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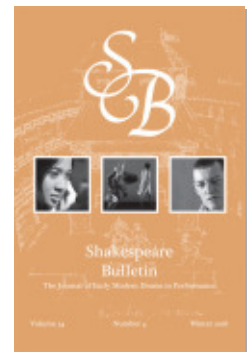
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Mark Thornton Burnett

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## “Not that Cheapo China Con-Job”: Alterity, Race and Same-Sex Desire in *Jarum Halus*, a Malaysian Film Adaptation of *Othello*

MARK THORNTON BURNETT  
*Queen's University Belfast*

*Jarum Halus*, a Malaysian film adaptation of *Othello*, had a successful art-house run in Malaysia on its release in 2008, won the Malaysian Film Festival Award for “Best Digital Film,” was screened at the Cineasia Film Festival, Koln, and attracted plaudits for its “deft handling of . . . subject matter [and] . . . symbolic visuals” (Muthalib 200).<sup>1</sup> Funded by FINAS, the Malaysian Film Board, *Jarum Halus* benefited from what Khoo Gaik Cheng describes as a governmental “push towards establishing a high-tech industry” that has worked to “democratise and activate the indie film movement” (138). The film has not been discussed in Western Shakespearean circles despite its unique deployment of vernacular English, *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay) and Cantonese dialogue.<sup>2</sup> The act of translation is highlighted in an opening credit announcement which glosses “*jarum halus*” as a “fine needle” or a “plan to cheat others . . . to weave a web of malicious . . . intentions.” Confronting ambiguity, translation is understood here not simply as the “transfer of texts from one language to another” (Bassnett 6), but, rather, as what Kate Sturge terms “cultural translation,” a process that embraces “practices” that mediate “cultural difference . . . [and] convey extensive cultural background” (67). In this instance, the unpacking of the titular expression simultaneously recalls *Othello*’s handkerchief, with its finely-needled motifs, and Iago’s plot to bring down the protagonist. Both will have an amplified and localized significance in this reimagining of Shakespeare’s play.

The work of Mark Tan, a young Malaysian filmmaker who directed the film after completing an M.A. in Creative and Media Enterprises at Warwick University in the UK, *Jarum Halus* emerges from a well-established

tradition of adapting Shakespeare to and in a Malaysian context. But, in contradistinction to older *bangsawan* (popular theatre) and *wayang kulit* (puppet theatre) traditions, which loosely mix Shakespearean narratives with other forms (such as the Indian epics), *Jarum Halus* represents a new departure.<sup>3</sup> Transposing *Othello* to a different medium, it is energized by Malaysian cinema's thematic turn towards ill-fated romances and urban locales, and, in common with *Gedebe* (dir. Nam Ron, 2002), a Malaysian film adaptation of *Julius Caesar* that reads the political discussions of the play through the in-fighting of punks and skinheads, is distinguished by a drive to make Shakespeare a rebarbative and critical force.<sup>4</sup> Like *Gedebe*, *Jarum Halus* closely models Shakespearean language, structure, and plot, making a virtue of prioritizing its status as adaptation in an on-screen acknowledgement, "Based on William Shakespeare's *Othello*."

This essay draws on *Othello* criticism that highlights the significance of two interlinked figures of difference and alterity in order to explore the film's distinctive confrontation with issues around race and sexuality. Using Emily C. Bartels's argument that Othello's significance resides in his simultaneous "inferior outsider" and "authorizing insider" position (451), and building on Robert C. Matz's discussion of how "exchanges of love" in the play are expressed via "male-male bonds" (261), I argue that *Jarum Halus* "translates" Shakespeare in such a way as to understand race and same-sex desire as urgently linked thematics. As Chinese, Daniel/Othello functions as the central figure of alterity, with the film highlighting the extent to which his non-Malay status reflects back on discourses of race inside contemporary nationalism. Manifesting the animosity directed against Daniel is Iskander/Iago, who functions as the film's spokesperson for Malay values. Complicating any neat binary of Malay-Chinese relations, however, is the homoeroticism which shapes Iskander/Iago's interactions. While *Jarum Halus* hints at the Shakespearean idea of an ultimately unknowable Iskander/Iago, it combines this with a reliance on a queer aesthetic that privileges scopophilia and attempts to establish a physical rapport between men. The aesthetic is implicit, with much depending on the valences of image and metaphor. In common with other filmmakers, Tan, in making *Jarum Halus*, was beholden to the strictures of the Malaysian Film Censorship Board. Tan found it to his advantage to work with rather than against contemporary censorship regulations. As he states in interview, the "Board helped [him]," facilitating how to demonstrate heterosexual attraction (in the absence of "inter-racial kissing") and how to signal ideas of intimacy ("red roses" were "required . . . on a floor rather than a bed") (personal interview, May 10, 2012).<sup>5</sup> From

this perspective, as this essay argues, compromise is not necessarily to the detriment of creativity, and part of the eloquence and impact of *Jarum Halus* inheres in its suggestiveness. *Jarum Halus* mediates the institutional underpinnings of its own possibility, operating in concert with the Malaysian censorship structures that inform cinematic representation. It also embraces “difference,” both at the level of what is deemed acceptable as part of a film product and in terms of the racial and sexual investments of the contemporary Kuala Lumpur scene. In this way, the film revivifies *Othello*, mobilizing the play as a necessary part of Malaysia’s “cultural background” and as a stimulus for reflection, debate and critique.

### Race / Difference

Typically, *Jarum Halus* draws attention to the often playful work involved in the adaptive process. Characters’ names are Malaysian-situated approximations (hence, Daniel Oh stands in for Othello, Iskander for Iago, and Mona for Desdemona); in-jokes recall the play via denial (“This is not Shakespeare, OK?” Iskander/Iago insists); and scenes involving MSN, the instant messaging service, jokily suggest the duplicitous machinations explored in the source-text (“Iago” is Iskander’s MSN identity).<sup>6</sup> In the ways in which characters switch in and out of different linguistic registers, the film shows itself responsive to how English, particularly in the Malaysian corporate sphere, merges with the “codes” of other languages—an index of “class” in “intra- and inter-ethnic communications” (Lo 19, 35). As the dialogue of *Jarum Halus* clarifies, accents can shift and modulate, suggesting ambition and instability. (Daniel/Othello teases Michael/Cassio, saying, “Since you were in the UK, your accent has gone way off!”). A successful executive at “Eco-Tech,” Daniel/Othello is characterized by an authoritative command of American English and Malay: “I wanted him to sound strong and focused when he spoke in Malay,” Tan asserts (personal interview, November 23, 2010). Fluency in both languages, the film suggests, is key to Daniel/Othello’s apparent impregnability. In a related way, the protagonist’s confident position in the corporate hierarchy is reflected in the inset account of the “stories” he relays to Mona/Desdemona; at a company dinner, he tells her of his traumatic past and the abuse his mother suffered at his tyrannical father’s hands. The content is modified (gone is the narrative of “slavery” [*Oth.* 1.3.137]), but the sense of a troubled and impoverished personal history remains as does the idea of eloquent persuasion (Mona/Desdemona weeps), all indicative of Daniel/Othello’s assuredness. Further illustrating



Fig. 1. Daniel/Othello comforts Mona/Desdemona at the company dinner. Courtesy of Fifoto Photography.

Daniel/Othello's position is the way in which he stands in for Dato/the Doge (the CEO and Iskander/Iago's father), leading colleagues through "the new electronic system" and organizing a welcome party for the company's German partners. As substitute and second-in-command, he is clearly central to "Eco-Tech" operations—vital, indeed, as the "Valiant Othello" is to maintaining Venetian supremacy (1.3.48). The film evokes a corporate system in which long hours, and commitment to the company, are the norm. In more than one sense, "Eco-Tech" is envisioned along regimentary lines that evoke *Othello's* militaristic landscape. Significantly, Daniel/Othello is represented as working within traditional hierarchical arrangements, and he addresses his one superior, Dato/the Doge, in Malay rather than English, suggesting respect—or a recognition of "very noble and approved good masters" (1.3.77)—for an older business generation.

For Dato/the Doge, Kuala Lumpur is a meritocracy, and Daniel/Othello belongs to its "new era." "This is the man who is the future," he announces in liberalist vein, continuing, "[Daniel] genuinely deserve[s] the chance to shine." The notion of Daniel/Othello as a star on the rise is consistently realized in both nomenclature—the German company with which "Eco-Tech" joins forces is called "Movendum," a term connotative of progress—and image and metaphor.<sup>7</sup> In a scene at the gym, for example, he is seen climbing an artificial mountain, his ascent suggesting a will to achieve and a flight ever upwards. Elsewhere in the film, a distinctive palette reverses the play's racialized black and white polarities



Fig. 2. Daniel/Othello and Mona/Desdemona share an intimate moment. Courtesy of Fifoto Photography.

to associate Daniel/Othello primarily with brighter colors: he is filmed against sunlight in his dazzling kitchen and, in office scenes, is linked indissolubly with clinically white interiors. These are the cool, fresh, and innocent hues of an anticipated Malaysian modernity. Hope is further encapsulated in the wonderfully sewn handkerchief—brought to mind in the *jarum halus* expression—that Daniel/Othello presents to Mona/Desdemona as a token of his love. Gifting it, he tells her, “My mother sewed it for me when I was young . . . different pieces of fabric became one masterpiece . . . [she] would say that only with the finest needle can you create the illusion that each piece of fabric was one . . . that the seams do not exist.” Elaborated in this way, the handkerchief signals how Daniel/Othello imagines his progress through Malaysian society (“I look at my life like this”) and his use of a tailoring analogy to suggest a professional success story. Clearly here what Daniel/Othello values is the memory of the mother and the heritage that she symbolizes. (The mother is also evoked in the minor key wordless theme, sung in a female voice, which recurs on the soundtrack). More importantly, Daniel/Othello’s account suggests a didactic work of art whose achievement resides in its marvelous incorporation of disparate elements. As he intimates to Mona/Desdemona in an affective moment, “differences” can be brought together in a “perfect tapestry . . . that’s what we have.”

The notion of integration reverberates powerfully in the context of a Malaysia where racial, cultural and social modalities run along divergent lines. In part thanks to the legacies of British colonial policy, the Chi-

nese in Malaysia have historically held the reins of economic—but not political—power.<sup>8</sup> The phenomenon of a privileged minority is always potentially problematic, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, there has long been friction between the dominant Malay and Chinese communities.<sup>9</sup> From the beginning of the twentieth century, nationalistic movements warning Malays of the dangers of “being displaced by the immigrant population” (Omar 344) reinforced divisions, while the 1957 constitutional definition of a Malay—one who “habitually speaks Malay, adheres to Malay customs, and is a follower of Islam” (Andaya 3)—served only to reinforce a sense of disparate social and cultural groupings. In 1969, underlying tensions broke into open hostilities when, in an electoral shock for the *Barisan Nasional* or National Front government, the coalition won less than half of the national vote. On May 10, following a victory parade staged by UMNO (the United Malay National Organization), the leading coalition party, “race riots” swept through Kuala Lumpur; rioting resulted in some 600 deaths, mostly Chinese, the resignation of the Prime Minister, and the declaration of a state of emergency (Andaya 297-98).

The 1969 “race riots” were a watershed moment for Malaysia’s sense of itself as a nation-state and, in their wake, a caretaker government quickly instituted reform, approving a *rukunegara* (or declaration of allegiance) and a New Economic Policy that actively favored Malay citizens (the *bumiputera* or “sons and daughters of the soil,” the phrasing itself divisive). Affirmative action policies encouraged Malays to assume a greater share of the corporate sector and, in particular, to participate in a business sphere that traditionally had been Chinese-dominated. Perhaps most tellingly, the changes initiated in the post-1969 period tightened pre-existing understandings of what it meant to be “Malay” and affirmed nationalist ideology. According to Mahathir bin Mohamad, Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003, Malays were obliged to become more disciplined and ambitious. The “Malays,” he writes, are “easy-going and tolerant,” characterized by “complacency and acceptance” (110, 78); by contrast, he argues, the Chinese are “materialistic [and] aggressive” (126). The conclusion—Malays must “invoke their rights” (184). First published in the midst of the emergency, and re-released in 2008, Mohamad’s *The Malay Dilemma* maps attitudes and beliefs still current in the modern era. The influence of this thinking on government policy has meant that, to cite Jacqueline Lo, there is a fundamental contradiction between a stated “rhetoric of democracy and multiculturalism” and the “existing political structure” (15). National identity in Malaysia is now elaborated “through a system of closure and exclusion” (14), with the *rukunegara* function-



ing constitutionally to protect “Malay political and cultural supremacy” against “non-Malay interests” (15).

*Jarum Halus* demonstrates how a weight of racial assumption and historical stereotype continually militates against Daniel/Othello’s advancement. In the play, as Emily C. Bartels notes, even as he functions as an “authorizing insider” (451), Othello is “demonize[d]” in terms of “exotic customs, appearances or behaviors” and “circumscribed as Other” (435). The point is embraced by Mark Tan, who observes that “within Malay dominated circles, being a Chinese is almost akin to being black . . . I am glossing over a highly complicated issue . . . nevertheless . . . to avoid the opportunity to draw parallels in the area of race would have been a disservice to the story” (personal interview, September 24, 2011). “My daughter would never marry a Chinese man!” explodes Baharuddin/Brabanzio at a board-room meeting, giving voice to a conviction that the main ethnic groups in Malaysia cannot co-mingle. Such a coupling, for this older representative of the Malaysian establishment, is dishonorable in the extreme. A counter-voice is represented in Dato/the Doge. “Do you really think that [being Chinese] is a bad thing?” he asks Baharuddin/Brabanzio smilingly, his identification of ideological fault-lines suggesting an interpretive alternative. This is an isolated moment, however, with Iskander/Iago, in particular, going further than Baharuddin/Brabanzio in his general condemnation. His stereotypical summation of Daniel/Othello—“that cheapo China con-job” (or “conman”)—represents, with its accusations of trickery and implausibility, a forceful application of racist values.<sup>10</sup> Nor is it only Iskander/Iago who contemplates the implications of the Chinese-Malay conjunction. “I think it’s quite hard . . . inter-racial marriage,” states Michael/Cassio at the welcome party in a reflection that suggests an empathetic response which is nevertheless dependent upon the recognition of Kuala Lumpur’s racist subtexts.

In the first half of the film, Daniel/Othello’s confidence in his own self-fashioning is suggested in the authoritative tones of his voiceover. At the start, we hear him assert his story: “This is . . . about . . . an unending love that lasts forever.” The voiceover confirms Daniel/Othello’s as the initial perspective, with the accompanying inset of the couple frolicking on the beach confirming the romantic asseveration. But, as identifiers of racial alterity accumulate, so does Daniel/Othello’s commentary begin to fade. Not only does it begin to sound increasingly despairing (“We betray our love . . . we die”), but, more significantly, it gradually merges with the voice of Iskander/Iago. At a pivotal juncture, the two voice-tracks blur, implying not only interlocked destinies but also the rise of Iskander/Iago’s



Fig. 3. A troubled Daniel/Othello surveys his environment. Courtesy of Fifoto Photography.

rivalrous prominence. Interestingly, confirming Daniel/Othello's loosening grasp on the narrative are spliced insets of Mona/Desdemona wearing a red dress being caressed by an unidentified hand. Red, as opposed to white (which Mona/Desdemona wears in the "real-life" sequences) is established as the color of fantasy, imbalance and disintegration. The image-scape, as well as the sound-scape, thereby shows Daniel/Othello up as increasingly disconnected and awry. As one voice is supplanted and another—that of Iskander/Iago—takes control, viewers are pulled into a complicit and amorally uncomfortable relation. Indeed, one of Iskander's seemingly good-humored voiceover questions—"How am I the villain?"—paraphrases Iago's very similar demand (2.3.310) and works, as with the soliloquy device, to insist upon audience engagement. More fundamentally, the voiceover trajectory suggests an act of colonization, of repatriation, whereby Daniel/Othello's voice is written out, absorbed, expunged. Slowly but surely, in a contest over narrative authority, the views and readings of Iskander/Iago come to hold sway.

Crucially, Daniel/Othello's awareness of his own alterity is exacerbated and brought into the open by the fact of his religious difference. If, in

*Othello*, Islam is the “other” against which Christian Venice is measured, *Jarum Halus* flips the relation, and Islam is envisioned as the religious and cultural norm to which Daniel/Othello must pledge allegiance. In this transfer of structures of identification, the importance of nomenclature is a point of debate. Mona/Desdemona reflects on the fact that, to marry her, the Chinese Daniel/Othello has changed religion and name. “Daniel Oh Abdullah, it sounds so odd, as if it doesn’t fit,” she states. Daniel/Othello’s response is to cite *Romeo and Juliet*, “What’s in a name?” The aphorism anticipates Daniel/Othello’s later repudiation of stereotype. “I’m not like one of those typical Chinese guys who are so emo,” he says, attempting to differentiate himself from a particular construction of alterity. The film adapts in these reflections *Othello*’s fascination with, in Ania Loomba’s words, “black-skinned people . . . typed as . . . highly emotional . . . irrational . . . [and] prone to anger and jealousy” (91). But, in spiraling out to suggest that Islam makes visible unbridgeable perceptions of difference, the film suggests that there *is* more to a name than Daniel/Othello acknowledges. In a later scene, echoing Othello’s question, “Have you prayed tonight, Desdemon?” (5.2.26)—and thus instilling proceedings with a grim foreboding—*Jarum Halus* shows Mona/Desdemona answering Kuala Lumpur’s call to prayer (robed to perform Muslim devotions, she kneels in the direction of Mecca at sunset). Highlighting the divorce between them, the scene simultaneously shows Daniel/Othello in the bath, submerging himself beneath the water as if staging a counter-ceremony of Christian baptism. Pink-filtered images of Mona/Desdemona are juxtaposed with blue-filtered images of Daniel/Othello: the emphasis in an archetypal masculine and feminine color scheme is on their failure to meet, spiritually and culturally. At a deeper level, the film argues for hollowness at the core of Daniel/Othello’s self-hood.<sup>11</sup> “I define who I am . . . It’s me!” Daniel/Othello insists to Mona/Desdemona in their fashionably milk-white living room, but the film demonstrates how slim a purchase he has on a securely anchored identity. Matching the play’s figuration of Othello’s self-doubt in racial terms (“Haply for I am black” [3.3.267]), *Jarum Halus* discovers Daniel invoking his ethnic status as a complicating element in his marriage. “There are so many factors that could affect the relationship . . . I’m Chinese,” he confides to Iskander/Iago: it is as if an internalized conception of prevailing Malay ideology erupts to plague him. Later, in a scene that takes place in “Shakey’s” fast-food pizzeria, the camera lenses Daniel/Othello’s face splitting into shards, the suggestion being that there is no whole but only separate and disintegrating selves.

Contrasting with the inset of his powerfully recounted “stories,” and with the ideals embodied in the handkerchief, is the scene in which Daniel/Othello confronts Mona/Desdemona over dinner. At once, the argument is precipitated by a disagreement over the correct way to prepare a regional cuisine, Daniel/Othello’s comments bolstering an idea of the impossibility of culinary cross-exchange. “Only Chinese woman can cook Chinese food!” he exclaims angrily. Faulting his wife for her attempt to meet him culturally, and espousing a misogyny that insists on ethnic separatism, Daniel/Othello here speaks in a non-standard form of English that throws into stark relief the global linguistic polish of before. Robert Hornback writes that, in *Othello*, the protagonist undergoes a “jarring linguistic breakdown,” or “poetic-syntactic collapse,” that underscores a concern with “black-faced folly” (64-5), and a comparable trajectory is evidenced in *Jarum Halus* in Daniel/Othello’s worsening facility with the *lingua franca* of Kuala Lumpur’s corporate world. More tellingly, an audience is invited to read into Daniel/Othello’s mistreatment of Mona/Desdemona not only an inability to connect—the camera’s low angle privileges the vast expanse of bare red tablecloth that keeps them apart—but also a replaying of familial history. In their bedroom, for example, festooned with elaborate voiles that analogize additional barriers, he snatches from her the book she is reading, a translation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, as if enacting in the present the past dramas of his abusive father. Intertextually, the novel’s presence situates the destructive spiral of Daniel/Othello’s behavior inside a dangerous racial *liaison*.

Self-consciousness also has a site-specific manifestation. Relocating *Othello* to modern-day Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital situated on a peninsula and a confluence of rivers, *Jarum Halus* offers a wry approximation of maritime Venice. It extends the water motif in shots of waves breaking on the beach and in the sound of the surf that forms part of the film’s *mise-en-bande*. Bringing to mind the idea of Venice as a commercial melting-pot, the film invests in corresponding visuals of late capitalism, as evinced in a high-rise urban skyline and glimpses of Kuala Lumpur’s signature buildings. Adding to the vivid sense of place are interior shots of restaurants purveying nostalgic images of an “old-time” America (the “Roasters” and “Shakey’s” franchises are given pride of place), the intrusion into the film’s sound-scape of American slang (Iskander/Iago peppers his conversation with “bro” and “man”), and a montage made up of proliferating designer labels (including Abercrombie and Diesel), all of which suggest a general cultivation of US signifiers.

This is, then, in Mark Tan’s words, a “city that’s heavily Americanized . . . a demented version of the West” (personal interview, May 10, 2012). Impressions of a global cityscape, however, interact with scenes showing a more conflicted and resistant Kuala Lumpur. Constant evocations of difference—whether these are manifested in the exceptional “alcohol” served at a “Malay party” or in references to the presumed sexual availability of “ladies” from the “UK”—testify to a culture in which traditional norms are instituted through dialectic.

Other instances of disequilibrium are not far from the surface. Television newscasts that play in the background of several scenes sensationalize the case of “Valerie Song,” a young Malaysian woman murdered in her own home. At one level, the murder of Song anticipates Mona/Desdemona’s fate, but, more critically, it suggests the dangers of a Kuala Lumpur beset by crime. As subsequent newscasts make clear, Song’s screams are ignored by neighbors and the police do not pursue the investigation; this parallel “story” stands, then, as a statement about neglect, disinterest and a communal abnegation of responsibility. In a related gaze, accusatory camerawork returns periodically to images of waste (an open sewer clogged with rubbish or a tree in blossom choked with a plastic bag). Only when away from the city is Daniel/Othello imaged as enjoying a greater independence; the shot of a kite being flown on the beach, for instance, suggests a rare moment of freedom, a lifting of restrictions.

The idea of a self-absorbed and individualist Kuala Lumpur finds a material correlative in architecture. Ania Loomba writes that *Othello* “brings blackness and religious difference into simultaneous play while also making visible the tensions between them” (107), and, in the ways in which buildings are mobilized in the cinematography of *Jarum Halus*, a not dissimilar assembly of signifiers is apparent. Repeated exposition and establishment shots show, in the same frame, the Petronas Twin Towers (headquarters of the global energy company) and the Kuala Lumpur Tower (a communications hub and platform from which phases of the moon are observed in preparation for Ramadan). A linked shot reveals the soaring skyscraper of the UMNO political party which, since independence, has governed the country in various coalition manifestations, supporting pro-Malay policies and endorsing the centrality of Islam in Malaysian religious and cultural life. The foregrounding in the *mise-en-scène* of the looming mass of the UMNO organization suggests an overarching *surveillant* power, one that is directly linked to the troubled histories that have determined Malaysia’s current political complexions. The combined forces of religion, government, and globalization intersect

in shots of the cityscape, one effect of which is to insist upon Daniel/Othello's "outsider" status, to stress his circumstances as "other." Or, to put the point in another way, in "the new world space of late or multinational capital," as Fredric Jameson argues, Daniel/Othello is akin to those "unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves" (6, 51). And, because these shots are spliced rhythmically through the film and trace a movement from light to dark, from daylight to nighttime, the narrative arc of Daniel/Othello's "story" is underlined.

At the end of the film, after he has killed Mona/Desdemona (the floral décor of the pink bedroom throws into grotesque relief the sustained violence of the murder), Daniel/Othello (in Malay) exclaims, "Please tell people it's not that I cannot love; instead, I only loved too well." But, speaking for the first time in his native language, he goes on to ask, in Cantonese, "I'm sorry, my wife. Please wait for me a little longer. I'm coming to find you." Invoking a Buddhist concept of the passage between natural and spirit worlds, Daniel/Othello is figured not so much as "reverting" as finally articulating a sense of himself as an "alien," as an individual whose non-belonging and alterity hinge on never having been authentically accepted.<sup>12</sup> Trying to find "something" in the midst of "nothing," he anticipates the bridging of a divide not allowed for in the segregated world he is about to leave. Furthermore, Daniel/Othello's request in Cantonese represents a filmic interpolation, an act of speaking that is not indebted to the Shakespearean register. (His reflections in Malay are a closely realized version of Othello's farewell speech). At least in an intertextual sense, there is a move here to reach beyond the framing influence of the film's literary underpinnings, to establish for Daniel/Othello an alternative space in which the authority of the master-text does not operate. The integrated utopia wished for in the handkerchief is affirmed only in Daniel/Othello's fantasy of the afterlife.

### Queer Aesthetics

Like Daniel/Othello, Iskander/Iago is linked to ideas of exclusion and given a backstory that impacts on his present. Elaborating relations not found in the play, *Jarum Halus* constructs a conflictual relationship between Iskander/Iago and his father, Dato/the Doge, which is complicated by the early death of the mother and brought into focus by the situation of a son who has failed to live up to expectations. As Dato/the Doge confides to Daniel/Othello in his wood-paneled office, "Sometimes



Fig. 4. Iskander/Iago plots his next move. Courtesy of Fifoto Photography.

I really feel as if you're my . . . son," an admission that wishes Iskander/Iago, and the disappointments he embodies, away. Denied a familial bond, Iskander/Iago cultivates an obsessive interest in the intimacies of others. While they embrace in a private room at the welcome party, for instance, Daniel/Othello and Mona/Desdemona are spectated upon by Iskander/Iago through a crack in the door; the close-up on his narrowed eyes suggests not just what Patricia Parker identifies in Shakespeare's text as an "extraordinary emphasis on . . . the desire to see" (244), but also a reification of heterosexual romance that manifests itself in a queer gaze. Critic Robert Matz notes that "*Othello* puts at stake . . . the regulation of desire . . . between men" (261), and, certainly, in *Jarum Halus*, unconsummated homoerotic attraction forever hovers beneath the surface. If there is an unspoken subtext in Iskander's declaration, "I am not who people think I am" (a vernacular reworking of Iago's "I am not what I am" [1.1.65]), then it is that of same-sex desire. The green hues enveloping Iskander/Iago throughout the film extend the heterosexual dynamic of *Othello*, suggesting male-male praxes of jealousy and the prospect of a sexual *ressentiment*.

Director Mark Tan speaks of Iskander/Iago in "homosocial" terms, citing the Hollywood genre of the "bromance," but his comments are belied

by the film's consistent entertainment of this queer aesthetic (personal interview, May 10, 2012). In view of the fields of representation permitted filmmakers in contemporary Malaysia, *Jarum Halus* is, of necessity, coded in its treatment of the Iskander/Iago and Daniel/Othello relationship even if, at one and the same time, it privileges the former's sense of an impermissible longing. According to Tan, when working with Razif Hashim, who played Iskander/Iago, interpretation was left to the actor's own devices. "I was very insistent that he never explain the motivation . . . to retain the authenticity of the character's ambiguity, it was important for me to be a stranger . . . and to shoot the film with my own sense of alienation in mind" (personal interview, November 23, 2010). On the one hand, it might be suggested that such a disavowal of knowledge of motivation licensed Hashim to develop an extemporized queer performance. On the other hand, Tan's statement can appear disingenuous, not least because of the extent to which *Jarum Halus* consistently circles back to fraught male-male relations and particularly to moments at which overtures to other men are initiated. "Be patient . . . relax . . . trust me," Iskander/Iago advises Michael/Cassio in low tones, slipping his hand covertly over that of the dismissed executive only to have it embarrassedly pushed aside. Elsewhere, the film makes a virtue of prioritizing homoerotic spaces (Iskander/Iago's fatal conversation with Michael/Cassio about the handkerchief takes place in the men's toilets of a nightclub, Daniel/Othello hiding in a cubicle to overhear them), while developing connections are intimated through visual and verbal cues. Thus, during the rope-climbing sequence, shots of Daniel/Othello ascending the wall are offset by reminders of how he is attached via the ropes to Iskander/Iago, with the camera's fascinated focus on the latter's elaborately belted midriff suggesting an entangled sexual nexus. At other points, as in the scene taking place at an outside café, Iskander/Iago is portrayed twisting the straw of his drink, as if lost in a troubled phallic reverie.

The film's homoerotic subtexts are bolstered by Iskander/Iago's metaphorical association with communications. Contemplating the online entanglements he has devised—the *jarum halus* expression again operates duplicitously—he reflects in one of his voiceovers, "The needle has pricked . . . I can't stop it . . . The whole thing has a life . . . a momentum of its own." What Iskander/Iago puts into circulation is imagined here as technologically toxic: he cyber-infects. (An early shot of a commuter train, on which is emblazoned an advertisement for an "Antibacterial Keyboard," is visually foregrounded as if in anticipation of this development). In the same moment, Iskander/Iago's statement is so framed as to



introduce ideas of insemination and conception, both mediated via the phallic and invasive power of the needle. Discussing *Othello*'s “anal eroticism,” Ian Smith notes that “Iago’s piercing language links lust to sodomy, penetration and sexual release” (193). His comments form a bridge with *Jarum Halus* and in particular with the idea that Iskander/Iago’s same-sex desire, possessed of sexual energy, is generative; in this voiceover formulation, the needle is significant not as an index of the mother’s craft but as the instrument with which intrigue can escalate unchecked.

In *Jarum Halus*, it is suggested, Iskander/Iago finds Kuala Lumpur imprisoning because of his sexual alterity. Certainly, he is regularly filmed in confined conditions. A typical sequence shows him entering an elevator. The *vertical* lines running up and down the grey doors evoke bars, and, when the doors slide open to a clean and white world, the implication is that Iskander/Iago does not or cannot leave. (In a complementary fashion, in a later bedroom episode, side-lighting through the blinds casts black and brown *horizontal* lines on Iskander/Iago’s body, enhancing the delimitation of an imprisoning locale). A linked jump-cut sees Iskander/Iago contemplating the city through a car window; Kuala Lumpur flashes past, glitteringly beautiful in the night light but unavailable as the voiceover makes clear: “This city is a prison with no walls,” it intones, “The world is full of doors, but none of them open to me.” Edward J. Soja writes that “every city is a carceral city, a collection of . . . nodes designed to impose a particular model of conduct and disciplinary adherence on its inhabitants” (29). With a gesture to the plate-glass and gaol-like environs of Michael Almereyda’s New York-set *Hamlet* (2000), *Jarum Halus* discovers Iskander/Iago as experiencing Kuala Lumpur as no less alienating a *milieu*.

The contexts for Iskander/Iago’s sense of alienation are not difficult to discern. Homosexuality is illegal in Malaysia, punishable by flogging and a twenty-year prison term. Seen, as Baden Offord notes, as an “unwelcome effect of globalization and Western neo-colonialism,” homosexuality exists only in the shadows of “Islamic and Malay cultural and religious identity” (141).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, homosexuality has recently become a headline issue in a way that has placed the attitudes and policies of the UMNO-dominated coalition under a global spotlight. In June 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was ousted from his position by Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad on charges of corruption and sodomy.<sup>14</sup> The Ibrahim/Mohamad struggle highlighted, as Barbara Watson and Leonard Y. Andaya state, “dissatisfaction with an authoritarian style of government which silenced dissenting voices” (329), but, more specifically, it also revealed how homosexuality in Malaysia is demonized.

Ideological praxes have representational correlatives. In Malaysia, lesbian and gay organizations are absent from civic culture, and there is no queer cinema (in contrast to some other Asian countries). Instead, filmmakers continually rub up against regulations that they have found contradictory and unhelpful.<sup>15</sup> Illustrative, in this respect, are the fortunes of those films in Malaysia that have broached themes of inter-racial relations and same-sex desire. For example, *Sepet* (dir. Yasmin Ahmad, 2005), concerning, like *Jarum Halus*, a relationship between a young Chinese man and a Malay woman, attracted controversy. Its distinctive strategy—of ambiguating the outcome of the relationship by alternating between “real” and “dream” scenarios—points up, according to Benjamin McKay, the “filmmaker’s incapacity to resolve matters of purity and hybridity in any other realm but that which is dreamed” (113). The film *Spinning Gasing* (dir. Teck Tan, 2000), is a similar case in point. Centered again on a relationship between a young Chinese Malaysian atheist and a Malay Muslim woman, *Spinning Gasing* shows how, in William Van der Heide’s words, “religious incompatibility” forces the couple apart (93). Banned because of its treatment of sex and religion, the film was finally released in a butchered version that rendered the narrative incoherent. A scene in the film involving a gay couple had to be altered to emphasize a comedic dimension, further unmooring the sense of the storyline. Such are the industrial conditions within which filmmaking in Malaysia is conducted, with the trials and tribulations of a number of films highlighting a state-sponsored drive to approve and preserve the *status quo*.

In such a production context, *Jarum Halus* takes risks with its how it mediates alterity, and nowhere more so than in the realization of 3.3, which unfolds in the deserted “Eco-Tech” offices at night. Suggestively, the scene is shrouded in shadows and dimly lit, as if there is something to hide. As an appalled Daniel/Othello sits on the floor (the spatial dynamic accentuates his belittlement and dependency), the more physically elevated Iskander/Iago, who lolls on an executive chair, launches a loaded recollection. “You remember that time we went to Singapore?” Iskander/Iago asks, going on, “that trip turned out to be the best in my life . . . we got so drunk . . . I don’t know what you think about me . . . forget Mona . . . I’ll always have your back.” The homoeroticism is accelerated by Iskander/Iago’s leaning forwards to place his hand on Daniel/Othello’s shoulder. A further hint of attraction inheres in the way in which the camera swings to dwell upon Iskander/Iago’s computer screensaver where he and Daniel/Othello are pictured in a pose of camaraderie—Mona/Desdemona has been cropped from the image. Too, Iskander/Iago and



Fig. 5. Once Iskander/Iago puts his plan into action, Mona/Desdemona is increasingly isolated. Courtesy of Fifoto Photography.

Daniel/Othello are filmed here in two-shot; the blocking mirrors the screensaver image, providing a second visual of a couple. The moment is tense with possibility even as the frisson of the occasion is defused by an uncomprehending Daniel/Othello, who rejoins, platonically, “You’ll always be my friend.” There is a coda to the episode: when, in a later scene, Daniel/Othello hesitates at the sight of the gun, Iskander/Iago complains, “I was willing to take this as far as you wanted to go . . . That’s how much I care about you.” In this exchange, as elsewhere, Iskander/Iago speaks in the tones of a hurt lover, emphasizing the import of the earlier nighttime office scene.

Iskander/Iago’s desire for Daniel/Othello (the forbidden “thing” at the heart of the relationship) imbues the film with a tremulous energy and nervous allusiveness. A salient instance is the climax and the groan of yearning that Iskander/Iago throws in the direction of Daniel/Othello, when he lies dead on the bedroom floor. Although, after the event, he claims the archetypal Shakespearean refusal to communicate (“From now, I say nothing”), Iskander/Iago’s perspective is in fact rendered to the viewer via the voiceover that he has claimed as his own. Apprehended by the police and taken to a waiting car, he reflects on the final significance of the handkerchief: “[Daniel/Othello] told me what his mother taught him reflected life . . . told me he was the tailor and with a fine needle would join all the differences in life together . . . my friend is wrong . . . I am the tailor. This is my masterpiece.” Here, the racial and cultural

significances of the handkerchief are rejected by Iskander/Iago in favor of an understanding of the *jarum halus* metaphor that underscores his own creative plotting. Now swathed in a mixture of dun greens (the color of his trade) and reds (the blood in which he is steeped), which usurp the brightness of before, Iskander/Iago is represented as triumphant, both directing the action in the tailoring role he has appropriated for himself and assuming narrative responsibility and centrality. As Mark Tan muses, “it’s his film, his story” (personal interview, September 24, 2011). Importantly, Iskander/Iago’s position at the end of *Jarum Halus* is indicated via language. Delivered wholly in Malay, his words overlay a visual flash-cut of Daniel/Othello and Mona/Desdemona which cedes place to another of Daniel/Othello and Iskander/Iago in the deserted offices of “Eco-Tech” at night. These memorial interruptions to the narrative take us back to that pivotal earlier scene, prompting us to register the intensely homoerotic moment (the point at which Iskander/Iago comes closest to a declaration of same-sex desire) as the film’s defining image. This is the image on which an audience’s gaze is invited finally to linger. Looking through the distortions of the police car window onto the forces of a gathering but uncomprehending media (the film cannot resist a nod to the final frames of *Taxi Driver* [dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976]), Iskander/Iago, discovered in close-up, is driven away. In this adaptation of *Othello*, then, if the narrative of integration is defeated, the “story” of Iskander/Iago’s alterity remains open-ended. As the screen fades to black, the destabilizing effects Iskander/Iago has engendered continue to reverberate.

### Conclusions

In a recent survey of *Othello* film adaptations, Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin argue that there has been a trend, in “world cinema,” towards “de-racialization”: there can only be “post-racial” versions of Shakespeare’s play in the present “global” moment (13, 15). The instance of *Jarum Halus* suggests otherwise. As this essay has maintained, the film is ignited by its absorption in issues around race; in addition, it is distinctive for recalibrating a set of “culturally conditioned responses to race and gender” (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 1) by shifting the emphasis to the ways in which race and desire conflict with each other even as they also interweave. Figures of alterity in *Jarum Halus* function in a discrete and overlapping fashion: they take on specific—and not necessarily expected—applications in local contexts. Carving out a distinctive niche for a Malaysian Shakespeare, *Jarum Halus* broaches vital

questions about the constitution of selfhood and pushes at shibboleths of cultural and national definition. It ponders the situation of the second largest racial grouping in modern Malaysia, and it does so via an intricate engagement with issues of sexual orientation and constructions of Malay and Chinese identities, British legacies, and global realities. Absorbing into itself the strictures of censorship, but also testing representational limits, the film makes a powerful if not critical case for rethinking current attitudes and policies.

Shakespeare is key to the film’s strategy, and it is possible that the interrogative thrust of *Jarum Halus* is allowed for by a popular transnational notion that the dramatist is the purveyor of universal—apolitical—truths. At the time of release, it seemed as if there was a coming together of the debates the film rehearses and the promise of political change. In the so-called “political tsunami” of 2008, the coalition suffered a major setback at the general election, occasioning UMNO to re-evaluate its priorities (Hodal, “Scandal” 22). Commentators in Asia and Europe assumed a shift in direction for national policy, writing optimistically about a convergence of cultures (Milner 212) and “the rise of a new trans-ethnic order” (Lim 95) in the Malaysian economic and social arena. The prognosis was to prove short-lived. In the post-2008 Malaysian environment, there are few signs of a different dispensation. Many divisions have been tightened: an anti-gay educational policy is being rolled out to parents and teachers, and, in 2013, the *Barisan Nasional* coalition again won at the elections despite concerted opposition to issues of racial discrimination and corruption.<sup>16</sup> In 2015, meanwhile, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim commenced a five-year prison sentence after the sodomy indictment against him was upheld. *Jarum Halus* is marked by its moment of production; at the same time, it also confirms how history can work against linear notions of progress and in concert with forces of repression and reinstatement. Appraising its adaptive processes from the present vantage-point, what is evident is that screen Shakespeares continue to undertake work that is urgent and timely.<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The film has only received one UK screening (as part of the “Shakespeare and World Cinema” series in association with the Queen’s Film Theatre at Queen’s University Belfast, May 10, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>For the two references to the film in Shakespeare criticism, see Fernández 221; Habib 99.

<sup>3</sup>On traditional Malaysian Shakespeare, see Abdullah; Abdullah and Lim.

<sup>4</sup>On *Gedebe*, see Burnett 125–159. Malaysian cinema is discussed in Van der Heide 83–95; Vick 225–227.

<sup>5</sup>Tan's reflections bring to mind how creative "subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere" (Muñoz 5).

<sup>6</sup>Throughout *Jarum Halus*, *Othello* is rendered relevant via an absorption in technology. Spotting Mona/Desdemona in an online chat with Michael/Cassio, for example, Iskander/Iago teases Daniel/Othello: "Just married and the wife is internet dating?" At home in the world-wide web, Iskander exploits online opportunities to provoke Daniel in much the same way that Iago reflects on conversation to excite Othello's jealous imaginings.

<sup>7</sup>"Malay society," notes Gordon Gray, "is sometimes referred to as a 'house society', due to the significance of the house as both a metaphor and a structuring motif" (127), and, in this connection, it is arresting that Dato/the Doge imagines the "new era" in domestic terms. As he states, looking about his sumptuously appointed house, "we want to welcome [the company] to our family . . . I want . . . our German friends to feel at home."

<sup>8</sup>Formerly a British colony, Malaya was reorganised as a Federation in 1948, gained independence in 1957, and was created "Malaysia" in 1963.

<sup>9</sup>Ethnically, according to a 2007 census, Malaysia is divided into 62 per cent indigenous or Malay peoples, 24 per cent Chinese and 7 per cent Indian, the remaining percentage being occupied by non-citizens from other parts of the world (Omar 337).

<sup>10</sup>Iskander/Iago's xenophobic attitudes are extended to Michael/Cassio, whom he brands an "international school kid with a fake English accent." The identical charge of dissimulation functions to elevate authenticity in the context of an anxiety about origins and a lack of roots; Cassio/Michael, tarred with the brush of the colonialism of an earlier era, is anathema to Iskander/Iago, who by default expresses the perspective of Malay nationalism.

<sup>11</sup>Joel Fineman writes that Shakespeare's play is preoccupied with "the empty shell of a hero . . . the evacuating clarification of Othello [and] . . . a loss of self" (148), and, modulating one of the signature tropes of *Othello*, *Jarum Halus* invests in an equivalent vocabulary of "nothing." "Nothing . . . Just to play a trick," Iskander/Iago states, responding to Emilia's question about the handkerchief, and, answering Daniel/Othello at a particularly intense moment, observes: "It's nothing, lah, it's nothing."

<sup>12</sup>For *Othello* and ideas of "reversion," see Boyarin 259.

<sup>13</sup>On queer identities and nationalism, see Puar xii.

<sup>14</sup>Imprisoned from 1998 to 2004, Ibrahim, on his release, brought opposition parties together in a new grouping and began arguing for a more progressive and moderate kind of politics. Lauded in the West as a liberalizing force, Ibrahim, in the affirmation of "freedom of expression [and] . . . civil liberties," has himself underscored the value and instrumentality of Shakespeare (see Ibrahim 23, 26).

<sup>15</sup>In Grossman’s study, Malaysian queer cinema is conspicuous by its absence. On censorship and Malaysian cinema, see Guan 59, 79–80.

<sup>16</sup>On the election and anti-gay legislation, see “Coalition” 14; Hodal, “Malaysia’s Islamic Party” 17. In a recent discussion of attitudes towards homosexuality in Malaysia, Walter Williams writes that “things are getting worse rather than better” (18).

<sup>17</sup>I would like to thank Mark Tan and Eleanor Low for the many courtesies extended to me during this writing of this essay. I am also grateful to Pascale Aebischer and to the anonymous readers who offered enabling suggestions for improvement and development.

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