial clashes,” but instead local problems, some lower-ranking politicians, including most conspicuously the state assemblywoman for the Taman Medan area, Norkhaila Jamaluddin, pointed the finger directly at the local Indian gangster problem. In an interview she claimed that Malays have “long been patient although the Indians have attacked us again and again” (*Malaysiakini*, March 9, 2001, emphasis added).⁴

Numerous stories in the media described the events as “racial riots,” “communal clashes,” or “ethnic clashes.” While some, as seen above, hinted at Indian gangs being the root cause, other accounts emphasized economic frustration and poor housing. Even the opposition alliance, the Alternative Front, issued a statement calling for the government to deal with the deplorable living conditions, particularly “widespread drug abuse, gangsterism and unemployment in the area” (*Yahoo! News Asia*, March 12, 2001), which they suggested contributed to the “ethnic clashes.” Two then-leading opposition figures and former university professors Chandra Muzaffar and Syed Husin Ali, respec-

tively, suggested that “ethnic relations . . . it is so fragile, it erupts,” and that Kampung Medan is a “cowboy town.” Echoing these reports, Nagarajan (2004) notes that some academics subsequently argued that endemic “anomie” within the squatter areas produced frustrations, bubbling over into ethnic conflict. But, as Nagarajan points out, the violence did not in fact occur within the squatter villages themselves, but rather along the major intersections of the *tamans*, or housing estates. Though many Indian squatters were victimized as they tried to return to their homes in the villages, the violence did not erupt between neighboring squatters living in poverty. But the media representation suggested otherwise: The squalor of squatter life was the culprit. Or, conversely, the “Indian problem” of “gangsterism” was the root cause. As one Indian policeman quoted in the national daily, the *New Straits Times*, suggested, “Where there is a concentration of Indians, you will find Indian youths there involved in crime” (*New Straits Times*, Internet edition, June 2, 2002).

A noted commentator and journalist, MGG Pillai, had this to say in response to the media coverage: “Officials insist what happened was not racially tinged, but allowed the media to suggest it was Indian gangsters against Malay residents” (*Malaysiakini*, March 12, 2001). Indeed, stereotypical representations abounded in the media, and not just in response to this specific event. These images solidified the gangster stereotype of the working-class Tamil (Willford 2006a; Nagarajan 2004; Nadarajah 2004; SUARAM 2004). Yet, as noted earlier, the injuries and deaths were one-sided enough to call into question the notion of an ethnic clash or “race riot.” Though the media coverage did not emphasize this, individual accounts by the victims that we collected in 2003–2004 certainly did.⁵

Accounts by Victims and Witnesses

Naga and I visited the houses of two victims of the attacks two years earlier. We entered the *kampung*, adjacent to a predominantly Malay *taman*, by following an open sewer. I noticed that despite dilapidated roofs and walls (with holes for rain quite visible), the houses had meters for electricity and water. I was told that they received these services from the city and were charged for them. But the shacks were very close to one another, as one would expect in any shantytown. In this particular area there was no room for plants, trees, or any greenery whatsoever. The narrow alley leading to the front door had several Malay homes in close quarters with the Indian family we were visiting. The victim, who had been badly cut on his leg with a *parang*, was absent at the time, so we spoke to his mother, who was staying there together with the children of a brother of the victim. Though the house was in bad condition, they did own a large television, entertainment unit, and several VCDs (video

discs) on the shelf. The mother, probably in her seventies, appeared distressed. She spoke of the hardships facing the family and how her son found it difficult to drive his truck now as a result his leg injury. Moreover, the MIC had failed to do what it had promised, she claimed. Given his injury and her age, she thought a ground-floor flat had been promised to her and her son, but instead they were to pay M\$25,000 (US\$6,579) for a fifth-floor flat in a building without an elevator. She complained, holding back her emotions but with tears in her eyes, that it was going to be impossible for either of them to climb that high. She asked, "How are we going to manage?" noting that her son had to care for both her and his own family, despite having a leg that was always hurting after the attack, which inhibited most kinds of manual labor.

We visited another victim's family, but again the victim was out at the time. His hands had apparently had been cut off by Malay attackers when he arrived home from work. It seems that when he approached the intersection leading to his village, he saw the police guarding outside and assumed it was safe to go home, but then a mob had caught him and cut his hands off. His family was also living in a shack that had little land or greenery around it. Moreover, there was a broken water pipe spilling water all over the front entrance. His wife was there together with a sister who had Down Syndrome. The man who lost his hands was one of the few victims who received a free low-cost flat as compensation for his injuries. Others given a flat were the families of those who had suffered a death in the family as a direct result of the attacks. As one of those victims turned out to be an Indian citizen and therefore not legally entitled to compensation, this badly injured man was able to obtain the flat allocated originally for that person. I was told that though the MIC had taken credit for all and any compensation arranged, it was actually the pressure exerted by NGOs and other activists that had achieved results. Even then, only M\$2,000 to M\$3,000 (US\$526 to US\$789) was offered as compensation for injuries sustained, and only those with serious job-threatening injuries were given anything at all. In fact, the housing compensation, I was told by an activist scholar, was nothing short of a "real-estate deal" that the MIC brokered, implying that they were selling units to the victims. We will recall from previous chapters the repeated accusations against local MIC officials and local branch heads for their purported involvement in the brokering of housing deals involving suspicious allocations, resale of homes at a profit, and renting of units meant to be allocated to the poor.

We picked up Palani, another victim, at his home in Kampung Semarak and went to the office of a Tamil-based NGO, accompanied by an attorney from a prominent law firm. We were to witness a case being filed against the police force for gross negligence and breach of duty during the attacks of 2001. The attorney recorded the statements in the law office. When we reached the

office, we heard from the parents of one victim and from one other middle-aged victim.

Anand was a middle-aged man who had adopted two small children and also had his own children. His wife was with him. The attorney, who spoke fluent Tamil, first asked the victims and their families if they really wished to record these statements. Doing so, she said, would possibly make these accusations public. The deadline for filing the case was fast approaching, so having the affidavits signed and the statements given was crucial if there was to be any further inquiry. There had been no official inquiry, save the initial "white paper," which was confidential and done by the government (Nagara-jan 2004). The case was effectively closed and no more compensation was being discussed for victims. The MIC was discouraging and in some cases intimidating those who wanted to speak to NGOs or lawyers about possible legal action.

Raja's left leg was crushed in the attacks. He was a truck driver and had one dependent, an elderly mother. Upon entering a main road near Kampung Medan, off old Klang Road at a major intersection, he was attacked, he said, by twenty to thirty Malays. He remembered about five people actually beating him. He was driving a motorbike at the time and someone stuck a stick into the wheel, which sent him tumbling. He did not remember how long it lasted and claimed to have blacked out during the attack. His left leg was badly injured, and he was hospitalized for fourteen days. Steel rods were inserted to hold his leg together. Now he could no longer carry heavy loads and thus could not earn what he used to. He used to make M\$1,400 to M\$1,500 per month on average, a modest income. After the attack, he now earned about M\$900 per month. Raja received two months' salary after the attack, but then the payments were stopped. He was given six months leave, which included medical benefits, but that too had stopped. Because he could no longer clutch with his leg, he lost his job as a truck driver.

When I asked him whether he had any nightmares about the event or any lasting psychological disturbances, anxieties, etc., he at first said he was fine and that he put the event "behind him." But then, when I repeated the question, he said he had suffered from fear and worry for some time after the attacks, but then assured me again that he is now "fine." His insistence that he was fine, I felt in his pensive response—and in his temporalization of his fear and worry as being "behind him"—suggested an attempt to archive his own progression out of fear. I sensed both an urgency and hesitation in his response that perhaps belied his ongoing inability to articulate his fears and worries.

On March 13, 2001, at a temple on Old Klang Road, in Puchong, near Kampung Medan, Muthu and Kumar were closing up the shrine after prayers around 9 P.M. Four men jumped out of a van and ran into the temple. The

two men had never experienced problems inside the temple before and were caught by surprise. They were also outnumbered. According to Muthu, Kumar was hit from behind by a *parang*. A temple priest, a Chinese man, and a policeman parked across the street were said to have witnessed the attack, yet no arrests were forthcoming, which shattered Muthu's faith in the law. Kumar was badly injured. Muthu, who was giving the statement, said that his hand was hurt quite badly and needed to be reconnected after two fingers were virtually severed. He was hospitalized for three days and received five months of medical leave. Gripping with the right hand became impossible and he suffered extreme pain in the same hand. His old job was making filter cartridges for a company, but he could not do so anymore given his loss of manual dexterity. After being "terminated" from the filter company in May 2003, his situation became more desperate. He and his wife had two children. One, aged nineteen, was studying in college, and they desperately wanted to fund his education to improve his chances for a good career. His daughter was fifteen and in "form 3" (high school). They were worried for the future and had received minimal compensation (M\$2,000). Now that he was without a job, his wife looked for part-time work but had not found anything substantial. In their desperation, they turned to a *samiyar* (Hindu spirit medium), who promised them that their money problems would be solved if they did what was asked of them. The medium suggested that he conduct a big *puja* (worship). But the *samiyar* took the family's jewelry, their last source of wealth, to finance the ceremony, and absconded. The wife broke down in tears while recounting this story. The husband then said they were a bit embarrassed to have fallen for this *samiyar* but that they were desperate people in need of help, and the *samiyar* had taken advantage of their desperation. Muthu and his wife then made an amazing claim that the MIC had threatened them for making a statement to the press to the effect that their needs had not been looked into and that the victims were being forgotten.

This couple seemed very close, personal tragedy notwithstanding, and having hit rock bottom with the MIC, the *samiyar* con, and the indifference of his employer, Muthu seemed emboldened to try the legal route of making a statement through this attorney, though he knew there were risks involved and that the likelihood of success in the court system was negligible. His wife, "Selvi," was "particularly upset over insinuations that 'Muthu' . . . was involved in a gang clash" (Nagarajan 2004, 314). Indeed, it was said that the case could be thrown out on several grounds before it went to trial. Mostly likely, I was told by the attorney, the case would be dismissed on the grounds that it could inflame communal sentiments, which is certainly one reason the MIC opposed litigation against the police. Especially as the communal situation now appeared calm, the pretense that litigation could inflame ethnic sentiments

provided a strong incentive to quash any victim's litigation. A final statement made by Muthu was troubling. He said he "*can't speak to Malays anymore.*" In fact, he said he gets uneasy when he sees a group of Malay men together. Unlike the previous case, where the victim had suppressed and purportedly surmounted his past, Muthu identified his anxiety in the figure of the Malay. Being able to speak to Malays would force a reliving the trauma of inexplicable violence perpetrated by those with whom one normally speaks without any problem.

Anand, who as mentioned above had adopted two kids, was attacked while coming home after work. He never saw his attacker. He mentioned that a Chinese man found him lying in the ditch and risked his own safety carrying him into his van and taking him to the hospital. I met him twice and heard the same story about the attack. The first time I met him was at the small Puchong flat he had been given as compensation for the attack. Formerly a steamroller driver, he could no longer do any manual labor. Indeed, walking up the four flights of stairs was a major undertaking for him (there was no elevator in the flat). In his old job, he earned M\$800 per month, up to M\$1,200 if he did overtime. He now earned a fraction of that doing odd jobs, but he had no regular employment. His wife sold snacks in a small roadside stall in Puchong. They adopted two children who were "in need" because their families were "broken," or suffering hardship. In one case, the family's father was a drug addict, and the boy, aged five, did not possess a birth certificate. A new baby, around six months old, had no documentation of live birth whatsoever. They did not even know how to obtain the documentation and feared that it would be "a nightmare" trying to get it, as they would be asked "all sorts of questions." And since they did not have proof of Malaysian birth, they feared the children could be put in a group home, deported (to India apparently), or worse. When asked why they had adopted despite being economically hard hit, Anand replied, "Well, you helped us," so he must do the same for others. He was referring to Naga and his colleagues having raised M\$3,000 in extra compensation for each victim's family. This money, however, was so resented by the MIC, I was told, for upstaging whatever compensation the party was trying to arrange (or not, as the case may have been), that Samy Vellu, the MIC president, insisted on disbursing the checks himself, though it was the independent efforts of social activists that made it happen.

Anand seemed quite withdrawn and distant. He often stared into space as if completely dispirited. A sadness emanated from his eyes. When I mentioned this to Naga, he said, "Of course, his world was shattered." He was soft-spoken and never raised his voice in the two meetings I had with him. He did say that the SOCSO (Social Security Organization) payments, a kind of workers' compensation benefit, was not what it should be. Payments for

work-related injuries were expected under SOCSO provisions, but in this case, Anand claimed he was having trouble collecting.

Palani was a young man now in his early twenties. He was a student in a technical college. Upon returning home one evening he was attacked by a group of unknown assailants. His hand was nearly severed and his stomach was badly gashed. He lifted his shirt and showed me a large scar that looked about eight inches long. It had been a deep cut and certainly would have been medically serious when it occurred. Though his hand was nearly severed, it was reattached at the hospital. But it did not work as before, and this affected his employment options. To demonstrate this, he held out his hand and tried to make a fist, but had trouble closing it. He then mentioned that his attackers had a “mace” when they attacked him. It had struck his head, and he has since suffered from bad headaches and dizziness. I asked why a CT scan was never done, despite its being available at the University Hospital. He seemed surprised at my question and said that such a test would be “too expensive.”

Palani was outwardly cheerful. He never volunteered any information on the attack, yet he seemed willing to cooperate when questioned. But he did not seem motivated in any way to tell his story, as did the other victims discussed above. Palani was misquoted in *The Star* newspaper (a popular national daily) as saying that “*he didn’t know why his neighbors turned against him. He just wanted to get along with his neighbor.*” Naga, who knew where Palani lived in Kampung Semarak and who took me to see his house, said this was not possible, as there were no Malays living there. The statement given on the hospital bed, according to Palani, was a misquote. After Naga interviewed him later on, a letter was sent to *The Star* requesting a retraction. They replied that they stood by their story. Palani said that the attackers perhaps were from the “neighboring” *grammam* (village). On this occasion, he implied in his statement to the attorney that he did not know the attackers, but in his earlier statement given in the hospital, he suggested that he recognized some of the attackers as being from around the area. I pressed him on this discrepancy, mentioning to the lawyer that this could be an inconsistency in the statement. Palani thought for a minute and then said it was speculation on his part that Malays came from a “neighboring” area, not that his actual “neighbors” were involved in the attack. He maintained that *he did not know the attackers*. My sense from this encounter was that he was confused as to whether he may or may not have recognized any of the attackers at the time of the attack, but in retrospect he was increasingly certain, but only upon reflection, that he did not know the attackers. It was true, moreover, that the houses neighboring his own were occupied by Indians and not Malays. At an earlier meeting, Palani said to us that he subsequently heard that the attackers were from a militia known as “Madura,” which supposedly had links to Islamist terror

groups in Indonesia and Thailand. This rumor, which he appeared to believe, externalized the aggressor further. “They were very organized, and wore combat boots,” he added. He even claimed they had a logo on their clothes. But no one else seemed to notice any logo, as far as I could tell from other witness accounts. One might suspect that the logo was an embellishment serving to objectify, metonymize, and archive a memory that was clouded and traumatic. Some others did say, however, that they wore boots and bandanas. The victims were caught off guard, Palani suggested, because the group was “so well organized.”

When asked about his sleep, he told me he was troubled with “sleep problems” and headaches but was getting better over time. He added, though, “*ippe bayaam*” (I still have fear). Palani also lost his job after the attack. Prior to the attack, he earned M\$1,000 a month. Now he was a part-time *roti* (bread) seller and student. He added that he has no more Malay friends and that he felt “fear” or was “nervous” when he saw a group of young Malay men. Before the attack, however, he said he had lots of Malay friends, but now he would not “trust them anymore” (*nambikai illai*). This was perhaps telling, given that he had identified, in retrospect, his attackers as an (external) “terrorist” militia, and emphatically not any of the Malays that he personally knew in the area. The monstrosity or incomprehensibility of intimacy betrayed was sutured with an account that figured the other as wholly Other, marked by uniforms, uncanny discipline, and violence. They were not part of his social world, and thus the trauma of the social turning against itself (Siegel 2006) was shielded by this symbolic work. On the other hand, his nervous fear of Malays and loss of all his Malay friends belied his capacity to externalize and locate the source of the violence.

Murugesu moved to Kampung Medan after the horrific 1969 race riots. He said that an Indian family had sold him his house—a typical wooden shanty, with a cement floor, little artificial or natural light, and a tin roof—after they had fled to India, fearing that the violence would eventually be directed toward Indians. The house was tiny and cramped. He said that things were still tense in his neighborhood, though he had not been directly attacked in the recent violence. But rocks had been thrown through his window, and he wished he could leave. But, he sighed ruefully, “what can we do?” Moreover, and underscoring the tenseness that pervaded the neighborhood, he claimed that an Indian boy had been beaten at a playground by Malays recently. Nobody dared fight back for fear of reprisals, he said. Several Indians had indeed fled after the 2001 attacks. Those who had remained were playing it cautious but felt uneasy, he explained. Murugesu had purchased a low-cost flat nearby for M\$35,000 and would be forced to move there once the squatter village was demolished.

Murugesu held a derisive view of Malays that seemed similar, in my experience, to those of middle-class Indians, not those in squatter areas. He said that “Malays shit in the same water that they bathe.” He then repeated, “What can we do?” shrugging his shoulders. In saying this, I took it to mean that the Indian plight is such that they must survive in a society dominated by an uncultured majority, elevated by state bureaucracy over the more “civilized” Indians. But read more metaphorically, one might think that he was critiquing Islamization indirectly. That is, the very religious waters that guided and elevated Malays in their quest toward civilization and purity in official discourses were despoiling them in the sense that Islam, as increasingly intolerant and wedded to ethnic exclusivity in Malaysia, was tearing asunder the very fabric of society, despoiling it with shit. In an indirect way, then, shitting in the very water in which one bathes (bathing being a central tenet in Islam, which requires prayers five times a day and a bath prior to each prayer) is an identification of rot, shit, or violence at the heart of the Law, in a Derridean (2002a) or Benjaminian (1986) sense, which in turn requires the supplementary violence of ethnic categorization and stereotypical or metonymic othering. In this sense, the rot of today had a specific genealogy that had its origins in the violence of the past, specifically with the riots of 1969 and the subsequent engineering of Malay special rights.

He said that the local Chinese shop owners were chased out on May 13, 1969. “Dato Harun (a late prominent Malay politician) is the culprit of May 13,” he said, suggesting that Harun wanted to establish the area for his constituency and used the events to claim Kampung Medan. Actually, he informed me, “it (Kampung Medan) was a Chinese area, due to the tin mines. It was a political settlement (for the Malays) from the beginning,” he said, referring to the specific Taman Dato Harun, which, he implied, was created by chasing the Chinese away in order to provide a political base for the poor Malay constituency. It is worth noting that this *taman* had a large mosque, a food court, and wet market, as well as a *dewan* (community center), all of which were built through the patronage provided by the government. The local Chinese, much less the Indians, had no such patronage. Therefore, to Murugesu, this was a “political settlement,” the systematic development of a neighborhood along ethnic lines, requiring the partial eviction of one community by another, aided by infrastructure, housing, and other forms of patronage. The large and impressive (and very legal) mosque that now dominated the landscape both authorized the law, but also, in the terms of his indirect critique, despoiled it, revealing its violent and contingent nature.

Murugesu told me a story of the local MIC representative (who we will hear more from shortly) whose son was badly beaten; his bones were “all broken when he was tied down by his attackers.” He said that many of the

Indians had moved out of the Malay-dominated *kampungs*, fearing for their safety. This seemed to further contradict the statement by Palani that claimed that he had no problems with his neighbors and that the attacks were led by outsiders.

Shanmugam was a young man, perhaps in his twenties, who was severely injured in the attacks. Both hands were badly cut and almost severed. As we approached the dilapidated and small house where he lived with his mother, we noticed a broken water pipe in front. Water gushed out and created a small stream and puddle of water that looked relatively clear. A small child was bathing with the water that flowed from the broken pipe, though it contacted the littered and muddy ground before it was ladled onto his body.

Shanmugam’s family knew it had to leave by 2005, when all squatters were to be relocated into flats, unless the residents could afford other homes. The flats were being sold at a price of M\$35,000 and were said to be at a discount of 7,000 (the asking price was 42,000, but this was negotiated down by the MIC, I was told). Shanmugam appeared depressed, very thin and gaunt. The case being filed against the police would have been aided by his testimony, but Shanmugam was worried that the case would hurt his chances for a settlement with SOCSO, the employee disability fund. In Shanmugam’s case, SOCSO would pay M\$300 a month, and only M\$35,000 in total. Originally they were supposed to give M\$50,000, but they declared that Shanmugam was only “semidisabled” and could work to supplement his disability funds. His mother was furious with this reasoning. She said to me, “What work? How can he work?” (*eppadi velai seyya mudiyum?*). She worried about his future. He did not appear able to tackle regular work. He did not speak English, and was thus was not a good candidate for light office jobs (which would suit his physical limitations best). That SOCSO says he “can work” had to do with their insensitivity to Indians, it was explained to me.

Shanmugam had approached the MIC for help in finding work or a loan. He had not received any help yet, two years later. He said he needed the loan to start a small business, but he had heard nothing. We walked to Taman Medan, a housing estate adjacent to Kampung Medan, where his aunt, a Tamil schoolteacher, was staying. The house was a typical terrace-style townhouse, ubiquitous in Malaysia, and much better than a squatter home. We were told that the police “ignored pleas for help” (also see Nagarajan 2004). Many witnesses were there, we were assured, to attest to this, but there was fear of reprisals in the case against the police that could impact on the witnesses’ retirement or employment. Particularly since they continued living in Kampung Medan and still felt nervous about the incident, they did not feel secure in testifying. In this catch-22, the lawsuit against the police, while conceivably highlighting the plight of Indians in a dramatic way, was met with reluctance,

as it would produce reprisals from either the police or Malay youths. The Tamil teacher, as a government employee, added that she was worried that “government servants” could be affected (i.e., their pensions and work status) if they were to testify against another branch of the government (the police).

Shanmugam did in fact file an affidavit with another attorney shortly after the attacks, which, I discovered, could potentially be used in the case being forwarded by the attorney discussed above. But Shanmugam was worried that any litigation, that is, signing on to the case as a witness, could hurt his settlement with SOCSO. In his case, he had been given a low-cost flat by the MIC and therefore did not want to antagonize or embarrass them with litigation that might shine a light on their unsatisfactory response to this event. What his reluctance demonstrated, too, was his awareness (as well as that of his aunt) that the law was not just. A fear of reprisals occurring within the operations of law suggested a consciousness of the law’s violent core. Unlike the (at least partial) faith in law exhibited by those who gave their statements above in the lawsuit against the police, Shanmugam (and his aunt) perceived the conjoining of police power and legality. The Law, as Lacan would have it, always takes hold in the anticipation of violence, for the submission unto the symbolic takes hold under the threat of violence suffered at the hand of the paternal figure. But against the determinative perversity of Lacan’s introjection of the Law, Shanmugam’s awareness of the Law’s violence lies closer to Derrida’s deconstructive understanding, whereas in the cases discussed earlier, the litigants, in compensating for the Other’s lack, reconstitute faith in the Law, albeit manifested in a higher or more transcendent register (divine Law, justice, etc.).⁶

The Demolition

Rain was coming down intermittently on the day when parts of Kampung Gandhi were destroyed. Not only was the memory of the attacks still fresh in the residents’ minds, they were also now dealing with the literal dissolution and demolition of their community, its houses, temples, mosques, and community hall. Bulldozers and diggers were doing some of the damage. Though most residents had moved out, there were trucks to haul away useful materials such as tin, furniture, fixtures, and other things that could be recycled.

One resident, an Indian Muslim, looked on sadly as his childhood home, and the home of his mother, was torn down. He lamented, “I’m sorry to see it go.” But when I asked if enough time had been allotted to make the transition and move out, he said, “If the government gives more time, then people will simply stay longer.” By this he implied that the residents would take advantage of any opportunity to stay on. They were in no rush to leave the

“cowboy town,” purportedly infested by gangs and substance abuse. As I spoke to this man, another man came up to me, apparently intoxicated and smelling of alcohol, and said, “Don’t treat us as garbage . . . don’t talk to me about the government.” He seemed visibly disturbed by the demolition and actually *did want* to talk about the government with me. But others nearby held him back, though he did briefly complain about the government and the lack of help he had received.

We went to another row of houses being destroyed and spoke with a family and their friend who was helping them salvage what they could from their home. As we entered their dilapidated house, the rain began to fall heavily. With the wind, rain, and lightning, our nerves were slightly rattled. Pieces of tin from the now half-demolished homes were hurled in the air. Lightning struck all around us as we huddled under the rattling and barely attached tin roof. The nails had been removed, so as to salvage the tin. There we spoke with two close friends, one a resident and one who had recently moved out. Both were thirty-four years old, and both were married. “Don’t do it like this,” one of them said. “A seven-month timetable is too difficult for the people to manage. Give more time.” He then stated that the “flats are impossible” (a familiar refrain to us by now). There will be “fights between youths” if they are relocated in flats, he claimed. There was “no proper room” for family activities, and this compared unfavorably to the situation in the squatter areas. Indeed, in this street, four households were adjacent to one another, affording an “extended” house feeling to their homes, provided the residents were on good terms. This allowed them to be part of the community with relatives and neighbors. But this feeling was lost in the flats, where people were dispersed and living adjacent to non-Indians in spaces that discouraged socializing.

Drinking tea that this poor family—in the midst of packing up their few belongings—insisted upon meant calling on a cell phone for a “tea delivery” motorbike. As we drank the sweet concoction from plastic bags and straws, we turned to the attacks of 2001. One of the two men said that the “police looked away” during attacks against Indians. Moreover, the hospital “only helped Malays.” The two friends insisted that they saw instances of police indifference. It was a terrifying time, one said, with the violence lasting for over “one month.” One insisted that there was a “cover-up” in the media, in which it had been reported that the disturbances were under control within a few days, when actually the situation was out of hand for much longer than admitted. When we asked why the attacks were so one-sided, with only Indians being killed, the friend who was helping salvage belongings said, “Indians killed Malays, too . . . it went on for one month.” But the government covered this up for fear the violence would get out of hand. Naga thought this

was a statement of “pride” and not borne out by the facts. He insisted later that the victims had all been accounted for and that there were no Malay deaths. But this man, the friend of the family moving out, claimed that “Indians were bad, too.” He did claim that the event was an orchestrated attack, as had others, but he also seemed eager to claim a mutual culpability. Or perhaps the impotence and helplessness of the Indian was being denied retroactively, and the other, the Malay attacker, was actually though secretly hurt. Moreover, he also complained about the impact of television and consumerism on the Indian family. He said that Indians were losing their values and were prone to “violence and materialism” from the media. In effect, he claimed that Indian values had declined as a result of the bad influence of Tamil movies, particularly the ones on TV.

The narrative structure here was different. This individual spoke more like middle-class Indians, who tended to distance themselves from their working-class counterparts (Willford 2006a; Kent 2000; Baxstrom 2008; Nagarajan 2004). The working-class culture, the purported bad values, crime, and violence associated with the squatter area in the media and popular imaginary, was here internalized. Rather than identifying with the Indian as victim in relation to the big Other—the fanatic but incomprehensible and unrecognizable “Malay” militia—he stands outside, distances himself from the image of the “gangster,” without negating the image of this monstrous figure being produced out of Malay desire, displaced as metonymy, “where the memory-screen is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish is petrified” (Lacan 1977, 167). That is, the stereotypical figure of the Indian gangster, as imagined by Malay desire as a displaced means to shore up its own ideological inconsistencies, is not negated in the manner seen earlier. There, a simultaneous sense of victimization was forged against the perception of a lacking Malay Other, signified by the state-sponsored ethnic subject of legal entitlement and ethnic privilege. Significantly, perhaps, this man left this village several years earlier, bought a home, married, and joined the ranks of the lower middle class.

Unlike others we met earlier, this man still had several Malay friends and was hopeful that the “bad days” were over. But, he maintained, police inaction had imperiled the lives of Tamils, and racial profiling that aided Malays had occurred. Yet he and his friend refused to testify in the pending litigation. The friend of the homeowner said, “I’m a family man, and I don’t want problems.” He was frightened of reprisals from the police. Though he saw blame on both sides, he said that racial polarization in Malaysia was worse than it was when he was growing up in this *kampung*. In the following account, we see a similar ambivalence, though expressed with greater invective directed toward the government and police.

Dr. Manoharan was a doctor with a popular clinic in Taman Sri Sentosa, an area that developed where squatters had lived. It was adjacent to what was then Kampung Medan. It took some time to see him, as he only had a few minutes to spare between patients. Indeed, it was a bit awkward, as he was eager to speak with me, perhaps out of curiosity and perhaps as a break in the routine of endless patients. The clinic, while not exactly immaculate, was very busy.

His father had been a “technician” who had sold his land in order to educate his son. His “forward thinking paid off,” we were told, as he, the doctor, had done well. Now the doctor, who was probably in his fifties, was sending his own son to school. He said that some “enterprising Indians had done very well,” relating the story of a scrap metal dealer who, while technically a squatter, had made a fortune selling the scrap and now owned businesses, drove nice cars, and had a large house. But in contrast with the success story, there were several problems that plagued the residents of the area. He described the problems of “drugs” and “alcohol,” particularly *samsu* (a potent and cheap liquor), that were hurting the community and empowering a “ruthless group of gangs.” “Gangsterism” was the big problem that the community battled, he explained. But this extended beyond the Indian community. There were, he claimed, Malay gangs in the area that extorted protection money. Moreover, the police, he charged, cooperated with these gangs, collecting their own “coffee money” or bribes. In one case, he said, an Indian who operated a computer shop in this neighborhood refused to pay the Malay gang and subsequently lost all his investment and was forced to sell the shop when it was vandalized in retribution. The police, upon taking the victim’s report, the doctor claimed, chastised the business owner, asking, “Why didn’t you just pay the money? It is a small amount.” In another way, the gangs influenced which businesses were allowed to operate outside of the shophouses. There were several large open-air Malay restaurants all along the roadside in Taman Sri Sentosa. The doctor told us there were Indian eating stalls before, but that they had less influence with the local police and gangs and were thus shut down. The brightly lit Malay restaurants had become permanent fixtures, though they were technically disallowed under the city ordinances, he claimed.

He said that though there were actual Indian “thugs” in the area and that these people needed to be arrested, the bigger problem, he maintained, was that “every Indian is treated like a gangster.” He said his son was harassed every time he returned from work or study in the evening, simply because of the color of his skin. The police profile Indians. He aroused my interest when he mentioned treating patients of police abuse. He said that in one case, he treated a punctured eardrum that a youth suffered after a police beating—a

beating that occurred, he maintained, when the youth protested being profiled by the police.

He described the Kampung Medan area as a “shit hole.” His family “will get out.” The situation was intolerable between the gangsterism, police abuse, and the racialization of Indians. He also mentioned that his wife, who was in the civil service, was routinely overlooked for promotions simply because she was an Indian. Suddenly he turned his anger toward the leadership within the Indian community, “Samy Vellu is the biggest gangster!” he proclaimed.⁷ Like many professional Indians, he had a dim view of the MIC leader. “He should be killed, not Saddam,” he said. The problems facing the Tamils were also much derived from their bad leaders, who themselves were thugs and gangsters, he claimed, and who purged the party of talented and honest people who could challenge them.

While it would be fair to say that this doctor was cynical, he was actually livid about the situation in his community. He showed us his subscription to *Harakah* (the PAS opposition newspaper) and *Aliran* (a multiethnic magazine and NGO airing critical stories about the government). “I support ‘Muslim fundamentalists.’” No, not out of complete political agreement, instead he said he supported the paper because it was critical and honest about corruption in the government. His support for the opposition was fueled by the saga of Anwar Ibrahim (a former deputy prime minister, sacked and imprisoned on charges of sexual misconduct at the time) and the Kampung Medan clashes. The two were linked, he maintained: “Mahathir planned Kampung Medan because of the Anwar affair.” Because Anwar had divided the Malay vote, Mahathir, he claimed, had orchestrated the incident to unite Malays against some enemy, or at the very least to blame the Anwar camp for fomenting extremism. Playing both sides indirectly, but not identifying ostensibly with either, allowed the Mahathir government to appear to be playing the role of restoring order. “Mahathir has destroyed the police and judiciary,” he said. In resignation, he said that “Indians should get out, migrate to Australia.” He said he had advised his son to do so.

Almost protesting with a question, we asked about the possibility of staying put and fighting for justice. The doctor replied, “How can one fight? What fight? People are afraid to speak out. Indonesians have more rights than us Indians.” He was referring, of course, to avenues for amnesty and possibilities of *bumiputra* status accorded through marriage. Many elite Indians share this view about Indonesian immigrants, feeling slighted that they, after many years of contributing to the country, are often surpassed by Indonesians who, through a bureaucratic mechanism, assume the role of *bumiputras*, even within a period of a few years. Some immigrants themselves enjoy Malay special rights and are *legally more* indigenous than are third-, fourth-, or even fifth-



Youths enjoying the traditional game of kabadi

generation Indian Malaysians. This has created a critical distance between the subject of juridical rights and notions of justice within the Indian community, as pointed out in previous chapters.

Finally, regarding the Kampung Medan attacks, he claimed that all the media reports “were lies,” and suggested that the whole event was orchestrated for political gain. There were no riots between entangled communities, but instead the source of violence was locatable in the law itself, as enmeshed with political interests.

Mani owned a fairly large house and compound along the riverbank. He was the MIC branch head (local representative) for the *kampung*. During the “riots,” his son was viciously attacked. Like the others, he was angry at the police for their inaction at the time. Moreover, he was upset about what the government claimed were the reasons behind the incident, and he felt that the chief minister, in particular, was insensitive. Mani was a small-time contractor. Compared to others in the neighborhood, he appeared to be fairly well off in that his house was of better quality, had a nice driveway, fruit trees, and a small family temple behind the dwelling. Thus, having something to lose (i.e., his house), he feared speaking out publicly. “If only I wasn’t in politics, I could speak.” Being in politics, that is, he knew certain “facts” about the incident but was bound to silence.

Mani said the full story will “never be known,” but he mentioned the following:

“While doing rounds with the police, a lorry and house in the *taman* had stashed weapons—M16s, bazookas, grenades, and *parangs* [blades]. Arrests were made, but we were not allowed to speak of this.”⁸ He implied that there was fear that such knowledge would implicate people, perhaps those in the military who might be involved with a “militant” organization. Mani went further: “the police clearly took sides with the Malays. They would watch indifferently as Indians were attacked. My own son was told, ‘*it is better if you die.*’”⁹

When Mani pleaded with the police for answers and help during the period of the attacks, he was greeted with “what can we do?” or no reply at all. “If a Malay called for help, the police were immediately on the scene. Samy Vellu, in tears, went to police station and pleaded for action, but was ignored until he gave two briefcases with cash.” Even then, the police extracted bribes from Indians who wanted to enter and exit the area where they lived.¹⁰ Five days after the attacks, the *menteri besar* (chief minister), Mohd. Khir Toyo, purportedly told the majority Indian audience that “‘*this was a lesson.*’ Indians walked out on him in disgust.” Mani displayed visible contempt and repeated the phrase “*this was a lesson*” with a sneer. He used Malay to repeat the phrase exactly as he remembered it spoken. The lesson, in other words, was one in the brute force of the law.

When I asked what was the “lesson” implied by the chief minister, he said that they did not wait for his explanation. In Mani’s mind, this was an unprovoked attack. He was implying that the chief minister, who already had a



Taman Medan housing estate

reputation as a Malay chauvinist, was pointing a finger at the Indians, and telling them they were being taught a lesson they deserved, echoing the state assemblywoman’s comments about Indian provocation that were mentioned earlier. Media reports of the “clash” reinforced the view that the victims were gangsters deserving of their fates. Mani, as an MIC representative, had gone on police rounds and had seen and heard far too much to stomach the media and political distortions that followed. He, on the other hand, lionized Samy Vellu’s intervention, but in doing so also implicated the police by saying that bribery was necessary for the violence to cease. It must be noted, too, that Mani had possibly benefited from his MIC position in terms of securing business contracts, a privilege that was widely believed to benefit most party branch heads. Moreover, as far as squatter houses went, his was fairly spacious and well constructed, suggesting further that his political position had aided him financially. He therefore could “not speak,” trapped by his own complicity. He was imprisoned within himself, divided by his own complicity in race politics.

Das was the MIC representative for the Desaria flats, adjacent to Kampung Medan. He was a middle-aged man, very talkative yet quite cynical about the problems he faced. He purchased his flat for M\$20,000 after his home and village were demolished prior to the incident. The squatters were relocated to the flats, unless they were fortunate enough to own land elsewhere. When we asked where the fighting began, he replied without hesitation: “The *taman* is where the fight started, not among squatters.” This was repeated by most witnesses we spoke with, despite media accounts that had suggested otherwise. He added, “A ‘weapons cache’ was found in Taman Medan. *Taman* Malays [i.e., lower middle class, in this instance] are more influenced by militia or militant groups.”

He said that few Chinese lived there, but mainly Malays and Indians populated the area, as most had come from Kampung Gandhi, Kampung Medan, and Kampung Lindungan. Before, when living in Kampung Gandhi, there were “little problems,” such as “a drinking fight which was quickly settled. *Anaal, flatsle, romba mosamaka irukku*” (But it is very bad in the flats). The flats were especially bad for children because they had “nowhere to go and nothing to do.” So they sat around “loitering in the parking lot around their motorbikes.” Flats, he concluded, are a catalyst for ethnic tensions and fights. “The parents can’t keep an eye on them in this context,” he said. Das thought the squatter life, though not easy, had its merits in that there were mechanisms for dealing with youth. He wanted very much to get out of the flats. While there, his daughter returned from “tuition” (being tutored), and his son also came back from school. The flat was reasonably well furnished, though fairly small for a family like his, which had only four individuals at

the time. But the hallways were dark and musty, and there was little room for social life. Within the flats, he claimed, the problems of “drinking and drugs is much worse” (than within the squatter areas). When pressed by us for details, however, he said it was still a small minority of residents who suffered from substance abuse. Moreover, only a few families were actually dysfunctional. Still, he was eager to leave this place behind.

Das owned a stationery business and was hoping to save enough to buy a mid-cost apartment in the near future. After the “fight” he became convinced it would be better to leave the area. He claimed that during the fight a group of armed Malay youths came up the stairwell looking for Indians to attack, but were told to “get lost.” He implied that the local Malays did not want the fight to break out on their home turf (i.e., within the flats), yet he immediately suggested that the Malays in the flats “could not be trusted.” He said that the ones in the flats were unfriendly and never socialized with the Indian residents. Moreover, he felt nervous around them after the attacks. For these reasons, he wanted to get out. In part, he blamed the Indian youth, who he claimed were increasingly belligerent, though when asked for specifics, he mentioned one or two local gangsters. On the other hand, “the Malays” truly frightened him.

He claimed, like others we met, that “police saw the attack. In one incidence, they saw the cutting of a young Indian man [who later died], but did nothing. Samy Vellu went to the police station, but the police still don’t do anything.” In this instance, Samy Vellu was again lionized as caring and good. The police were callous, racist, complicit in murder, and unprofessional—this myth, as we have seen, was resonant in the Indian community. I heard it proclaimed many more times than I can reproduce here. What then was terrifying about the Malays now, from the Indian perspective, was their identification with the capricious violence at the heart of the Law, as epitomized by the attackers and their enablers, the police.

Returning to Mani’s story once again,¹¹ he complained that his son mixed “with the wrong crowd” (the son mentioned earlier who was brutally attacked). Whenever we saw the youth, he looked tired, disheveled, and depressed. The father said, “He goes out drinking. . . . I don’t know where he is going.” He explained that Kampung Gandhi was having drug problems. There were suppliers who are coming into the area, luring insiders into using. “When I tried to come down on them, they framed my son by putting drugs on his motorbike and then tipping off the police. . . . Police don’t clean up the drug problem because they are on the take.” He was visibly disgusted. His view of the police was dim in light of the ongoing drug issues and the corruption he perceived in the law, and because they failed to bring safety and order during the attacks, nor did they investigate any incidents thoroughly.

There were no convictions, despite a couple of arrests and numerous eyewitnesses. On the other hand, Mani is also suggesting that bad influences in the area, *even within* the village, were corrupting his own son. In this sense, the stigma attached to the squatter area had been in part internalized. But the desire of the Other, as Lacan would argue, is also negated through a victim’s narrative that also emphasizes the corruption of police, and by extension of the Law, figured as the big Other. The law, as we saw earlier, demanded him to keep silent about just what he had seen in the *taman* during his rounds with the police. He saw them, the Other, as metonymized by the police, for what they were. As Veena Das has argued in a different context, the inexplicable act of the Other, is “grown” out of the “everyday,” in that violence, “even if it appears shocking, shares in the heterogeneity of everyday life” (2007, 136). Thus, while protestations have been heard throughout this chapter that violence came from the outside and was not a product of internal rivalries or tensions between neighbors, it appeared that “previous enmities were woven into the event” (Das 2007, 157).

Turning to the view that ethnic Malays were making it difficult for Indians (the police in their callous indifference being one symptom), he claimed that “school test results are faked to pass Malays.” He said, “The expected pass rate for matriculation for Malays is 100 percent.” Indians, on the other hand, were graded harshly on exams and had to rise to a much higher standard. He incredulously added, “I will buy some cattle for my son to raise.” In his frustration that his son was not working, he saw fault lying in part with the police, in part with the education system, and in part with his son’s poor choice of company. All these problems, however, were colored, and perhaps covered, by racial prejudice.

Another instance in which the law appeared corrupted and empty related more directly to his own authority as a local MIC leader. Though not enabling him to “speak out”¹²—a complicity for which he paid in silence—he saw and heard much about the police. He apparently also knew much about the cause for which his public role was defined. Unlike Das’ story about the bribing of police, Mani said, “Samy Vellu threatened to bring an Australian ‘private force’ to control the Malay attacks. Then, and only then, the police went into action.” The “private force” referred to Malaysian Indians who had emigrated to Australia. It also drew on stereotypes that Samy Vellu had a syndicate of henchmen who could do his dirty work if called upon. Though presented obviously without evidence and based solely on the shroud of rumor, the suggestion by Mani unexpectedly (for an MIC representative) reiterated the stereotype of “gangsterism.” Just as we saw an ambivalence expressed about his son’s company and prodigal ways, his own ambivalent political commitment was called into question by his backhanded championing of his political boss. Divided

against himself, in this sense, a voice of morality brings the Law into being. But this law is further divided within itself, owing to its extrajudicial impulses toward a potentially violent justice above and beyond the rule of law.

We went with Mani's son for a tour of Kampung Medan to find out exactly where people were attacked. He pointed out where he and a few others had been ambushed. In all cases, they were in the main intersections in the *taman*, and not in the crowded labyrinth of squatter residents. The savage attacks took place in front of middle-class and lower-middle-class homes, not in squatter areas (see Nagarajan 2004). The son then recounted a strange story: he claimed that Malays told them a few days before the attack that they "had better get out because there is going to be trouble." These were Malays with whom the youth had been friendly. They were stating that they would be forced to show solidarity with the attacking Malays, yet in another subtly coded message were saying that they had nothing against the Indians *per se* and hoped that they would avoid the attack by leaving first. This warning, he reiterated, came prior to the wedding/funeral event, which was said in media accounts to have sparked the incident. This statement both implicated local Malays by forcing them to act as part of the Malay corporate identity—an ethnic signifier—and simultaneously suggested or reaffirmed, given local myth making, that an organized attack came from the outside. In this sense, it made the local Malays unreadable, incomprehensible, indeed uncanny, and as frightening as the outsiders themselves. As we have seen in several narratives earlier, *Malays could not be trusted anymore*. This seemed to be different than the recognition of the Other's lack, which nurtured a victim's narrative, positioning the subject differently with regards to the law, the state, and the police. We will return to this distinction later.

Most individuals in the squatter areas maintained, however, that the attackers were outsiders. Taking this at face value, we can assume that the media myth of an "ethnic clash" was a mischaracterization. As one long-time resident said, "*The attackers were all outsiders. Our neighbors were all nice people. These Malays had long hair and some looked like Indonesians.*" Like the story about the militia called "Madura" we heard earlier, the Indonesian became the signifier for Malays who are not "really" Malays. We might recall, too, that as Indonesians blend and merge into the Malay community—and that many Malays, including several prominent politicians, are second- or third-generation Sumatran, Javanese, part or wholly Indian, or from other parts of the archipelago—Indians come to resent the fluidity of the "Malay" signifier and its arbitrary bestowal of *bumiputra* rights and privileges. Therefore, a displacement of monstrous characteristics onto the "Indonesian" possibly serves to safeguard more than memories and friendships in the village. That is, the figure of the Malay is also safeguarded.

This figure, itself a product of the standing reserve of human categorization created by the census, allowed for a particular worldview, in Heidegger's sense (1977). The world becomes a "picture" aided by the ethnographic tools or technologies of measurement, what Foucault would later call governmentality, that creates "the structured image that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before" (1977, 134). This "enframing" and productive force, which allows man as "subjectum" to know and measure the world, including the others in the world, is grounded in techniques of measurement. But, as Heidegger argues, the shadow of the incalculable, or total contingency, always haunts the human capacity for total representation and structuring images vis-à-vis a knowing subject. It is in this phenomenology of the shadow of incalculability that ontic ensnarement or the flight into certainty occurs, in Heidegger's understanding. This, he argues, is an uncanny force driving the ensnarement of our being in objectification,¹³ which in turn is the hallmark of modernist subjectivity. For present purposes, I am suggesting that the preservation of ethnic signifiers, or stereotypes, serves as that "structured image," allowing for a worldview to take hold. But the shadow of uncertainty and incalculability that surrounds their absolute delineation produces anxiety. Malaysia's ethnic signifiers are profoundly unsettling and productive in these terms. As a system of knowing, they are productive of an entire political economy, which guides development, law, and land rights, with consequent psychic investments therein. On the other hand, the uncertainties raised by these calculations of identification, a standing reserve aided by bureaucratization, produce a recurring problem of legibility, requiring supplementary evidence of difference. In turn, ensnarement, or a "flight into tradition" (Heidegger 1977, 136), is one mechanism of enframing or suppressing angst, albeit temporarily, within the categories of the known. As Derrida has subsequently argued in several works (e.g., 1974; 1981; 1995a), the archive, including the ethnographic one, serves to supplement and efface the originary difference created by "arche-writing" or "arche-violence," which itself occurred with humanity's instantiation of the proper name—a primal act of writing or representation—itsself in response to an originary lack in speech. Unlike Heidegger, however, Derrida (1989) does not locate a fundamental metaphysical shift temporally, which by extension might conjure a hypothetical unity of Being in the premodern past (or in Heidegger's case, to pre-Aristotelian Greece).

Consider now the words of another individual, the Hindu priest we met earlier from Kampung Gandhi, adjacent to Kampung Medan and part of the whole "Kampung Medan" or Petaling Jaya Selatan (south) area: "The police were there on March 8 with 400 officers, but the attacks still occurred on the roth! The police escorted the Malay fighters . . . the police are also paid off

by the Indian drug dealers, so they played that side too.” Did he mean that drug dealers were protected and the actual victims were thus innocent bystanders? Or did he mean that the “gang” fight stereotype was created out of the police characterization, based on their inside knowledge of (and complicity in) organized crime. Or perhaps he meant to suggest that the police played the sides against one another. Moreover, this man charged, not only were they not intervening in the attacks, the police were aiding and abetting the attackers.

The priest, we might recall from chapter 6, had problems dealing with Malaysian immigration because his daughter was born in India. He was particularly incensed by the ease with which Indonesians were able to obtain Malaysian citizenship in comparison with Malaysian Indians born overseas. The Indonesian, in other words, comes to signify all that is arbitrary and unfair, if not inauthentic in the national symbolic. At the same time, the Indonesian, once holding a Malaysian IC, is magically transformed through the technology of bureaucracy into a “Malay.” This standing reserve, in Heidegger’s sense, is political capital, but the incalculable angst that surrounds this incorporation, figuration, and signifier produces redoubled efforts to highlight ethnic demarcations in the body politic. From a Malay perspective, the rationalization of Malay rights takes on greater urgency and feverish archivization given the shadow or contingency surrounding the construction of the very category itself.¹⁴ But in recognition of this lack, too, the imaginary of Indian victimization takes particular hold; at the same time, a doubling of the Indian as “gangster” and “victim” also oscillates. Moreover, we have witnessed a kind of angst over the identification of the Malay in several instances in this chapter. The need to disentangle the Malay from the Indonesian in various witness accounts suggests, perhaps, a desire to deconstruct the emergent picture as it evolves in Malaysian politics. At the same time, it attempts to disentangle possible relationships and possible selves with Malays (friendships, associations, memories, kinship) with the growing fear that these same Malays will possibly betray their relationships, if politics demand it. The warnings by the politicians (that “this was a lesson”) and by the local residents (to get out while they still could), suggested to the Indians that Malays could not be “trusted anymore,” and that they, as victims, increasingly had no choice to but see the Malays in a corporate way, lacking in a profound moral sense. Identifying with that lack, a victims’ narrative was taking hold.

In sum, the accounts given by witnesses of the attacks, and by those still residing in the Kampung Medan area, including (and especially) within the flats where squatters had been relocated, suggested that there was an increasing fear and tension about a “new” (but essentially lacking and untrustworthy)

kind of Malay. At the same time, there was frustration and anxiety about the relocation schemes that had and were being implemented because, on the Indian side, loitering and gangsterism were on the rise in the flats, and on the Malay side, ethnic and religious extremism was said to be taking hold. The latter myth, however, was tempered by the notion that the actual attackers of 2001 were outsiders, perhaps even Indonesians, or influenced at least by foreign militant groups. One Indian woman living in Desaria flats seemed to sum up both this anxiety and ambivalence in this manner: “There is too much hanging around, doing nothing but drinking, which leads to fights.” She added that there were police roundups every night. Therefore “it is a frightening place (*enakku bayum*). Lots of us want to move out of the flats . . . we are uncomfortable now after the fight of 2001. One hundred families have moved out fearing another Malay attack. During the attacks, Malay attackers got as high as the third floor, but Malays living there told them to go away. Still we don’t want to live near *those kind of Malays anymore*.” Similar sentiments were expressed earlier by the MIC chairman living in the flats. “If we were renting, we’d have moved by now, but were are stuck.” I return to the conditions and fears of those living in the flats in chapter 8.

The Invention of the Malay and Mahathirism

The working-class and lower-middle-class Indian accounts described above seem to unsettle the popular myths about an “ethnic clash” among the poor squatters. Indeed the facts, as best I could ascertain, suggested a one-sided attack, carefully planned and executed given the element of surprise in each case, in which victims were randomly selected (also see Nagarajan 2004). This said, my perspective is exclusively Indian—that is, their remembrance of this incident has been my concern here, not fact finding per se. If this had been an ethnic or communal clash, as represented in the media, one would have expected fighting to have been intense in the densely populated squatter villages. On the other hand, it is conceivable that “extremist” groups had arisen in the housing estates (the *tamans* and flats), and that anti-Indian sentiments festered there. We may recall that the attackers were described in many accounts as “outsiders.” To what extent they were “outside” remains an open question since none, as of yet, have been brought to justice. There is a possibility that some of the attackers came from the housing estates, or perhaps that local militias had been aided by outside groups. Middle-class Indians increasingly held the view that a kind of extremism emerging among lower-middle-class Malays corresponded to the bureaucratizing of ethnicity and religion, as part of a nationalist discourse. Along these lines, I have argued elsewhere (Willford 2006a) that an exacerbated insecurity over identity has produced

an overidentification with an ideological ego-ideal in the form of a nationalist ethnic imaginary, one that takes hold negatively through the metonymic representation of the “Indian” as the Malay’s surmounted past. The uncanny figure of the Indian, I have argued (Willford 2006a, 2009), became an important ballast within Mahathir Mohamad’s Malay-Islamic nationalism and the development policies it engendered between 1981 and 2003. Countering this discourse, middle-class Indians, in recognition of the lack in the Other (the hole within the national whole), have argued that “the invention of the Malay” required a silencing of history and political contingency. That lack has been filled by aspirations to authenticity and spiritual ascendancy by elite Tamil Hindus. Leaving aside questions of Malay identity, as experienced by Malays, the invention of the Malay within a middle-class Indian imaginary appears to preserve a place of critical alterity and moral ascendancy. While this book focuses more on the plight of the Tamil working class, I return to this Indian middle-class imaginary in chapter 9.

The bureaucratic fashioning of the ethnic subject in Malaysia has taken hold of “everyday Muslims” in a way that silences varied resistances to the state project. Michael Peletz, most importantly, has argued in many works (e.g., 1997, 2002, 2003) that the adjudicating of kinship and culture in an increasingly bureaucratized and rationalized state structure has “transmogrified” and “troubled” identities that were more “hybrid, fluid, and protean” in the past (2003, 20–42). He suggests, like Weber’s proverbial “iron cage,” that such modern subjectivity can rest on a “shaky bed” (29). While he speaks specifically of kinship in Islamic law, one could link his insight, perhaps, to the unsettled and uncertain fixation upon identity that is dependent on “surmounting” the ethnic Other, in this case the Indian, who comes to represent, albeit in a displaced or metonymic form, the pre-Islamic Hindu past (Willford 2006a; 2009). In other words, I am suggesting that the well-rehearsed argument of Weber’s concerning an oscillation toward identity-based politics out of the disenchantment of bureaucratic reason misses an important point: that bureaucratic reason and the ethnic ego-ideal can act similarly, as Žižek (1993) has argued, particularly as fused in state ideologies, as in the case of Malay-Islamic modernism. But such ego-ideals also can frighten, like Freud’s famous uncanny automaton (1997), in the partial recognition of their contingent social origins. That is, the alienating other within, as the big Other (e.g., nationalist ideology), can prove monstrous, thus exacerbating a need to displace or demonize this presence.

In his masterful analysis of uncanny feelings, Freud (1997) suggests that there are two potentially fearful “automatons” that arise: the fear of the surmounted primary narcissistic or animalistic self’s return in uncontrollable ways, and the automaton that is the double of conscience and conditioned

reason (the ego-ideal). That is, one becomes alive, but only as the living dead—living in the compulsive silencing of that which one lacks through the painful pleasures of repetition—when one submits to or overidentifies with symbolic order, or ego-ideal. More generally, that one’s thoughts, words, or actions never wholly belong to one’s self—Freud’s critique of presence, before Derrida—given their social provenance, is the source of the uncanny sensation surrounding the automaton. This is analogous to what Heidegger called the “they-self,” or the ontically certain, yet ontologically most distant (Heidegger 1996). In both instances, angst seems to accompany such repetitions of identity affirmation in the shadow of the double.¹⁵

The double reminds, in its phantasmic ubiquity, the realization of the ego’s contingent source. Specifically, the ego-ideal cannot be obeyed fully, as the Other (a displaced double) cannot be fully extinguished, which in turn fuels the superego’s efforts to censor and silence its offending other (Žižek 1993).¹⁶ The ego-ideal is plagued by the return of its surmounted double, its (secret present, displaced as) archived and signified past. Thus the gist of the uncanny to Freud has to do with the eroding face of reason that the return of the double produces. Within the transferential relationships between individuals and groups, we might ask whether the disavowal or surmounting of the Other can produce uncanny doublings, which, in turn, fuel overidentification with the ego ideal, or, in Heidegger’s words, “ensare” the subject within representational logics. In this case, the standing reserve of ethnic types serves to objectify and ensnare subjects, but as Peletz notes, “transmogrified” identities rest on a “shaky bed” of bureaucratic typifications that are haunted by a shadow of incalculability.

An “ethnographic state” (Dirks 2002), or one in which the law is premised on so-called measurable cultural or ethnic differences, is in constant need of supplemental archival evidence (Derrida 1995a) to efface the originary violence of its arbitrary enactments. It is for this reason, as some scholars have argued, that mimicry, in the context of colonial fantasies of mastery, is most menacing. That is, the originary difference/violence has been revealed through mimicry to be arbitrary and unessential. Thus, the supplementary violence of racial stereotypes, census keeping, and other archival and legal mechanisms are enacted with feverish vigor in response to mimicry (Bhabha 1994, 85–92; Stoler 2009; Spyer 2000, 58; Siegel 1997; Cannell 2005; Pemberton 1994). In the context of the transferential relations between disentangled ethnic groupings in the postcolonial context, secret familiarity between politically ascribed and fantasized markers of difference can prove monstrous and uncanny, fueling fetishistic fantasies of ethnic purity (Appadurai 2000; Malkii 1995; Hansen 2001). In these instances, measuring difference can take on desperate and corporeal forms.

On "Mythico-History"

Lisa Malkki's (1995) powerful study of ethnic violence in Burundi, as remembered by refugees in Tanzanian camps, suggested that the structuring of a categorical mythico-history occurred under specific historical and institutional determinants. Though she did not ostensibly employ psychoanalytic or deconstructive theory, I draw on her notion of mythico-history through the analysis of what might be called "ethnic uncertainty" (see Appadurai 2000; Kakar 1996), itself a product of colonial demarcations and a postcolonial bureaucratization of ethnicity in Malaysia, wedded to a project of ethnic nationalism. Against a purely historicist reading, however, I have argued that the anchoring of the subject within structures of meaning, or the metonymic displacement of desire, following Lacan, produces ambivalent doublings that in turn prove monstrous within the imaginary of the subject. That is, under certain circumstances, the neurotic attachment to the Other's desire (the "gangster" figure of the "Indian"), even in its compulsive negation in recognition of the Other's lack (the "invented" or untrustworthy Malay), can produce an uncanny silencing of the "surmounted" double in a perversely cathected ego-ideal. Aligning with Malkki in this instance, and with Weber's general critique of bureaucracy, I have suggested that the ideology of Malay-Islamic modernism, particularly in Mahathir's nationalist development discourse, is produced negatively in the disavowal of the "Hindu" and "Indian" past (Willford 2006a), and as such is haunted by the specter of inauthenticity and uncertainty (or an oscillation,¹⁷ in Weber's terms, to a politics of meaning). That said, the tipping of the scales to a more pathological categorical mythico-history, in which racialization reaches the extremes experienced elsewhere (like Burundi or Sri Lanka, for instance), has fortunately not yet occurred in Malaysia. Recognition of the Other's lack, in this instance the Indian imaginary or "myth" that Malays are "invented"—and that "everything is given to them," though they are "seen for what they are" because they are "insecure" and thus "don't want to mix anymore"—structures an Indian subject that ambivalently splits the image of the Malay. On the one hand, the new kind of Malay who is metonymized as inauthentic, extremist, and ultimately lacking, seems to emerge within a mythico-history in the Indian imaginary. On the other hand, the "true Malay," who is tolerant and culturally and religiously linked to the Indian in a particularly intimate history, is also figured in the accounts given by working-class victims of violence, as well as by professionals, though in slightly different form. Though alarmingly polarized, the emergent myths are not monoliths, nor is the lithic order indestructible. Rather, the subjects we have heard from have deconstructed their own accounts in several instances, which suggests that the truly monstrous violence experi-

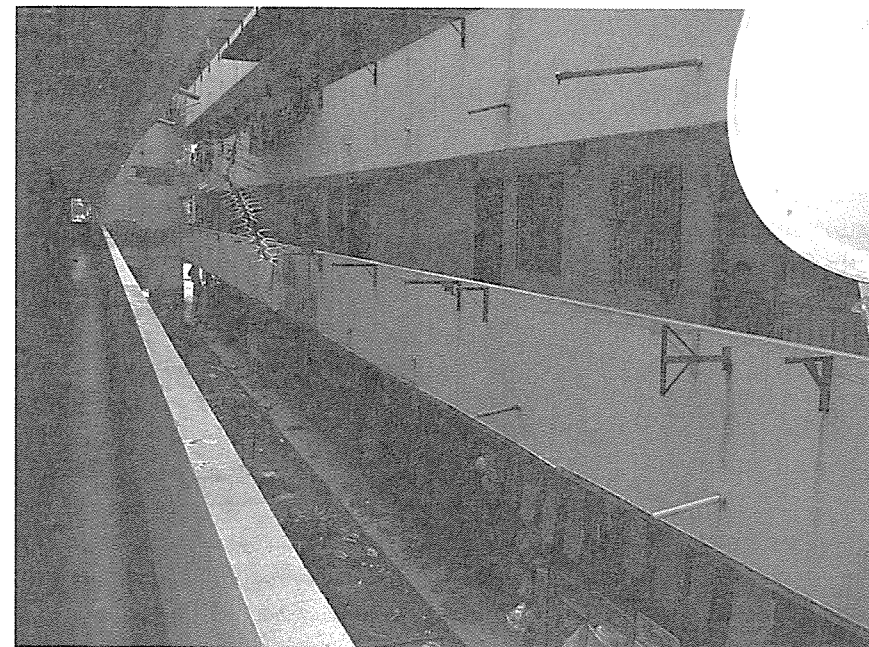
enced elsewhere is not yet fully anticipated in Malaysia, despite the troubling trends in this direction. Interestingly, the paternalistic discourse of the Malay politician directed toward the Malay-citizen subject is also internal now to the Indian structuring of the Malay in an imaginary of Indian victimhood. That is, as the government, particularly Mahathir, berated Malays for being backward, superstitious, "Hindu," or "animist" (Willford 2006a; Peletz 2002; Hoffstaedter 2011) and subsequently called for their redemption through science and Islam, it simultaneously also instructed Malays to be "grateful," as everything was "given to them" through state-sponsored ethnic preferencing in jobs, education, and financing. Given that this interpolation has occurred, it is also likely that Indians have also invested in other narratives of the nation. Indeed, much of their anger and trauma seems to result from their sense of being betrayed by the nation they believed in.

Herein lies the risk of mythico-history for both Indians and Malays. While the structuring of stereotypes organizes ethnic differences in ways that anchor the subject in a particular self-image, or ego-ideal, the "lies" that act as the guarantor of certain truths, as Lacan suggests, become neurotic and compulsive when the superego's demand is too great. We can recall a lesson by Levi-Strauss provided within his famous "The Sorcerer and His Magic," in which a Zuni boy who is accused of sorcery, but who is ultimately innocent, is compelled to lie in the final instance in order to protect the structured truth of Zuni belief. Lies, and in my usage self-lies within the desires of metonymic displacement, may guard certain mythically structured "truths," but in the multiethnic environment of Malaysia and in more volatile places elsewhere, the "truths" that may be guarded by self-lies can become perversely pleasurable in their productive silencing of their uncanny doubles.¹⁸ But as argued here, narratives told by victims, witnesses, and interested parties suggest that even these structured truths (or lies) are troubled, divided within themselves, and unstable. The instability of these myths can lead us away from the pessimism of a structural account of violence.

8 Flats

Driving toward flats in Taman Permata, Dengkil, near Putrajaya, the nation's new administrative capital, in June 2004, one could see five blocks of low-cost, low-rise flats that on first glance were similar to those seen elsewhere in Malaysia. But upon closer inspection, it was apparent that these were particularly shoddy. Although they were only a few years old, cracks could be seen everywhere, particularly in the narrow and dank staircases. The stairs were broken or shorn off altogether in many spots, posing an obvious safety risk. Pipes and plumbing were held together with makeshift sets of clamps and wires, and the pipes themselves looked to be made of the thinnest PVC available. Stucco was crumbling everywhere, and paint was largely discolored and faded, a common problem where hard monsoon rains occur. In addition to these obvious problems in wear and construction, design flaws were evident. Proper ventilation was lacking in the stairwells, and there was no common meeting area whatsoever. The small playground for each block was far too small to be of much use. Moreover, it was covered with dangerous litter, including jagged aluminum cans, and had broken swings and slides, which posed a risk to children. There was nothing redeeming about the outside physical appearance, and as far as I could tell there was no place for families to walk, play, or socialize, save for the overcrowded parking lot.¹

Naga and I met several young men who were socializing on the first floor, adjacent to a parking lot. They informed us that there were five blocks in total, with eighty units in each block. The original asking price for each unit was 31,000 ringgit but the price came down to 18,000 after negotiations. These units were built for the former estate workers who were evicted from their homes and jobs when Putrajaya was being constructed. Their monthly mort-



Corridor in Taman Permata Flats, Dengkil

gage payment was 150 ringgit. Initially, they were told they would get land in Putrajaya itself for housing.² But this was later denied by the MIC and union representatives who negotiated and facilitated their relocation. "That place (Putrajaya) is for the wealthy," one man said.

One of the difficulties in resettlement, as was often the case elsewhere, occurred in the consolidation of temples. The four primary plantation temples were consolidated into one for these flats, and it was about one kilometer outside the flats. The temples within the estates were demolished. The complication of consolidation involves difficult decisions about which deity image (*murti*) to save, which temple committee gains control of the new temple, and how to best transgress those sacred spots and their deities through deactivation of temples. This produces an anxiety of proper care for the deity, as we will witness at the end of this chapter.

One individual said he had worked as a contract gardener now for about three to four hundred ringgit per month in Putrajaya. Supplementing this income was difficult from where he lived now. There was no land available for growing vegetables or grazing cattle. Without good transportation, which was also apparently lacking in Dengkil, relocated estate workers found it difficult to secure employment. The wage he now earned was no better than what

he earned as a plantation worker. But in the plantation he had supplemental food sources (e.g., vegetables, fruit, and dairy products) and free housing.

He went on to say that in the flats, there were lots of “fights over girls” (*santikka*). There was little peace, because “the youth have idle time in the parking lot, but nothing constructive to do.” There was also the problem of having the four estates, with their socially intense relationships, now congregating in one common area. Established practices of leadership, religious authority, marriage, and thus kinship were suddenly thrown into doubt.

School dropouts were evidently high. One reason for this, we were told, stemmed from older children having to look after younger children while the parents were at work. “Money problems are a lot different than they were in the estate. Here there is no supervision of children. There is only enough money to survive. Nothing is possible” (*ohne mudiyatu*). In the estate, “there was always land to grow food [and] relatives or neighbors to watch children.” In one block, he added, there were lots of dropouts because of the need to babysit younger siblings. In one case, a boy was needed at home to watch his sister for two months. He was “dropped” (expelled) from his school after missing so much class.

Upon retrenchment and relocation, the NUPW and MIC arranged to have compensation ranging from five to twenty thousand ringgit paid to each worker. “But the government never asked us, they went to the MIC and negotiated,” the man complained. There was anger in this because the MIC first assured the families they would negotiate on their behalf for terrace houses near their former estates. With this verbal promise, the families allowed the MIC to represent their interests. But when it came to signing the final settlement, the MIC pressured the families to accept the Dengkil flats agreement. The residents felt that they had fallen victim to a bait-and-switch charade carried out by the government, developers, and the MIC. We can recall similar stories elsewhere in previous chapters: Early in negotiations, estate workers are assured by the MIC that low-cost housing in the form of landed terrace houses can be obtained through their patronage, only to be bitterly disappointed later when the party representative appears later with a settlement that proposes flats at an alternative location. In one sense this is not surprising given that the speculative value of estate properties is what led to retrenchment and eviction in the first place.

Another man joined in the conversation, echoing the previous comment. “Putrajaya is for rich people,” he said. “Houses there cost three hundred thousand or more. These are for Malays! All civil servants are Malays!” He reflected on this for a moment, and then added, “I am not angry, what can we do? No point being angry. I miss estate life. We had more time. Now we work early, come home late, have to pay water and electricity (which was

covered by estate employers). There we grew food . . . none wanted to leave the estates.”

Another man joined the conversation and added, “The NUPW threatened us. Wages were low, and we were told that if we did not accept the settlement, we might end up with nothing.” This, of course, was a common predicament we witnessed among estate residents facing eviction.

Approaching another man at the entrance to the flats as he left his car, we asked what he thought of living conditions there. To this direct question he replied, “I don’t like the flat. It is too small for six people.” He explained briefly that his family left the estate and was squeezed into one unit. Then he described a problem of flooding that often occurred in the flats. As it turned out, the flats were built in an area prone to flash flooding during storms. “*En-nakku bayum*” (I’m afraid), he said, of the flooding. He added that “flooding up to the chest happens.” Not only does the first floor flood, but the drainage spills from the stairs onto the first floor, making the stairs not only impassable, but dangerous. While we were talking, a few of this man’s friends joined in the conversation, adding their own stories of the floods. All were eager to confirm how poorly the flats had been designed with regards to drainage and flood safety.

Though these flats were built to house the relocated estate workers, one could find many Indonesian workers living on the first floor units of one block, and one block was predominantly Malay, since Malays were also relocated. Why these Malays did not have more leverage in bargaining for housing or access to *kampung* reserve lands was not ascertained, though their very presence in the flats (albeit in smaller numbers) belied myths among some Indians about the limitless entitlement of Malays. But at the same time, we discovered that many so-called Malay flats were actually housing Indonesian workers.³ They had been sublet. Some Malays had invested in the flats at the reduced price, as was their right as retrenched plantation workers, and then proceeded to rent their units out to itinerant workers. The Indonesian workers’ flats appeared cramped, dirty, and unkempt. The laborers clearly used them for sleeping and cooking, but only as a temporary work residence and not as a permanent home. There were none of the comforts or decorations of home that would signify “home life.” And these units were shared by numerous male workers, who sprawled out and slept on straw mats wherever they could find room.

I briefly visited the flat of an Indian family, who let me in to see how the unit looked. A man full of tattoos sat on a sofa with eyes glazed while his wife cooked and cleaned house. He had obvious needle marks on his arm and appeared lost to the world. It was apparent that the man was a drug addict. Visiting another unit, a man said, “I cannot say about the house anything . . . but cracks are everywhere.” He pointed to the cracks on the wall that had

emerged in the plaster. We were told that for some reason related to the problems in construction, housing certification had not yet been given for these units, which has affected the bank's dealings with the property developers and owners of the units. For now, the bank had stopped accepting payments from those residing in the units, and those who did not pay cash for their units were now staying for free!

After visiting a few more units and getting a sense of their layout and relative comfort, or lack thereof, we decided to walk to the temple grounds, about one kilometer away. To get there, one had to cross a train track and walk on a semipaved road past abandoned oil palm trees. Eventually one came to a modest-sized Mariamman temple. Some residents had complained to us earlier that the temple was too far away for many to walk with ease, and that it was built on a natural gas main, and therefore not terribly safe. These complaints notwithstanding, Samy Vellu had himself broken ground in 2002 at this site for a relatively large new temple to be built that would replace the existing structure, which could hardly accommodate the residents of all four estates now living in the flats. The grand new temple, which had its plaque and future design displayed on site, would make it possible for all to come together and consolidate worship in a manner that was not yet available. Indeed, one of the big problems with this temple stemmed from the process of merging four estate temples into one. Here, the four estate temples each had Mariamman statues in their consecrated shrines, as well as Murugan and Vinayagar statues, but only one of each deity could be housed in the inner sanctum of this temple. That in and of itself was a source of tension and anxiety for the devotees of the now-demolished temples.

If your temple's *murti* or statue is not to be reconsecrated, how might this affect your sense of connection with the relocated and consolidated temple? Moreover, and as we have seen anxiously expressed in other chapters, what if your consecrated statues are fated for destruction? What would be the emotive impact of such violence? Indeed, the problem that emerged was precisely this: many former estate dwellers felt little loyalty to the temple because their image and their priest or temple committee had been eliminated or marginalized in this process. Though God is everywhere and one, his or her justice is always perceived by humans to be particular and terrifying, if not incomprehensible (Derrida 1995b; Ram 2013). This paradox is felt acutely in Tamil religion. On the one hand, the intimacy and fluid line that separates humanity and divinity is underscored in Tamil Hindu religiosity, as witnessed by its saintly and *bhakti* traditions (Shulman 1980; Hart 1979); on the other hand, the word for God in the abstract, *kadavul*, literally means crossing from the known into the unknown, or the incalculable beyond human reason (Nabokov 2000). The incomprehensible shattering of particular worship communities,

and the covenant of *puja* that governed their relationships, though replicated in consolidation, never completely compensated for the particular and unequal justice meted out according to the force of Law. This angst generated schisms, rival claims, and in some odd circumstances even the housing of shrines and images within flats (which I describe at the end of this chapter). This was a pattern I witnessed in other estate closures and resettlements of temples.

The *pusari* (priest) doubled as an x-ray technician at the University Hospital in Petaling Jaya. He studied under a *gurukkul* (priestly authority), but since priests were often unpaid and often left for India as a result, he was left without much training. Now both he and his sister more or less ran the temple. He led the devotees in the singing of *devaram* (sacred hymns). The temple had drummers and music, and the singing was followed by the *prasadam* (consecrated food offering) of *pullisaddam* (tamarind rice).⁴

Puja was first performed for the *navagrahas*, or nine planets, followed by *puja* for Murugan, Vinayagar, and then Mariamman, the main deity of this temple. There was an "extra" Vinayagar shrine to the left, which was also prayed to. I was told this was an "extra from one of the estates." Here we can witness both a concession and an anxiety being manifested in the duplicate Vinayagar. The desire to incorporate this extra shrine, brought about by the transgression of the deity in the consolidation process, is anxious. In this doubling act, the phantom of random or arbitrary selection is not put to rest. Rather, the odd doubling only ensures perpetual awareness of the capricious nature of the law. The nonpresent deities, in other words, are still at large, exerting their phantasmic presence.⁵

The atmosphere was festive, and approximately thirty-fifty devotees from the flats were in the temple at any given time, but they arrived in waves. The *pusari* seemed optimistic about the temple's future and about the flats in general. He spoke highly of an MIC representative who had helped in the negotiations. He reiterated, however, that it was not easy getting four estates to work together, alluding to the schisms within the temple community. When asked if there were parts of Putrajaya that people went back to, some special spots or trees that held any special memory, he mentioned a "mango tree" that marks "all that is left." This mango tree, formerly part of Prang Besar Estate, which now lay near the prime minister's palatial residence, had great meaning, as it was the site of an important shrine. Now, I was told, the former estate workers sometimes went to see the tree, which for some reason has not been destroyed.

The temple did, in fact, face difficulties. It lacked proper lighting along the dirt path leading to it, and there was the ever-present danger of the gas line. Moreover, the *pusari* and his sister mentioned that mostly women attended the temple, as few youths or men bothered to come. As he explained, "men go to work [and] come back late."

Arriving at the flats early one evening, we approached the principal provision shopkeeper in Dengkil flats. We had been told that he knew a lot about the current state of affairs in the settlement and would be able to tell us what we needed to know about the problems there. The shop owner was a man I estimated to be in his early sixties. His modest provision shop sold basic foodstuffs: rice, bread, spices, powdered milk, eggs, instant noodles, plus household goods and a few luxury items such as sweets and toys for children. Sitting at his register while talking to us, he explained that he was from Prang Besar Estate. Business for him now was okay, but he was worried about the future about Carrefour, the giant French-owned retail shop, that was to open in Putrajaya. As most residents in the flats worked in either Cyberjaya (the multimedia supercorridor) or Putrajaya as laborers, they might stop at the superstore on their way home to save money, rather than supporting the family business. He said the wholesalers charge the small shopkeepers more, and therefore these small shops cannot compete for prices. He mentioned that even now the twenty-eight to forty Malay families that lived in the flats did not shop in his store. As he put it, “Malays don’t shop in an Indian shop.” Such polarization, however, was not present in the old estates; people shopped in the estate provision shops in those days, regardless of ethnic background. Coming to a flat signaled an entry into the bureaucratizing of land use, space, and ethnic residency. With this new classificatory order—a kind of standing political reserve (Heidegger 1977)—came the retroactive discovery of “traditional” identities, an effect of the law.

As we spoke, the man’s adult son joined the conversation. The son lamented the many changes that had accompanied the transition to life in the flats: “Those days were better. We had a lot of changes coming here. We don’t know who is above or below us [in the flat]. [There is] no place to play football. There we had proper terrace houses that were big and spacious. These [flats] are small and cramped. All who can afford it buy houses outside and rent out flats. About 80 percent of the original owners from the estate are there, but we rent our place.” This father and son had bought separate houses nearby. The son worked in Petaling Jaya as an engineer, which he described as “too crowded and expensive.” Still, he had escaped the cycle of working-class poverty. He was married and had a small daughter eighteen months old. The father added, “Before, we grew food, and even basic leaves for all cooking are grown near the house. Now we must pay for everything.” The son then reflected on the past and present: “The estate life was more like a village. We had our football teams . . . and played against other estates . . . now we face some problems . . . gangsterism, fighting, drugs, etc. We rent to Indians [from India], Indonesians, or Malaysian Indians. Also Bangaladeshis.” This nostalgia for the past was heard by others in flats (recall chapter 7). But even facing

the prospects of relocation, we have witnessed nostalgia within estate communities resisting displacement (also see Nagarajan 2004).

The father then said that “the temple is so far away—over one kilometer. The land adjacent to the flat is government land, but they won’t allow the temple to go there . . . don’t understand why. A *surau* (praying room) is there for Malays.” Indeed one of the principal complaints I heard in these flats concerned the building of a *surau* in one of the blocks where Malay families tended to live most. It seemed that the children’s playground and field were used for the building of the *surau*, which angered the Indian families, since first their temple was built more than a kilometer away, and second that such a small group of Malays could obtain a *surau* at the expense of the needs for a playground for such a large Indian population. The capriciousness with which Malays and Muslims are prioritized in the development logic of the state is resonant here. The arbitrary acts of the law, wedded to an ethnic claim and further sustained by the bureaucratizing of privilege that reached even the administering of *surau*s over temples and playgrounds, placed a “force of Law” (Derrida 2002a) in sharp relief. That is, its inner workings were made visible. In this sense, the Law, as linked to the genealogical fantasy of a transcendent fatherhood, operated by attempting to naturalize a Malay Islamic identity at the nation’s core as its ego-ideal. In turn, this act required the supplementary violence of ethnic difference being codified, metonymized, and naturalized, in order to tear apart that which is complexly interrelated. In this context, pure representations of Malay culture and identity were subverted by the porous relationality of identity constructs.

Continuing the conversation, the son said, “The housing facilities are not good. Sewage seeps up to the ground floor and leaks into the shop. Toilets also do not flush well.” As mentioned earlier, rubber hoses were used as water pipes on the ground floor, suggesting flimsy plumbing. Aside from the poor appearance, the central block did have, as mentioned, a provision shop as well as a small tea/noodle stall and barbershop. Because of these shops, there was more visible social activity. The father concluded our conversation by saying, “We went back to see the place where our life was. It felt a bit sad.” When asked what could be seen, he said that “a few trees can still be seen” of the old estate, but not much else. As we will see, the image of a single surviving tree amidst the destruction of all else was particularly poignant.

Moving from the shop to the tea stall, we sat down and chatted with a Tamil Indian national who was living in the same flats. He was eating some *mee goreng* (fried noodles) and at first was hesitant to talk to us, unsure of whether we were with the government. Once he was convinced that I was a researcher, he opened up. He was on a three-year contract doing construction work in Putrajaya, though his legal status seemed vague given the laws on

Indian immigration and work permits. Generally, Indian workers were employed in two sectors, the professional fields, primarily information technology, and food services, as cooks and servers in Indian restaurants. Construction jobs normally went to Indonesians or Bangladeshis.

This man, in his late twenties or early thirties, was recruited by Malaysian Indians from his village of about five hundred people near Thanjavur, in Tamil Nadu. He said he liked Malaysia but came “just to make money.” He found the stall food “okay, but prefers to cook.” Working every day except Sundays, he rented a flat with five other workers for three hundred ringgit a month, or sixty ringgit per person. But he had not seen his wife and two children that were of “studying age” for two years. When I asked him of his future plans, he said he planned to go back to India soon. I saw him pray in the nearby Mariamman temple that was used for the former estate workers. Being of working-class background himself, he did not display the distancing behavior of other professional Indian nationals that I interviewed,⁶ who tended to avoid mixing with the Malaysian Tamil working class.

This man’s coworkers were also Indian nationals. As far as his house in Dengkil was concerned, he did not share the same frustration that the former estate workers did. Perhaps his own trajectory from village India to Dengkil was quite different compared to the relative “comfort” of plantation houses, though the latter should hardly be considered luxurious. In village India, however, houses might not even have running water or electricity. His salary, though modest he said, was enough to save for his daughter’s computer studies in India. When asked what he did in his leisure time on Sundays, his lone day off, he replied that he liked to do “nothing but rest.” When asked if he watched television or movies, a favorite pastime among most Malaysian Tamils, he responded that he does not watch television.

Perhaps not inconsequentially, the stall cook where we met this worker was also an Indian national. That the Indian worker could interact with his countryman in the tea stall, let alone room with coworkers who all spoke his language, must have softened the hardship slightly of being away from home. The sacrifices he made to make money for his children’s education was obviously considered worthwhile enough for him to endure this separation, as he realized the only way out of the cycles of poverty in India was through education. This global labor flow, as it was decades before, was hardly the golden path to riches for the laboring classes. But at the same time, it afforded modest opportunities for those who were willing to suffer its occasional bumpy ride. For every satisfied worker, one also heard stories of deceived, underpaid, or even unpaid workers, exploited by unscrupulous agents in the international racket of cheap mobile labor.

On another occasion, I met with a man in the tea stall under the flats who

was eager to tell a story of betrayal by the MIC and the union (NUPW). He said, “We were made to look stupid by the MIC . . . we were told we were getting terrace houses until the day we moved out.” This, he maintained, was a deliberate act of deception to get the people to agree on the settlement and move out of the estate housing. Moreover, they had all paid a deposit of five thousand ringgit to the MIC for the housing and were promised a terrace house. But the union and MIC were dishonest brokers and had betrayed them. The “MIC and NUPW are one,” he said, adding, “I spent all my benefits refitting and furnishing the flat. . . . The door was so bad you could punch a hole in it.”

This man worked as a gardener in “Badawi’s place” (the then prime minister’s residence). He traveled to work by motorbike and noted that the “*mambalam maram*” (mango tree) still stood at the residence of the prime minister’s house. This tree, as mentioned, had special significance to the residents of Prang Besar Estate. Many seemed to focus on the fact that it was still standing, as if it harbored some mysterious and miraculous secret.

He continued, “No one believed it was going to be flats.” When he protested the apparent bait and switch, he claimed that “MIC thugs beat me up.” Life in the flats was not easy, he maintained. Many motorbikes had been stolen “for parts.” But he claimed that theft was perpetrated by “outsiders,” not by his neighbors in the flats. The flats themselves were reduced in price from 35,000 to 19,000 ringgit after much protest. Also, there was a M\$1,500 “move out benefit” given to each family that left the estate voluntarily.

We were told that something odd had happened regarding the compensation for the four temples. According to their records, the compensation offer for the four demolished temples was M\$302,000, M\$275,000, M\$55,000, and M\$58,000, respectively, or nearly M\$700,000 in total. This compensation fund was announced by the developer, but the fund was unseen and nobody knew what was happening with the money. This man and his father felt, as did a few others in the flats, that the MIC had siphoned off the funds for its own local leaders. Publicly, the MIC stated that the funds would be used in the construction of the new temple. But it was claimed that there was no public accountability for the monies, “no accounting whatsoever.” A police report, I was told, was soon to be lodged by concerned residents, led by this individual, if the funding could not be accounted for.

There were twenty Malay families in the flats, living together in one block. But the man in the tea stall asked, “Why did they have to take our playground and build a *surau* (prayer hall) there?” Because there was no playground, a ball had evidently wandered into the *surau*, causing a “big fight” to break out. “The police had to come,” he said.

Anger was palpable among the residents of these flats, particularly given the spreading news that better settlements were occurring elsewhere.⁷ In a

settlement in Ampang, just north of Kuala Lumpur in Tanah Merbok, all residents had apparently received “terrace houses” as compensation (or promised as such), the temple was relocated, and a Tamil school was also built. The story of this “successful” case of compensation was pasted on the wall of the provision store for everyone in the flats to see as they purchased goods. Clearly the political climate was changing as success stories were spreading throughout the Tamil papers. A political awakening was occurring, but there was still a sense of frustration. Many felt they had been manipulated by the MIC and NUPW and had fallen victim to national(ist) development logics. This latter point, the ethnicized nature of the landscape, was becoming a ubiquitous motif in the exasperated expressions of Indians. As the man cited above put it, “nothing is possible for Indians in Malaysia (*onnumai illai*); everything is possible for Malays.” “Many [Malays] had reserve lands near the estates, and these people are still there.” Putrajaya left them untouched. Indeed, when one looked carefully at the drawing of Putrajaya’s boundaries, it was clear that the boundaries of the estates were used, whereas the Malay reserve lands and *kampung*s were largely spared (see Bunnell, Nagarajan, and Willford 2010).

Between 2004 and 2006, we visited these flats in Taman Permata, Dengkil, a number of times. The anger directed at the MIC by many residents, including the man quoted above, who found it outrageous that the political party had collected five thousand ringgit from estate workers without issuing home ownership certificates. There was also a much more general sense of melancholy about “estate life.” Like others I spoke to before (and we have witnessed in other chapters), this man missed estate life, especially having time to grow his own vegetables, raise chickens, and enjoy more time with his family. The estate experience was retroactively constructed here, as we have seen in other instances, as a time of relative comfort, peace, security, and, more surprisingly, leisure, whatever its harsher realities might have been. This construction of an idealized past, like the melancholic object in Freudian analysis, distorts the real through a projection into fantasy, but is borne out of the very fissures of desire generated within its contingencies. But these fissures are historical and cannot be reduced to transhistorical symptomology. That is, the nostalgic fever for an archive of idealized memories is both generated from and populated by historical specificities.

On one occasion during the summer of 2005, I met with a young man who was working as an office cleaner in Putrajaya. Another man who worked as a janitor in Putrajaya also joined the conversation. The janitor earned 400 to 500 ringgit per month, and the office cleaner earned 650 ringgit per month. Yet another man, who worked in Serdang Hospital, earned 750. In Putrajaya, contract workers could earn up to 600 per month. These incomes were considered around the poverty line in Malaysia. The men spoke of “gang” prob-

lems in the “*flatsle*” (inside the flats). There were a number of problems, including “*tani sappadu*” (alcohol) there. They told me that twenty children who should be attending school were “out of school” because they lacked proper “certificates,” most likely birth certificates, and money for school uniforms. This, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, was a common problem. Children were oftentimes too busy taking care of younger siblings while their parents were at work to attend school themselves. These men complained that the government knew about this problem, as did the teachers, but did nothing. The implication was that the neglect of Tamil schoolchildren did not concern those in power.

I then visited the offices of a large NGO adjacent to the flats. This Indian-based NGO, funded by grants obtained through the European Union, targeted problems faced by Indian women in Malaysia. I spoke to its volunteers, who used their location next to the flats as an opportunity to address working-class Tamil social problems. They offered evening classes to housewives living in the flats (to about “twenty students per night”), teaching anything from sewing to computer skills. There were ten volunteers who formed the core group. The volunteer I spoke with recounted the social problems in the flats: alcoholism among men, lack of education, domestic abuse, and a general lack of upward mobility for women. They had hoped to train women to enter the job market. One of the biggest problems facing the community, I was told, was its obsession with “love stories,” which “distract” working-class women from pursuing their education and work. This came in the form of movie watching or pining away for boyfriends, lovers, and wayward husbands. As with many middle-class Indian NGOs that directed their services toward the working class and poor, a degree of well-intentioned paternalism (or maternalism) and sense of distinction from the so-called culture of poverty of the Tamil poor could be discerned (see also Willford 2006a).

When we returned to the shopkeeper we had met the previous year, he reiterated the problems facing the temple. He explained the gravity of the problems of consolidating four temples into one, particularly when compensation funds were yet to be accounted for. Moreover, he said, temple compensation was in MIC hands, specifically in the Serdang chief representative. According to him, the money for the Dengkil temple was being held by the MIC representative but that this was not disclosed. This had, indeed, led him to file a police report, as he threatened to do a year earlier, and to summon the media. On July 8, 2005, a story appeared in *Malaysia Namban* (a local Tamil paper often critical of Samy Vellu) asking where the “missing money” for the Dengkil temple was.

This man feared that some improper funneling of funds had occurred. In addition to the temple compensation issue, burial ground compensation had

apparently been paid but was also not accounted for. According to this man, ninety-seven plots were removed in Prang Besar and forty-nine more plots in another estate. M\$2,000 was to be paid per burial for the removal of remains. This would equal roughly M\$300,000 in compensation that was to be paid by Putrajaya Holdings to the Land Office. This in turn was disbursed, he claimed, by the local MIC branch head who also headed the Dengkil Temple Committee. Out of each family's compensation total, a sum of \$600 per family was given to the MIC's own medical college fund. This was done without the approval of the families being displaced, but I was told that "families kept quiet out of fear of losing their housing. If you make noise . . . you lose!"

To the shopkeeper, this was an abuse of MIC power as well as a siphoning of compensation funds for political purposes, against the spirit of the law. It simply strengthened the institutional base of the party and furthered the grip of the MIC's power over their lives. The party would maintain that the medical college would ultimately benefit the Indian community and thus required the support of the whole community. Several members of the local community saw things differently and were upset by the perceived tactics of the branch head, and they went so far as to file a police report. I was unable to interview the MIC branch head to get his version of events.

I inquired as to why Putrajaya Holdings would disburse compensation through the Land Office, which was a public entity, which in turn would work within the parameters of a political party to disburse funds to individual families, citing this as a possible conflict of interest, particularly if certain families were not party members or supporters. The shopkeeper agreed that this was improper, but he reiterated that this was how power was brokered in Malaysia at the local level. Even compensation for the removal and relocation of remains was mediated through the ethnicized and partisan representative that one was compelled to support or risk losing everything.

That the temple was controlled by a particular faction was not surprising, given the consolidation process that has occurred. That the temple committee was influenced by the MIC branch chairman was also not surprising, given the financial interests at stake. It remained to be seen what public disclosure would follow as to the nature of how and where that money was to be used. Presumably, the more permanent structure that was being planned for this site would require considerable finances and could absorb much of this. But the air of suspicion detracted from unity within the temple. The unofficial "priest" of the temple, whom we met earlier (the technician from University Hospital), had a very different opinion of the MIC and of the flats at Taman Permata than that held by most, if not all, of those I spoke with. He spoke in glowing terms about the MIC branch leader and for his ability to negotiate such a reasonable price on the flats. Moreover, he felt that the land title for

the temple was achieved due to the MIC branch head's efforts. When asked what problems exist for the community in the flats itself, he responded, "What problems? Where can you find flats like this? These are the best flats. They are near the town, the temple, everything."

On another occasion, this time in the summer of 2006, I met with a man who repeated the accusations against the MIC branch head over the missing burial funds. The shopkeeper who had spoken to us the previous summer had, unbeknownst to us, passed away suddenly a few months earlier. The gentleman, a younger man in his thirties, claimed that the MIC had told them a "*nalla* (good) good lie"⁸ to get them to settle with the developer and the party years earlier. The compensation for the temple, he reiterated, had been unaccounted for, which led to a police report filed by some in the flats. He then turned to the question of unequal justice afforded to Tamil versus Malay plantation workers as they were retrenched as plans for Putrajaya were put in motion. He said, "We were told about 'Kampung Putrajaya' and assumed a nice Kampung Putrajaya will be built for us all." In reality, Malays mostly went back to their *kampung*s in the vicinity, and Putrajaya was built on the estate land. Tamils, on the other hand, "*live like refugees because we are Tamils.*" Reserve lands and squatter lands are impossible to access in and around Putrajaya for Tamils, whereas for Malays, *kampung* lands are considered reserve lands. Therefore, at least for some, there may have been an option of returning to the natal village after retrenchment. But the perception that this was always possible was exaggerated, since several Malay families were living in the Taman Permata flats, which would certainly not be their first choice. Some rented out their allotted unit, as did some of the Tamil families. It was therefore possible that the so-called Malay block consisted of renters rather than former estate workers/owners. In any event, the perception that Malay options were more varied and fluid was widespread among Tamils, who, felt they were caught between a rock and a hard place, given the tactics employed by the MIC to strengthen their hold on grassroots Indian affairs. The man repeated the story about the converted playground we had heard from others. He said, "There is no football field . . . and now boys take drugs. Still, two years ago, the state assemblyman allocated a *surau* (prayer room), though only ten to fifteen people use it."

The notion among Tamils that they are "like refugees" was a newer discourse in Malaysia. As we have witnessed elsewhere, this new victim's narrative provides parameters of identification vis-à-vis a morally lacking and culturally inauthentic Other. And while this might be understood as coming to terms with the violence of the law, there is also a great risk in forging identification in the stereotypical Other's lack. The response itself might become hysterical, exaggerated, and fraught with inconsistencies that are only shored up by finding inward sources of betrayal. In this case, the often disas-

trous role of the MIC seemed to serve as the agent provocateur within. That is, that which resolved the problem of categorical victimization by the big Other was none other than the inner betrayer, the one complicit with the Other. The MIC served that symbolic, if not actual, role. We will return to these themes in chapter 10.

Returning to the fate of the temple, the man discussed above complained that only the Prang Besar Estate was then represented in the temple. He claimed that the MIC branch head had appointed a woman to take care of the temple. She and her brother were in charge, though they did not have the consent of the whole community to conduct prayers. This was a cause of disunity within the temple committee and within the temple itself. Like others, he remarked about the solitary mango tree that was still standing in Putrajaya, but he did not elaborate on its significance.

Like the man in the tea stall quoted earlier, he spoke of “outsiders” as the cause of local problems. Drugs and alcohol, he claimed, were being brought in by outsiders, and violence, when it did occur, was also instigated from the outside. Avoiding the implication of violence from within appeared to be a ubiquitous theme in many accounts I heard (including those in the Kampung Medan case discussed in chapter 7). Locating an external cause was important. Betrayals had a source, were cognizable, and could be figured by a particular aggressor. This appeared to nurture a victim’s narrative and allow the anxieties of inward fracture to be deferred or displaced, albeit temporarily.

Lastly, he turned again to the controversy surrounding the compensation of graves. While M\$2,000 was supposed to have been given for each grave, only M\$1,400 had been paid by the MIC head in 1998, he claimed, while M\$600 had purportedly gone missing. That is, M\$600 times ninety-seven families. This amount was to be paid, I was told, to the Maju Institute of Educational Development (MIED), the medical college of the MIC, as a donation for the future scholarship of Malaysian Indians. But this was evidently done without the consent of the families, and so the aforementioned shopkeeper had filed a police report. According to this account, the MIC branch head attempted to settle with the shopkeeper quietly by offering him M\$10,000, which was refused. Forty-seven graves remained uncompensated, and the families that had been paid partial compensation had not approved the mysterious “donation” to the medical college.

The Miraculous Mango Tree

While interviewing residents in the flats about their transition to a new way of life, I heard stories (alluded to earlier) about a mango tree that held special significance to the members of Prang Besar Estate, the largest of the

estates displaced. As it turned out, this mango tree was evidently still standing right in the heart of Putrajaya, though its proximity and significance were lost on the residents of the new city. To the Prang Besar residents, this was a miraculous tree. To this day, former residents now living in Taman Permata flats will occasionally visit the tree, leaving behind food offerings to the gods.

The story began years back, we were told, when a blind woman named “Cauvery” prayed for sight at the Mariamman temple within the estate. After a miraculous restoration of her eyesight, a Madurai Viran (a “protector” or guardian deity in Tamil Hinduism) statue was erected by the grateful devotee near a mango tree outside the temple. Every year following this incident, the statue of Madurai Viran became the sight of special prayers during the festival for the goddess. During the festival, devotees would fall into a trance, and in this state of *arul* would offer acts of self-mortification. The power of the miraculous shrine grew in the community’s estimation.

Upon demolition of the Mariamman temple and shrine to Madurai Viran, the woman who had been caring for the shrine took the statue of the god and his ritual implements, a sword and rope, and relocated them into her flat in Dengkil. And while the dispersal of community had fragmented the congregation that would celebrate the festival before the tree and Madurai Viran, the caretaker continued to hold the annual festival in her flat. A woman fifty-eight years of age, she told me that all her “relatives” (*sountakarar*) “come together” at this time and recollect their life in the estate. She did add that she preferred estate life to life in the flats but was doing what she could to honor the deity. At the same time, she expressed grave concern about the status of the god residing in such an inauspicious dwelling. She reiterated, “Flats are not possible for prayers (*flatsle puja seyye mudiyatu*) . . . a house is needed.” Indeed, the Tamil word for temple is *kovil*, which means, among other things, a “house” for the god.

Looking closely at the statue, I noticed a photograph placed carefully in its lap. As it turns out, my colleague from Singapore,⁹ also collaborating on the same study of Dengkil and Putrajaya, had taken a photograph of the mango tree with one of the former Prang Besar residents offering *puja* before it. This photo, taken in Putrajaya in 2004, was now part of Madurai Viran’s shrine, reuniting the deity with his sacred space and miraculous tree, if only through the refracted memory of the photograph.

The poignant beauty of this memorial suggested a logic of compensation built on the recognition of things as they should be—a piecing together, literally, out of the shards of destruction, the beautiful remnants of the broken past. In Kant’s sense, this is “beautiful” recognition and reconstitution. Yet there is an uncanny and sublime face to this as well: the sheer contingency



Shrine for Madurai Viran inside flat

that the demolition of the miraculous *shrine must impress upon the traumatized devotee* the terror of the incomprehensible. The reconstruction of the broken body of the god's statue, though with devoted intent and with the aim to restore agency and miraculous power, like Frankenstein's monster risks raising the wrath of the deity through improper handling; the flat is not a proper home to the deity, and the deity may not take too kindly to this. The benign or protecting power associated with the memories of the estate can turn malevolent too, and that is of grave concern to the caretaker of the shrine, who, at some risk to herself, stages festivals in her flat that involve offerings of meat and beer to the potentially violent "guardian" deity. The question that remains is whether the photograph and ritual memorialization can effect control over the wound caused by the destruction of the sacred space. More broadly, whether a particularly dangerous and justice-seeking deity's violence can be contained is brought to consciousness through this memorial. Read as an extension of the community, the village gods are explicitly bound to their subjects in an eternal contract of reciprocity. They can equally create or protect against calamity, according to Tamil folklore (Kinsley 1986; Whitehead 1921; Ram 2013). But against the horrific and sublime reconstitution through ritual control, we have the beauty of the continued life of the tree, prevailing in the



Mango tree

midst of the new government buildings, with their symbolic intent, providing memories of a landscape that was once theirs.¹⁰ Yet even in this repossession of the land, as is often the case in the “social” ritualization of the sacred landscape in Tamil Hinduism, the possession of the devotee that accompanies this process by an unseen and dangerous power that lies outside of oneself becomes partially inexplicable or exceeds the symbolic order (Nabokov 2000). From here, aspiration, divine justice, the miraculous, and the limits of reason coexist. As in Derrida’s contrast between the “calculating apparatus” that is the law and that is subject to the rules of the archive, justice is “infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry” (Derrida 2002a, 250). The sublime sacred in Tamil Hinduism haunts the (human) order of the law and exceeds historical reason (Ram 2013). Its de(con)structive power to unmask the contingencies of human law proves politically potent, as we will witness in the collective force of Hindraf in the wake of the state’s transgression upon sacred spaces. As we will recall, Madurai Viran and other protector deities that possess, in particular, lower-status members of society, stand at the transgressive margins of society’s laws. Their seizure of the subject, either through violence, sexual license, or other forms of conquest, point on the one hand to the violence within the order of the law itself. That is, the bandit and king are revealed to be the same (Shulman 1985). On the other hand, their ability to cross boundaries of hierarchy, and to thereby create disorder, brings on them punishment or self-sacrifice in the name of the Law. This, in turn, produces divine power, the power exercised by the powerless against their unjust position in life. In this sense, interestingly, even the injustice done to the shrine of the deity can be turned into a source of divine power, a point I will underscore yet again in chapter 10. But the power generated by such sacrifice is awesome, sublime, and incomprehensible, though it has the power to possess or overcome the subject.

In this poignant example, the logic of compensation that haunts justice in Malaysia can be witnessed through the optic of Tamil notions of the sacred and its transgression by the law, and by extension by the actions this might precipitate among devotees. Here the powers unleashed by demolition remain undetermined, dangerous and therefore uncanny in their power to possess (Siegel 2006), to an extent uncognizable, and perhaps a sublime source of unease (Gasche 2003) as much as a beautiful source of hope.

9 The Law’s Betrayal

At that time, we were all Malaysians, but now we are Indians.

Throughout this book, we have seen that a vision of the law’s true face from a Tamil perspective came when plantation workers’ fates lay in the hands of developers working in collusion with the state. In short, our concern has been those pushed against the wall. Though physical displacement has produced the most visceral awakening to the violence within the Law, a cultural displacement, as experienced by the Indian middle class, has produced its own narrative of growing intolerance and betrayals of an idealized and nascent nation to be. This sense of betrayal among the Indian middle class, while not the main focus of this book and discussed in more detail elsewhere (Willford 2006a; Kent 2000; Baxstrom 2008), is still important. Because many important leaders for the Tamil community have arisen from the middle class, and their narrative of victimization has taken a more cohesive ideological form, they have exerted considerable influence. Their intellectualization of feelings of betrayal sometimes traversed class and status divides, and was disseminated to the working class through the work of activists, politicians, writers, NGOs, and lawyers.

Param

Dr. Param was a retired Malaysian academic. He taught for many years in the Department of Indian Studies at the University of Malaya. Both his master’s thesis and PhD dissertation concerned Tamil religious and social practices in Malaysia. He lived comfortably in a large house in Subang Jaya, a middle-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur. For an academic, he had managed to do relatively well. He had one married son abroad, married to a foreigner

in the United States. He and his wife also had one adult child who continued to live at home.

He showed no reluctance to speak out about problems that he perceived in the academic and political systems in Malaysia. Though he never “ruffled feathers” during his career, he now spoke candidly. It became clear that he was disappointed that he did not publish more of his work. In particular, he felt his thesis should have been revised and published. But various personal struggles had interfered with his productivity. Moreover, he was, like all Malaysian academics in the public university, forced to retire at the age of fifty-five. In his case, this only allowed him a few short years as an associate professor. While his PhD was completed in 1982, he was forced to retire in 1994.

Param had originally wished to do his PhD abroad. But the university “was so blatantly racist that they selected Malays only for foreign degrees. The vice chancellor told me to do it locally. Malays were the only ones urged to go overseas.” He mentioned that a prominent Malaysian Chinese academic was given a hard time about his work. “The administrators would ask him about his ‘contributions to national unity’ when he was up for promotion. He was disgusted and left for Hong Kong . . . we have citizenship in order to live in Malaysia, but not for equal rights. There is no justice. There is probably racism everywhere, but here it is so blatant.”

Param told us that he wished his son was closer, and he regretted seeing him only once a year since he was working in the United States. But he asked his son “to not come back to Malaysia, as the whole civil service is now Malay,” referring to the policy of ethnic preferencing in all government-related jobs. He then turned to the ubiquitous theme of Malay cultural insecurity and the suppressed presence of the foreign within their language and culture: “[A] Malay scholar once admitted to me that Malays are insecure knowing that they don’t have a Ramayana or Mahabharata.¹ Their history begins four hundred years ago.” I had heard numerous similar sentiments expressed over the years, which I felt represented a desire for recognition that was built in the form of a hierarchical impulse. That is, Indians, from their feelings of frustration and betrayal, sought compensation through a narrative of cultural supremacy—one that posits the Malay as derivative, or at the very least a mere reflection of their greater and more ancient civilization.

Param then told a story about his research in Kampung Gandhi, the site of his dissertation fieldwork. He said that Indians had to ride several kilometers to the nearest police station. When they arrived looking tired and sweaty, they would be told to go away because “they are drunk.” Similarly, he claimed that “Indians who report Malay crimes are turned away from police, who refused to accept their statements.” He added, “With Indians leaving the country, the situation will only worsen for those who remain. . . . Islamization

has made them more narrow and afraid to mix. They (Malays) will ask me when they come to the house, ‘have you cut the chicken in a *halal* way.’ . . . I’m fed up and won’t invite them anymore.”

This is a ubiquitous and representative theme among middle-class Indians in Malaysia: the Islamization of Malays has made them turn away from history and from any meaningful dialogue with the Other. But they are insecure about this movement away from a more intimate or fluid relation with the Other. The assumed identity that is accomplished with the aid of a state bureaucratic apparatus, and institutionalized through the education system (like the one at the University of Malaya), produces excessive rationalization and rigidity expressed through a concern for halal food, ethnic and religious purity, etc. Their turn to orthodoxy is a symptom of the displacement caused by the new, terribly exacting, yet hollow, ego-ideal of the nation. As Param himself explained, “The separation is there more than when we were in the 1950s and 60s. At that time we were all ‘Malayans,’ but now we are Indians, with no claim to the nation.”

They had, in other words, been negated from the nation by the very way that Malays had negated the more porous boundaries of cultural belonging and interethnic fluidity that were at one time imaginable. The idea of being Malaysian in this more inclusive sense was not imaginable because the new imaginary was shaped by an experience of legislative rigidity, one that was transgressive of the more plural identities of yesteryear. This required a reiterative silencing of the Other’s presence within the corridors of being Malay.

He claimed that “Malay crimes are not reported . . . but these things cannot be said.” This may or may not be, but it was also said by Indians that Malay crimes that are known are suppressed, as in the Kampung Medan case discussed earlier. What also therefore cannot be said, is that to be “Malay” was to participate in the collective crime of entitlement, its arbitrary foundations in the inauguration of legal acts, and the pleasures experienced through repeated signification (a signifying chain supported by an expansive legal apparatus). The inaugurating violence of the legal act was supplemented through the sustaining violence of various further decisions derived from the founding decision (Derrida 2002a; Benjamin 1986; Agamben 2005). In Malaysia’s case, as well as in many others, the rendering of political identities through the law was necessarily supplemented through the archiving of ethnic difference. That these remained haunted by the inability of closure or complete disentanglement produced, in turn, the feverish dimension of racialized thinking in the name of the Law. But Law as genealogy revealed itself to be lacking, albeit partially. Ideology, as Žižek (1989) might say, is partly though not sufficiently cynical. The partial dimension belies or silences the insecurity

that will not allow for a full disclosure, either of the events at Kampung Medan or the other crimes of metonymic representation.

But in the victim's narrative, Islam becomes the explanation and signifier for the symptom: "Islam is the reason there can be no melting pot." Islam turned the Malays into racists, or so it seems. The culprit, however, lay in the signification of ethnicity, and with it legal entitlements, and not Islam per se. But Islam has come to metonymize all that was intolerant. This signifier and all it represented allowed Param (and many others) to rationalize his own life's trajectory, allowing him to grasp his own limitations and, perhaps, sense of failure in the light of an unhappy but unavoidable victimhood. Malays, too, of course find in Islam a convenient condensation in ethnic singularization. But through this condensation, the archive as serial type (Anderson 1998) buttresses the impossible demand Islam makes on Malays (Peletz 2002).

Consider and recall the perceived excess in every housing estate, as recounted by the Ebor Estate leader fighting for his temple: "They don't want a temple in this *taman* [housing estate]. There are huge *masjids* everywhere." There is no logical connection in these statements taken at face value. But the very fact that there is an *excess of masjid*, if you will—in which large but ultimately empty mosques are built over vast stretches of land, while little, if any, land can be acquired for low-cost Indian housing or to save an old temple—suggests a pleasure in signification that goes well beyond political expediency (and reason). Even if the ubiquity and perceived heavy-handedness of *masjid* growth does not represent a desire to make Islam and Malay identity iterable and Tamil and Hindu identity invisible upon the fabric of the landscape, I am suggesting that the Tamil and Hindu perspective that this silencing is deliberate is important. The narrative of victimhood is extremely compelling and sensible to a growing number of Indians. The educated middle class are particularly skilled at turning their disappointment and disillusionment into a compelling and compensatory narrative of victimization.

Param lamented the patterns of development that had taken hold in Malaysia. He was particularly upset to learn that the MIC had allowed the assets from the SILF (South Indian Labor Fund) to be taken over by the government.² This fund was designed to help poor laborers educate their children through loans and scholarships. He asked rhetorically, and with some exasperation, "How could they do that without consultation and discussion with the union and workers?" To Param, and to many other educated Indians, the MIC and its various organs had colluded too closely with the government, not resisting various policies that hurt Indian interests. They did so because there were material rewards to be gained through this collusion for that minority of politically connected individuals who benefited from party patronage.

I concluded our discussion by turning to the subject of housing and the

transformation of the Kampung Medan area in the wake of the so-called riots. Knowing he had conducted extensive fieldwork in the area in the 1970s, I felt he would have a sense of how the demise of this old squatter community would be felt by those moving to new low-cost flats. He said the flats are "much worse" in his experience than squatter houses. The "greed of developers" was, he claimed, the force behind the kinds of low-cost housing that were being developed by the state. Like many others, he suggested that that "riots" were simply a pretext for profitable property development.

The rest of this chapter is mainly devoted to accounts of betrayal that came from two influential former politicians, both of whom were also successful lawyers with excellent reputations. Both had retired from active politics when I met with them.

Dato Kanthan

Dato (honorific) Kanthan was the MIC representative for Petaling Jaya Selatan (South) under Tun Manickavasagam's (the second MIC president) leadership. He was also the state executive councilor and state assemblyman between 1974 and 1982. At the time, his constituencies included Kampung Gandhi, Pinaga, Lindungan, and Medan. Kanthan enjoyed a good reputation among more older plantation workers and working-class families for his progressive politics and perceived personal honesty.

Upon arriving at his house, I was struck by his obvious wealth. He lived in a prestigious part of "PJ" (Petaling Jaya). The house itself was palatial and had a sizable back yard and well-tended swimming pool. His private legal practice had been lucrative, I thought to myself. But according to many accounts I had heard, he was an honest politician when he served and actually gave up much income to serve in public office. His money came from law, not politics, I had heard. But he also wanted Naga and I to understand this, and he therefore stated it directly.

We were warmly greeted and treated to snacks and tea. The Dato appeared to be a youthful sixty or so. He seemed healthy and vibrant. To begin our conversation, he recounted one of his greatest successes, which sadly goes unnoticed today. In 1973, he and "Padma," Dato Padmanathan, then labor minister who also served in the same cabinet under Manickavasagam, wrote a plan of action called the "Estate Workers Housing Scheme." This appeared in the MIC blue book and made several recommendations to the government. It had a plan to eradicate the *samsu*³ (drinking) problem that was emerging in the estates. It also had a clearly laid-out blueprint, which then prime minister Tun Razak evidently approved, that would have helped plantation workers purchase their own homes over time (recall the brief discus-

sion of this plan in chapter 2). This was a policy rarely implemented, though it was apparently favored by Prime Minister Razak “at the height of the NEP (New Economic Policy).” Kanthan emphasized this fact in order to underscore the point that even the Malay nationalists such as Tun Razak were not against a move to prevent a migration to squatter areas among Indians who were already being displaced by retrenchments and the subdivisions of various estates.

In addition to this, the blue book also had all the schematics for a cooperative finance program. With this program, it was believed that Tamils could invest and “see better returns for their children.” As a whole, it aimed to ward off the effects of plantation displacements and mine closings. MAIKA holdings (a failed investment scheme for Malaysian Indians, see Tate 2008), which were to be Samy Vellu’s legacy, were already being planned for in the blue book. But MAIKA later became a fiasco in which the estimated 100 million ringgit raised from working-class Indians was mismanaged or worse, and no profits ever emerged (Tate 2008; Nagarajan 2004). Most simply lost money. Kanthan explained that all the details of the previous plans were in the MIC meeting minutes, but they were ignored after Samy Vellu took over leadership of the party. Anything implemented under the previous leader, Manikkavasagam, was discounted and nullified, regardless of whether the ideas were good or not, Kanthan claimed. Samy’s “ego was such that he didn’t want anything to succeed that he himself did not approve.” Moreover, he feared Kanthan and Padmanathan politically and did not want their “blue book” to overshadow his own future initiatives. As it turned out, Kanthan suggested, Samy Vellu became powerful by nullifying achievements negotiated earlier with the government, and thus pandering to UMNO hopes for greater Malay political and economic hegemony. He ingratiated himself to UMNO, and especially to Mahathir, but he betrayed pivotal Indian interests.

In more recent times, however, Samy Vellu had suggested that the government create a separate “NEP for Indians,” given their economic woes. Kanthan found this cynical at best. He said, “This is absurd: 100 million could have grown to 200 million by now just through a regular bank account. There is no excuse, and Samy has no right to ask for an NEP for Indians.”

While Dato Harun was chief minister of Selangor between 1974 and 1982, sixteen housing schemes were approved based on the MIC blue book recommendations, but not all were implemented. These included five different schemes in former tin mining areas, in addition to housing in several large estates.⁴

One of the famous temples in Petaling Jaya was majestically perched atop Gasing Hill, a popular hiking spot with dramatic vistas of Kuala Lumpur and beyond. It was also the site of luxury homes. The Shiva temple that crowned the hill had to fight for its very survival against the government, and

in particular the state-owned Telekoms company. The Gasing Hill temple committee clashed with Telekoms for survival in the 1970s at a time when the company wanted to access this valuable land for communications towers. Kanthan was involved in the fight to save the temple. In recounting this fight, he commented, “They are anti-temple . . . you know the town council Malays.” He implied that any possible opportunity by a government agency to take over land where a temple existed was seized upon. When afforded a chance to remove a temple, whether the land was required for a particular use or not, they took pleasure in doing so, he insinuated. A Kafkaesque bureaucratic pleasure was unleashed through the decisions guided by arbitrary policies. These policies were compulsive, given their ideological weddedness to a project of Islamization and ethnic preferencing. The institutional realization of such preferencing occurred in the micro-decisions of planners and town council operatives, as well as in the resonant political discourse of *bumiputraisim*. But he succeeded in saving the temple.

In addition to fighting for this particular temple, Kanthan worked to improve the conditions of people living in the Kampung Medan area, his constituents. Prayer facilities, a school, and a clinic were created at the time in Kampung Gandhi. Dato Hormut Rafei, however, refused permission as the chief minister of Selangor. He said no to a project that would have built permanent housing for Indian families in Kampung Gandhi. Kampung Medan housing schemes were also approved, with much Indian support for the initiative being floated and sponsored by Kanthan. But in the end, because of the fever of ethnic preferencing that was emergent at that time and sustained by the NEP, the new housing “went almost 100 percent” to Malays. Tamils, on the other hand, were put in “longhouses”⁵ (temporary housing). Dato Hormut Rafei, in short, wanted to “Malayanize Kuala Lumpur,” Kanthan claimed. To do so meant that discriminatory housing policies had to be adopted, buttressed by the legal institutions generated by the NEP.

Ironically, it was the Indians who were willing to purchase the low-cost homes, whereas Malays demanded free homes and were recalcitrant in their negotiations, according to Kanthan. But it “was a bitter pill” to swallow, in the end, that the distribution of housing was clearly based on ethnic biases and politicking. Kanthan, like many other non-Malays in the coalition government, felt the sting of betrayal from the idea of the nation they had invested in. But, he rationalized, this was the “heyday of the NEP.” It was a time for the government to execute the blunt force of the law to achieve gains for Malays, regardless of the perceived fairness of these policies to the non-Malay poor. The legacy of the NEP was felt in the statements recorded by former civil servants and politicians regarding the preferences given to Malays: that they receive everything for no obvious reason other than the political

pleasure of UMNO leaders and followers. This was a secret that could not be spoken or “said,” as Param pointed out earlier, yet was constantly on the lips of the Tamils, as we have seen. Of course, the instrumental reasoning is quite clear, even to these former partners in the nation. It is just that the vestiges of idealism still resonate in their senses of betrayal.

Sadly, from Kanthan’s point of view, the minutes of PKNS (Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor, or Selangor State Economic Development Corporation) and MIC meetings were not read again. Though Tun (honorific) Tan Siew Sin, then the federal finance minister, was in favor of the proposals Kanthan helped author, there was no follow-up at the local or state level (within PKNS). And thus the foresight seen among progressive politicians in the 1970s regarding the then present and future challenges facing the Tamil communities was ignored. In hindsight, the housing schemes in particular would have prevented much of today’s suffering among working-class Tamils. Therefore, a great betrayal had indeed occurred.

In no sense disagreeing with the analysis of a lost opportunity, it is important, however, to gesture toward the desire to recapitulate a history that disentangles the historical actor from the decisions and policies that were eventually implemented. What was undoubtedly a complex and certainly frustrating set of negotiations is presented in its recounting as a betrayal by those determined to realize their political ambition, and materialize their ethnic commitment. While not doubting the sincerity of this eagerness to have a proper history restored, we must also consider the power of the present in shaping the clear contours in the narrative of the past. Victimization of the Indian and a betrayal of the idealized nation offers a particular compensatory logic, supplemented by the archive of memory. Kanthan readily offered to obtain the aforementioned “blue book” for us. Building the evidentiary base for a moral claim involved a degree of documentation. It was his hope that with a proper understanding of recent history, justice might be done for those facing eviction and resettlement today. The first step in squaring the account, however, lay in uncovering specific acts of betrayal. For this, an archive existed, an evidentiary base upon which to proceed, speak, and ultimately act. As I have suggested throughout, this model of jurisprudence reconstitutes the Law, shoring up its apparent lack.

Dominic Puthucheary

It was a rainy day in 2004 when Naga and I first met Dominic Puthucheary in Jeevan’s restaurant in Bangsar, a middle-class to affluent neighborhood in Kuala Lumpur. Along a side road, there was a row of Indian restaurants and shops that were patronized by the large middle-class Indian population of

Bangsar. Jeevan’s was known to be a “Ceylonese” shop and had a large but not exclusive Sri Lankan Tamil clientele. As the rain pattered on the tin roof veranda where we were sitting, I listened intently as the legendary lawyer and politician spoke. He was a generous host, insisting that I have something to eat and drink, though he himself had only tea. Dominic was a member of parliament for a number of years in the Barisan Nasional partner, Gerakan Party. But he left politics in the mid-1990s and practiced law, increasingly with an eye on social causes. Both he and his brother were political prisoners in Singapore before independence, and were important enough as “freedom fighters” that Mahathir attended his brother James’ funeral, though their politics were quite different.⁶

Dominic asked for my impressions of the current situation facing Malaysia before he spoke. I mumbled something about the fear of racialization taking hold among many Malaysians. He began a long and eloquent discourse—almost a thesis outline—that narrativized what has transpired in Malaysia and Asia more broadly.

He asked me to look at the “big picture.” The “impact of colonialism was such that it made Asia a place to manage.” He thought this came in two particular ways today. First, “global capitalism” had largely emerged out of colonialism, and Asia played a significant role in the global economy of labor and production. “Terrorism” was the other concern that made Asia a place to “manage.” He suggested that the latter was related to the former insofar as the roots of terrorism could be found in colonialism and capitalism, and also insofar as terrorism was the threat to global capitalism.

Echoing Samuel Huntington⁷—but only partly so—he suggested that there is a clash of “two fundamentalisms in the world today: a Christian and a Muslim one.” He spoke of the “moral footing” the West previously enjoyed but was now losing under the “Bush doctrine” and pre-emptive strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan. “There is a loss of moral footing for Western societies,” he suggested. Whereas some in politics in Malaysia would speak of the loss of values in Western society, he meant here the immoral nature of Christian fundamentalism or its symmetrical and antagonistic relationship with Islamic fundamentalism. Unlike Huntington, however, he saw the West as increasingly guided not by secular principles, but by religious zealotry.

Turning to Malaysia, he described UMNO as a “failure.” He emphasized that “all communal parties are.” He also suggested that a betrayal had occurred. Like others of his status and educational level, particularly those who fought for an independent Malaysia, he felt that the nation that had emerged was not consonant, but rather was the monstrous double of the vision that his generation had, which was “the old romantic” idea of an inclusive nation.⁸ Communal politics had destroyed whatever inclusive nationalism that might

possibly have been taking hold in an earlier era. Of course, the vision of a Malaysian Malaysia, not formulated on ethnic terms, was arguably more a Chinese and Indian dream than it ever was a Malay one.⁹

Taking up a theme I myself have argued regarding attachment to ethnic identity—that is, that insecurity over ethnic signifiers of ethnicity might ironically produce greater attachment to the signifier through the supplemental work of knowledge production—Dominic said that “insecurity” had arisen among Malays because “they are a British invention.” He was referring to the measurement of race in colonial times that had hardened what used to be more permeable categories (Hirschman 1986; Mandal 2004). He then spoke more directly on the theme of ethnic relations, alluding to the Kampung Medan violence: “What is to stop ethnic conflict? There will be many more Kampung Medans in the future. It is among the lower middle class where the fascism spreads. Their disappointment will lead to either PAS or, if possible, UMNO patronage.”

He was suggesting here that UMNO would promote a chauvinist agenda, and even provoke ethnic hatred, where and when it served the interest of political patronage, even as structurally speaking, the possibility of upward mobility for many Malays was blocked by corruption, inefficiency, and nepotism. Where and when this was not successful, PAS would be an attractive alternative. It was also the case that the lower middle class would be particularly vulnerable to ideological perturbation. While Puthuchery did not explicitly theorize this dimension, I would argue that this was due to the very constitution of the class being a product of government-sponsored affirmative action policies implemented through the NEP. Their investment in the NEP, and the racial ideologies that underpinned it, would contribute to fascist tendencies, particularly when rationalizing arbitrary privilege over those left behind, and would increasingly require a zealous attachment to imagined cultural ideals of race and ethnicity—ones that belie experience and thus require supplementary forms of evidence (the law, historical revisionism, and the constant reaffirmation of difference). To point to the example provided by Kanthan, we saw that squatters in Kampung Medan were accorded permanent housing solely on the basis of ethnicity, regardless of the specific history of the settlements. This, of course, as we have seen in the context of compensation claims in the plantation sector, was felt to be capricious and arbitrary. In his statement, too, we can observe a worried disposition with regards to PAS that was shared by many educated non-Malays. Though critical of the government, they often continued to prefer the Barisan Nasional to the PAS opposition. In Puthuchery’s case, this would explain his preference for Gerakan, a party that is ostensibly multiracial though dominated by Chinese and working within the communal-based Barisan alliance.

As we will see, walking the Gerakan tightrope could lead to disillusionment as the racial politics become manifest, even in the noncommunal party. But it should also be noted that Puthuchery’s intellectualized understanding of the communal predicament, while mirroring and informing my own, was not totally idiosyncratic or unique. Indeed, I present his views as representative. His cynical condemnation of UMNO’s race-baiting political formula was and is ubiquitous among Malaysia’s intelligentsia of all so-called races. Though it goes beyond the scope of this book to analyze the growing middle-class critique of UMNO and Barisan Nasional in greater detail (see Weiss 2011) one can find similar commentaries aired almost daily in the prominent online newspapers such as *Malaysiakini* and *Malaysia Today*, as well as in the blogosphere.

Puthuchery turned to the debilitating consequences of an ethnic entitlement regime, claiming that “Malays must put up appearances of doing well. Actually, they cannot compete with non-Malays, and feel insecure about it. They will act self-important, but ultimately they are incompetent. No good Malay lawyers or judges anymore [*sic*]. In the earlier times, yes, but not anymore.” He was suggesting here that the appearance of doing well was a political mirage accomplished by UMNO. This, of course, had consequences in how policies became ostensibly pro-Malay, as the gestures made by the government to show how much is being done to help the Malays created a talent vacuum that could only be rationalized through ever-more excessive attachments to entitlements. On the other hand, he was also saying here that the “putting up appearances” was also a necessary public image that had to be adopted by individual Malays in positions of authority. The trickle-down effect of this mentality, one presumed following his earlier prediction that many more Kampung Medans will occur, suggested that the insecurity that Malays felt as they inhabit the roles that their own injunctions call on them to play—that is, the appearances that they must display—will manifest themselves in acting self-important but ultimately feeling incompetent, culturally and professionally. They will be overheard, discovered for what they are, inauthentic and incompetent. “Fascism will spread among the lower middle class, its warning sign being the violence of Kampung Medan”—not necessarily among judges and lawyers, though the effects of the collective putting on of appearances would be felt more strongly at this level. Here is where the bureaucratic taking hold of everyday Muslims silenced varied Malay resistances to the state project (see Peletz 2003; Hoffstaedter 2011). Lastly, the judges of yesteryear were possibly good, but not anymore. This is so because the Malay judges of old were not selected because they were Malay, but rather because they were well-educated and talented individuals who held their own on merit, not through bureaucratic intervention. The

insecurity was ultimately rooted in the invention of a category, which became the arbitrary ordering of the colonial order and later the nation-state, with its symbolic ranking of ethnic types. The signifier has great power to effect social violence in various forms, but its meaning is contingent on what it negates. In this case, we see that the meanings associated with ethnic typologies and preferencing were perceived to negate a more inclusive idealized notion of national identification. Moreover, the productive power of signification relates to the supplemental forms of evidence (or violence) that retroactively make them “true” or seemingly natural.

Dominic then turned directly to the problem of justice within the juridical order: “There is no sense of justice or injustice—that is left to God—‘*allahu akbar*’ (God is great). Therefore outrage over Anwar (the former deputy prime minister) is not there.” Here he was suggesting that the submission unto God of all that is to be adjudicated by men under normal circumstances absolves, defers, or externalizes that which should and could be dealt with directly within the law. The suspension of judgment, or the impetus to feelings of conscience, which should be manifested in outrage or a “sense of justice” was forestalled or delayed with the ultimate displacement unto God. He elaborated a bit on this, saying to me that the modern Malay attitude is able to accomplish a miraculous compartmentalization in which what is appalling, such as Mahathir’s treatment of Anwar,¹⁰ is rendered an external issue—one that God decides upon. Therefore, the letter of the law can be followed, but not the spirit. In one sense, one might see a parallel with what we witnessed among Tamil Hindus in their awakening to the violence within the Law and hence a deferral of justice to the divine. But here, in contrast, the Law, with its cold decidability, is not the root of the problem. Rather, it is the perceived racialization or perversion of Law that renders true legality and justice visible (the two still conjoined). In another sense, we can almost see two super-egos in operation. On the one hand, the ego-ideal of conscience, which should be operative, is underdeveloped among Malays and resists too little the workings of Law. On the other hand, the fixating on the letter, without conscience, seems to be increasingly possessive; this accounts for the pleasures of the big Other (Law) and the lack of accountability to anything other than procedural jurisprudence. This is a kind of “automaton” in Freud’s (or Kafka’s) frightening sense (1997). It operates independent of reflective intentionality, leading to the ultimate exteriority of one’s words and actions from one’s conscience. In this uncanny doubling, the big Other becomes a demand that must be obeyed, despite memories that confound its arbitrary institution. As Žižek (1989), among others, has argued, this produces a perversity of attachment to ideals, precisely in response to their arbitrariness and contin-

gency. The perversity of overattachment feverishly negates what, at some less-than-fully conscious level, one perceived to be an impossible demand for identification.

Puthuchery turned to one of the favorite themes expressed by elite Indians in Malaysia: that the contributions of Indians to the country’s development have gone unrecognized. He spoke of the INA’s (Indian National Army’s) impact on Malay nationalism. He also described the Tamil contributions to “clearing the land” through hard labor. The Tamils “made it productive. The Malays would be nowhere without the Indian laborers and Chinese capitalists.” Turning briefly to the Chinese, he said Chinese business, “chambers of commerce, guilds, etc., control the economy.” He suggested that the Chinese are autonomous in the sense that they do not need anything from the government. But the converse was not true. Putting up appearances of Malay success, as exemplified by the Mahathir’s obsession with icons of development (i.e., skyscrapers, shopping malls, giant mosques, and a new airport), was contingent, paradoxically, on Chinese success, as it was through the capital raised by the latter that the Malays (read UMNO) had any resources to offer their clients. Negating this source of economic power and, more broadly, the collusion of Chinese capital and Malay nationalism required figures of displacement. These negated sources of being sustained a fantasy of ethnic and religious difference.

Returning to the theme of “invented” or displaced origins, Dominic then pointed at the former prime minister and architect of Malay modernity and asked, “Is Mahathir really a Malay?” He then recounted the often-told story of Mahathir’s Indian father, the denials of his paternal lineage, and the attempt to cover his traces. In this story, Mahathir had turned against his Indian identity. Though he had supposedly listed his ethnicity as “Indian” on the entrance registration form for the University of Malaya in Singapore, he had never admitted to this while prime minister. His birth certificate, according to a legend spreading among the Indian elite, registers his birth as “Indian.” But according to Puthuchery, an Indian gentleman at a nonaligned meeting in Madras in the 1970s shouted in approval after Mahathir’s talk, “He’s one of us!” which produced greater applause. After this event, he became self-conscious of this identity and chose to conceal it completely.¹¹

He then joked (only partially in jest) that Mahathir had created a “dual constitution” in Malaysia. First, there was the “model based on legal principles, and the other was Mahathir’s own constitution.” He added, “The communist soviet model of judiciary adopted by Lee Kuan Yew was later adopted by Mahathir. Tun Razak [the second prime minister] believed in judicial independence, but not Dr. M. [a nickname for Mahathir]. Anwar’s fate was

sealed before the case began; and before judgment was written by Paul [Judge Augustin Paul], it was being drafted. It became a means of promotion for those who helped draft it.”

There is much in this statement. He is pointing to a tension in the law, that is, that “legal” principles are retrospective in nature, calculable in and after previous judgments, which obscures the force or power in their inaugural injunction. By splitting the Law into “authoritarian” perversions versus “legal principles,” a faith in legality is restored. That is, as Agamben (2005) argues, the “anomie” at the heart of the Law is shored up through an exception—a limit case that suspends normal legality. This limit case creates an illusory or ideological power surrounding the principles of normal legality, much like Derrida’s earlier notion of the supplement.¹² In this instance, the splitting of the Law into its liberal and illiberal forms preserves faith in pure legality. Specifically, aside from indicting the totalitarian tendencies that he observes in Mahathir’s meddling with the judiciary, which has been described in several scholarly works (e.g., Khoo 1993; Gomez and Jomo 1997; Crouch 1996), he is arguing that the team of writers being employed to work on Anwar’s judgment were using the letter of the law, as opposed to the spirit of the law, in order to obtain personal advancement. Indeed, he told of a few instances where individuals he knew had benefited from it. In this context, they were not only following legal principles—the right terms and rules—but being rewarded for it, despite the purported Kafkaesque nature of Anwar’s trial. This worked to highlight or metonymize the process by which uncertainty and overidentification with the Law were coproductive. In another intriguing detail—for it must be remembered that Puthuchery mixed with attorneys, was a member of the Bar Council, and knew influential politicians well (he was personally close to Anwar)—he pointed out that the judgment, which was supposed to have been written by Judge Paul alone, was produced a mere seventy-two hours after the case had concluded. Yet it was, he said, extremely long, something like one hundred pages of detailed legal argument. He cited this as evidence that it was being drafted from the start. Or as he put it, “Anwar’s fate was sealed before the case began.”

Puthuchery left Barisan Nasional and the parliament in 1995, after the national elections. “I began having nightmares. The election was unfair; there was so much corruption. UMNO’s money is Daim’s (former finance minister and business tycoon) and Mahathir’s.” His conscience was troubled to the point where he could no longer reconcile his fear of PAS with his hopes, now fading, in Gerakan’s multiethnic dream. Moreover, his socialist ideas were compromised by his party’s failure to speak in socialist terms, as we will see.

His disillusionment began when Musa Hitam, a former deputy prime minister and finance minister, still high-ranking in UMNO, said to him,

“There must be a Malay solution to a Malay problem. Likewise, there must be an Indian solution to Indian problems.” He added, “When we were growing up we rejoiced when a Malay married an Indian. Our ideas were different then.” The critical difference emerged with the demarcation and policing of ethnic boundaries.

This blatant racialization of politics contrasted with the age of the “romantic” time in dreaming the nation, before the inventedness of ethnic categories became the organizing principle for politics and social life. As he spoke, the rain became harder and panged on the tin roof. I felt droplets on my feet, and the man’s disposition became distant, sad, and reflective—as if the death of this dream was the end of optimism itself. I felt a palpable heaviness at this point in the conversation. He was a wounded man, semitragic in his faith in the political process and subsequent yet gradual loss of hope. The idea of intermarriage was particularly poignant here, given that Mahathir’s own denial of his paternal ancestry signified the barring of this possibility.¹³ The hope itself becomes transgressive desire from the point of view of Mahathir and his followers, as read in its countertransference among Indians. To Indians, the Other’s lack is recognized in a powerful way in this instance. That the Other cannot desire or rejoice in union with the Indian lays bare, with some agony to the one viewing it, the horrendous and monstrous lack in the Other, which makes such a heavy demand for recognition. In recognition of this lack, one might say that the subject, the Indian subject, finds a source of being that itself is structured in the negation of this negation. A constant, repetitive return to the short-circuited or barred desire of the Other was the narrative structure of the Indian imaginary. Indians, in short, become the “object petite a” in the countertransference of Malay desire, in Lacan’s terms. This narrative can assume symbolic petrification in the ubiquity of a victim’s narrative in which the Other’s advantage and aggression becomes the fulcrum of self-identity. As in Gregory Bateson’s generative model of schismogenic imbalances, identity, though dysfunctional or imbalanced, still forges its sense of self-awareness vis-à-vis its antagonistic Other. This thing, the Other as barred object of desire, retains a melancholic presence, in Freud’s sense; that is, it never retreats entirely from psychic circulation.

Elaborating the narrative and giving it a hardened mythical character, Puthuchery said, “Indians who died of malaria and snakes, etc., clearing the land is the untold story . . . but the Malays don’t want history.” There is some sense in which epochs and histories are unrelated. History in this sense would require a narrative of becoming, which would also require an accountability toward the contingencies of wealth and power. As McKinley (1979) argues, epochal thinking circumvents this. The Hindu past is present as it marks an earlier epoch, but in the bureaucratic reasoning of the state, it is to be silenced,

erased, and along with it all the reminders of it; the traces of the past, as seen in the present, must be put into the past. This requires a degree of repetition in order to surmount what is present (albeit secretly). Insecurity over the traces is displaced as the silencing or erasure of the Indian. This silencing is productive as the archive of ethnic difference grows feverishly to supplement the arche-violence of the injunction.

Puthucheary concluded our first meeting by describing his descent from politics after witnessing the “racism” in his own party. At a Gerakan meeting in the 1990s, an Indian man was laughed at when he addressed the assembly speaking in Tamil and using an interpreter. He did not speak English, and he was from the working class. He recounted, “They have absolute contempt for the working-class Tamil. The Chinese are outright racist. They laughed because they find the sound of Tamil amusing. When I scolded them saying they were racist, I was attacked. *Attenale* (“therefore” in a sudden shift to Tamil), this began my fall from politics. . . . I was marginalized in the party and left BN in 1995.” Again, he repeated what he had said earlier. “The election was not fair. I was having nightmares, but felt great relief after leaving.”

In the context of 2004, when this conversation occurred, it bears mentioning that he brought this up at a time when Gerakan was in the midst of some internal controversy regarding Indians not being nominated for any official party posts or being nominated to stand for election. Some Indians complained loudly that the party was, indeed, Chinese dominated. What is more intriguing here, though, are the nightmares and their resolution after leaving the party. What was so monstrous? Surely these nightmares were not the result of his party having laughed at a Tamil man. Was it his own doubled conscience? Was it the double that had chosen to identify with the party for a long time, waffling in his commitment to socialism by collaborating with the racial politics of the state, coupled with a gradual realization that he was aiding and abetting a system that incarcerated political dissidents like Anwar and demonized them for sexual perversity, which led to the growth of the “fascism of the lower middle classes”? This did not fit tidily into a coherent narrative. How could the Soviet-style state produce ethnic fascism among the lower middle class? How is it that uncertainty and insecurity over invented origins lay at the base of this insecurity? And finally, how is it that the demonized PAS and demonized Indian worked in tandem to support a fantasy of rule-following, law-abiding citizen-subjectry? In the first instance, it has been suggested that implementation of ethnic policies inaugurated a transformation in the direction of an overinvestment in “invented” ethnic ideologies. That these ideologies demand, and in turn produced, a silencing of more protean and permeable categories, memories, and desires redoubled the uncertainty or “insecure” diagnosis of the Malay, as understood by many Indi-

ans. Finally, in the incipient analysis suggested by Puthucheary and elaborated in my own analytic language, the deferral to “God” of judgment, as well as the displacement onto the figure of the “Tamil” or “Indian” those undesirable or necessarily unrecognized parts of being, produced a semblance of legality buttressed by an idealized ethnic nation.

I continued to meet Dominic Puthucheary off and on during 2005 and 2006. He was interested in some of my ideas about contemporary Malaysian historicity (particularly among Tamils) and wanted to meet to discuss these ideas. I, in turn, was drawn to his own seemingly parallel observations and oftentimes sharp commentary. One could say that I approached him as a thoughtful commentator, even scholar, more than as a former politician. His professorial manner, however, was tempered by the life of political and social aspirations for the causes he had championed. More importantly, however, he seemed to want to express himself free of the shackles that had held him down in public life as a politician and lawyer functioning in the highly controlled political and legal climate in Malaysia. Always the provocateur, he launched into one of his characteristically acerbic indictments as we ate our bowls of *laksa* (noodles) in a Malay eating stall outside his legal offices in Damansara:

“Fascism is coming to Malaysia,” he declared, matter of factly. This was so, he maintained, because of the “superficiality” and “lack of ideology” that had accompanied the convergence of political power in Malay hands. With “no devolution of political power” in the foreseeable future (e.g., to non-Malays), there had been a “shift in Malay thinking to fascism.”

One might take this, in the terms I have argued here and elsewhere (Willford 2006a; see also Hansen 2001; Žižek 1989), as the assertion of ideology in its absence of substance. Fascism takes hold in its absurd impossibility—that is, in its very assertion or instantiation. The violent iteration of Law demands supplementary work, and the more absurd the greater the “archive fever” (Derrida 1995a) needed to buttress its claims. It is through the violent and inaugurating “force of Law” (Derrida 2002a) that supplemental or sustaining forms of violence are required, indeed demanded. Archiving this desire for legal closure over the contingency of a particularly impossible claim drives the retroactive historicizing of the subject and generates an invented lineage. The assertion of an aggressive and unified Malay identity produced its own history, one which denied or negated the Other’s presence within its own symbolic form. As metonymized by Mahathir, the aggressive and “strong” Malay emerges only in the disavowals of other presences within the self (Willford 2006a; Khoo 2006). Superficiality and a “lack” that it produced only lead to more aggressive positing of the identity, that is, to silence the inner specters of doubt that this process evokes.¹⁴ To this mechanistic view

of the psychology of fascism, he evoked the animalistic pleasures of the monkey. "They are monkeys waiting to evolve into humans." By doing so, he noted a certain pleasure in the bureaucratic involution of the subject of Law within prescribed normativity.

Dominic then described how these increasingly fascist notions of Malay greatness were invented by the British. He went so far as to cite Eric Hobsbawm on the "invented traditions" that bolstered this sense of identification, though it was largely artifice. Indeed, "most Malays are from Indonesia," he maintained. "All of the top politicians are from Indonesia, even P. Ramlee [the film actor]."¹⁵ He went on to state, "You should hear how they talk in parliament about the Malay master race." The conversation then turned to expanding notions of identification to be more inclusive of India, as well as Indonesia. "I told Mohammad Rahmat [former information minister under Mahathir] that while Indonesian connections are celebrated mostly and accepted in Malaysia, why not expand to encompass India, too." But, alas, "Rahmat then attacked me indirectly in the newspapers."

Dominic then turned to the invention of history directly once again: "Maharajas became sultans under the British with the approval of Queen Victoria. The whole Malay identity was invented at this time through the Durbar" (royal court display). While it is true that the consolidation of Malay identity (versus Bugis, Kelantanese, Javanese, Minangkabaw, etc.) was partially consolidated though the Durbar (Andaya and Andaya 1982), there were sultanates acting independently of the British for some time before Queen Victoria authorized state-sanctioned Durbars. Nonetheless, the codification of ethnic boundaries certainly became more rigid and exclusive during the reign of the queen and subsequent king (Hirschman 1986).

This lunchtime meeting ended with his appraisal of the political situation facing the Tamil community. He concluded, "Badawi [then prime minister] is a bit sympathetic to the plight of Indians. Most Malays don't care. The Chinese don't mind so long as the economy is good." In this statement, we see the stereotypes of Malaysia being played out among one of its more intelligent observers. The Malays come across as apathetic, the Chinese as greedy. The statement was problematic, of course, for the multiracial and multicultural aspirations of its author. Such gross generalization was precisely what his politics and career were attempting to fight.

On another occasion, this time over coffee in his office, he spoke about the "Emergency" (communist insurrection) years in Malaya. Dominic had been researching this period and felt that given the world economy's dependence on rubber at the time, the Emergency was, in reality, about controlling labor in the dominant industry, not about containment of a communist threat. Rather, it was about making sure the unions were compliant, docile, and open

to management's demands. He went on to describe how the prominent labor activists Veerasenan and Ganapathy were "executed" by the British for union activities even though the Labour Party was in power in the UK. The killing of Veerasenan and Ganapathy was part of an orchestrated "liquidation" of radical activists who were deemed a threat to the cheap flow of latex. This, he maintained, was initiated at the insistence of the Americans, particularly the CIA. The evidence for CIA involvement was to be found, he claimed, in classified and newly declassified Cold War documents in the United States.¹⁶ Otherwise, he suggested, there was little incentive to crack down so harshly on labor activists.

Reflecting on his time in government, he then described a time when he earmarked a special project that would help a fair proportion of Indians. His constituency, he said, was roughly 20 percent Indian, 60 percent Malay, and 20 percent Chinese. Dominic claimed that the project would have helped his constituents in the same proportion as their numbers, yet the government was not pleased given the priorities for *bumiputras* in the doling out of special project benefits. The "Special Branch investigated, saying you are 'doing everything for Indians.'" This treatment drew his ire, as he was being singled out as a minority member of the government and being intimidated for what was distributed, according to him, fairly and in accordance with the numbers in his constituency. The implication of his exasperation, however, was that Malays always get much more than their fair share of the government's assistance.

As always seemed to be the case, Dominic ended our conversations with a dramatic and prophetic statement about Malaysia's possible cloudy future: "The social contract in Malaysia is a failure. The NEP is a failure. It was designed to bridge the communities, but now it is used to divide them. Malaysia is a failed state." While one might have fears that this might happen, the notion of "failed state" seemed a bit of a stretch to me at that moment, given the fairly robust economic growth and political stability being enjoyed in Malaysia vis-à-vis other more famous examples of failed states. Nevertheless, the frustrations and despair that he experienced in politics were not entirely dissimilar to those experienced by plantation laborers, though their experience was articulated differently. Most significantly, the specific betrayals over promises of land and housing that stung the estate workers were markedly different than the vaguer sense of betrayal experienced by the educated Indian professional.

As we have seen, the workers were specifically pained by the betrayal of specific promises made by management and politicians. Puthuchery and Kanthan, in contrast, were most upset about the betrayal of an ideal. A melancholic attachment to an imagined ideal produced a continual reliving of the past in order to sustain an idealized self nurtured by notions of victimhood.

The “failed state” attribution allowed the ideal to live on within idealized selves by deferring an interrogation of the implication of the earlier ideal in the emergence of the contemporary moment. What was shared, however, was a deep sense of betrayal by a state that no longer played by the older rules of the Law. Rather, the new Law was capricious, unjust, and amnesic. Whereas the poor imagined a justice in divine terms, Puthuchery, the socialist, could hope for a restoration of a kind of law and civility he not only believed in, but had devoted his entire professional career, both legal and political, toward realizing.

Two Indian Taxi Drivers in Kuala Lumpur

Though I have emphasized a middle-class reaction to the perceived Islamization of public and civil life in this chapter, the thoughts of two taxi drivers, similar to many others I have heard over the years, are worth noting. Taxi drivers, in most instances, are located socially somewhere between the educated middle class and the Tamil working class in the estates or squatter areas. Like small business owners, they have sacrificed for their children and hope to better their lives, sometimes offering them educational opportunities in the private sector or overseas in lieu of the special quotas that have been set up to help Malays enter the university and get jobs.

“What is this shit? How can they say we don’t recognize your University?” one taxi driver exclaimed while I sat in the back seat of his car. The federal government had just stopped recognizing the Crimea Medical College (in the Ukraine) because they claimed it was not up to the standards practiced in Malaysia, both in terms of education and health care. But many Indians felt the derecognition occurred because the majority of students from Malaysia who attended this university happened to be Indians. The driver added:

It was because our minister saw that that there were so many Indian students there. The parents work so hard to send them overseas to study because of the discrimination they face here; and then the government has the nerve to do this shit. . . . There will be a civil war in the future because of what the government is doing! The Indians and Chinese will join together. The MIC is doing nothing. I stay away [from politics]. I might listen to what they say, but I believe we must take care of ourselves.

The driver, now quite angry, explained that his own sister’s son was in the Crimea Medical program and now faced this terrible blow to his career. “The first three ministers were fine. Only the fourth (Mahathir) did all of these

changes. What if another university or country decides they will not accept UM (University of Malaya)?¹⁷ The problem is that so many Indians were in law and medicine.” By this he meant that the government used this policy to lower the representation of Indians in these fields, and that Indians perceive an increasing desire to enact policies that systematically erode the Indian position within the nation’s economy. More ominous were his predictions of ethnic conflict. We will see such sentiments resurface in chapter 10.

Another driver on a different occasion echoed these views in his own acerbic comment:

I lived in railway quarters until they were demolished. Then I moved to municipal flats in Bangsar. People think Bangsar¹⁸ means you are rich. Before all this development it was simply a housing estate. . . . That bastard [Mahathir] did all this. We Indians are like beggars. We don’t have anything. Before it wasn’t like that. We came in 1400. The Malays in 1800s from Indonesia, and the Chinese from 1600. This Jalan Raja Chulan [a main thoroughfare in Kuala Lumpur] is Cholan!¹⁹ But we are second-class citizens in this country now because of that bastard, the fourth PM. The Malays were very happy with him because he gave them everything.

Here we see anger mixed with a fantastic historical consciousness. The glories of an imagined Tamil past in Malaya are emphasized to underscore the reversal of fortunes that has occurred. One sort of compensation witnessed here is that of historical recollection. By reworking the past in terms of a deep Tamil imprint in Malaysia, the driver brings into sharp relief the contrast with the de-Indianization of Malay culture and of Malaysian history more broadly. This, in turn, brings the narrative of betrayal and cultural inauthenticity to the foreground. A reversal of narratives occurs whereby it is the Malays, not the Indians, who are the most recent entry into the ethnic landscape, against the grain of official historical narratives. Thus Indian historicity and its negation produce the parameters of victimization as a historicizing desire among Malays. Indians, in supplementing the lack in Malay desire, assume a place of victim. The victim of historical silencing, in turn, is compensated by the pleasures of identity forged in the shadow of Malay lack. Of course, the irony here is that one can sustain this form of compensation only in the parameters of a historical narrative of victimization. Also, while providing a schematic set of arrival dates, the driver ignored two important details. First, of course, the majority of Tamils did, in fact, arrive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and are not direct descendants from the so-called Chola age of incursion or settlement in Malaysia. Moreover,

what evidence we possess about the Cholas places their sphere of influence existing much earlier than 1400. By 1400 the Chola empire was a vestige of its former self.

The Doctor

I met Dr. Palanivel for dinner at Gem, an up-market Indian restaurant in Petaling Jaya. Dr. Palanivel was a wealthy and influential physician, known publicly for his interest in religious issues that affected the Indian community. Over the course of our conversation, he expressed great concern about the plight of “dalits” in Malaysia.²⁰ His own spiritual orientation, he told me, was summed up in the phrase “*Anbe Sivam*” (God is love). He mentioned Ramalinga Swami, a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tamil mystic who used to worship god as light, as an exemplary force for good in the world.

Dalits in Malaysia suffered a lot, he claimed. “No one ever admits openly that they are one. Samy Vellu, the MIC president, is proud of his *thevar* (caste) heritage. He never puts dalits in high places, but uses them as thugs.” Speaking of Hindu festivals, he claimed that they have great cultural importance, but not much spiritual significance anymore. For example, *arul*, or falling into a possession trance, a common highlight during festivals in Malaysia (recall chapters 3 and 6), was a basically “dissociative behavior with therapeutic value, but was nothing spiritual.” Thaipusam itself, he claimed, was more cultural than religious. More orthodox temple worship also left him spiritually empty. He said he felt “unimportant” when he goes to a large temple. “Everyone needs their own special place to pray to God.” The big urban temples lose this intimacy, and hierarchies and protocols get in the way of spiritual experience. Among middle-class Indians, Sai Baba, a famous contemporary spiritual teacher in India, was “filling a spiritual void,” he claimed. The idea of “service and going beyond rituals” was important and answered to a deeper spiritual calling. “Something always comes along,” and Sai Baba was just the latest answer.

The dalits, he maintained, were a “marginalized community within a marginalized community. Nobody was really speaking up for them. People tell me not to talk about them because people might think I’m one of them.” This statement suggested a distancing move by Dr. Palanivel as well as a commentary about his peers. That he followed this statement with a brief foray into the hopelessness of dalit life and the allure of gangsterism suggested a need to distance himself further from the stigmatized object of his sympathy.

Another area of concern to Dr. Palanivel was the rise of various cults that appealed to the spiritually hungry. He claimed that there were numerous

“copies” of Sai Baba that were “taking advantage of the people.” As for various efforts at Hindu reform, he was not against reform in principle, but he argued that education was the key rather than simply banning certain practices. In his mind, “don’t simply take away [temples, rituals, animal sacrifice], but educate into intellectual side [*sic*]. Eventually people will be ready for Ramalinga [a nineteenth-century Tamil saint].”

The doctor’s views, in some ways, typified those of the middle-class Tamil Hindu in Malaysia. On the one hand, we witness a genuine concern for the plight of the Tamil working class. This is manifested in both concerns about their economic well-being as well as their eventual spiritual progress toward a more enlightened and less ritualistic form of Hindu practice. The benevolent paternalism behind this sentiment is, I have argued, driven by a need to distance oneself from the stigma currently attached to images of Tamils and of Hinduism. This stigma plays out in the public representation of “cultural” events like the Thaipusam festival, in which two million devotees converge each year. The spectacle of this event, as depicted in the Malaysian media, not only partially robs it of its spiritual significance and symbolism (Belle 2008), but also works to clearly contrast popular Hinduism from the idealized Islam promoted by the government. This distancing by the educated middle-class Indian allows himself or herself to be seen as “intellectual” and yet not intolerant of both the ritual practices of the working class nor to Islam. Though these sentiments exist in India as well, and have a long lineage in various strands of Hindu reform and revivalism during the past century and a half, they take on an added resonance in the context of the perceived Malay and Islamic denigration of Hinduism as the archaic and premodern that must be put to rest—at least for Malays.²¹

Lingam

I met Lingam, a prominent lawyer in Malaysia, at the famous Selangor Club in downtown Kuala Lumpur. This club has a checkered history as a symbol of colonial privilege and exclusion during the British times. In postindependence times, the club became popular with Malaysian professionals, particularly Indian elites. We talked over a long meal. Lingam complained about the “loss of culture” that was affecting the Tamil community. He attributed this to the “loss of language” that was occurring because parents no longer supported Tamil schools. This predicament was partially the “Tamils’ own fault,” he maintained, as “once language goes, there is no self-respect.” Middle-class Tamils, he argued, were ashamed of the Tamil language and Tamil schools and felt the sting of association with the working class. Over the

years, middle-class Tamils had increasingly turned toward English-medium schools, recognizing the economic opportunities available to those who were strong in English. Conversely, Tamil education was believed to have no utilitarian value in Malaysia, though people had sentimental attachments to the language. Moreover, defenders of Tamil education argued that self-esteem that comes with education in the mother tongue has great academic and social benefits (Arumugam 2008).

Given the critical and progressive views he espoused about the political system, in which he criticized the “ethno-political power structure,” I was surprised to hear Lingam suggest that he would prefer that a “king rule Malaysia.” He felt that under a king, there would be “proper culture and discipline.” Lingam said that the current political leadership was inadequate to the task of addressing problems in the community. At one time, he claimed, Samy Vellu was a “new voice” who had “raised hopes” with his ideas and energy. But after the people were “betrayed by the MAIKA affair,” the party “was hijacked by gangsters.” “Since then, he [Samy Vellu] became a gangster,” according to Lingam. He was, like most others at this time, also incredulous that the Crimea Medical College degree was no longer going to be accepted in Malaysia, effectively disqualifying hundreds of Malaysian Indian students from practicing medicine. This, he felt, was a deliberate act of discrimination by the Malaysian government.

In Lingam, we see a concern with a “loss.” Tamils had lost their language, their culture, and their discipline. Their loss, attributed only partly to the Other’s lack, was manifested in varied domains, but in each case the loss of something they once possessed was linked to the actions of powerful Indians, such as the leader to the MIC. Moreover, both the middle-class Tamils who either followed the lead of the MIC or, conversely, those who negated it altogether in their aspirations to English education and a disavowal of the plebian or “gangster” nature of its leadership (it should be noted that the middle class had disdain for the MIC in part because of its lower-status image) contributed to the experience of “loss.” This was due to the betrayal either of the working class through overt distancing behavior (turning a blind eye) or through collaboration with a party that “hijacked” power for their own ends. Either way, something fundamental was lost and remained increasingly lacking in the Indian community. A transcendent father, such as a “king,” supplemented the perceived lack with an idealized source of discipline, cultural authenticity, and justness. Here we witness one solution, albeit an alarmingly totalizing one, to the problems of loss. A preference for an authentic genealogy toward the ultimate sovereign is both asserted and desired. The king would function to stabilize meaning, retroactively of course, through a genealogy. Lack would be surmounted in this historiographic desire.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, we have witnessed a strong sense of melancholy about the “lost” ideals of the nation. The cherished memory seems to nurture a victim’s narrative by documenting a betrayal of the ideal. This ideal of a more inclusive nation-state that has subsequently been betrayed by bureaucrats has animated these accounts. Buttressing the arbitrary claims to privilege and status through the disavowal of the Other seems to be one key ingredient of the victim’s narrative. This disavowal takes varied forms, but they coalesce in pro-Malay ethnic policies and a vigorous cultural debate about the merits of increasing Islamization. Indians, particularly representatives from the middle class, recognize this process as simultaneously disempowering and stigmatizing. This sense of betrayal also has effects on the relations between middle-class and non-middle-class subjects. A sense of stigma attached to the working-class subject has provided impetus for discourses of reform, distancing, and ultimately transcendence. But transcendent discourses can take two forms. On the one hand, idealized forms of the nation can foster critique of the juridical nature of the postcolonial ethnic subject (i.e., some of its derivative or “invented” pretensions). On the other hand, alternative genealogies can seek to re-establish an authentic nationalism, supplementing or surmounting the lack of the present status quo. Herein lies some of the danger. Ultimate sovereigns or envisioned civil wars spring forth from these aspirations. It is to this question of ethnic uprising and polarization that we now turn.

10 Hindraf and the Haunting of Justice

On November 25, 2007, thirty to forty thousand Tamil “Indians” demonstrated against the Malaysian government in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, only to face tear gas, batons, and water cannons. This event, captured by the global media and spearheaded by the Hindu Rights Action Force, or Hindraf, surprised many Malaysians, if not other Indians, both in the diaspora and India, in its boldness. But for us now familiar with the “burning” sentiment in the working-class Indian community in the mid-2000s, the event, while surprising in its scope and audacity, was not entirely shocking. The resonance of the Hindraf movement owed much to various forms of economic, social, and political marginalization in Malaysia that the working-class Tamils believed they experienced. In this concluding chapter I examine both leaders and lay followers of this movement, hoping to demonstrate that it represented a unique confluence of spontaneous anger and symbolic work.

Hindraf’s emergence was the culmination of a host of factors, but I could summarize them briefly here as (a) the perceived failure of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) to ameliorate the perceived economic and political marginalization of the Tamil community relative to the Malay community, (b) the belief that Islamization was eroding the rights of non-Muslims, particularly as pertaining to conversion laws, inheritance, and the administering of land rights regarding temples, etc., and (c) the feeling that the Tamil community was harassed by police and by political proxy groups sheltered by the police, particularly in the fallout of the so-called Kampung Medan attacks of 2001 (see chapter 7; Nagarajan 2004). In this already explosive context, a series of insensitive temple demolitions sparked these already converging sentiments.

I want to make three broad claims about Hindraf that recapitulate the principal arguments of this book. First, I claim that the Indian awakening or uprising, particularly as realized in the “Hindraf” movement, gained resonance as an exercising of the Law’s ghostliness (Derrida 2002a). That is, the violent performativity of the Law had been increasingly revealed to Malaysian Tamils in recent times, particularly through a series of events—specifically, the defiling of temples, the appropriation of land, and the seizing of the body by the state—that had left them frustrated, angry, and sometimes traumatized. Second, the transgression of the letter of the law became a means to realize a distinction between legality and justice. As communities displaced from plantations, as we have witnessed, used tactics of civil disobedience, or simply became *de facto* squatters on the land where they had lived for many generations, they often exceeded the letter of the law in search for compensatory justice. The reasoning of justice or compensation being grounded outside of legality had implications in revealing the limits of the law. At the same time, legal redress and precedent were often still sought. The dialectic of transgression and reinscription within the law had Tamil subjects caught between the rails of recognition within the politics of identity and a logic of compensation in Malaysia that confounded legalistic identification. Third, and related, I suggested that an emergent sense of historicity among Tamils articulated frustrations over increasing Islamization and the perceived de-Indianization of Malay culture. Tamils increasingly felt that the latter point was a source of historical disentangling, leaving Malays insecure about their own origins vis-à-vis their Tamil or Indian neighbors. Indian fantasies for compensatory recognition imagined a re-entangling of Tamil and Malay historicities, an intimacy they felt had been disturbed by Islamization and the serialization of ethnic politics. I will not dwell as much on this point of “re-Indianization” fantasy here, as I do elsewhere, though we recall these sentiments in previous chapters focusing on the middle class (Willford 2006a). Finally, the capricious force of Law and the violence of “order” was haunted, I suggest, by its obverse, the sublime and inexplicable fragmentation of memory and experience wrought by the “betrayal” of the state on the land and the sacred. This sublime horror, a *horror religiosus* of sorts, has a culturally recognizable logic within Tamil Hinduism, though one that does not rest easily in the imagination.

By now it should be clear that plantation communities, developed and populated by Tamils, were literally inscribed into the Malaysian landscape in such a way that their descendants, living in these same plantations and facing retrenchment and eviction under the pressures of “development” and ethnic politics, had a growing sense of historicity and with it a growing sense of outrage at their fate. This has been one of our central recurring motifs. At the

same time, however, this historicity increasingly took the shape of a victim's narrative among the Tamil poor and working class and even to some extent among the middle class. Moreover, a compensatory narrative generated ethnic myths about the lacking of inauthentic Other, the "new Malay" (*Melayu baru*) that was the subject of state-sponsored nationalism. Hindraf was fueled by these sensations of the Other's lack, and of course of being victimized. This concluding chapter examines the rise of Hindraf through the eyes of its leadership and from the everyday observations by Tamils. Here we also catch glimpses of a potential Malay backlash against the Tamil or Indian uprising.

"Berkeley Corner," Klang

I initially encountered a few members of Hindraf, or those who were sympathetic to the movement, in a restaurant in Klang. One was well known to me, a shop owner in Jalan Tuanku Kelana, in Klang's "little India." He had often spoken in spirited terms to me about his discontent with the government and in particular with the current leadership of the MIC. We met in a fairly large Indian restaurant, which also featured lots of Malay food and had Malay workers as well. The diners were mostly but not exclusively Indian.

I was told immediately by this man that he supported Hindraf, that he was "not against anyone," and that he was not afraid to admit it. He was accompanied by another man, whom I vaguely remembered from a previous trip to Klang. This man told me about the "dilemma of Indians in Malaysia." The shop owner immediately jumped in: "25 percent of Indians in Malaysia struggle to send their children overseas for medical school. The parents end up going bankrupt, because they must use all of their savings for this. This is the situation in Malaysia. They cannot go to the university here, and so they must draw out their EPF to finance son's [*sic*] overseas study."

He added, "They worry all of the time about the future of their children and end up getting hypertension." But according to him, working middle-class people, who have spent their savings on their children's overseas education, will not seek medical treatment for their ailments, leading to complications in their conditions. Diabetes, for instance, was common among Indians.

According to the shop owner, corruption was endemic in Malaysia, which exacerbated the problems facing the Indian community. Because of corruption, there was a perpetual waste of resources in the government. "Eighty percent of government servants said they would accept bribes," according to a recent survey, he told me. His colleague nodded and added, "It is true." Because of this culture of corruption, which existed at every level, the average person, particularly the Indian, had to pay exorbitant amounts to wade through any public service sector, whether it be procuring a business license

or even obtaining a driving permit. This added strain, he maintained, had even affected the diets of Malaysian Indians, claiming that in recent years they had turned to "vegetarianism" out of "poverty," though they "pretended, out of shame, to be doing it for religious reasons."

When I asked what could be done to remedy this situation, the shop owner mentioned that come election time, the MIC would pay a price this time around. This time, he said, the Indian voters were hoping that the opposition would break the two-thirds majority in parliament held by Barisan Nasional. This would send a message to the MIC in particular and to the government more broadly. With this, the MIC would suffer some sort of shakeup, which might lead to the emergence of new leadership. The current leadership, both the shop owner and his colleague maintained, was not beneficial to the community. Instead, the party was headed by "rogues" who had "set up branches to sustain their national position." They said that four thousand branches had been created in the last twenty-five years to bring in delegates favoring the national party leader, but not the local communities that they were supposed to represent. The reason the new branches had been created was that the old branches were seen as independent and locally based, not directly loyal to the party's top leader. But in creating local branches in high numbers, the leader had consolidated his position in a large pyramid of various branches, which in turn offered a political and economic base for the party.

"We are as good as dead," the shop owner said. "Because we worry all of the time about our children, our careers fail. This leads to a failure of health. At first we didn't agree to this idea of 'ethnic cleansing' that the Hindraf leader was talking, but when we thought about it for some time, it is true." He added, "We end up as waste carriers, or something like that. If it is not ethnic cleansing, then you tell us what it is and give us the correct name."

My understanding of the shop owner's political shift, as evidenced above, was not so much a desire on his part to supplant ethnic politics in Malaysia as it was to shake up the current leadership in the MIC. That is, "sending a message" through oppositional voting, though bold, was not necessarily awakening to a new political possibility outside the communal representational box that grounded Malaysia's politics and apparently marginalized Indians in numerous ways. A more radical position was taken by the leadership of Hindraf itself.

Regu: Hindraf Leader and Cofounder

Regu, dressed in business attire, came toward the table where I was meeting with the shop owner and his colleague. A man in his late thirties or early forties, neatly dressed, and quite intense in appearance, Regu introduced

himself and handed me his card, which identified him as a member of Hindraf, the Hindu Rights Action Force. Given that he had been arrested the previous day for his participation in a demonstration the previous weekend, and given the general attacks on Hindraf as a terrorist organization in the media more broadly, the calling card self-identification with the movement surprised me. Regu sat quietly at the table while the shop owner complained about the “rogues” who had overtaken the MIC. He entered the conversation when the shopkeeper said, “we [Hindraf] are not against Malays.”

At this, Regu jumped in and said, “You [the government, property developers] pushed us into a corner. There are 27,000 temples in this country. Many of them are 150 to 200 years old. They are threatened with demolition. When we came to this country, our people brought earth from India with them from their villages in order to start temples wherever they went. The temples they built when they reached Malaya were built on the earth (*kallu*) that they carried from India on the ships, in their own clothing. There is a deep connection to these temples.” Indeed, soil from the *ur* or natal village carried the *kulam*, or essence of the community, as well as that of the *kula devam*, or ancestral deities (Daniel 1984).¹ Thus the perceived continuity and contiguity was very powerful and real for some.

Regu said, “I will tell you the history of Hindraf now: It began with the Moorthy case [the case discussed earlier in which the government claimed that Moorthy had secretly converted to Islam, which the family contested]. This was a terrible injustice. Moorthy was seen offering Deepavali greetings, and two weeks later his body was being claimed. The shariah court ignored all of the evidence that was placed before it. We knew we had to do something.”

He explained that a meeting was called of forty NGOs, which then issued a memorandum to the government. At this point, Hindraf was very mainstream, with the Hindu Sangam being involved as well. Regu said that then Deputy Prime Minister Najib had to be acknowledged as the father of Hindraf, as “ten thousand temples had been destroyed under his watch.” Moreover, he claimed, it was Najib’s attitude toward the Hindus that had allowed this to happen. Moreover, Najib had refused to discuss the problems of the Indian community and thus had galvanized the need for a more assertive organization, leading to the formation of Hindraf.

I asked Regu to elaborate on the particular problems faced by the Indian community and how these had contributed to the discontent that had culminated on November 25, 2007. Regu spoke first about the transformations in the estates that had led to “squatter” areas and projects. In such contexts, there was “no field to play,” and this had led to the rise in popularity among the youths of video game rooms. These video game rooms had become dens of petty urban crime, where protection money was paid to local syndicates to

stay in operation. This protection money, he claimed, was collected by Indian youths from the squatter areas or from the low-cost projects. In most cases, these Indian youths acted as petty thugs or gangsters for Chinese bosses, but were inculturated into a life of crime. According to Regu, the government failed to invest in “human capital” where and when it was needed most, leading to the rise in urban crime among Indian youths.

With the government’s failures in “human development,” to use terminology from the world of business and NGO work, Regu said a second mistake had been critical. The government had begun to aggressively punish the petty “gangsterism” of the video game room culture. This, ironically, pushed Indian youths into the hands of yet more violent forms of gangsterism as economic opportunities were diminished yet urban consumption desires were great. The drug trade, in particular, came onto the scene in the past five years, turning gangs more violent. Also, theft increased dramatically. This, in turn, led to more police profiling and arrests. A vicious cycle of Indian incarceration had escalated. A disproportionately high number of Indian youths were arrested (SUARAM 2004, 2005), and while in custody often suffered abuse or even death. This was not lost on the community, and it created hostile relations between law enforcement officials and youths. The MIC and government more broadly had failed to address this crisis among the Indian youth.

But it was the temple issue, which gathered a lot of steam in the early 2000s, that gave Hindraf much support. Regu pointed out that Klang, where we were having tea, once had thirty-nine temples, but now only one remained (which seemed a slight exaggeration since I knew of at least a couple more temples in Klang). He added, in contrast, that twenty-nine new *suraus* had been built in recent years in Klang, while Hindu temples were being demolished. This pattern was being repeated throughout the country, and Hindus were outraged.

The government-recognized Hindu Sangam originally served as advisor to Hindraf, according to Regu, who was also a main member of the Hindu Seva Sangam, another Hindu reform association. Emphasizing Hindraf’s mainstream support at the outset, he said that “all were there” and went on to list many of the principal Hindu religious organizations in the country that supported Hindraf, naming the Hindu Youth Council, the Hindu Mamandaram, the Mani Mandram, among others. The point he wanted to make was that at its inception, Hindraf was a coalition of the mainstream Hindu organizations in the country and was not in any way perceived as radical, either inside or outside the umbrella coalition. Even the MIC, he maintained, supported Hindraf. Essentially, the organization was concerned about the demolition of temples and the recent “body snatching” incident, as well as other court cases involving conversion, which had raised some concerns, as the civil

courts had relinquished decisions of consequence to Hindus to the shariah (Islamic) courts.

But it was the breaking of a temple in Shah Alam (in Kampung Padang Jawa), right before Deepavali, that outraged the community, particularly after efforts to spare it were ignored. This gave the movement tremendous momentum, which Regu called a “divine plan,” culminating in the support for the mass demonstration on November 25, 2007. Prior to this, however, Hindraf had distributed literature at Thaipusam (the major Hindu pilgrimage festival in Malaysia) in January of 2007, explaining the purpose of the organization. One hundred thousand CDs that showed how temples had been destroyed in other places, and that emphasized the marginalization of Indians more broadly, were distributed to the crowds. This “created awareness,” according to Regu.

In the meantime, a memorandum was prepared and presented to the chief minister, who did not respond. Then it was presented to the sultan, but “he did not respond.” “Then we approached Samy Vellu, the PM, and even Parliament, but no response.” “Finally we approached the *agung* (king), and no response. At this point, we did not know what to do. But then we thought, the British brought us this problem, why not we present this memorandum to the British government.” Regu gave credit for this idea to their legal counsel, particularly Uthayakumar, an activist lawyer being held under the Internal Security Act (ISA) following his high-profile role in leading the protests on November 25.

But filing a suit against the British government for abandoning the Indian community to the Malay-dominated state was not only a provocative tactic that attracted much attention both within Malaysia and in the global media, but it was also costly. Regu explained that trying the case in the UK would cost them one million ringgit. The breakdown of expenditures was not explained to me, but I assumed it to be a combination of travel expenses, counsel fees, and filing fees for the suit itself. This money would be raised from “the community,” according to Regu. On the positive side, because the case caught people’s attention, it made them try and understand the issues better, he explained, which had the effect of “educating people about their rights.” In that sense, it was much more than a publicity stunt, though it garnered much publicity.

According to Regu, the Hindu Seva Sangam (HSS) acted as the brainchild and mother body, or secretariat, for Hindraf. While there were the spokespersons, particularly the legal counsel, who were good at public speaking and understood the law, the HSS had been organizing and mobilizing from the outset, he claimed. From his point of view, the five ISA detainees (the legal counsel for Hindraf) were not the “leaders of Hindraf,” though that is what

the public believed.² This misperception was not a problem, according to Regu, since their incarceration kept people motivated, attending meetings, and focused upon the struggle.

To their surprise, once they embarked on a road show in Malaysia to raise awareness and money and to rally support, they drew large numbers of people. At their first rally, on September 25, 2007, two thousand people came, and the second rally drew four thousand at Putrajaya. This was followed by crowds of five thousand and ten thousand at Penang and Kulim, respectively. They were amazed at the groundswell of support they received.

Regu mentioned that he had been detained two days prior to our discussion in what was called “*operasi padam*” (“operation put out fire”), an attempt to intimidate and arrest Hindraf leaders and followers. This had occurred following the “day of roses” demonstration the previous weekend.³ But, he explained, the police had simply detained and released him without booking him. There were no grounds for arrest, he explained. He also explained that he had the respect of all the police in the precinct and was treated well.

On the question of Hindraf demands, he said that Indians were only given twenty seats in parliament, whereas “they should be given fifty” because of their concentration in peninsular Malaysia in certain districts. But while seeking greater Indian representation in this current election (2008), the movement was abandoning the Indian ethnic political party, the MIC, in favor of the multiethnic opposition. The “*makkal sakti*” (“people power”) campaign was not backing any specific political party, but was advocating that Indians should vote against Barisan Nasional at any cost. This would be to punish UMNO with its “racist” and “Islamist agenda,” which had led to the demolition of thousands of temples, and to punish the MIC, which had not stood up to UMNO on this issue and which had failed to deliver economically for the Indian community. If the two-thirds majority was broken by the opposition, and if the MIC was sent a strong message, they believed that the government would be forced to listen to the Indian community’s discontent more seriously.

He explained that “*makkal sakti*” had already proven its power in organizing against the sheer might of the police and FRU (Federal Reserve Units), facing down tear gas and water cannons. They also pulled off an amazing boycott of the biggest public festival in the Malaysian Hindu calendar, Thaipusam. This normally drew more than a million visitors to Batu Caves each year. That year, as a result of a boycott called for by Hindraf/*makkal sakti*, the turnout was purportedly around 275,000. Moreover, 150,000 came to an alternative site sponsored by Hindraf in Port Klang to celebrate, as well as to other temples in Malaysia. The grievance stemmed from the Batu Caves temple management’s tactics on the eve of the November 25 demonstrations.

That night, as demonstrators gathered in the temple, they were suddenly locked inside behind the large gates that enclosed the compound. The enraged crowd felt they had been locked in to prevent their demonstration. While they were locked behind the gate, some “thugs” began to throw stones at the Hindraf members from outside the compound, but when those trapped responded in kind, the police intervened, and some of them were hit by the stones. This gave the police a pretext to arrest and charge those trapped inside with attempted murder, according to Regu. Moreover, the stone throwing that injured the policemen brought out the water cannons that were fired on the temple, which was an act of desecration to the temple that further angered Hindraf supporters. Thus what was meant as an act of containment only inflamed sentiments.

I concluded our discussion by asking Regu what sort of benefits he saw manifested in the behavior of Tamil youths in the aftermath of the Hindraf demonstration. He seemed pleased to have been asked this question. He claimed that violence among youths had dropped about “90 percent” in total, and motivation was high among the Indian youth as well. The demonstration had given them something to be proud of, and it proved to be symbolically salient at several levels. Moreover, with daily text messages coming out about the *makkal sakti* movement, there was a palpable sense of empowerment occurring. I was told that an “awakening” had occurred, leaving the Indians feeling “proud and motivated.”

He concluded by lamenting that the national unity that used to exist in Malaysia had been destroyed. This had begun with “MARA⁴ and other Malay-only institutions,” referring to the rise of colleges that taught and cultivated a sense of Malay supremacy vis-à-vis the other “races,” either explicitly or implicitly, through their race-based intake and Islam-based policies. Regu said that with each generation of graduates from these institutes, the problems faced by the Indian community became progressively worse.

Brickfields Shopkeeper

Mylon books was an old establishment on Jalan Tun Sambanthan, the principal artery passing through Brickfields⁵ and into Kuala Lumpur. It sold books about Hinduism and Indian culture, both in Tamil and in English. It also sold prayer items, such as incense, brass oil lamps, statues of gods and famous leaders, etc. Though I often visited this bookshop to speak with one of its employees, an Indian national living in Malaysia for many years, or to buy books, I struck up a conversation with a proprietor of the bookshop shortly before the elections of 2008.

I started the conversation by simply asking how the upcoming elections

would turn out. The proprietor answered, “We are sick of this MIC. They have been taking all for themselves. We will only know after the election what our future holds.” I then asked him what would happen if the election went badly for Barisan Nasional. To this he replied, “There may be a change in leadership in the MIC, but people are also afraid to vote against BN because if they vote for opposition, then who is going to represent their interests? The fear is there, though they are angry with Barisan and MIC.” He went on to say that “all are in support of the Hindraf, because they are fighting for our basic rights.” But his analysis of the predicament of the Indian voter reflected the dilemma faced by most Malaysians who felt trapped by the communal logic of political representation in this country. On the one hand, they felt frustrated by the notion that they must support the so-called ethnic representative for their community, realizing that this opened the doors to corruption. The government, by allocating resources for the Indian community through the MIC, created a situation whereby those in the Indian community not part of the MIC’s exclusive system of patronage were left out. We have heard stories to this effect throughout this book, particularly when concerning the allocation of low-cost housing. On the other hand, voting for the opposition, they feared, would shut the door entirely to Indian representation in parliament. This was certainly the tactic used by the MIC and by Barisan to garner Indian votes. While it might seem odd to a non-Malaysian, it would not be seditious to suggest that a non-Indian, even from a member of one’s own coalition government, would not care for one’s community needs as an Indian elected official would. Therefore, the necessity of ethnic representation was and is constantly reinforced. This holds true not only for Indians, but for Chinese and Malays as well. Even the purportedly multiracial parties, Keadilan and DAP, were (and are) pigeonholed as representing Malay and Chinese interests, respectively, their campaign slogans notwithstanding.

Malay University Leader

While this book has focused almost exclusively on Tamil predicaments and interpretations thereof, I turn briefly to Malay responses to Hindraf. Though not an adequate representation, it gives an idea of the backlash that occurred among some Malays. I interviewed the head administrator of a leading local university, of necessity a Malay. He spoke in general terms about the coming elections, stating when asked that “of course, only BN will form the government.” I pressed and asked if he felt it would capture the two-thirds majority, and he replied that he thought it would. Turning to the Hindraf issue, I asked if there would potentially be a Malay backlash against it. He said there already was, pointing out that Malays were a bit annoyed by the image of

Mahatma Gandhi that had been paraded during the November 25 Hindraf demonstration. Moreover, the image of Queen Elizabeth evidently had also been used by demonstrators, which to this administrator, and apparently to many Malays, was insulting, as it connoted loyalty to India and Britain, respectively, and not to Malaysia. "If they had put an image of our king, that would be better," he said. I mentioned to him that Gandhi was probably used to indicate their nonviolent intentions, and he replied that it in the eyes of Malays signified loyalty to India. That is, the figure was to be identified iconically or metonymically, rather than indexically, toward an abstract ideal.

In another sense, Malays were angered, the administrator claimed, because Hindraf demands challenged Malay "special rights." Malays perceived the demonstration as being "against Malays." Another professor present in the room added that many Malays were worried and upset that their rights to education and economic assistance were being questioned by Hindraf. This, they both concurred, made Malays "against the Hindraf movement" as a whole. But when asked if this perception was entirely accurate, or perhaps a misperception of what most Indians seek redress for, they could not say. Moreover, consequences of further Indian discontent, I suggested, might be more assertive civil disobedience campaigns with large public gatherings. To this, the leader of the university answered, "Luckily we have our FRU (Federal Reserve Units) and efficient police to deal with them, so I do not anticipate any problem." In other words, brute force was the correct approach, from his point of view, in dealing with public demonstrations. This, he suggested, kept the peace and placated an uneasy public, particularly the Malays. He confirmed this by stating that the real calming of Malay feelings occurred once the ISA was used to detain the five lawyer-spokesmen for Hindraf.

Regarding the problem of temple relocations and demolitions, the Malay educational leader was not entirely sympathetic. He said there certainly was a problem, but that the problem existed because all of the "Tamils have moved out and the land has been developed in the estates, but only the temple from the plantation is left there." He argued that the problem is "the Indians become upset if you demolish the temple." But at the same time, they did not live there anymore, and the land has to be used for other purposes, he implied. This was an intractable problem of development, not a plot to marginalize Hinduism or demolish temples at will. But it did not occur to him to take a larger view of the entire process of displacement and development, starting with the retrenchment of Tamil labor from the estates they had lived on, in many cases, for generations. The sensitivities and emotional attachment to temples arose, I suggested, because of the dispossession these same people felt upon leaving the estates, and the temple has therefore taken on a magnified importance in their struggles to save a semblance of their past community

lives. In response to my interjection, he uttered, "Yes," but merely stated that the problem of temples is "sensitive" and difficult to resolve as the development process marched on, inevitably replacing plantation communities with new housing estates that are primarily non-Indian. The point I wanted him to comment on, of course, was whether this displacement and population-replacement process was itself just or fair, but he either did not see the point or thought it moot.

The educationist left me with a final thought to ponder, which seemed to exemplify the government attitude toward Indians. "Our attitude is that we give the MIC some funding and then let them decide what to do with it. If Indians are not happy with the way the MIC is allocating the resources, it is up to Indians to change MIC. It is not our concern." This attitude is problematic, of course, at several levels. If the government thinks in such a manner, then it is not governing for the people, but instead using political parties as brokers to do their bidding, with little or no oversight. If the performance of the party is "not our concern," then who is to be held accountable? He was implying that it was the ethnic-based party that must be held accountable, and not the government as a whole. But what if corruption or mismanagement of resources left entire segments of a population marginalized?

Naga and I watched a couple of films about Hindraf made by Malay students of English literature at this university. The films used documentary footage taken from the Internet, which showed the demonstration on November 25. The films were sympathetic at the outset, given that the footage showed police manhandling and crowd distress, not to mention the effects of water cannons and tear gas. But when it came time for analysis and interviews, a decidedly non-Indian perspective came through. One interviewee mentioned that the protesters were simply "against the government, and not against other races," and thus should not be taken as provoking sensitive racial issues. But another interviewee mentioned that the movement had touched on the theme of Malay "special rights" and that they "shouldn't question special rights." Yet another said that they were against the demonstration because "everyone is treated equally in Malaysia, but that Malays should always be given special rights above others." One student filmmaker was very upset with Hindraf, she said, as it had sullied Malaysia's image overseas, adding, "Malaysia is the most peaceful multicultural nation in the world," and the image of the protests would make people think otherwise.

Another said, "This was done just before the election to make people vote for the opposition." The makers of the first film gave their own opinion at the end of their film, stating that it was a difficult assignment. They had gone to Batu Caves to interview people about Hindraf, and they felt uneasy the whole time and found it hard to find people to talk to them. I suspected that, as

Malays, there was some suspicion that they were reporters or spies for the government. Even saying they were from the university would not be enough, in my experience, to get most Tamil Hindus to open up and talk freely. They mentioned, for instance, speaking to taxi drivers around the caves, rather than to Hindu devotees in the caves. They also spoke to policemen in Kuala Lumpur rather than Hindraf members. The selection of interviewees told us about the subject position of the filmmakers and the likely awkwardness of their project at the time of its production. The filmmakers themselves said they initially felt some sympathy with the Indian cause but felt that the Malaysian government was basically “fair” to all Malaysians. Furthermore, the “special rights” of *bumiputras* had to be respected, and therefore the demands of Hindraf were “unreasonable,” they concluded. The Indian grievance could not be fathomed.

Malaysian Hindu Sangam

Datuk Vaithilingam’s office in Taman Petaling Utama, in an area near what used to be Kampung Medan, sat in an industrial area, not particularly impressive from the outside but comfortable and clean on the inside. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam, the organization he presided over, was the main umbrella organization for Hindu temples and societies and was supported by the Malaysian government. It was his organization’s charge to make sure that Hindu temples were practicing in accordance with *agamik* (Tamil scriptural) principles. In addition to this task, his organization helped locate and negotiate for alternative sites of land when property developments led to evictions and the potential demolition of temples. The Hindu Sangam also spoke out on issues of concern in the Hindu community, voicing alarm, for instance, if a proposed government policy was perceived to be unfair to Hindus.

I asked the Datuk what his thoughts were on Hindraf and more generally on the discontent that was expressed on November 25 in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. He began by stating, “It was a real wake up call, wasn’t it?” But then he said he would have to “backtrack” and discuss the factors that led up to the protests. Beginning with the social transformations that had led to social unrest among Indian youths, he spoke of the “complete social changes since the 1980s” among the Indians. For one thing, he argued, with the transformation of the economy from the estate-based way of life to the urban-based wage economy, Indians had experienced two types of cultural shock. First of all, there was the cultural shock that came from “interethnic mixing.” Indians in the plantations had lived, he said, “as if they were still in the villages of India.” By this he referred to the ethnic exclusivity of their lifestyle, the rural atmosphere, the centrality of the temple and its festivals within plantation culture

and social life, and the recreation of village political ideals, such as the *panchayat* (local headmen who traditionally form a council of five in villages) system of local decision making. But with the move to urban areas, be they squatter areas or low-cost housing projects, upon termination of estate employment, Indians experienced their minority status vis-à-vis the Chinese and Malay presence in the city. They became aware of themselves as an ethnic minority. And on top of that, as an underprivileged ethnic minority largely coming from poor backgrounds, they faced a degree of stereotyping and racism. Related to this point, when they migrated to the urban areas, they not only faced the cultural shock that accompanied “mixing with other races,” but also experienced the economic shock of having to compete in the wage economy more competitively without the benefit of job skills or land to grow basic foodstuffs, as had been the case in the plantation system. The type of work available to former plantation workers was limited by and large to menial labor, such as gardening, garbage collecting, bus driving, and other basic service jobs. The cultural shock and the economic shock, according to the Datuk, produced much social strain on the working-class Tamil community, which was exacerbated in the 1980s by the acceleration of the process of displacement from plantations. This, in turn, led to frustrations among the youths that contributed to an increase in crime and gangsterism in recent years. The Datuk’s narrative, in short, reconfirmed much of what has been described in previous chapters and elsewhere (e.g., Nagarajan 2004; Tate 2008; Loh 2003).

But the Datuk’s perspective on the social significance of temples proved useful. Temples, he explained, were a major unifying cause within the Hindraf support base. The problems facing temples in Malaysia could be traced back to colonial times, according to Vaithilingam. At that time, the British government allowed the Tamil laborers “to build temples in every long-house,” referring to the early plantation settlements, or labor lines. These earliest shrines were sometimes quite small and basic. Sometimes they were improved and upgraded as the plantations evolved. But while these plantations and their temples multiplied, there was “no proper ruling made by the government” that was legally binding regarding the building and retention of lands for temples. This created a problem when it came to the registration of temples in Malaysia. There was legal ambiguity about the status of temples lying on lands that were acquired for property development.

Without a clear legal code regarding temples or places of worship more generally, Vaithilingam explained, the practices of individual developers determined the fate of existing temples, regardless of their age. He put it very simply: “Some developers are good, whereas some are greedy.” By this he meant that some developers spare a parcel of land where the existing temples

existed, allowing them to continue unharmed. In other cases, developers might offer alternative parcels of land plus cash compensation for temples that had to be removed for a project to be completed. The Hindu Sangam was charged with working with developers in helping to locate alternative sites for temples. In some cases, developers had duped uneducated people by getting them to sign “documents that they did not understand,” which ultimately led to the demolition of their temples.

Hindraf certainly gathered momentum after a series of temple demolitions upset the Tamil community. But according to the Hindu Sangam president, Hindraf exaggerated the actual numbers of temples being destroyed in Malaysia. “Hindraf has claimed that thousands of temples have been destroyed in Malaysia,” Vaithilingam said. But in reality, he maintained, this number is a gross exaggeration. The Hindu Sangam is concerned about temple demolitions as well, he said, but by working with the government and with developers, in most cases the outcomes had been relocation, not outright demolition.

Hindraf began in earnest, according to Vaithilingam, after the Moorthy conversion-after-death case. In this widely known case, which caused great outrage in the Tamil community, the body of Moorthy, the Everest-climbing hero, was taken from his grieving widow by the religious affairs department, which made the sudden claim that he had converted to Islam while he was in the army. His family noted that he had not told anyone of this and had continued to practice Hinduism until his death, and they produced evidence to this effect. None of this evidence was admitted into court, as the matter was referred to the shariah court, which only considered the written evidence of his conversion. This case inspired the formation of Hindraf, with the Hindu Sangam also present and supportive.

The other issues that led to support for Hindraf were the aforementioned problem of temple demolitions, the high rate of unemployment among Indians, and the condition of Tamil schools in the country, according to Vaithilingam. This all culminated in the November 25 “wake up call.” As a result of this demonstration, the prime minister did “call a meeting” with several important Indian NGOs and organizations to address problems within the Indian community. This had been one positive development. He said, however, that “there is no need to ban demonstrations; an orderly demonstration would be easy to control.”

For some time, Samy Vellu did not openly criticize the Hindraf memorandum or organization, particularly when it came to protesting the demolition of temples or the Moorthy case. But once the demonstration of November 25 was being planned and was banned by the police, Samy Vellu attacked Uthayakumar (Hindraf lawyer and spokesperson) and the other Hindraf fol-

lowers. According to Vaithilingam, Samy Vellu even tried to save the infamous Padang Jawa temple, which had been destroyed right before Deepavali, an act that had angered many Hindus and garnered momentum for the Hindraf movement. In his account, Samy waited until the last moment, then went to the site and tried to stop the demolition, only to arrive a bit too late. In the Datuk’s story, Samy was upset that he could not save the temple. People at the temple, it seems, were upset with Samy Vellu for not being able to stop the demolition, and they blamed him for it.

Though the *Tamil Nesan* (local Tamil daily) evidently did show the November 25 demonstration in detail, Samy Vellu was critical of Hindraf in the days leading up to the event. He personally attacked Uthayakumar and the other leaders of Hindraf. It was only at this point, according to Vaithilingam, that Hindraf and especially Uthayakumar challenged the MIC leader and called upon followers to back the opposition in coming elections. Uthayakumar, according to Vaithilingam, said, “I don’t talk to office boys of the UMNO,” referring to Samy Vellu.

After the event itself, Samy went one step further and spoke to the media about the “true” economic position of the Indian community in Malaysia, claiming that they were not marginalized. He presented economic statistics to “prove” that under his leadership, and under Barisan Nasional, the Indians were performing fairly well. Critics within the Indian community lambasted him for singing the government’s tune and not fighting for the Indian community. Moreover, his economic data was called into question by academic commentators in the media.

Our discussion turned to the anger that existed in the community as a result of the desecration of the Batu Caves temple that occurred on the eve of the big demonstration. As will be recalled from Regu’s account, a crowd of Hindraf supporters had gathered in the Batu Caves temple, only to be locked inside. According to Vaithilingam, the order had come from somebody above who felt that by locking everyone in the temple, the demonstration the next day could be thwarted. What is worse, somebody had begun throwing rocks into the crowd at the temple, which the Datuk suggested was a deliberate provocation to violence. With the crowd trapped inside, the rock throwing agitated the crowd, making them break the gates to get out. When the crowd in the temple began throwing rocks back, water cannons were called in and sprayed at those in the temple. And it was for the return fire of rocks that some in the temple were charged with the attempted murder of a policeman. Vaithilingam, however, felt that they had been provoked into a fight and that this had been done to discredit them and to justify the heavy hand of a police lockup and water cannons.

Vaithilingam questioned Samy Vellu as to why the temple gates were

locked, and he wanted some sort of inquiry launched into this matter, in addition to having those arrested released. This angered Samy Vellu, leading to a strain between the MIC and Hindu Sangam. One consequence of this strain was the formation of the National Malaysian Hindu Council by the Batu Caves temple chairman, a Mr. R. Nadarajah, and Samy Vellu's son, Vel Paari. This organization was formed to represent seven hundred temples across the country, and they called for a meeting with the then chief minister, Mohammad Khir Toyo. In actuality, only forty-six temple committees attended the meeting. This splinter committee did not have much support among temples or in the community, according to Vaithilingam, and was only formed to counter the influence of the Hindu Sangam.

In contrast to the new and apparently weak Hindu Council, Hindraf called for the boycott of Thaipusam at Batu Caves to send a message of community strength to the government. This boycott was called out of disgust for the Batu Caves temple management's handling of the crowd the night the temple's gates were locked. Allowing the temple to be defiled by water cannons and tear gas enraged the community. According to Vaithilingam, the boycott was hugely successful, with only two to three hundred thousand devotees coming to Batu Caves for Thaipusam that year, as compared to one million in each of the previous few years. Alternatively, supporters of Hindraf gathered in the tens of thousands in an alternative temple in Port Klang and in a few other temples to show their solidarity. Though Samy Vellu denied the effectiveness of the boycott, numerous eyewitnesses said it was a huge success. In sum, the Datuk corroborated much of what Regu, and by extension Hindraf, had claimed.

As we concluded our conversation, I asked Vaithilingam for a more general assessment of the Hindraf movement and its potential for generating positive or negative change or polarization. Vaithilingam began by stating that one positive development was the government's moratorium on temple demolitions. This, he felt, was an important first step in bringing "more sensitivity" to this issue. Hindraf had alerted the government to the consequences of indefinitely angering the Hindu community. As he put it, the "temple problem is UMNO's problem." On the one hand, they had to resolve this issue to the satisfaction of Indian voters at some point. But, by the same token, their hands were also tied because they had to first and foremost placate their constituencies. After the election, they would quietly work to restore Indian confidence without losing face in front of Malays, he claimed. That meant that in this election, the "MIC would certainly lose some seats," he predicted, but the "government will follow up with some of their promises." I asked if he felt Prime Minister Badawi was sincere in his recent overtures toward the Indian community. He said he believed that he was and that he would keep his promises.

On the negative side, he suggested that Hindraf risked alienating Malays

and others by its overstatements and "exaggerations." Just as he had pointed out with regards to the number of temples threatened with demolition, he also mentioned that phrases like "ethnic cleansing" of Indians or the "genocide of Kampung Medan" were not to be taken seriously. These hyperbolic phrases undermined the serious issues at play for the Tamil poor. The real situation was serious enough without embellishment, and these exaggerations called the credibility of the struggle and of its leadership into question. Moreover, there was also a risk that one could be accused of telling strategic lies to garner foreign sympathy. That was, indeed, a charge leveled against Hindraf, and one that riled up many Malaysians, particularly Malays.

Kampung Gandhi

I returned with Naga to the Kampung Gandhi temple after the demonstrations to speak to the *pusari* at the Mariamman temple (recall chapters 6 and 7). The temple was all that was left standing in what used to be a densely populated squatter area. Toward the main road, there was also a *surau* that was patronized by Tamil Muslims. The temple appeared to be safe from demolition and continued to be patronized by the former residents of the area, most of whom had relocated to low-cost flats nearby. I was interested in the priest's thoughts on the Hindraf issue. He was just wrapping up his evening prayers and was thus free to share his thoughts with us:

Yes, I was there to stand with my fellow Indians and support what they are doing. They are fighting for our rights and I should support them. . . . Why is it that Indonesians can get housing units without an IC and we have a tough time getting units? Why do they treat us like this? After all we are Malaysians. The Indonesians come and within one generation can marry locals and buy units or get an IC. But with us there are difficulties with our IC and birth certificates. . . . After Hindraf, the temple has been left alone for now. Especially with the election looming, they will not demolish anything. Nothing is yet promised (for the temple relocation), but the MIC gave all local temples a nice donation recently and this temple also received five thousand (ringgit) for "renovations." Though we realize this is because of the election, we are happy to receive the money for the temple. . . . During the annual festival, people returned from the flats to the temple. It was a large gathering once again of former Kampung Gandhi residents.

The *pusari* is exhibiting a pragmatic attitude here. He accepted the money from the MIC for the temple, as would many others. But at the same time,

he was sympathetic to Hindraf and went to the demonstration, believing that the question of “rights”—and, one might say, justice—was fundamental. Moreover, he was upset with the different treatment meted out to Indonesians as compared to Indians, though Indians were citizens in many cases for many more generations than Indonesians. This awareness led him to be critical but not to take a principled refusal of MIC aid. This was the compromised position of many working-class Indians. They required the petty assistance of the MIC in their business dealings, but they oftentimes resented the brokerage system and increasingly were openly critical of it.

Makkal Sakti Rally in Port Klang Temple

Given that Hindraf rallies had been broken up, sometimes with water cannon and tear gas by the police, the movement had taken a more amorphous form through the banner of people power, or *makkal sakti*. This also reflected the more diffuse sense of discontent that existed in Malaysia among Indians that perhaps exceeded the more specific set of demands made by Hindraf. The *makkal sakti* movement, in turn, had taken to organizing events under the protective umbrella of the temple grounds. These were ostensibly organized as “prayers” but would inevitably feature speeches by leaders of Hindraf, opposition politicians, and other critics of the MIC, or activist members of the Tamil community. Word of these “prayer meetings” was spread through flyers, but more effectively through SMS (text messaging) and e-mail. I attended one such prayer meeting/political rally in Port Klang at an old but refurbished Mariamman temple, formerly from a plantation that had been closed in 1984 and its land converted into housing estates. As the temple compound was large, it could house several hundred devotees. I estimated the crowd to be about five to six hundred people.

Many in the crowd were wearing orange buttons with the printed words “Makkal Sakti.” Some wore saffron sashes around their necks as well. I asked the temple chairman if he thought it was fine to use the temple for a political gathering. He seemed nervous and did not want to say much, but he did say that as they depended on community support, “we must not stop people from using the temple.” But he was worried because he had received a warning from the Special Branch (of the police) about using his temple for political rallies. He felt trapped between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he could not stop the supporters of the temple from having their “prayer meeting,” as this would alienate the temple from the community, which would be economically disastrous for the temple. On the other hand, if the government got wind that his temple was being used for opposition rallies, he feared he would not be given the legal title to the temple, which would jeopardize

its future security. Indeed, in this case the temple had not yet received the legal title, and this particular temple chairman was concerned that he would have to work closely over time with the local MIC member of the state legislative assembly in order to procure it. Therefore, he became worried once he started to hear fiery antigovernment and anti-MIC speeches being given in the temple. These speeches were not only hostile to the current government, but they were amplified and easy for eavesdroppers to hear.

But aside from the temple committee chairman, others in the temple told me they were there to express a demand for their “rights.” One man said it was “necessary to safeguard our rights before we live more in the future [*sic*].” Therefore, standing up now without fear of repercussion was the order of the day. The Hindraf “awakening” of November 25, 2007, had taught them this lesson. There was no going back to being meek and quiet. From here forward, he explained, they would have to assert their rights loudly and clearly.

Speeches by special guests such as the Hindraf leader V. K. Regu, whom we met earlier, were given after a *puja* and *bhajan* session had concluded. The speeches were fiery and called on the audience to vote for the opposition in the election. They were asked not to forget about the demolitions of temples in the country or about their “brothers under ISA” detention. They were told not to be “taken in by election crumbs . . . they want us to be beggars.” Another speaker, a prominent trade unionist and activist, pointed out that “they ask for our taxes, ask for our lives serving in the military, but still they refuse to give us jobs in the government service.”

I asked one woman in the audience who had come from Bukit Jalil Estate (see the opening vignette in the introduction) why she had come for this



Regu speaking at Hindraf/ makkal sakti rally inside temple

meeting. She was wearing a “Makkal Sakti” button and said, “We did not come yesterday to Malaysia; we are Malaysians who deserve to be treated better. I am fifty-three and this is the only home I know.”

The crowd was energized, laughing and applauding with the speakers, finding the mix of religious imagery and political rhetoric a potent mix. Because the event took place in a temple, *bhajans* were sung and a collective *puja* was offered. Thus, the overall atmosphere was charged with a kind of religious fervor. Talk of justice was conjoined to a higher or spiritual law.

Memorandum at Sekolah Tamil Simpang Lima, Klang

The Hindraf movement energized the Indian community in more ways than one. Tamils schools had long been a source of discontent for being purportedly underfunded. The physical infrastructure, in particular, in Tamil schools has been a source of much unhappiness among parents, activists, and educators (Arumugam 2008). Though many Tamil schools are fully or partially government funded, many believe they have inferior infrastructure and facilities as compared to Malay-medium or Chinese-medium schools. Sekolah (School) Tamil Simpang Lima, in Klang, was a classic example of this trend, critics charged.

The parents of this school held a rally on February 23, 2008, to present a memorandum to the Board of Education. This school had more than 2,100 students, making it the largest Tamil school in the country. But the original classrooms and canteen were so overcrowded that the parents had to raise 1.4 million ringgit privately to build another new and larger canteen, plus new classrooms to accommodate the students. Though this was the government’s responsibility, the parents’ previous requests and memoranda had fallen on deaf ears, and so they were forced to act. “Even the poor contributed to the building,” the speaker at the rally said to a large crowd of parents.

There were about five hundred parents sitting in the canteen as the head of the parents’ association spoke to them. On the dais was Kamala Ganapathy, the MIC state assemblywoman from the area, a Malay representative from the Board of Education, as well as a couple other government officials. The chairman of the Parent Teacher Association said, “We are not bothered about [vision] 2020,⁶ we are worried about now.” The crowd applauded with this statement. He then said, “We are *rakyat* (the people) of Malaysia.” The crowd clapped loudly. This speech was reminiscent of Hindraf rhetoric, and scanning the audience, one did see the occasional “Makkal Sakti” button. He said the parents were asking in the memorandum that a proper science lab be built, a surfaced parking lot be completed, and a fence be put around the school. At that time, there was no fence around the school, effectively enabling any-

one to enter or leave at will, which was unusual for a Malaysian school. This evidently had been noted in letters to the Board of Education for years. He said, “We are asking basic questions . . . as this mother tongue education is our fundamental right. . . . We worry about our future in this country. We demand—if you want to take it this way—but will work with you, perhaps with a rolling fund—however you want to take it.” The audience clapped vigorously. When the parent representative asked rhetorically, “Why are we not getting funding?” one man, standing off to the side, said, “Because we are Indians.” This elicited a chuckle from those standing around him, though the speaker did not hear him. But it was clear from the rhetorical nature of the question that the speaker was implying that Tamil schools are poorly funded and discriminated against relative to other schools.

I interviewed one parent who was active in the Parent Teacher Association. He was also an active supporter of the Hindraf movement and saw the mobilization of the parents on this day as being inspired to some extent by the former “awakening.” The school, he said, was “a good school, but not properly equipped.” The “Tamil school child is basically underprivileged,” he suggested. But now, “people got fed up” and have finally voiced their displeasure at the infrastructure. As I looked around I could see that the playing field was full of discarded debris (broken concrete, iron scraps, etc.) and unsafe for sports. The older classrooms appeared dilapidated, but not exactly ramshackle. The most urgent problem, however, was that of overcrowding.

But the individual mentioned above had other complaints about the problem of racism in the education system. He claimed that in the national schools Tamil children were “ill-treated, segregated, and subjected to Muslim holidays and culture.” He even spoke of a recent case where a Tamil girl won the prize in Port Klang for being the second best in the whole school but “refused to accept the prize” because this would have led to her being “segregated into the 1st class, which was all Malay.” Here she would have felt extremely alienated. What he was trying to say was that the Malays are segregated from the non-Malays, put into a higher stream, or “1st class,” which gives them an unfair advantage. He is also claiming that the environment in an all-Malay class will be entirely hostile or alienating to the non-Malay—so much so that an honor student would prefer to pass on a major award in order to remain in a mixed ethnic setting.

This parent went on to speak about the “racially abusive words” that Tamil children experience at the hands of teachers in the government Malay-medium schools. He said, “We have come to the conclusion that it is not our place to study.” This, he said, explained the dramatic shift among Tamil pupils from national to Tamil schools in the past several years, and it explained the growth of this particular school in Klang. I had heard that in Selangor, Tamil

schools were overcrowded and increasingly popular.⁷ At the same time, based on what we have seen and heard regarding plantation retrenchment struggles, it is also true that a consolidation of students within surviving Tamil schools was another cause for overcrowding.

We are taught, he said, that “being an Indian” is to “live within your limit.” The educators want to send the children a message at an early age not to ask too much out of life. They must be content with what they have. “They do this because they do not want Indians to ask for more. . . . The same thing that happened in Sri Lanka will happen here!” I did not press on this, but he clearly implied that Indians might eventually be forced to fight for justice. He then turned to the ubiquitous grouse regarding ethnic quotas and *bumiputra* privileges.

“All licenses for business, newspapers, scrap metal, etc., must have 30 percent *bumiputra* rights—30 percent share in company for *bumiputras*. Even our small business [*sic*], the ones that we have taken up when we have been denied access to many other lines of work, must have 30 percent *bumiputra* share ownership now!”

Another man joined the conversation at this point. He had been listening quietly up until now, but now he jumped in. “Even conservatives were upset about the temple demolitions. The Hindraf roadshows opened up people’s eyes to the issues. Hindraf is the accumulation of thirty to forty years of frustration.” I asked if there are any positive aspects of Hindraf, in his estimation. Both men smiled and nodded in the affirmative. The man joining the conversation later continued, “The youth will now say *vanakkam* [a respectful hello]. Every Indian in Malaysia supports Hindraf.” I then asked about whether the boycott of Batu Caves during *Thaipusam* had been effective. He said, “Yes, about 100,000 people had congregated at the Port Klang temple, whereas only one-third the normal amount came to Batu Caves. Everyone felt, ‘I must participate.’”

The first man then spoke about the school once again to point to a change in people’s thinking. He pointed out that the MIC politician, state assemblywoman Kamala Ganapathy, had announced a forty-thousand-ringgit allocation to the school during the meeting before the assembled crowd. In years past, the crowd would have cheered. But this time the crowd kept silent, understanding that this amount was insignificant in the long run, and moreover that it was an “election gimmick.” He suggested that at least 70 percent of the Indian vote would go to the opposition in this election. The second man spoke again, emphasizing the sense of betrayal that fueled Hindraf’s rise:

We have been so loyal, and have given so much to this country—rubber, oil—what of this [our] state now? Who put up the railways? Our people

are put into the prison. What is happening after I die? Will I be buried as a Muslim? You kill my language. You kill my religion. I do not even know if my body will be taken from family after my death. Am I a nobody? “Kafir” is what they are teaching the young. The young are learning to look at us like this. What is going to be of my children? We have been deprived everywhere. . . . When I take my Malay workers out, who are subordinate to me, they have the nerve to ask me, “please go to Malay shop.” It is my money, and they don’t want to drink tea in an Indian shop!

I asked both men what could be done, given the highly racialized environment that they were describing, to prevent the Hindraf movement from provoking a strong Malay backlash. Indeed, according to both men, Kairy Jamu-luddin, a leading UMNO politician, had issued a threat to Indians that “Pemuda [youth] UMNO can be summoned” to face the Indian youths. Here they felt that Anwar Ibrahim, the Party Keadilan Rakyat leader, could serve as an effective communicator to the Malay heartland that Hindraf was not anti-Malay, but was against the policies that have hurt Indians. In the zero-sum world of Malaysian ethnic politics, however, this distinction was hard to maintain. But Anwar’s popular appeal with Malays, it was hoped, would soften the potential for a strong Malay backlash. Anwar’s sympathetic stance toward the Hindraf demonstrations, however, had earned him much scorn from many Malay voters.

As in the case of the shop owner discussed earlier, the bread-and-butter issues for these men came back to economic concerns, though the religious worries and sentiments were not insignificant. As middle-class parents, they were worried about having to use their entire EPF savings (retirement) to educate their children overseas because the government universities were reserved mainly for Malays through the *bumiputra* quota system. As they aged, they would have to sell their earnings to pay medical bills, leaving “no earnings behind for their children.” In this way, each generation was faced with the same dilemma: all of one’s savings was spent in old age. For this reason, there was little wealth passed down through the family, and the class of the family declined instead. As one of the two men said, “We work twelve hours a day and try to send our children overseas to study, hoping their future is better; but every day is a worry. The pressure is too great.” This feeling of economic pressure and resentment toward government assistance for Malays was leading middle-class Indians, particularly, lower middle-class Indians, to identify with the Hindraf movement.

While at the rally at the Tamil school in Klang, I interviewed a *makkal sakti* supporter who was passing out flyers for an upcoming “prayer meeting”

featuring Hindraf leaders, activists, and opposition politicians. I had seen him before interviewed by *Malaysiakini* (an online newspaper) during a temple fast to release the Hindraf leaders being held under the ISA. He told me that “all the while I was living my life, not thinking about politics, but when I heard what the Hindraf was saying and fighting for, it all made sense to me, as I had experienced these things.” I asked him to explain, and he said, “For example, when I go to the government offices they are eager to help me, because they think I look like a Malay (he was of mixed Chinese and Indian ancestry), but when they see my IC and that I am an Indian, their attitude changes completely. It happens to me all the time. Am I not a Malaysian?” He became emotional as he expressed this. The racism that he had experienced had apparently been a formative and personally hurtful experience to him.

But he now felt a sense of purpose with *makkal sakti*. Indeed, the symbolic power of the movement lay in the fact that it exceeded a political purpose. It tapped a religious and symbolic core, fusing it to feelings of social and political alienation. Justice and the sacred lay beyond politics and the law. He explained the feeling of power and solidarity he experienced being part of this new community in this way: “I feel this power when I see another person now and we greet each other and offer to help each other. I feel a connection or energy field—like I know you already. Some people I don’t know just treat me as a brother now. This is the power of the *mantiram* [mantra] ‘*makkal sakti*.’” *Makkal sakti* was not merely a political slogan but was believed to be a magical phrase in itself, producing a powerful bond between people, or an “energy field.” This energy field grew in strength with each iteration of the utterance. The more these prayer meetings were held, and the larger the crowds could utter this phrase in unison, the more potent the power of this energy. While it generated the context or forum for political action and speech making, it was much more than this; it tapped into a symbolic core of Tamil Hindu belief that is widely practiced in rituals such as *Adi Puram* and *Thaipusam*. That is, the dissemination of spiritual power occurs through a recognition of injustice produced by the capricious nature of hierarchy. This recognition, in turn, is premised on that of another: that the highest, or God, can become manifest in all through the simple act of devotion and in allowing oneself to be overtaken, overwhelmed, indeed possessed (*arul*) by it. At the same time, this “energy” is unknowable, in cognitive or reasonable terms, and remains beyond the containment of words, though induced by the verbal incantation, or *mantiram*. This fusion of the political and the spiritual was harvested by the Hindraf movement and its affiliates, but to proximate and political ends.

Ramaji, Spiritual Advisor to Hindraf

I met leaders from Hindraf at Berkeley Corner Restaurant in Klang, a quiet place to have a discussion. Present was Regu, whom we met earlier, an assistant, and Ramaji, the so-called spiritual advisor to Hindraf, as well as two other assistants. These individuals were all from the Hindu Seva Sangam, which by their account formed the nucleus of Hindraf from the start. In their words, the legal counsel, which included the lawyers who were then being held under the ISA—P. Uthayakumar, M. Manoharan, R. Genghadharan, V. Ganabathirau, as well as T. Vasanthkumar, who was not a lawyer—were hired as spokespersons for the movement since the actual leaders were less adept at public speaking. Regu, for instance, who was present at the table, said he was “very shy” at public speaking and would only speak boldly when he was upset about something. Moreover, the lawyers really were necessary, as they understood the “law” and what “our rights” really were. Now that the spokespersons were under arrest, the role of speaking at rallies had fallen upon Regu and Rama, or “Reguji and Ramaji.” They were leading the “roadshows,” traveling to prayer meetings in Penang, Kedah, and Johore. Ramaji told me he had just returned that day before from large gatherings in temples across Johore.

Regu presented evidence to me of the modern Indian presence in Malaya dating back to the 1820s, taken from research the lawyer Uthayakumar had collected in London during a trip there. This was being compiled as evidence of a “two-hundred-year history in Malaya” and of the claim that some temples are older than previously thought. Documenting the antiquity of the community in Malaya seemed to be an important strategy in the Hindraf legal case. Finding evidence of the earliest presence would bring greater legitimacy to their claims of deep-rootedness in Malaya, it was believed. If it could be shown that plantations had been there for more than 150 years, with their attendant temples, then the demolition of these temples would appear all the more capricious and cruel in the world’s eyes, they would argue. In this sense, Hindraf was formally archiving what we had heard several evicted plantation communities saying in their struggles for compensation and for the survival of their temples, schools, and homes. The archive rendered visible the refused gift or reciprocity by the modern Malaysian government (Grosz 2005) and created the narratological parameters of victimhood, demonstrating the violence at the heart of the Law. This archive was, of course, also built on the desire and hope for future recognition. In that sense, while Hindraf exceeded legalistic arguments in its search for justice, outside and above the law (or in a higher, divine Law), it also pursued legal strategies grounded in the archiving of a kind of historical precedent.

Ramaji outlined his own version of the Hindraf story. He repeated what others had already said, namely, that the Moorthy “body-snatching” case had galvanized Hindus in protest and had led to the formation of the Hindu Rights Action Committee, first with Datuk Vaithilingam as its advisor. The Hindu Seva Sangam and the Hindu Mamandaram, as well as other Hindu bodies, were also involved in this coalition of groups that filed a case in the High Court on behalf of the widow on December 28, 2005. But as the failure of that case frightened the Hindu community, the more forceful Hindu Rights Action Force came into being.

Ramaji explained that “Islamization was very strong” and had influenced how the police dealt with local communities. In “2006 alone, twenty-nine temples were destroyed in a space of three weeks.” After demolitions in Setapak and Pantai Dalam, memorandums were presented through their legal counsel (by this time, they had already procured the legal aid of P. Uthayakumar and P. Waytha Moorthy) to the sultan of Selangor, the prime minister, and even to the king, but with no response. “We finally said, we had better go to the foreign.” Ramaji explained that the decision to file a suit against Her Majesty’s government came only after six letters to the prime minister were left unanswered, in addition to the memorandum that had been submitted to the prime minister on behalf of Hindraf.

I asked if he thought the movement was headed in the right direction now that the ISA had detained the spokespersons and the government had branded Hindraf a terrorist-linked organization. Ramaji said, “We are uniting for the whole of society, not for the self, but for a cause. But we are branded as ‘gangsters.’ The youth are motivated. There were no criminal cases at Thaipusam last year. In years past there would always be criminal or gangster elements at Thaipusam.” Hindraf, he maintained, had given them something to believe in.

Though Hindraf had called upon the government to help Indians economically, Ramaji’s philosophy for the Indian community was self-reliance. “We want a self-sustaining society, no longer dependent on the government or MIC. Fundamental works can be identified. They (the people) can do things on their own.” By fundamental works, I believe he meant occupations and skills. Basically, he was arguing that if given the opportunities and educated about those opportunities, Indians would take advantage of these and become a self-sufficient community. But due to the obstructions in employment and education as a result of ethnic quotas, the Indian community had faced difficulties.

Ramaji then spoke about the harsh chemicals that were added to the water cannons on the “day of the roses” demonstration, touched on earlier. “We wanted to present roses to the prime minister, but chemicals were added to

the water to hurt us, instead.” This, he added, was a “very cruel” way to treat people who wanted to demonstrate peacefully. Moreover, we “carried the *agung’s* [king’s] picture at the rose demonstration to show our loyalty.” Perhaps displaying the photo of the king was in response to Malay anger that it was absent at the earlier demonstration.

I then asked whether the prime minister’s promise to Indians, which came out in a meeting with twenty NGOs, to look into specific problem areas faced by the community, would produce tangible results. Ramaji said this was just a “bluff to stop our movement.” “He has not even acknowledged our memorandum in his promises.” His promises were empty, he surmised, because they did not respond directly to Hindraf. Of course, had he responded directly to Hindraf, the political cost with Malay voters might have been terribly consequential for UMNO. But Ramaji did not consider this. Indeed, he saw an ominous dark horizon in interethnic relations in Malaysia, which echoed what others had said to me. “It will *happen like Sri Lanka*. . . . We’ve been tolerant enough for the last fifty years.” But while Hindraf did not appear to have, nor did it admit to, any LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) links, Ramaji did admit to have learned from the RSS, and even to have some loose affiliation with the VHP and RSS.⁸ His orientation was therefore conservative and Hindu, not radical Tamil nationalism, which has been historically anti-brahminical in both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. But Hindraf was a many-headed hydra.

Ramaji and Reguji then took me to a rally at Padang Jawa, “where it all started.” They explained the significance of this site. “This was a divine event,” the awakening of Hindraf. And this awakening happened because of the breaking of a specific temple a few days before Deepavali in Padang Jawa, in Shah Alam. There was nothing particularly significant about this temple to the goddess or this case, but a combination of publicity and photos produced by Hindraf, and the fact that it occurred right on the eve of a major Hindu festival, magnified its symbolic importance (Makkal Sakti 2008).

In this working-class area, the ground zero of the *makkal sakti* movement, Hindraf turned the breaking of the temple, what had been a tragic event in the Tamil community, into a rallying point, even a pilgrimage spot. To underscore its spiritual significance, the temple was temporarily reconstituted within the compound of someone’s home, or between two homes, safe from further demolition. Regu said to a crowd of assembled devotees at this site, “We tried every avenue to save this temple, but perhaps, because of this, and how the authorities handled it, something bigger or divine was planned.” Ramaji led the group of about a hundred people in chanting, and then spoke to the crowd about the “spirit of sacrifice” that was in one woman who had tried to save the temple and who had helped rebuild it. That spirit of sacrifice,

he said, was now needed in the whole community. Opposition politicians were also called on to speak.

This focal point helps us understand Hindraf's power vis-à-vis the force of the Law. Though I do not wish to detail the struggle against developers, and ultimately the state, that led to the eventual demolition of the Padang Jawa temple on the eve of Deepavali, an important Hindu festival, I would suggest that this had a profound psychic impact on the Tamil community. It revealed to them that the state and its laws were more forcefully transgressive, if not outrageously arbitrary, than before. This betrayal, in turn, led to a precipitous decline in Indian support for the government. The simultaneously incomprehensible yet symbolic violence of demolition, as played out in the Tamil and independent media, also awakened an unease, a restless insecurity of faith, that sought reconstitution in a higher power or reason, in a transcendent source.

As we have witnessed in previous chapters, there is a denial of a temple's destructibility on the one hand, expressed in the face of potential demolition. There were many miraculous stories in which the immanence of spirit deterred bulldozers or would-be transgressors. On the other hand, a crisis of faith could ensue with demolitions. These would be supplemented by rationalizations of future rebirth, deferred vengeance, and punishment, all symptomatic of a shattered faith. Indeed, we also witnessed talks of retribution for transgression whereby the logic of deferral was manifest. That is, the spirit was only apparently defeated with the physical desecration of sacred space, whereas divine justice was ultimately forthcoming. One might add to this the logic of self-sacrifice in Tamil Hindu ritualism and folklore. The apotheosis of the Tamil antihero in folklore (Shulman 1985) is tragic but also spiritually empowering to both the hero and his downtrodden followers, both of whom find redemption through his demise and rebirth. Exposing the Other's wrong (the capricious king or brahmin, or in this case the Malay-led government) or lack, in these instances, is a critical component of this redemption. Even Gandhian nonviolence is, arguably, embedded within a similar logic, but in the Gandhian exemplar, redemption, and one might say recognition by the Other as Self, is possible. The notion of reciprocal violence, operating by a similar force of law, is more haunting. The possessive force of violence, its overwhelming sway, is more destabilizing and uncontrollable, reinscribing the principle of Law over that which it destroys. Thus, "like Sri Lanka" remains a very real threat.

In its rebirth, the temple itself had been sacrificed for the spirit of community awakening—a "divine event" disseminating the temple's power (or transforming its apparent failure) into the people, now reborn with "people power" (*makkal sakti*). In this instance, the shards of destruction and creative energy (*sakti*) seemed comprehensible, at least in part, in the emergent nar-

rative of the apocryphal birth of Hindraf out of the temple's sacrifice. Still, a violent unease about the future gripped the imagination. The specter of the state, the ghost of "like Sri Lanka," and the fear of future demolitions lurked as an unfathomable horizon.

It is perhaps worth underscoring, too, that the majority of temples in Malaysia, particularly within plantations, are dedicated to the goddess Mariamman. Thus it is the desecration of the goddess that most caused outrage. We are witnessing not only the state as arbiter of Law, but rather the special legacy and meanings within goddess worship, marking a refused intimacy that is the basis of female power, or *sakti* personified in the deity (Ram 2013). Justice, in short, is understood to be the goddess' special charge, given female suffering and disavowals in the patriarchal Tamil society. This critical discourse in Tamil culture and history takes on a new resonance in Malaysia, heightening the critique of Law already present within its tradition (Shulman 1980; Kinsley 1986; Ram 2013).

In Tamil Hindu terms, a violent unleashing of the transgressed goddess (Kinsley 1986; Nabokov 2000) will overwhelm and possess her subjects in response to the arbitrary violence of the law. At the edge of reason, *katavul* (the sacred, God, or more specifically "crossing" from the known to the unknown, Nabokov 2000, 8) reconstitutes the subject with a sense of power and mastery, but an uncanny residue remains. As Nabokov (2000) has argued for possession and countersorcery more generally in the Tamil context, a violence inheres in both the attack against the subject that announces itself as possession as well as in the destruction of the anthropomorphized demonic presence. Nabokov's insightful analysis of several countersorcery rituals underscores their unresolved nature. She demonstrates that the destruction of a possessing demonic agent, as achieved through the countersorcery ritual, is never absolute or complete, as it involves a splitting of the psyche of the Tamil subject. The offending deity, as representative of the subject's forbidden desire and as translated through the cultural work of symbolization,⁹ is subject to external objectification through the work of effigies, which in turn are destroyed by decapitation. The literal destruction of one's (alter) self, and the renunciation of desire that accompanies this process, Nabokov argues, produces not only a recapitulation of the law and its violence (in this case the patriarchal structure of Tamil life), but also the ever-present feeling of suppressed selfhood haunting the conscious subject.

The subject is forced to renounce his or her desire and the etiology of his or her possession, and is forced to submit unto the Law, despite the spirited protest by the alien presence, which made itself known at the edge of reason, or in a "crossing" (*katavul*) into the unknown. In the Tamil context, the notion of divine justice is also always already haunted by the force of the Law

with its arbitrary violence, as demonstrated in Shulman's work on bandit heroes and clown figures (Shulman 1985). That is, even the heroic figures of folklore, while transgressing and thus revealing the violence within hierarchy more generally, through their own violence and tragic ends reinscribe a principle of power dependent on self-sacrifice. This Tamil theodicy produces its own version of the sublime, outside though not entirely dissimilar from its Kantian variant. As Rodolphe Gasche has eloquently argued, "What is judged sublime is the mind's capacity to form an apprehension of something that thwarts even the possibility of minimal objectification, and that like the 'wide ocean, disturbed by the storm . . . is just horrible'" (Gasche 2003, 127, quoting Kant). But, arguably, the sublime object, born of a divided and violently suppressed self, is "minimally" objectifiable; however, this objectification, as Freud's notion of the uncanny would have it, possesses the subject, bringing on a restlessness and agitated psychic movement. Beyond reason, the force of judgment produces both a futural angst and desirous fantasy about violent outcomes, imagined and figured as justice.

Conclusion

There is a haunting of justice in Malaysia because certain acts of the law are haunted by the force of the decisions that inaugurated them. The instantiation of Law is violent in its performative act, but it is also supplemented in its lack through the sustaining violence of various juridical evidences (Benjamin 1986; Derrida 2002a; De Vries 2002), further decisions derived from the founding decision, and the archiving of difference, which circuitously serves as evidence of the Law's inviolability. In the case of Malaysia, as in many other postcolonial renderings of juridical difference, identities were created and rendered through the law and supplemented through archival measurements of race and culture (Hirschman 1986; Anderson 1991; Stoler 2009), but, I suggest, these remained haunted by the inability of complete disentanglement or closure. The feverish cataloguing of racial and ethnic difference that distinguished and ossified racialized thinking in Malaysia for decades is a great silencer of justice, though it arrives in the name of the Law.

That is, an originary lack in the Law itself may be haunted by its own violent suppression of its arbitrariness (i.e., a performative founding act). The historicity and contingency of the state's truth claims, for instance, may require compensatory elaboration in a chain of substitutions, signifiable in time and space as ethnographic others, thus deferring and displacing this originary lack with supplementary violence.¹⁰ As Derrida argues, there is a "mystical" dimension to authority and the Law in its performative utterance: "There is here a silence walled up in the violent structure of the founding act; walled up, walled in

because this silence is not exterior to language" (2002a, 242). He adds that the act is haunted as "Its ghostliness deconstructs from within all assurance of presence . . . it always maintains within itself some irruptive violence" (2002a, 253–256). In this sense, an originary lack inherent in the "irruptive violence" of Law is supplemented through the "archive fever" (Derrida 1995a) of an ethnonationalist state (Dirks 2002). Grounding itself in stereotypical emblems of cultural difference provides an aura of naturalness and retroactive historicity to the violence of the state, and the ethnographic archive of purported ethnic differences, in turn, is a critical part of this exercise and the exercising of the Law's ghostliness. That is, the contingency inherent in the violence of the letter of the Law more generally requires a continuous source of exteriority as a source of authority. This dimension of statecraft, referred to provocatively as "lawfare" by Comaroff and Comaroff (2006), through its very performativity, finds itself vulnerable to hauntings of justice. Racialized thinking and identification in Malaysia has required such feverish archiving (Hirschman 1986; Kahn 2006; Peletz 2002; Mandal 2004; Khoo 2006), but, I am suggesting, as a consequence the law (and identity more broadly) is deconstructible and haunted by the impossibility of complete disentanglement (Povinelli 2002; Appadurai 2006; Baxstrom 2008; Willford 2006a).

In this study we have witnessed dozens of stories that have illustrated the vicissitudes of law, particularly as predicated on an ethnonationalist framing. From fieldwork with community-based activists, laborers, and academics on the struggles faced by retrenched Tamil plantation workers in Malaysia, we discovered that "successful" claims for compensation have not occurred through the recourse afforded by the law. Instead, the communities that successfully negotiated compensation were those that improvised campaigns of civil disobedience increasingly in transgression of the letter of the law. This transgression was predicated on a higher and oftentimes "divine" Law. Though forged out of a sense of victimization, this higher aspiration, while politically fecund, ran the risk of reinscribing another kind of law, one difficult to contain given its possessive and divine force. On the other hand, this aspiration is predicated on a certain kind of historical consciousness of the contemporary moment in Malaysia, where the disavowals and negations that define ethnic politics, and ultimately influence land rights and compensation claims, also serve as repressed evidence of a suppressed history—one that is particularly intimate between Malays and Indians (Willford 2006a; Kessler 1992; Kahn 2006). I suggest that a moral economy is at work, in which the history embedded in memory and suppressed relations between groups provides the ground upon which not only "shaming" the developer and state can work, for instance, but the deconstructibility of the Law also becomes apparent. This circuit of exchange seems to me to lie at the heart of both successful claims for com-

pensation, but also in imagining a Malaysian subject beyond the ethnic line and the narrow legal determinations that produce this line.

The unanswered yet consequential question, then, remains as to whether the deconstructibility of the Law, as premised on an intimacy and shared historicity, can overcome the anger and betrayal that appears to be fueling a victim's narrative and generating fantasies of divine Law. As we have seen, compensation struggles have taken on a moralizing, indeed, an extra-judicial justice-seeking form. This has been an overriding theme throughout all the chapters and the reason my ethnographic attention became, much to my surprise, once again preoccupied with religion. Throughout, we have witnessed the power of shrines, their attendant deities, and the role of the devotees in bearing witness to divine power. Not only were temples and festivals rallying points for community solidarity but they were also evidence of a divine presence on the landscape. This physical Tamil-Hindu inscription, in other words, was more than just symbolic. It was the living archive of community presence, as well as the abode of higher Law, a sublime and incomprehensible power over and above the laws of men. Its shattering, transgression, or betrayal produced crises of faith, manifested in deferrals (or what some might call denials). In some cases, out of the ruins, rebirth or transformation to a higher cause proved potent. In other cases, divine punishment for transgression was fantasized. It was ultimately the animus of this divine power, as immanent in Tamil Hindu shrines, that in their destruction or transgression coalesced in the Hindraf movement and massive demonstrations of 2007.

Thus it is fair to ask whether the awakening of sentiment I describe throughout this book leads to a critique of Law, or merely the application of laws. If divine Law simply transcends the laws of men, which are revealed to be fallible, then the idea of Law retains its force and sovereignty. Therefore, the rise of Hindraf could be seen simply as a symptom, or the counterpatrimonial imagining of justice under a higher Law. But what Tamil Hinduism has demonstrated, not totally unlike the famous bondsman's discovery of spirit in Hegel, is that sovereignty is always divided within itself, requiring reciprocity and recognition. Devotees produce the immanence and power of their gods; moreover, even the gods require human birth to transcend the aporia of existence. The destruction of particular shrines and sacred spots, while troubling, also awakens the unease of the unknown, where anything is possible. The deconstructibility of Law, in Tamil Hindu terms (and probably in Hindu terms more generally), extends to the limits of consciousness itself. *Kadavul*, the abstract notion of a transcendent God, is literally the crossing from the known to the unknown (Nabokov 2000). It cannot be put into reason. This produces a critical stepping back and contemplative pause—per-

haps a saving grace from an imagined and totalizing justice that could turn malevolent. Therefore, I have oscillated between suggesting that new political possibilities were made visible through the transgressions and betrayals that were described in this book, and a concern that these new possibilities produced a hardening of ethnic distance. Imaginings of justice can easily take a form of vengeance, but I maintain that the deconstruction of juridical reason in Malaysia by Tamil plantation workers was an important step in rethinking what was possible in the nation. Indeed, the Hindraf movement, while no longer unified or coherent in 2013 as I write this, produced momentum that called into question the politics of ethnic representation, as practiced by Barisan Nasional for fifty years (Ooi, Savaranamuttu, and Lee 2008). This produced real electoral change in the 2008 and 2013 elections, with the opposition making dramatic gains. There is no denying that Hindraf had a huge impact on the political landscape.

That there were plenty of bread-and-butter issues on the table inspiring Hindraf and its followers is certain, as I have detailed in several chapters. Perhaps most significantly, we found that changing home ownership policies (from the 1970s to the 2000s) for plantation workers was one of the greatest determinants as to whether a community could transition to postplantation life without too much difficulty. Moreover, and it is worth underscoring yet again, "compensation," we have found, did not simply refer to material relief, but instead indexed and reinforced ideas of "community" to those we have encountered. Concerns over jobs, housing, poverty, education, ethnic profiling, police brutality, and suspect religious conversions were critical, but they were not the emotively galvanizing factors that were the destruction of shrines and temples in the former plantations and squatter areas. Therefore, and to my surprise given where I began this study of "compensation" struggles, I found that compensation to Malaysian Tamils needed to be reconsidered outside of an economic formulation.

The hard materialist or Marxian analyst might object to the statement above on the grounds that religious ideology is simply a form of misrecognition and alienation. That is, even the iterative or community-created powers of the sacred, such as that produced by the *mantiram* for example, could be explained as the alienated (hence, noncognizable) yet socially produced powers of social action. Thus what lies haunting or outside of reason (sublime) could be interpreted as Marxist alienation. Indeed, what I have called, following Derrida, the supplemental forms of ethnic difference, or archive making, in Malaysia, be it state-driven or in its response (i.e., the victim's narrative), might be recast as facets of superstructural ideology on the one hand and alienation on the other. Though not wholly unsympathetic to such a formulation (Willford 2002, 2006a), I believe that on the whole, it is inatten-

tive to the inherent and compulsive instability in the Law, be it expressed in juridical, religious, or nationalistic forms. This instability—inherent in all struggles for sovereignty but exacerbated by the absurd demands of hierarchy (Rutherford 2012)—proves to generate supplemental acts of violence, or what Benjamin called “law preserving violence” (1986). Attentiveness to this impossibility within the instantiation of the Law provides not only tools for analytic deconstruction, but, as I have tried to demonstrate ethnographically, also provides resources for critique (or deconstruction) from within Tamil Hindu terms. But unlike the more utopistic Marxian view of ideology, the Derridean view, and indeed the psychoanalytic critique, is more ambivalent, noting the possessive force of the call to justice itself. Acting in the name of a higher Law can also enact a violence that is hard to contain without sustaining forms of violence. Thus what we might call civility or hospitality becomes elusive.

Tamils increasingly feel that a *new and insecure Malay identity* is increasingly brash and assertive, manifesting itself in monocultural policies and Islamist insensitivities to the history of Malaysia, and especially to the sentiments of other communities. This new identity and mindset has been cultivated through exclusive educational institutions, entitlement regimes, and the cognitive dissonance that comes with the partial knowledge that *bumiputraisim* (pro-Malay policies and ideologies) is built on historically shallow notions of ethnic purity that belie recent immigrations from Indonesia, India, etc. That is, Malay identity has always been more fluid (Mandal 2004) and cosmopolitan (Kahn 2006), indeed Malaysian, than the new brand of ethnic purists want to admit. Hence the new kind of racialism that permeates the landscape of ethnic politics in Malaysia finds its displaced scapegoat in ethnic Others, be they Indians, Chinese, or foreign workers. Indians, in perceiving this lack in the Other, attempt to surmount or supplement it. But in the supplementary acts, the excessive and possessive force of identification also simultaneously alienates the subject from itself, and not just its labor (Siegel 2006; Appadurai 2006). The evidentiary base of the archive grows in direct proportion to the sense of self that is forged in the parameters of victimization. The nurturing of spirit (Derrida 1989) or justice, in these terms, carries within it the risk of (temporarily) silencing the haunting double that drives the imaginings of the subject (or perhaps of the imaginary subject). As manifested in Hindraf, the call for justice evokes an assertion of higher or divine Law, which might even be called a reverse patrimony, as defined against Malay-Islamic nationalism. But achieving this awakening requires an extensive and feverish archiving of transgressions by the Other against the authenticity of the Tamil Hindu presence.

The “powers” and memories associated with temples and shrines within the plantations are indeed the animus behind the emergence of Hindraf as a collective force. But benign or protecting powers associated with the memo-

ries of the estate shrines can turn malevolent, too. And this concerns devotees who make offerings of meat and beer to potentially violent “guardian” deities (Shulman 1989; Mines 2005; Nabokov 2000). The question that remains is whether ritualized memorializations, protests, or archivization can control the wound or rupture caused by the destruction of the sacred space. Whether dangerous and justice-seeking violence can be contained by ritual control remains a source of unease. As an inextricable extension of community, the village gods are bound to their subjects in a reciprocal relationship, a kind of isomorphism. According to Tamil folklore, these deities can provide protection or wreak unfathomable havoc (Kinsley 1986; Whitehead 1921; Shulman 1989). Despite the potential anxieties, memories of a landscape that was once theirs are witnessed in the emotive, focal, and indeed archival attention paid to these shrines and temples. Yet in this repossession of the land, figural or literal, the possession of the subject by noncognizable powers exceeds the symbolic order (Nabokov 2000; Ram 2013). From here, I have argued that divine justice, the experience of the miraculous, and the limits of reason coexist and generate both ethical and compelled acts.

Following Derrida’s distinction between the “calculating apparatus” that is the law—which is subject to the rules of the archive—justice, as we have seen in the Tamil context, is to some extent “infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry” (Derrida 2002a, 250). The sacred in Tamil Hinduism haunts the performativity of the Law and exceeds historical reason. A Tamil Hindu ethical and divine call carries within itself the power to unmask the contingencies of human law. This has proven politically potent in the wake of the state’s transgression on sacred spaces, as seen in the collective force of Hindraf. This call to justice, while potentially possessive and violent, is thus not simply the proverbial “opiate,” nor is it simply the “sigh of the oppressed.” Rather, it works to inspire aspirations to justice and movement toward the oneness of spirit. In this sense, this Tamil notion of the divine is not equivalent to the “wholly other” and thus completely inexplicable Other that Derrida identifies with the Abrahamic God (1995b), though I have certainly argued for some similarities. Rather, the inevitable realization of and identification with this Other, in a Hindu sense, produces a logic that one is always the Other and the Other is within, whether one is cognizant of it or not (Shulman 1985). The One, or absolute, supersedes and encompasses difference in Hindu thought. Whether this makes the universe more mechanistic or cognizable is an open question I cannot resolve here. But we can note a similarity and difference that obtains from the Hindu view of the self as compared to the Western one. To the Hindu, the alien or Other within the self is not perceived to be a wholly other presence, or one that leads, as Hegel would have it, to a “struggle unto death.” Multiplicity within the One is thus,

at least in theory, less terrifying. Indeed, the idea of possession by the Other is as ubiquitous as it is universal in Hindu thought (Smith 2006). Sovereignty need not be seen as equivalent to autonomy in the Hindu view, though arguably this recognition of sameness or Oneness, rigid status distinctions notwithstanding, has contributed to the obsessive quality of caste, purity, and hierarchy so prevalent in Hindu societies. That is, the dissolution of hierarchy, in an absolute sense in Hindu thought, is the uncanny engine of difference (Hart 1979; Shulman 1985), again not unlike the illusory sovereignty that violence and posited difference provides to Hegel's "master." Moreover, the political implications of this Hindu or Tamil ethical call requires more thought outside of the ontotheology within Abrahamic traditions and subsequent philosophical traditions. Perhaps ethnography can contribute modestly to this aim precisely at the juncture of continental theory and noncontinental theology. While conjoining the latter two in my analysis, I have implicitly argued that normative or ontological structures need not be taken at face value. Theory helps us challenge the status of cultural ontology, while the latter forces us to question the cultural predicates behind certain theoretical assumptions. Thus, at the end of the day, I have resisted a culturalist explanation for the phenomena presented here, though I have repeatedly argued that culture produces a radical critique of hierarchy from within.

Finally, what does this portend for the possibility of civility and hospitality in Malaysia? The general problematic or aporia, obviously, concerns the bureaucratic fixing of serial identifications. The originary lack inherent in the violence of the Law is supplemented through the archive of an ethnographic state (Dirks 2002; Hirschman 1986). Grounding itself in conventions provides an aura of retroactive historicity to the violence of the Law and state. The postcolonial state, in short, requires a continuous source of exteriority through which to ground its authority and its decisions. The ethnographic archive—an archive of difference—supplements and grounds an impossible ideology. This is the larger problem of "bound" serialization that Benedict Anderson (1998) and others have called attention to. In a civil-legal and bureaucratic order established to sustain, indeed to supplement, the impossible arche-violence of bounded serial types, any proclamation toward multiethnic tolerance, hospitality, and civility is always already founded on an act of violence (and a reciprocal expectation of violence). The disposition, therefore, of the victim, as in the case of the perception of the aggrieved minority Tamils in this case, becomes one of justice outside and beyond the juridical/civil order.

True hospitality would, like the true gift, be impossible, as it would involve a forgetting—a nonrecognition, or noncalculation. It is in allowing oneself to be overtaken and overwhelmed, destroying the boundaries of self and other. Derrida argues, "If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready

to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the *hôte* (guest) as invited, there is no hospitality" (2002b, 362). That this mystical and infinite hospitality is impossible is not hard to see. But the lack, paradoxically, induced by this demand is supplemented by the calculable demands of difference and recognition, and herein lies the paradox of religious and ethnic nationalism coupled with juridical rights and privileges. One comes to define hospitality and civility through the matrix of difference and an expectation of the Other's failure to match one's own. Again, as Derrida reminds us with a Jewish joke, "Two Jews, longtime enemies, meet at the Synagogue, on the Day of Atonement. One says to the other: 'I wish for you what you wish for me.' The other immediately retorts: 'Already you're starting again.'" (2002b, 381). As he explains in his analysis of the joke, the two old enemies apparently make a gesture of "forgiving each other." But it is "fake" and for "laughs" as "they reopen, or internally persist with, the conflict. They avow to each other this inexpiable war; they symmetrically accuse each other of it. The avowal goes through a symptom rather than through a declaration, but this changes nothing of the truth: they have not disarmed; they continue to wish each other ill" (2002b, 381). Herein lies the problem of achieving what might be called civility under the legal premise of ethnic accommodation. The demarcation of types, as wedded to legal rights and privileges, brings with it a symmetrical expectation of hospitality's failure. And with that, gestures of legal rights bring with them a kind of laughter, coupled with an inexpiable underlying symptom and calls for a justice that are oftentimes far from civil.

This brings me to my dilemma as anthropologist. My own alignment and complicity within the discourse of the "victim" exceeds my written analysis. Indeed, my perspective in the "field" was enabled by a collaboration with an activist scholar, who in turn through his various collaborations had established contact with radicalized (or at the very least politically "awakened") members of various squatter and plantation communities. This, of course, as is often the case with our work, proved immensely critical in terms of access and vantage. But a betrayal is inevitable. In obvious and simple terms, I betray a very situated perspective (the people I chose and, significantly, chose not to interview and/or represent). The victim's narrative of betrayal that I underline mutes those more mundane, but perhaps more "successful" individual outcomes. Even if these are deemed exceptional, they are not without significance. Thus the betrayal of bias for both parsimony and analytic majoritarianism (i.e., highlighting the perceived majority sentiment) moves us beyond the normal bias of perspective and suggests something uncannily similar to the failure of hospitality I described above. That is, the expectation of the other's failure occurs within a discourse of majority and minority rights. Here, in my actions, I

expect the “failure” of the differing account to tell the story that I believe is the majority experience. Thus, the minority report is sequestered, silenced, and deferred. Is this failure of analytic hospitality a necessary one, given one’s political convictions? This, in turn, leads me to consider a second and third betrayal: that of my interlocutors and, ultimately, of my conscience.

As I have argued, containment of calls for justice is never certain. Indeed, my argument has in part been that a possessive force often accompanies calls to justice and that these take a “divine” turn in a Tamil theodicy. My own discomfort with or recoil from the potential violence of divine justice allows me to archive difference, to give analytic “objectivity.” But this so-called and perhaps necessary objectivity is really constructed out of the fear of “contagion” that true hospitality would entail. My reserve is my betrayal of those I seek to understand and know. Conscience cannot escape this double bind. For if I pay heed to my recoiling conscience, my betrayal of intimacy with those “victims” is certain. On the other hand, my identification with the victim produces its own form of betrayal, suspended in the transferential and potentially counter-transferential space of recognition. Still, effacing these traces of being in the service of a so-called objectivity or moral absolute is, I believe, the greatest betrayal of all, one that mirrors the arche-violence of the Law.

Epilogue

Now what was the fallout from Hindraf? Five of their leaders, the aforementioned legal counsel, were arrested and jailed under the ISA shortly after the large demonstrations of 2007. The government used the state-controlled media to characterize Hindraf as a terrorist or extremist organization in the hopes that Indians would shy from it and that Malays would be placated by their stern actions. As it turned out, Indians, inspired by Hindraf, largely abandoned the ruling coalition, siding with the opposition almost wholeheartedly in the March 2008 elections (Ooi, Saravanamuttu, and Lee 2008). They were an important voice in Anwar Ibrahim’s opposition alliance. Anwar himself adopted the *makkal sakti* slogan while campaigning and used it to both woo Indian voters and to argue that under a new opposition alliance, the Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Alliance), a new era of multiethnic politics would begin. Five years later, it is hard to surmise that the era of ethnic politics in Malaysia is on its last legs. Perkasa, an ultra-chauvinist Malay NGO under the leadership of Ibrahim Ali, has pressured the government headed by prime minister Najib Razak to protect and enhance Malay special rights and privileges. This political pressure has partially derailed Najib’s attempts to woo non-Malay voters. Pakatan Rakyat continues to make inroads among the young and educated, though fissures have emerged from time to time

between its three main parties, PAS, Keadilan, and the DAP, over the questions of *hudud* and shariah law. Hindraf was also splintered shortly after the 2008 elections, as the government ironically wooed one faction within Hindraf to join forces with Barisan Nasional, and thus the Makkal Sakti political party was born. Another faction formed the Human Rights Party (HRP), headed by the lawyer and former ISA detainee P. Uthayakumar. The HRP has been critical of both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat in their “neglect” of the Indian minority. The majority of Hindraf supporters continue their campaign to protest iniquities that affect the Indian community, particularly focusing on economic and social issues. But, as pointed out, Hindraf was a coalition of various individuals and NGOs that united when the perceived marginalization of Indians in the country was intolerable. Moreover, the catalyst for mass demonstrations came about when temples were being demolished and high-profile conversion cases were in the media. Thus the unity and leadership of Hindraf after this uprising was never consolidated politically or ideologically. Some have suggested that the Ponnusamy brothers, Uthayakumar and Waytha Moorthy, actually “hijacked” the movement and after doing so distanced themselves from the various NGOs that were part of the original Hindraf/*makkal sakti* coalition. This intrigue and recent history is beyond the scope of this study.

With the outcry that occurred in 2007 after several temple demolitions, the government has taken a softer approach. Now there is a stronger desire to relocate temples and avoid bad publicity, though a few well-publicized cases of temples under threat of demolition have once again galvanized some support, albeit more muted, for Hindraf. With elections looming in 2013, there were questions as to whether Hindraf would once again back Pakatan candidates and support Anwar, and vice versa. Some leaders in the newly reconstituted Hindraf complained about the lack of progress for Indians in Pakatan-controlled states, particularly in Penang and Selangor. Defenders of Pakatan’s record have accused some in Hindraf, in turn, of playing communal politics for personal ends. It now appears doubtful that Hindraf can unite the vast cross-section of the Indian public as it did in 2007 and 2008. Indeed, some Indians have remarked to me with almost a lament that the “revolutionary moment” has come and gone. Indeed, as I write this shortly after the 2013 elections, and one of the key figures in Hindraf, P. Waythamoorthy, has joined forces with Barisan Nasional, it appears that Hindraf has been mortally splintered. On the one hand, upon the re-election of Barisan Nasional, and of the prime minister, Najib Razak, Waythamoorthy has been awarded a deputy ministerial post in Najib’s cabinet. On the other hand, Waythamoorthy’s brother, P. Uthayakumar, has been charged with sedition and faces prison time. The principal difference in their respective fates, as perceived by

many Indians, was that the former joined forces with Barisan, whereas the latter did not. Thus legality, once again, seems unmoored from justice in the eyes of many Malaysian Tamils.

What can be said with more circumspection is that the violence of the Law awakened the Tamil community in ways that it had not been before. Though the highly politicized moment that climaxed in 2007 seems to have dissipated, things have changed. This provoked awareness that justice, indeed compensation, was not to be found in the law but rather in its transgression has potentially lasting effects. The delinking of justice and legality has both important theoretical and practical implications for Tamils as they struggle to adjust to a socioeconomic reality at the end of the plantation era in Malaysia. And lastly, the emergent sense of justice and compensation is grounded in an equally emergent historicity of cultural recognition, defined against the politics of ethnic exclusivity. Indian fantasies for compensatory recognition imagine a re-entangling of Tamil and Malay historicities, if not identities. Thus much of the future answer lies in whether the exclusivist and extremist forces of ethnic nationalism become more or less entrenched within the developmental politics and legal injunctions in Malaysia. But in the fragmentation wrought by state “betrayals” and the violence of displacement, a recognizable logic within Tamil Hinduism has taken hold, both as a political resource and as a source of unfathomable unease. Justice in its incalculable and infinite sense is divine. But divinity, too, has the power to violently possess with inexplicable force. This very potential turns the aspiration to justice into its possible haunting.

Notes

Chapter 1: Introduction

- 1 The original phrase in Malay was, *mana ada estet di Kuala Lumpur?* Literally, this means “Where is there an estate in Kuala Lumpur?” But in this context, its meaning was more rhetorical. Thus, the translation used is closer to the meaning intended.
- 2 The land will be segmented according to the different religions: two cemeteries for Muslims (9.6 hectares), Buddhists (3.3 hectares), Christians (0.5 hectares), Hindus (0.4 hectares), and other religions (0.17 hectares).
- 3 Evangeline Majawat and Choong En Han, “From wet to eerie for Tamil school,” *New Straits Times*, November 9, 2007, p. 18. Charles Fernandez, “School to make way for cemetery,” *The Star, Metro*, November 20, 2007, p. M8.
- 4 Minutes of the meeting on the resettlement of former Bukit Jalil Estate residents to the PPR flats in Kampung Muhibbah Puchong held at city hall on 25 September 2006.
- 5 For example, the residents produced the Prime Minister Department’s tender notice advertised in the newspapers in 1989, calling for contractors to tap rubber on the remaining 208 hectares.
- 6 Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, “Bukit Jalil Estate Residents’ Last Stand,” <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/70771>, accessed August 4, 2007.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 City hall.
- 9 Derrida (2002a).
- 10 *New Straits Times, Streets*, March 9, 2009, p. S3.
- 11 B. Suresh Ram, “RM2m for new Tamil school,” *New Straits Times, Prime News*, April 24, 2009, p. 6.
- 12 Human Resources Department to city hall, dated May 9, 2008.
- 13 This is particularly true in Putrajaya and Shah Alam, where former estate lands developed by Tamils are now showpieces for Malay identity and thus vigorous

in their erasure of these Tamil pasts. See Bunnell, Nagarajan, and Willford (2010) and Nagarajan (2004).

14 Nabokov is now known as Isabelle Clark-Deces.

15 When Derrida (1981) wrote about the “*pharmakon*” for memory that is writing, he, through an imaginary discourse between the king and his subject in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, revealed the risk and remedy inherent in naming. In this text, the king’s fear of being supplanted by the gift of writing or his archive, evicted, as it were, by the sign, evokes and interrogates Plato’s dream of a pure memory without its material sign or supplement. It is this ambivalence that is critical, as it points to the inescapability of substitution. The god of writing, Thoth, offers both a remedy and poison, and his appearance as Theuth (himself a symbol of substitution) threatens the king’s *logos*, or the provenance and purity of his speech. The *pharmakon* “dulls the memory” through a process of substitution that “entrains life outside of itself” (134). It is a debilitating of memory, in all its complexity, in the service of indexing certain “symptoms” or “monuments” that, in turn, substitute for memory. In this substitution, supplement, or remedy, the *pharmakon* foregrounds certain symptoms or markers of illness while foreclosing others.

Chapter 2: An Emergent Betrayal

- 1 For a more detailed historical analysis of the Malaysian Tamil community, particularly with regard to the plantation economy, see Nagarajan (2004); Tate (2008); Stenson (1980); Sandhu (1969); Arasaratnam (1979); and Ramasamy (1994). My earlier book, *Cage of Freedom* (2006a), also offers a more detailed historical analysis than is presented here.
- 2 This is not to imply that caste was not challenged in colonial Malaya. E. V. Ramasami (“Periyar”) brought his “Self-Respect” movement to Malaya between 1929 and 1939, instigating reforms and political mobilization against caste-based forms. See Alagirisamy (2012) and Amrith (2009) for detailed discussions.
- 3 As Stenson (1980) pointed out, Tamil laborers were told they were being sent to “Tai nadu,” which in Tamil literally translates to “motherland.” In actuality, many of them were sent to Thailand by the Japanese army to work on the infamous Thai-Burma railway.
- 4 Details of this incident can be found in “Report of a Commission of Enquiry Appointed by his Excellency the Governor of the Malayan Union to Enquire to, and Report on, the Circumstances of the Conflict on Dublin Estate, South Kedah, on the 28th Day of April, 1947, in Which the Police Opened Fire.” More details of this and other incidents can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumstances_prior_to_the_Malayan_Emergency.
- 5 This means “Sons of the Earth,” and refers to a belief that the Malays are the indigenous people of Malaya. It was argued that they therefore deserved greater political power than the so-called immigrant communities.
- 6 These figures are taken from Pang Eng Fong, “Race, Income Distributions, and Development in Malaysia and Singapore,” in Lim and Gosling (1983).
- 7 For example, weak share capital at less than 1 percent for the Indian community, high unemployment, the absence of government land resettlement programs such

as the FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) schemes that existed for Malays (see Gomez and Jomo 1997; Nagarajan 2004), and the absence of job retraining programs for former estate workers.

- 8 This was the name given to a broader alliance that came into being after 1969, replacing the old alliance. A number of smaller political parties were brought under the same umbrella together with old alliance partners, UMNO, MCA, and the MIC.
- 9 Quoted from *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 13, 1979.
- 10 See King (2008) for an academic discussion. I was told by some Malay intellectuals at local universities that the architectural designs in Putrajaya were “alienating” to Malays, as traditional Malay architectural principles and motifs were largely abandoned in favor of more Arab, Persian, and South Asian representations of Islamic architecture.
- 11 The work of S. Nagarajan (2004, 2008) is a notable exception.
- 12 The indigenous people, Orang Asli, have also been victims of Malaysia’s developmental push in Selangor (Nicholas 2004; J. Edo, personal communication).
- 13 As I write this in 2011, there is much controversy leading up to the next general election concerning charges that UMNO has awarded citizenship to thousands of immigrant workers from Indonesia in exchange for their loyalty as voters. For example, see “MyKad Scam: PAS Corners Bus Load of Foreigners,” www.malaysiakini.com/news/178439 (accessed on October 12, 2011).
- 14 In a detailed analysis of the framing of the Malaysian constitution, Fernando (2006) convincingly demonstrates that while the intention of its authors was to guarantee freedom of religion within a secular state, Article 3 (1) of the constitution states “Islam is the religion of the Federation” (2006, 249). This opened the door to ambiguity and differing interpretations of the status of Islam within the state. Article 11 within the constitution, however, guarantees freedom of religion.
- 15 The original temple was in Sungai Renggam Estate. The area surrounding the temple became part of Section 19 of Shah Alam as the township developed on former estate lands. The new Malay residents who moved into Section 19 evidently protested the presence of the temple in their vicinity. The temple worshippers felt intimidated by Malay protests and decided to relocate the temple. The state government identified a site in Section 23 of Shah Alam for the relocation. But the Malay residents in this township were not happy with the plan for relocation, and this culminated in the protest. <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/234170>.
- 16 “Residents protest relocation of temple,” *New Straits Times*, August 28, 2009, www.nst.com.my/CurentNews/NST/articles/20090828203330/Article/index.html.
- 17 “Hisham defends cow-head protesters,” *The Malaysian Insider*, September 2, 2009, www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/36672-hisham-defends-cow-head-protesters.
- 18 For details and analysis of the case and settlement, see Nagarajan (2004).

Chapter 3: Plantation Fragments

- 1 There were two temples in this estate. The first, a Murugan temple, was described as a “proper temple” in that it possessed a priest doing regular forms of worship

- (*puja*). The second was an Amman (goddess) shrine that had a spirit medium or *samiyar* doing special *pujas* while in a state of trance. His clients came from all over, I was told. They lined up a few hours before the *samiyar* went into a trance, seeking his consultation on various personal problems and ailments. His reputation had traveled as far as Singapore, and, so I was told, people came great distances for his counsel. Still, I was told that local residents mostly preferred the Murugan temple, and it was suggested that there was some distrust or disdain for the medium among local residents. Some of this distrust perhaps stemmed from the fame and financial dimension of outsider patronage that came with it. In an estate that was financially downtrodden, as this one appeared to be, the influx of visitors to a single individual, with no residual benefit for the whole community, was perhaps bound to incite distrust, if not envy.
- 2 Registered places of worship generally existed on public land. As temples on estates were on private property, they were not registered. Thus, once these properties were sold their legal status was precarious.
 - 3 New Village lands were created during the years of the emergency to relocate Chinese communities away from areas suspected of harboring communist guerrillas.
 - 4 To be clear, flats that were five stories or less did not have elevators. Some flats were in high-rises and had elevators. But we often heard that these “lifts” would not function due to poor maintenance.
 - 5 Terrace houses are townhouses built in attached rows. The distinction being drawn here is between high-rise flats and ground-level housing.
 - 6 Vinayagar, also known as Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, and Murugan, also known as Skanda and Karthikeya, are the two sons of Siva and Parvati, the great god and goddess of Saivism. Mariamman, the goddess of smallpox, is understood to be an aspect of the great goddess Parvati in Tamil Saivism. Thus her temples always have representations of Murugan and Vinayagar.
 - 7 I am quoting verbatim from the doctoral dissertation of Dr. S. Nagarajan (2004, 128–130), my research collaborator, but I was also present at the moment of this ethnographic encounter between ourselves and the two aforementioned community leaders.
 - 8 Ladang Bukit Jelutong-Rasak Proposed Urban Development Preliminary Environmental Impact Assessment for Kumpulan Guthrie Sdn Bhd, by KTA-CSF Environmental Consultants Sdn Bhd, 1987.
 - 9 Guthrie Property Development Holding Sdn Bhd’s assistant general manager, Zarul Akmar Abdul Aziz, to Selangor executive councilor K. Sivalingam on Nov. 3, 1977, following their meeting with Bukit Jelutong Rasak Estate residents on the same day.
 - 10 They were seeking reductions similar to the ubiquitous “*bumiputra* discount” that was automatically provided for Malay homebuyers. This discount normally ranged from 10 to 20 percent.
 - 11 I cannot verify the statement. This was simply reported to me by local residents.
 - 12 I found this data in the National Library, Kuala Lumpur, in the annual reports for the estate.

- 13 One could always see a difference in appearance in the homes used by migrant laborers, as these homes were disheveled and had the appearance of a boarding house, not a home. The Tamil homes, in contrast, had *margosa* leaves before the door, usually a garden in front and on the side, and some remnant from the most recent Hindu festival. “Selamat Hari Deepavalli” (Happy Deepavali) signs, for instance, often lasted for several months.
- 14 In my experience traveling to several estates and hearing about several cases, it is hard to generalize about the union’s role. In some cases, one heard complaints about the union’s inaction or unwillingness to fight on behalf of labor, whereas in other cases, certain local union leaders were said to be extremely helpful and committed to helping the cause of labor and compensation rights. Aside from the question of individual temperament and commitment, one can say, as many scholars have noted (Stenson 1980; Jomo 1986; Ramasamy 1994; Nagarajan 2004; Selvakumaran 1994), that the union in Malaysia was not adversarial to business on behalf of labor. Therefore, structurally, the union was not acting with the degree of autonomy desired by laborers.
- 15 This was due to the lack of amenities that low-cost flats provided. There was little social space, safe playgrounds, parks, or other well-lit areas where families could interact. Rather, youths congregated in the “car park,” where fights were said to break out.
- 16 As the *talaivar* had earlier explained, the developer had already engaged in compensation negotiations with the residents, who had received their retrenchment notices. These negotiations could be lengthy, depending on the tenacity of the residents and on the urgency of the development project. Moreover, if the estate land was still productive, the developer could choose to pay workers on a short-term basis to continue work while negotiations dragged on. This could also allow a developer time to assemble necessary resources to commence a project in stages, leaving the labor lines, temple, and school for the final stage of the development project. In many projects, the plantation could continue to function in parts, whereas in another section trees were cleared for new development. Rarely was an entire area clear-cut at a single time.
- 17 This ritual consecrates the temple after it has been completed or renovated. Normally, the shrines are bathed in milk, ghee, and honey, followed by special *pujas* that last for several hours. There is considerable expense in the *kumabbisbekham*, as of course there is in the renovation of the temple. Given the precariousness of the estates, one might wonder why poor Tamil communities go to the trouble. In several instances, I found that temple renovations had occurred merely months before the scheduled demolitions of temples. Some professed a faith that the temple’s “power” would protect it against demolition, literally denying the imminent future. In other cases, there was a recognition that the future was uncertain but that the demands of proper care for the temple dictated when and where renovation and *kumabbisbekham* should be celebrated, not external circumstance.
- 18 This is a folk dance found performed primarily in Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, South India, but is also popular among Tamils in Malaysia. In festival celebrations to Mariamman, the *karaga* involves carrying a pot of water on the head,

- adorned with flowers that peak at a tip. The dance is vigorous and is accompanied by drumming, and oftentimes it involves trance states among its performers.
- 19 The lines of ancestry are usually complicated. Though recognized as an untouchable by society, the hero-bandit often possesses unknown divine parentage (Shulman 1985). On the one hand, they are inherently antibrahminical and iconoclastic with regards to orthodox propriety. On the other hand, their tragic earthly fates, as Shulman suggests, are infused with moralistic themes of sin and atonement as well as karmic fatalism.
 - 20 Nabokov (2000) offers a compelling contemporary ethnographic analysis of exorcism rituals in which “dangerous” transgressive and possessing deities are renounced and symbolically “decapitated” in order to restore patriarchal laws. This suppression and subsequent repression, she argues, is never stable or complete. Shulman (1985, 1986) also notes decapitation and impaling themes are ubiquitous in the self-sacrificing stories of atonement of the bandit heroes themselves. Madurai Viran, for instance, decapitates himself as an offering to the goddess Minakshi (1985, 358).
 - 21 Morris (2000) makes a similar point in her analysis of mediumship in northern Thailand. Empowerment through possession, on the one hand, circumvents and thereby exposes the materiality behind normative hierarchies in religious and political authority. On the other hand, the citationality of possession draws on a repertoire of orthodox forms and gestures, including the keeping of notebooks, so as to archive the authenticity, paradoxically, of each mediated speech act.
 - 22 I do not mean to imply that alcohol or drugs were being taken. The trance itself was intoxicating, as were the drums that accompanied it. Clearly, inhibitions were abandoned and behavior normally suppressed was given expression, giving the appearance of intoxication. The dance itself appeared to be a letting go, a release of all frustration and tension. But another way of reading this would be, instead of as a letting go, as a seizing on the subject.

Chapter 4: Tapping Memories

- 1 Amman refers to the goddess, or divine consort of Shiva, Sakti, or Parvati. But it literally means “mother” as well. It is used as a short form for Mariamman and Kaliyamman, as well as many other minor goddesses. The various names and attributes of the goddess are customarily followed by the suffix -amman.
- 2 The Employee Provident Fund is the individual retirement account each worker possesses.
- 3 For an insightful analysis of collective land rights claims among indigenous groups in Sabah, Malaysia, see Doolittle (2005).
- 4 PSM, or Parti Socialis Malaysia, was headed by many prominent socialists. The party became registered as an official political party a few years later.
- 5 This act, first passed in the Federated Malay States under British rule in 1913, aimed at protecting lands owned by Malays from non-Malay acquisition. The act was renamed and strengthened in 1933 (Zaki et al. 2011). Its enactment occurred in response to the fears that Malays were losing their lands as collateral for loans taken from non-Malays.

- 6 “Longhouses” are temporary barracks for displaced workers, not to be confused with traditional housing in some indigenous communities in East Malaysia.
- 7 This government-owned investment organization, founded in 1978, is committed to enhance the economic wealth of the *bumiputra* (Malay) community.
- 8 There were probably exceptions. But the most notable institutional exception I encountered occurred under the auspices of the National Land Finance Cooperative Society, or NLFCS (Nagarajan 2004). The cooperative facilitated home ownership in several former estate communities in Malaysia. The cooperative, though politically independent, was founded by former MIC president Tun V. T. Sambanthan.
- 9 In the estate, families would grow vegetables, herbs, and fruits.
- 10 According to Nagarajan (2004, 163), Guthrie would make 186 million ringgit upon delivery of vacated plantation land to Harum Intisari. Despite the enormous profits to be reaped, the total incentives offered to the estate workers, according to Nagarajan, amounted initially to one million ringgit.
- 11 Malay reserve lands, as established by the Malay Land Reservation Act, are considered inalienable for commercial development, unlike private plantation land. Therefore, Malay workers in plantations often had lands outside the plantation where they resided. Here, the assumption by the Tamil workers was that Malays would be simply granted land use rights as a political strategy, whereas the Tamils were insignificant enough (in numbers) to be ignored. But this instrumental reading might miss the more visceral and emotional element of the statement, which implies a racial prejudice at work in land allocations.
- 12 Luxury housing was planned for the former estate lands, which presumably would produce large profits.
- 13 My official affiliation at that time was as a Fulbright scholar attached to the University of Malaya.
- 14 This was their assertion, which I cannot verify or invalidate. I did not interview the MIC leader to hear his side of the story.
- 15 For example, MIC President V. Manickavasagam, during the opening of the 23rd Assembly of the MIC in Kuala Lumpur on July 5, 1975, spoke about the “blueprint for action” that had been prepared by the party to address the housing needs of estate workers. In this speech, he reiterated the MIC’s commitment to implementation of the estate workers’ home-ownership scheme. He said that “the implementation of this scheme alone will go a long way to transform the environment within which estate workers now live and remove many of the handicaps they now face in the education and employment of their children. It will also be a major government project for the thousands of estate and mine workers (Manickavasagam 1975).
- 16 Upon locating a Mercedes outside one home, my research partner, Naga, and I joked that it must belong to a local MIC politician. Sure enough, our hunch was proved correct when we discovered that the car indeed belonged to the local MIC branch head.
- 17 Guardian deities like Munneswaran more typically are housed at the entrance to a village in order to protect it.
- 18 Labor recruiters, or *kanganis*, often recruited relatives and targeted specific villages (Sandhu 1969).

- 19 Former finance minister and known billionaire Daim Zainnudin.
- 20 Both are less than one hour from Kuala Lumpur.
- 21 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia certificate of education) is roughly equivalent to the “O levels” examination. It is normally taken after the eleventh grade.
- 22 This is an important Tamil harvest festival that occurs in January.
- 23 These are intricate designs that are seen outside the doors of Tamil Hindu homes. They harbor spiritual power that protects the home from harm. They are either drawn with a kind of chalk, or they can be made from colored rice.
- 24 Rice *ponggal* is either sweet or savory and is traditionally made with milk, ghee, black peppercorns, and rice.
- 25 Batu Caves is the site of the most famous pilgrimage and temple for Malaysian Hindus in Malaysia, and it is associated with the Thaipusam festival in particular. See Collins (1997); Willford (2006a); Belle (2008).
- 26 The Japanese army recruited many Malayan Tamil laborers for work on the Thai-Burma railway once they had captured Malaya.
- 27 He was referring to the PNB status of Golden Hope, which was a government-aided institution.
- 28 Denison was leading an NGO linked to the MIC at the time. In one paper written after the so-called Kampung Medan clashes, discussed in chapter 7, he suggested that Tamil youths’ “anti-social behavior” was partly to blame for the violence that ensued.

Chapter 5: Interruptions, Insurrections, Strategies

- 1 Whether legal fees and/or expenses were later recovered in successful settlements, I cannot say.
- 2 Upon the launch of any property or real estate development, a model of the proposed project would be unveiled in the several shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur and its suburbs. These were sales events in which advance bidding was done on units (based on the model, as these developments were not yet built). In addition to shopping mall displays, invitations for bookings were seen in the mainstream newspapers almost daily. It was clear that the “prebooking” of units (mainly apartments and houses) were necessary for the project to commence and to be completed. One occasionally heard stories of projects that never reached fruition for one reason or another and of investors who struggled to recover their investments. Prebooking thus carried some risk.
- 3 The temple, however, was not part of the settlement. The Braemer Mariamman Temple was the old structure left standing within the construction zone of the new housing project that was replacing the old plantation. What used to be an estate had already been demolished and housing, a highway, and shops were being planned. This modest temple had shrines for the goddess, with the usual shrines for Vinayagar and Murugan, off to the left and right of the goddess, respectively. There was also a small Muniandy/Munneswaran shrine off to the left, as was often the case near Mariamman temples. There was a sign asking people not to “pollute the temple’s waters”—now part of a muddy construction site. The temple had not been threatened yet, but it would likely be destroyed as the Braemer residents

- did not obtain protection for the temple as part of their settlement. Evidently, the temple caretaker’s brother had caused some friction within the Braemer community (Nagarajan 2004) and thus the caretaker and the temple had been left to their own fate. The caretaker, though not responsible for the feud, was nevertheless not invited to participate in negotiations for a final settlement. I visited the modest house of the caretaker and his wife and children in a nearby neighborhood. He had moved out of the estate a few years earlier, after retrenchment, but stayed a short distance away in a nearby *taman*. He told us how he had tried to raise the issue of the temple, and even though the NGO and lawyers were all there they could not secure a place for the temple in the new housing proposals. He lamented that without a temple, the community would suffer from social ills, noting that when there is a temple in a community, there are fewer social problems. He also pointed out the place the temple had played within this particular community with regards to weddings, festivals, and special prayers, and he thought the community was making a terrible mistake by turning its back on it. It seemed as though the members of the community were not encouraged to save the temple since the lawyers, including Pathi, were not themselves of a religious mindset. Moreover, the community had been harassed by the caretaker’s brother—though the caretaker did not discuss this feud. The wife of the caretaker was more emotional, bursting into tears several times as she feared the worst for the temple. Not included in any final settlement, the fate of the temple was almost sealed, unless someone could again take up the issue. The problem was that the residents themselves did not want to fight for it given their experiences with this family, coupled with their satisfaction over the housing and cash compensation settlement. The caretaker, for his part, was skeptical about politicians, NGOs, and lawyers. He claimed his desire to save the temple had no political or social backing, and so the struggle was his own, unless “god helps.” His wife felt deeply hurt by the community’s apparent betrayal and abandonment of the temple.
- 4 The strategies employed by PSM and Jeyakumar are discussed in Jeyakumar (2002). A common strategy that Jeyakumar and his activists employed in several cases discussed in the book was to raise public awareness through picketing outside the gates of the estate where retrenched workers were fighting for compensation or alternative housing. They also marched in front of Parliament, passed memorandums to the Labor Ministry, and courted arrest several times themselves, standing with people as they were being evicted from their homes. All the while, the media coverage of these tactics, though spotty, was picked up in newsletters and PSM propaganda, which helped get the word out. The strategies adopted by PSM and Alaigal, the NGO organized in Ipoh by Jeyakumar, have followed a generally Gandhian model of civil disobedience.
 - 5 More recently, in 2011, Jeyakumar was detained under the Emergency Ordinance Act when he and five of his colleagues in the PSM supported the Bersih memorandum, which called for a freer and more transparent electoral process.
 - 6 He is now the secretary-general for PSM and is no longer attached to SUARAM.
 - 7 Flexibility does not, of course, connote benevolence. Indeed, flexibility, if and when it exists, may have been borne out of a concern for profits and their potential loss through construction delays and bad publicity.

- 8 It should be mentioned that much of his explanation was directed at me, as Naga had already consulted with the Ebor Estate community over their grievances prior to my meeting with them and was already more aware of the details surrounding this case.
- 9 I did speak in general terms about some of my observations with *Malaysiakini*, an online newspaper. *The Straits Times*, in Singapore, also interviewed me about my research a few years later.

Chapter 6: The Locus of God's Power

- 1 Munneswaran is part of the Tamil Saivite (Siva worship) religious symbology. In Malaysia, due to the Hindu Sangam's efforts, this "minor" deity has been "elevated" to the status of a manifestation of Siva himself (Lee and Rajo 1987). As such, the Sangam has argued, animal sacrifice and nonvegetarian offerings, coupled with alcohol and tobacco, are deemed inappropriate, though these offerings are the ones said to be the deity's preference, according to most devotees I have met and observed. Moreover, the Hindu Sangam has no power to enforce its recommendations within the Hindu community. For a detailed and nuanced analysis of Munneswaran worship in Singapore, see Sinha (2005).
- 2 This statement already reflects a reformist discourse, as Mariamman was, historically speaking, not always a vegetarian. But in Malaysia she has been increasingly "Sanskritized" (Lee and Rajoo 1987), and identified as the great goddess Parvati or Sakti, the consort of Shiva.
- 3 But to imply that these heroes are simply anticaste is a simplification. While it is true that they expose contingency within kingly or brahminical orders and point to iniquities within the order or laws of man, the so-called bandits are often of royal or brahmin birth, only mistakenly identified as outcasts through adoption arising from difficult circumstances (again pointing to contingency). Thus the injustice they suffer arises from a misidentification rather than a complete disavowal of hierarchy. Moreover, in doing penance for their sins against brahmins and kings, and even in accepting their fate (usually a violent death), they reinscribe order and hierarchy (Shulman 1985, 1989).
- 4 The American-born Subramaniya Swami was important to Saivites in Malaysia for his patronage of Saivism and for his global magazine, *Hinduism Today*, which was fairly popular in Malaysia. He had many devotees in Malaysia up until his death in the early 2000s and remains popular today.
- 5 Babaji, as Yogananda described him in his autobiography, was an ageless adept living in the Himalayas. Yogananda claimed that Babaji was the founder of his spiritual lineage. While there is no photograph of the adept, Yogananda's book *Autobiography of a Yogi* presented a drawing of his likeness, in accordance with Yogananda's personal encounter with the adept. I asked who the person in the image was, knowing it was Babaji but not knowing whether Muniandy actually read Yogananda or was aware of this legend. He replied, "Babaji" without hesitation.
- 6 The nails rose from the sole of the shoe in a fairly dense pattern to press against the bottom of the foot, pointy side upwards.

- 7 I was told by some Tamils that Munneswaran is a more Sanskritized name for Muniandy. But Sinha (2005) appears to distinguish the two deities, while considering them both *kaaval devam*, or male "guardian deities," sharing a similar iconography.
- 8 The spire that covers the *sanctum sanctorum* housing the principal deity in any Hindu temple.
- 9 Indeed, it is described already in some detail in R. Rajoo's PhD thesis, written in 1984 but based upon work in the 1970s.
- 10 I was attached to the University of Malaya as a Fulbright scholar during 2003–2004. I often introduced myself as being with "University Malaya," as people would understand this more readily than explaining my foreign affiliation.
- 11 I have no way of verifying whether the former MIC leader actually gave a personal loan to the priest. I believed him, finding him a trustworthy and devout individual. I found out nothing regarding the terms of the loan.
- 12 I visited the temple two weeks before this was written in 2008. It still stood alone, but the houses surrounding it were all gone and the residents had shifted to low-cost flats. In the wake of the Hindraf demonstrations in November 2007, and with elections approaching, the temple was temporarily safe from demolition, but would still likely be relocated, according to the priest, who still dutifully carried out his prayers.
- 13 This is slang for a person of mixed Chinese and Indian ancestry. "Chindians" are generally raised to speak Tamil, and many are Hindu. The most common marital pairing that produced Chindian children, historically, was of a Tamil male and a Chinese female. Also, after the Second World War, many orphaned Chinese girls were adopted by Tamils and raised ethnically Tamil and Hindu. Some were also adopted by Malays at this time and raised Muslim.
- 14 Frederick Smith, in his masterful work on possession in South Asia (2006, 128), complicates the notion that "*arul*" translates to "grace," with its Christian connotations. Instead, drawing upon ethnographic and scriptural sources, he notes that this state can simply refer to a possession in which the deity's true form becomes known through its unbearable immanence.
- 15 Petaling Jaya City Council.

Chapter 7: Ethnic Riots and Other Myths

- 1 "In other words this other is the Other that even my lie invokes as a guarantor of the truth in which it subsists" (Lacan 1977, 172).
- 2 Some speculated to me that he may have been mistaken for an Indian because of his dark complexion.
- 3 *Time Magazine*, international, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and *The Economist* were the leading print magazines that carried the story.
- 4 See Nagarajan (2004) for a detailed analysis of her statements.
- 5 It should be noted that certain prominent activists, such as Professor P. Ramasamy and a lawyer, P. Uthayakumar, published letters shortly after the attacks in the independent online newspaper *Malaysiakini* claiming that there was no "racial clash," but rather a premeditated attack against defenseless Indians. As

Uthayakumar said, “the tragedy was not racial clashes as made out to be. It was a case of a very small group of Malays (from outside Kampung Medan . . .) who attacked any and every Indian in the area and its surroundings, resulting in six people being brutally massacred and about 50 others injured, many seriously” (*Malaysiakini*, April 11, 2001). This interpretation of the event was never published in any mainstream newspaper, nor were any politicians willing to state this openly.

- 6 Shanmugam ended up working in Pasu Pathi’s (recall chapter 5) legal firm as an office assistant. Pathi hired him to help him build up some self-confidence and financial security. After three years he resigned and now drives a taxi in Kuala Lumpur.
- 7 The veracity of these accusations is not my concern. Some accused Samy Vellu of working with local thugs and gangsters at the grassroots level. Also, the former MIC leader was accused by some Indians of being “submissive” to the government’s “Malay” interests.
- 8 This seemed a possible exaggeration to us, given that no reports of such sophisticated weapons ever being used emerged in the violence, though it does support the idea of a paramilitary militia preparing itself.
- 9 His exact account is as follows: “there were more than 50 men beating me up. No one came to my rescue. I do not know how long this lasted. After beating me up, the youths just left the scene. They broke my leg. I could see two bones jutting out. I just laid there on the ground. A little while later a white Proton [Malaysian-made car] police patrol car with flickering blue lights came along and stopped near me. The policeman did not get down from the car. He just looked at me through the window. I felt relief that help had come and asked for help, ‘Bang, tolonglah, Dia orang hantam sama saya, dia orang kasi saya mati. Tolonglah abang’ (Help me brother, they have whacked me. They want to kill me. Please help me, brother). The policeman’s response was, ‘Lagi baik matilah!’ (It’s better that you die). The policeman then drove off in the patrol car” (Nagarajan 2004, 300).
- 10 There were reports of police asking for M\$5 to M\$10 as an entrance fee into the neighborhood.
- 11 Naga and I interviewed Mani several times in early 2004.
- 12 He did say he would vote for the opposition in the next election, but would never admit to doing so publicly, as he was expected to campaign for the MIC.
- 13 And away from a more authentic and ontological understanding of Being.
- 14 For instance, the UMNO-controlled government, and government-controlled newspapers often emphasized the need for Malay unity and for registering Malay voters, given the purported non-Malay challenges that are (inevitably) being raised.
- 15 This is analogous to Hegel’s self-certain subject in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977, 104–119) that in truth is haunted by the phantom of its double—profound uncertainty over its contingency upon the other’s recognition.
- 16 Žizek (1993, 200–238) specifically links this superego’s impossible demand to the overidentification with the nation.
- 17 Or, in Heidegger’s terms, becoming “ensnared” and “enframed” by tradition

precisely in the illusion of self-mastery provided by scientific reason and its corollary, humanism (1977).

- 18 As Siegel (2006) brilliantly argues, the violence of the social can be revealed in the collective lies of structural truths, thus offering a simultaneously redemptive reading of the social self (revealed through the haunting of conscience, violence, etc.), as well as a trenchant critique of Levi-Strauss.

Chapter 8: Flats

- 1 The latest information on the flats and the grievances of local residents can be read at <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2013/06/13/dwellers-of-unsafe-flats-give-najib-an-ultimatum>.
- 2 They were told they would be able to purchase terrace homes, or “landed property,” as opposed to flats.
- 3 Tim Bunnell, working with us on one visit, interviewed some of the Indonesian workers.
- 4 After consecration before the deity, the *prasadam* is consumed by the devotees.
- 5 Of course, in another register, every Hindu realizes that the names and forms of God point to an indissoluble one (*kadavule ondraba irrukum*). Thus the distinctive and immanent replication of sacred power within specific shrines is both a theological paradox and a rationale for why shrines accrue power and sacrality. As God is One, the devotions of devotees invite the immanent presence of the deity in multiple locales, yet presence, in this sense, is acknowledged to be a social product, in this case resulting from the energy generated by devotional activity. Neglected shrines are thus less “powerful” than popular pilgrimage spots, due to the intensity of devotion offered before them. But from this perspective, the transcendent power of God is held hostage to the labor of humans, albeit (partially) recognized in an alienated fashion, as some Marxian-inspired anthropologists might argue (e.g., Sangren 2000). I suggest, however, that the sublime or deconstructive—archive-destroying—capacity of the deity cannot be accounted for through Marxian analysis alone.
- 6 I had interviewed professional IT workers from India in Cyberjaya and Kuala Lumpur about their relationships with local “Indians.” Generally speaking, there was little mixing between the professionals from India and the Malaysian Indians. Professional Indian nationals explained to me that they saw the Malaysian Indians as lower in status and coarse in their mannerisms.
- 7 Recall the Braemer case mentioned in chapters 2 and 3. See also Nagarajan (2004).
- 8 The repetition of the word “good” in both Tamil and English was intentional and meant to be humorous.
- 9 Tim Bunnell, from the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore. Also see Bunnell, Nagarajan, and Willford (2010).
- 10 Indeed, the question might be even more poignant today than it was in 2004, given that the miraculous tree is no more, destroyed to make room for new houses in Putrajaya.

Chapter 9: The Law's Betrayal

- 1 Of course, Malays do have a Ramayana and Mahabharata in their old *hikayat* literature. What Param meant was that they do not have their own indigenous epics.
- 2 There was a perception among critics that the MIC had benefited from the takeover.
- 3 A potent, cheap, and sometimes illicit liquor associated with alcoholism.
- 4 He mentioned Tennaimaran Estate, Manikkavasagam Estate, Selangor River Estate (Bukit Rotan) and Sepang Estate.
- 5 Longhouses were sometimes offered to those displaced by development projects as a temporary housing solution. For example, railway workers, who sometimes lived in makeshift housing around railways, might be put in longhouses when relocated. The houses themselves were crowded, as they were designed for extended families. Moreover, they offered little in the way of privacy or amenities.
- 6 James Puthucheary was a well-regarded socialist intellectual, academic, and political economist.
- 7 The political scientist famous for his thesis regarding an inevitable “clash of civilizations” between the West and the Islamic world, not to mention China.
- 8 Akin to what Benedict Anderson called the “unbound seriality” of an imagined community (1998).
- 9 As Bayly and Harper (2003, 2007) have demonstrated, however, there were inclusivist and nonethnic nationalist voices among Malays as well.
- 10 Anwar was Mahathir’s former deputy prime minister. During the financial crisis in 1997, he clashed with his former mentor on matters of policy and was subsequently fired by Mahathir. Anwar launched large public demonstrations in protest of his sacking and called on the masses for “*reformasi*” (reform). He was eventually arrested, tried, and jailed for corruption and sodomy (which is illegal in Malaysia), though the country was divided as to whether the charges were political revenge by Mahathir or not. As I write this in 2011, Anwar leads the opposition alliance, known as Pakatan Rakyat. But after electoral success in 2008, Anwar was once again accused of sodomy. The government prosecuted this case, and Anwar was found not guilty early in 2012. The attorney general appealed the court’s ruling, but the appeal has not been heard. Anwar has accused UMNO of political conspiracy.
- 11 That said, there are legends told among Indians, though not by Puthucheary this day, that Dr. M makes secret visits to the father’s village in Kerala.
- 12 Derrida (2009), however, is critical of Agamben’s absolute threshold that separates life from “bare life,” the sovereign and the nonperson who can be killed, arguing persuasively that these distinctions are never absolute and thus the threshold of absolute difference is untenable, analytically or politically.
- 13 After leaving office, Mahathir was a bit more forthcoming about his mixed-race ancestry.
- 14 On this point, and given Mahathir’s Indian ancestry, I heard a story from a politician who should remain anonymous. Mahathir, when prime minister, once in-

vited members of the government to a special workshop that the prime minister was hosting in Langkawi. At this event, the “PM” said that “Americans were hypocrites, because they always go on about how ‘black is beautiful,’ whereas we all know that ‘black is ugly.’” At the same event, Mahathir also said, according to this same source, that “we have already done enough for Indians,” in response to a request for more government assistance for the Indian community. Whether this story is true or not, or whether it really speaks to an ambivalence over his Indian ancestry given his staunch pro-Malay politics, is impossible to determine with certainty. But it is suggestive, especially in light of Dominic Puthucheary’s observations.

- 15 On this important point, see Joel Kahn for an assessment (2006).
- 16 Puthucheary hoped I would investigate at the Library of Congress. I, regretfully, have not had a chance to do so.
- 17 Indeed, it has been brought to my attention that additional coursework and certification is required for Malaysian doctors when relocating to certain developed countries.
- 18 Bangsar is now a trendy and up-market part of Kuala Lumpur.
- 19 I had heard this before. Some say that Raja Chulan refers to the Raja Cholan or the Chola king who attacked and purportedly briefly ruled Malaya when it was under the suzerainty of the Srivijayan empire. This mythical or fantastic understanding of a Chola conquest and brief occupation of the peninsula is not grounded in any sustained scholarship to the best of my knowledge. Moreover, Raja Chulan was a historical (Malay) figure in Malaysia and so far as I know has no direct link to Chola lineages.
- 20 The term is used in India to designate a “scheduled caste.” Scheduled castes are identified as those traditionally marginalized by caste discrimination. The designation allows for some affirmative action in hiring and university admissions in India.
- 21 This is one of the central themes of my book, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Willford 2006a). A more detailed discussion with various forms of ethnographic evidence can be found there.

Chapter 10: Hindraf and the Haunting of Justice

- 1 Daniel (1984) describes the intimate relationship between the natal village—its very soil, plants, and people—and the permeable body and soul of an individual Tamil person. This is more than a symbolic reference for “home.” Rather, that shrines utilized earth from the natal village, or *ur*, sacralized the landscape, making it an extension of the village in India. This was no more evident than in the deep anxiety that existed when shrines were demolished.
- 2 Hindraf has subsequently split into several rival groups with some more aligned with the government than others. Regu, while a founding member, was expelled by P. Waythamoorthy, the “official” leader of Hindraf in 2008, presumably for challenging his authority to lead the movement. As we see in Regu’s account, the legal counsel were not the initial leaders, though as the public face of the movement they gradually assumed more influence.

- 3 During this demonstration, Hindraf followers marched with roses in their hands toward Putrajaya and the prime minister's residence. Ostensibly, they simply wished to present their roses to the prime minister. But, of course, they hoped the publicity surrounding the event would garner sympathy for their demands.
- 4 MARA stands for Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Council of Trust for the People). MARA institutes were designed to further technical training among Malays. Admission is mostly limited to *bumiputras* (Malays and indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak).
- 5 Brickfields is a "little India" within Kuala Lumpur. Formerly the home to railway workers and civil servants, it retains a high population of Indian residents and businesses. See especially Baxstrom (2008), but also Willford (2006a), for ethnographic descriptions of Brickfields.
- 6 Vision 2020 was Mahathir Mohamad's ideological blueprint for Malaysia to achieve fully developed nation status by the year 2020.
- 7 Though I did not highlight challenges facing Tamil schools in this study (See Arumugam 2008; Santhiram 1999), I did speak to Tamil school educators who made similar points to me regarding the growing problem of racism in government schools, as well as the corresponding revival in popularity for Tamil-medium education.
- 8 The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtrya Swamysevak Sangh (RSS) are two leading militant right-wing Hindu organizations in India. Together with the political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), they make up the core of the *Sangh Parivar*, or brotherhood of saffron.
- 9 As Gananath Obeyesekere and Sudhir Kakar have also argued in other South Asian contexts.
- 10 A similar logic is found in Agamben (2005), where he argues that the "anomie" within the heart of Law is shored up through the "state of exception," a figure of displacement. But whereas Derrida concludes that the supplementary archive is never stable, indeed, its "fever" indicates an instability at the heart of the Law, Agamben seems to suggest that figure of "exception" stabilizes the illusion of impartial law.

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