

# The Short Films of Mien Ly and an Articulation of Feminist Queer Theory in Malaysia

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## Introduction

1. As the enactment of resistance, provocative portrayals of sexuality and female desire have become signature themes of women filmmakers in postcolonial 'Third World' nations like Malaysia.<sup>[1]</sup> Representations of women's bodies and sexuality in Malaysian filmmaking cultures, both mainstream and independent, become a site where the boundary between 'tradition' and modernity is contested. More specifically, images of female bodies and sexuality have become the canvas for an articulation of cultural struggle and anxieties about the pace of modernisation and Islamic resurgence.<sup>[2]</sup> In the short films of the queer feminist Malaysian filmmaker Mien Ly, women's sexualities and desires transgress cultural boundaries that are marked by a deep colonial imprint. And for this reason, it can be argued that such transgressions are decolonial in intent and 'seditious' in effect. As a queer feminist filmmaking practice, Mien Ly's short films offer a vision or snapshots of possibilities for a decolonising queer feminist theory and praxis in Malaysia.
2. In this paper I elaborate on the following assertions: a decolonising queer feminist approach involves a specific, if often marginal, location of enunciation and an orientation (following Sara Ahmed's definition of the term<sup>[3]</sup>) towards a projected future of queer and feminist ideality; radical cinema offers feminist and queer scholars a focus for reflecting on such a future characterised by women's sexual self-determination and the decolonisation of one's subjectivity; an analysis of postcolonial Third World women's cinema in particular is a dialogue with the creative testimony of marginal women filmmakers whose creative production problematises feminist academic pedagogy; a future and imminent ideality of women's sexual self-determination and decolonisation of subjectivities may be shared between scholars and filmmakers but the dialogue between the two is not necessarily equal and therefore needs to be critically constructed. This paper is an exercise in such a dialogue.
3. In writing this paper I am informed by the decolonising critique of 'First World' feminist theory of Chandra Talpade Mohanty who challenges the epistemic assumptions of a feminism that constructs and reinforces the 'Third World' as its Other.<sup>[4]</sup> Through the authorial signature of First World feminism, Third World women are rendered monolithic in contrast to the historically specific vantage point of First World women. In concert with her critique, Mohanty urges postcolonial feminist knowledge production by Third World women through the restoration of their local and historical specificities and experiences. Mohanty's critique of western feminist theory and its epistemic Other, the Third World woman, is employed here to mobilise a different kind of decolonising critique, one that targets the colonial construction of gender and sexual subjectivities in contemporary Malaysia. The aim is to illuminate forms of queer and feminist resistance to colonial disciplinary regimes that restrict queer desire and restore the specificities of queer Malaysian Chinese women. Queer and feminist resistance in this instance is bound to the cultural and political possibilities within independent cinematic practice.
4. This paper is situated in the corpus of literature on visual media within the context of global and

postcolonial gay imaginaries. Engaged with critiques of 'global queering' and 'sexual westernisation' in the Asia Pacific, this paper is also aligned with criticisms of androcentric commentaries on transnational queer cultures. In the attempt to dismantle the hegemony of western knowledge production, a decolonising approach to queer theory has to avoid the pitfall of essentialism; that is, avoid framing local non-normative practices as presumably authentic and locked in the past. While the proposal for a hybrid model of queering is attractive, the localising of queer theory in Malaysia must move beyond east-west binarism and decentre 'the west' within the field. In agreement with other authors on the need for material grounding in the practice of theorising queer cultures in Asia, in this article I suggest that queer theory in Malaysia must be understood chiefly through intersectional paradigms.<sup>[5]</sup>

5. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality began as a critical response to the silence of white feminists on African-American women's oppression and the anti-racist movement's subordination of the needs of women in the name of racial unity. Crenshaw argued that anti-sexist politics and anti-racist approaches very rarely correspond with each other and as a result negatively implicate the understanding of black women as subjects for feminist intervention.<sup>[6]</sup> As an analytical tool, intersectionality aims to further feminist agendas by not only examining gender as a source of female oppression but by illuminating other dimensions of power such as class, race, sexuality and disability, and in particular, the neglected social locations in which two (or more) of these dimensions intersect. The idea of Malaysian-ness may be understood intersectionally as a set of shifting and overlapping categories and as a site of (uneven) multiplicity. Social identities in Malaysia are already mediated and overdetermined by ethnic/racial categories, linguistic and regional differences. Although attempts have been made to transcend these differences between Malaysians, through personal affirmation that one is 'Malaysian first' and '1 Malaysia' sloganeering, such attempts have yet to accomplish the impossible: the embrace of a single, deracialised national identity. Multiplicities as a concept presents itself as a challenge to established identities and function as a source of political and intellectual possibility for an explicitly localised queer theory specific to Malaysia.
6. In writing this paper I have two main aims. First, to articulate an aesthetic 'vision' of Malaysian queer feminist politics using two short films by the independent filmmaker Mien Ly. The two short films in question, *My Confession Diary* (2005) and *2 Boys, 2 Girls and a Beat Up Car* (2009), depict the intersecting themes of female sexuality and desire, civil agency and cultural transgression. Second, with the aesthetic 'vision' of a Malaysian queer feminist filmmaker articulated, some thoughts are outlined for aspects of decolonising queer theory in Malaysia through a post-colonial feminist lens. I argue that queer theory in Malaysia cannot be sustained without feminism due to the feminist contribution to local queer cultures and politics. Towards these two aims, I address the following: points of convergence and divergence for feminism and queer theory: the context of Mien Ly's professional career as an independent filmmaker; an analysis of the two aforementioned films; and an outline for a contextualised feminist articulation of queer theory in Malaysia.

### **The intersections between feminism and queer theory**

7. An often overlooked intersection exists between feminism and queer politics in Malaysia. Moreover, a sustained discussion on the ways that Malaysian feminism and queer theorising inform each other is lacking. The literature on queer politics and feminism as constitutive of Malaysia's liberal civil society discusses queer identities and feminists as if they are separate entities who nonetheless share common platforms in the pursuit of human rights, freedom of expression and civil liberties. Major feminist organisations in Malaysia are recognised as heteronormative in political outlook, suggesting their distance from queer agendas.<sup>[7]</sup> However, Malaysian feminism is represented by individuals from a variety of backgrounds, not least from LGBTQ communities.

Taking into consideration the significant presence and voices of queer feminist women active in rights-based politics, one may feel compelled to ask: to what extent can feminism inform and define queer theorising in Malaysia? What and where are the points of convergences and departures between feminism and queer politics in Malaysia?

8. Such questions re-ignite previous debates about the departure of queer theory from feminism and gender studies brought about by the apparent heterosexism of feminism and the male dominance and misogyny of queer theory/activism.<sup>[8]</sup> More fundamentally, the division was prompted by the separation of sex and gender in feminist inquiry, leaving sex and sexuality the preserve of queer theory.<sup>[9]</sup> Other divergences that separate feminism and queer theory further are to be found in certain assumptions stressed in the two fields. Queer as an intellectual orientation 'suggests a positioning as oppositional to both the heterosexual and homosexual mainstream, and thereby signifies a protest against the binary.'<sup>[10]</sup> Feminism, or rather, feminisms, do not always challenge the heterosexual and homosexual mainstream. Instead, certain theoretically influential feminisms have the problematic tendency of reproducing 'irrefutable' sexual differences between women and men and maintaining the heterosexual gender binary.<sup>[11]</sup>
9. The separation of feminism and queer politics/theory means that those who form subjectivities at the intersection of femininity, feminism, female homosexuality and queerness may risk being marginalised on both sides of the separation or worse, rendered absent, effaced and silenced from representation. For this reason, intersectionality as a feminist concept is crucial to the construction of subjectivities that are more than just queer because as a paradigm for theory and praxis it calls attention to 'how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice.'<sup>[12]</sup> When put into theory and practice, multi-dimensional intersectional thinking reveals the overlapping forms of discrimination and oppression experienced by singular individuals.
10. Despite the divergences, feminism and queer theory are related to each other and often overlap. In their encounters, both share critical relationships to a set of hegemonic formations. Early intersectional feminist theorising was produced by lesbian feminists of colour like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa who established the notion of 'inter-dependent and (non-dominant) mutual differences' between women along the lines of race, class and (lesbian) sexuality.<sup>[13]</sup> That the contribution of these notable feminists of colour to queer theorising goes mostly unremarked or erased altogether reveals the [Ms A1][BC2]unmarked whiteness and racism within the field of queer theory. Both feminism and queer theory have also been criticised for homogenising power struggles across the world with the imperialistic intent of envisioning the hegemonic sisterhood and global gay respectively.<sup>[14]</sup>
11. More recently, schisms within feminist discourse on the inclusion of trans-women's issues, in particular against the gender identification by trans-women as women within the pejoratively named 'trans-exclusionary radical feminism' (TERF), have deepened the divide between feminism and queer theory. By contrast, the trans-women—or Mak Nyah—and transmen communities in Malaysia are closely aligned with local feminist activism. There are possible reasons for this alliance. First, there is a lack of a sophisticated and locally developed theory on gender in Malaysia and a disengagement with (radical) feminist debates on trans-inclusion. Second, only until recently, transgender voices and influence in Malaysian feminist discourse were marginalised.<sup>[15]</sup> With greater political influence the transgender community in Malaysia will be able to steer the direction of debates on gender in Malaysia and illuminate what being a Mak Nyah and transman means in local feminist discourse.

## Mien Ly: A profile

12. In this section I trace the creative career of Mien Ly as a filmmaker whose work is situated in the shifting nexus of 'New Asia,' the development of new media technologies in the region, conservative religio-politics, and the rise of youth activism and civil society movements in Malaysia in the early 2000s. These trends function as both enabling and constraining factors requiring strategic approaches by actors who wish to develop feminist and queer projects in a socially conservative nation. The impetus for Mien Ly's filmmaking career meanwhile is buoyed by new and established cultural trends in Malaysia, namely the emergence of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) independent filmmaking movement, the queer possibilities opened up by new information technologies during the Mahathir era, and the long-running influx of western media cultures which expanded with these technologies. [\[16\]](#)
13. The independent filmmaking movement in Malaysia can be characterised as 'underground, low-budget, non-profit oriented, guerrilla filmmaking, and made without consideration of being screened in censor-ridden mainstream cinemas. [\[17\]](#) Since the watershed production of Amir Muhammad's *Lips to Lips* in 2000, the DIY independent filmmaking movement has developed into a niche yet culturally significant genre in its challenge to mainstream filmmaking practice. [\[18\]](#) Mien Ly's involvement in the Malaysian women's movement coincided with her budding independent filmmaking career that began with her participation in the making of short film projects by her friends and colleagues in university. Her first short film in 2003, *The Swing*, made for a university course, about betrayal in the family is autobiographical and influenced by her consciousness-raising work at the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), a Malaysian women's shelter. Other short films with a feminist edge followed; 2007's *Laundry* concerning the plight of female domestic workers in Malaysia, *Harga Cinta* (The Price of Love) in 2008, on gender and food security, and *Happy Massage* on sex workers and HIV, from 2010.
14. By making short films about female sexuality and marginalised communities, Mien Ly is responding to a patriarchal context that punishes and discriminates against minorities and often cracks down on dissent. Like many other independent filmmakers who are ethnic Chinese Malaysians, Mien Ly is excluded from participating in the Malay-dominated mainstream film industry, making her medium of choice an expression of resistance to the prevailing discrimination in Malaysia's popular culture. [\[19\]](#) And yet as female film practitioners, Mien Ly and other women filmmakers are under-represented within the male-dominated independent filmmaking community in Malaysia. Critical of the lack of access to filmmaking and screening opportunities, Mien Ly and her friends established Filmmakers Anonymous in 2006, a cooperative venture for amateur and first-time Malaysian filmmakers to make and exhibit their films at screening events. In 2010, in an attempt to address the dearth of women in independent filmmaking and nuanced representations of female sexuality in film, Mien Ly launched HerStory Malaysia, a collective of Malaysian women filmmakers, at Seksualiti Merdeka, a sexuality rights arts and culture festival. [\[20\]](#) Since then, she has exhibited her films in international queer and lesbian feminist conferences and film festivals.
15. Although Mien Ly has been successful in generating public interest in films made by the Filmmakers Anonymous and HerStory Malaysia project, she has been the target of criticism for making overtly 'personal' films and activist 'propaganda.' [\[21\]](#) Voiced by members of the local independent filmmaking community, these troubling criticisms undermine the politics of so-called 'women's issues' in the Malaysian creative sphere. They also underline the heterogeneity of power relations and tensions within the independent filmmaking community that compelled Mien Ly to pursue separate collaborations with other women filmmakers. Although the current literature describes independent filmmaking in Malaysia as a medium for political criticism, it has yet to fully explore the role of Malaysian women filmmakers like Mien Ly, and the likes of Norhayati Kaprawi, Nadira Illana and Nadiah Hamzah who make films on feminist issues for public contemplation. An analysis of Mien Ly's short films herein addresses this lacuna with an aim to promote further



discussion on gender and sexuality in the Malaysian independent filmmaking community as a medium for queer and feminist politics in Malaysia.

### **A vision of feminist and queer Malaysian politics in two short films by Mien Ly**

16. *My Confession Diary* is one of Mien Ly's earliest short films and exemplifies her foray into experimental feminist filmmaking. There is no soundtrack in the video. Without sound, the video has only textual and visual elements consisting of close-up montages featuring a solitary young woman in a room. The montages show the woman perform both surreal and mundane acts, such as dipping a dead fish, a stone, bolts, and a soft toy into a fish tank and sitting alone in the darkened room. The expression of the woman in the film oscillates between indifference and emotional agony. A line of text appears throughout the film in the lower half of the frame, like subtitles but typed in real time, that represents the woman's thoughts in the form of entries in a diary. In one early scene, the woman masturbates on her bed. The camera is placed at a low angle and out of focus, obscuring her face during the intimate act. As she masturbates, her thoughts are addressed to a male lover who is anachronistically traditional ('100 years ago, I tied up my feet, because you said the smaller my feet, the more beautiful I am').
17. The confessional diary 'entries' reveal a number of issues relating to female sexuality. Among them is a woman's struggle to reconcile her desire to be an active sexual participant with the expectations of her lover and society imposed on her to be a passive object of male wants and needs. There is a reference to the 'open coffeeshop,' a Malaysian euphemism to denote the exposure of one's underwear when sitting in an 'unlady-like' manner. A reminder that a girl should always conceal her 'coffeeshop' suggests that the policing of female sexuality begins from a young age and, as an adult, a Malaysian woman's bodily autonomy continues to be policed by oppressive social customs. In a later scene, there is an oblique reference to imminent violence and harassment represented by the foreboding 'footsteps' heard at a 'women's festival.' Her confession of fear of violence and harassment speaks of an anxiety that undermines female bodily autonomy in public spaces even in those designated as 'safe spaces' such as a feminist or women's event. This anxiety is contrasted with a 'feminist' psychology of fearlessness represented, in the film's text, by a feminist friend at the festival who hears the 'footsteps' and yet is liberated from the fear of harassment.
18. The young woman begins to reclaim her identity towards the end of the short film. She attacks a wall covered in photographs of her lover, during which time the text across the scene signifies a yearning for transcendence beyond her physical and psychic immobility. During this scene, the character ponders on the rigid constructions of Malaysian femininity that restrict her movements through the wearing of high-heeled shoes and an inability to wander in a park alone. In the film's climax, photographs of her lover are set on fire in a plant pot as the text describes female independence and reclamation of female sexuality ('I can go anywhere. With or without anyone. No footsteps. No gender. No fear. It feels so.... sexy, to be free'). Soil is then added to the ashes of the burnt photographs for a houseplant to grow in, signifying (re)birth.

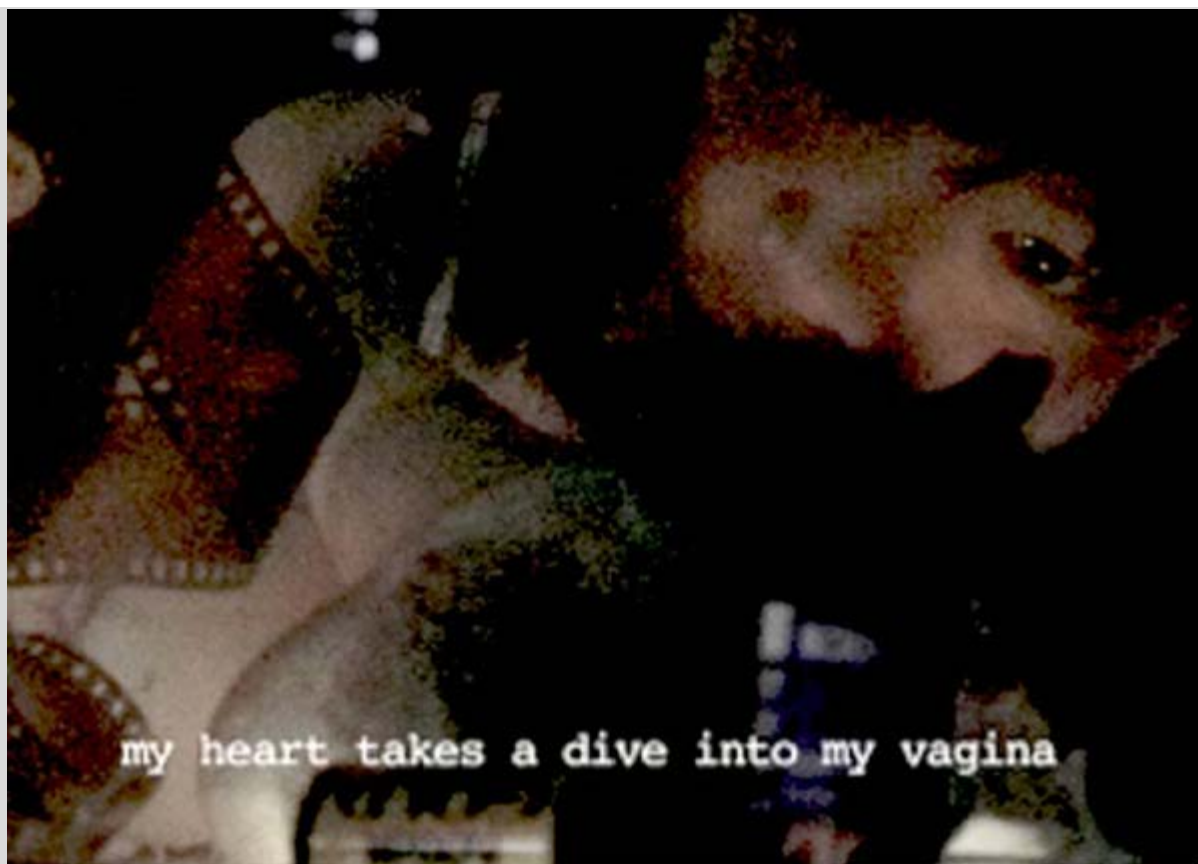


Figure 1. A scene from *My Confession Diary*. Source. Mien Ly

19. *My Confession Diary* bears several hallmarks of feminist filmmaking. To begin with, feminist filmmakers tend to produce similar kinds of content in their films, namely about women struggling in the public domain of formal and informal politics.<sup>[22]</sup> Feminist films and incidentally, women's diaries, are 'testimonies to the struggle women wage to create a language, to formulate a stable sense of self, and to survive economic dependency on men.'<sup>[23]</sup> As testimonies, they often feature women speaking to the camera or in the case of *My Confession Diary*, entries of a woman's diary. *My Confession Diary* is a tribute to the lost art of feminist counter-cinema whose purpose is to break down the patriarchal system of narrative in cinema through avant-garde conventions.<sup>[24]</sup> The lack of narrative serves to deny the pleasure of the male gaze and reclaim other cinematic pleasures that female spectators are thought to identify with. Made initially for a local music group, *My Confession Diary* as a feminist commentary on desire and female sexuality also suggests that feminist politics can be refashioned as popular culture. The malleability of Mien Ly's short film confirms Joanne Lim's observation on the lack of distinction between popular culture and youth political participation through new media production in Malaysia.<sup>25</sup> This very malleability exhibits an intertextuality, both ontologically speaking and as social-political praxis, as the short film complicates the easy generic boundaries that separate different cultural texts. Without the definitive, closed-off boundaries that distinguish cultural texts from each other, in this case as pop music video and feminist avant garde short film, intertexts such as *My Confession Diary* become more resistant to commodification and the absorption into the capitalist logic of production and consumption.
20. *My Confession Diary* lacks a clear narrative and features a nameless protagonist who engages in a range of clichéd and surreal acts brought about by failed romance. The use of surrealism and cliché invites a wellspring of ideas for discussion on form and aesthetics. However, it is the lack of a soundtrack which foregrounds the woman's 'voice' that I want to focus on in an identification of *My*

*Confession Diary* as a short film with critically 'ethnographic' qualities (see below). Without a sound track, the viewer's attention is drawn only to images and the text that constitute the protagonist's 'voice.' What the text reveals is frequently incommensurate with the images in the film, destabilising the traditional cinematic form that mandates the 'correct' alignment of picture and sound to produce a coherent film sequence. Because it lacks a narrative, what the short film offers instead are snapshots and visions that juxtapose cultural repression with female sexual determination. When transgressing patriarchal culture in Malaysia becomes itself a 'sexy' act, Mien Ly transposes the motivation of the nameless female protagonist into a distinctly queer 'logic of the libidinal' whereby resistance is about and aligned with desire and pleasure.

21. *My Confession Diary* shares a few similarities with the 1989 *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, a film by the avant garde feminist filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha. *Surname Viet* also features subtitled testimonials by postcolonial Third World women. Distance is established between the voice and the image of the woman in *My Confession Diary* and *Surname Viet* through the use of subtitles. However, unlike *My Confession Diary*, the subtitles in *Surname Viet* obscure the faces of the women as they speak to the camera about Vietnamese tradition and patriarchal culture. Trinh deliberately obscures the source of the women's speaking voice in *Surname Viet* to problematise the status of the Third World Woman as the 'truth teller' commonly found in western feminist discourse.[\[26\]](#)
22. In *My Confession Diary*, the nameless woman's 'voice' or entries of her diary represent a 'written' testimony of what it means to be a woman caught between an arcane patriarchal culture (the practice of feet-binding) and modernity (the freedom to roam public spaces alone as a woman). The film is, according to Mien Ly, one of her most personal and semi-autobiographical short films. It is her testimonial as a woman and Malaysian filmmaker in a society that silences and marginalises women. As a postcolonial Third World feminist whose medium is film, Mien Ly's filmic voice in *My Confession Diary* is an 'interventionist strategy against subjugation/signification' constructed by patriarchal culture but also western feminist discourse.[\[27\]](#) Through its lack of sound, its playful and 'imperfect' use of language, avant garde visual metaphors, and representation of femininity that destabilises the (masculine) pleasures of narrative story-telling, Mien Ly's postcolonial tongue/camera is de-objectified in relation to patriarchal narratives of Malaysian femininity and homogenising narratives of Third World women. Her films are projections of the subaltern whose narrative incoherence and visual rhetoric complicate the construction of Third World women in feminist scholarship.
23. *2 Boys, 2 Girls and a Beat Up Car* begins in a car driven by Beth, a human rights lawyer and her passenger, Katherine, who, as the film unfolds, is revealed as Beth's secret lover. The two women are on their way to meet their respective male partners, Ah Heng and David, who are jogging in a forest. While waiting for the two women, Ah Heng and David talk about the women as intercutting scenes from the past show the circumstances in which the men met their partners for the first time. David met the strong-willed and magnetic Beth at a party, while Ah Heng and Katherine, a political journalist, quarrel in their first meeting in an internet café. The men remark on how strikingly similar the two women are; both are ballsy and passionate about human rights. The men and women in *2 Boys, 2 Girls* are Mien Ly's signature characters: they are irreverent, playful and crude, who share 'private' moments of peeing and farting together.
24. Two key scenes from the past intercuts the men's musings about the two women; Katherine's detention by the police for exposing high-level corruption and her initial encounter with Beth, her defence lawyer. Their powerful attraction to each other in their first meeting, signalled in a lingering shot of their interlocking gaze and Beth's reassuring grip on Katherine's arm, is quickly established. When their car pulls up towards Ah Heng and David in the film's closing scene, the camera is

pulled away in a long shot. The exchange between the women and the men is not heard but the effect appears to be devastating. As the car drives away leaving the angry and shell-shocked men quite literally in the dust, Beth and Katherine formalise their love by holding each other's hand on the car's gear shift knob.



Figure 2. In *2 Boys, 2 Girls and a Beat Up Car*, Beth (right) reassures Katherine (left) that she will be released from detention. Source. Mien Ly

25. The viewer is able to conjecture that the women are kindred spirits ('They are damn kam ching,' says Ah Heng) before the women hold hands at the end..[\[28\]](#) As outspoken and fearless activists with a political cause, Beth and Katherine represent ideal Malaysian feminist figures. By contrast, the men, whose careers and political orientations are undefined, are boorish and homophobic. Intercutting between the past and present, the film uses temporal oscillation to narrate a progression, not least towards the affirmation of the women's queer identities, budding love, and happiness as they drive off into the forest. In *2 Boys, 2 Girls*, the past is heteronormative, the future is full of queer possibilities. In fact, the car is a literal and metaphorical vehicle that transports them on a journey from heteronormativity to some uncertain but nonetheless queer destination. The women's movement into a new temporality, a distinctly queer one, coheres with José Esteban Muñoz's formulation that queerness is an event defined by its imminence; 'always on the horizon'[\[29\]](#) . Muñoz's definition of queerness is one that is not yet here, a futurity that is perceived through one's critical and affective faculties. In fact, the scene in which Katherine and Beth drive away into the future, away from their ex-boyfriends, verily embodies a vision of queerness that is visible only in the distance.
26. Aside from the explicit reference to same-sex female romance, *2 Boys, 2 Girls* makes implicit and sly allusions to conservative social and familial expectations and repressive government policies against gay men.[\[30\]](#) These are agonising concerns to contend with in Malaysian society marked by a homophobic colonial imprint. The challenges of being a lesbian and queer women in Malaysia have also been recorded.[\[31\]](#) However, the cultural stigma of female homosexuality in Malaysia is relatively less pernicious than male homosexuality. The law that prohibits sodomy in Malaysia, an arcane colonial legislation inherited from British India, is conflated with the criminalisation of male gay sexual relationships. It has been invoked to infamous effect in the conviction of sodomy of the former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, in 2000. By contrast, debates concerning



same-sex relations between women have not been couched in political or legalistic terms as male homosexuality and transgender identity have been. [32] In fact, queer women's issues in Malaysia are deeply marginalised and little understood.

27. As a couple, Beth and Katherine will face difficulties forging their own course. The tribulations of their uncharted future ahead is felt by Beth: 'Not going to be easy with the boys, this country, this society, our families.' Although the two women are oriented towards a queer future, they are still postcolonial subjects subjected by colonial legislation that criminalises homosexuality and enforces detention without trial. Their negotiation with the colonial imprint of contemporary Malaysian culture thus requires both a look backward and a look forwards. As progressive political subjects, Beth and Katherine speak the language of human rights (against Katherine's allegedly unlawful detention). Their progressively political and queer identity communicate interlocking ideals about a broadly conceived idea of social progress promoted by feminists and more recently by queer activists in Malaysia. [33]

### Mapping the ground for a decolonising queer feminist theory in Malaysia

28. *My Confession Diary* and *2 Boys, 2 Girls* explore the themes of sexual determination and mobility as freedom, themes that motivate Mien Ly as a filmmaker. Sexuality in Mien Ly's films is shot through a decolonising postcolonial feminist lens that projects a vision of sexual self-determination and decentres the heteronormative femininity expected of Malaysian women. Her short films offer snapshots of feminist and queer experience in Malaysia, a collage featuring instances of love, loss, vulnerability and resistance by women who move along the shifting intersections of Malaysian Chinese, queer, and feminist subjectivities. The theme of space interrogates the gendered notions of public and private spheres and is at the centre of debates in Malaysia about the policing of (homo)sexuality and its banishment to the private sphere. Being 'out,' openly transgender or genderqueer in Malaysia has violent repercussions particularly for Muslims whose lives are subjected to Sharia laws and non-legally binding fatwas. [34] Because of repressive laws and the policing of sexuality, mobility through the act of migration to western societies has become an important undertaking for many Malaysian queers, not least for Mien Ly who has spent four years in England, Europe and Mexico. Seen through the lens of class and race, however, mobility/migration for queer Malaysians abroad is fraught with contradictions. As Jasbir Puar argues, while 'gay and lesbian tourism [represents] an ironic marker of an elitist cosmopolitan mobility, a group momentarily decriminalised through its purchasing power ... immigrants are increasingly criminalised and contained.' [35]
29. While postcolonial feminist thinking requires one to be attentive to class structures within the economy of desire and knowledge production, the short films discussed in this paper do not. That the characters in the short films speak in effortless Malaysian English says a thing or two about the privileged middle-class background of its filmmaker and her intended audience. The English language spoken in the films also enacts scenes from what Rey Chow calls the 'racialised encounter with language with (post)coloniality' in which postcolonial subjects speak in a language that is not theirs. [36] Postcolonial subjects of the imperial periphery like Malaysia are reminded of their inauthentic status as speakers of 'Manglish,' a creole with a predominantly English vocabulary but augmented by local intonation and Malay and Hokkien grammar structure. By contrast, the only time Malay is spoken is in *2 Boys, 2 Girls* when Katherine expresses her outrage at the police's unlawful detention which suggests the association of power and repression with Malay identity.
30. Through its constitutional and legal apparatuses, Malaysian society still lives in the shadow of colonialism. But the envisioning of another Malaysia, one that defies legal heteronormativity and hegemonic cultural structure is hardly regarded as an anti-colonial one, because its object of opposition—the imperialist entity or 'centre'—is absent. Instead, the British colonial administrators

have been replaced by new a 'centre,' a mainly Malay elite that administers a colonial government and its colonial legislation and cultural constructs. Thus the decolonising critique is distinguished from anti-colonialism in this article as a methodological orientation rather than a nationalist project to undermine colonialism. The postcolonial dream of political independence from the British and the creation of a new nation was substituted by rapid development and modernisation in the 1970s and 1980s in order to create a broad middle class. Rather than looking back towards its colonial past, Malaysia as a postcolonial state is forward-facing, towards a perpetually unfolding modernity.

31. The trajectory of Malaysia as a modernising postcolonial state was founded on the development and enrichment of a Malay middle class, defined broadly as an ethnic group that not only speaks Malay, but habitually practices Malay customs, and observes Islam. While the hegemony of Malay culture is maintained through 'invented traditions,' other Malaysian ethnic groups historically uprooted from different caste communities in India and various regions of China become a people without a past.<sup>[37]</sup> As a means of maintaining hegemony, the identity of Chinese and Indian Malaysians are measured against the historical markers of Malay culture.<sup>[38]</sup> Groups and individuals who challenge laws that are enforced for the preservation of 'harmony' and 'security' of the nation are subversive and unlawfully 'seditious.'
32. The legal and cultural constraints in Malaysia outlined above represent the local and historical specificities and experiences of the subject conceived through a decolonising feminist and queer lens. As a queer Chinese Malaysian woman, Mien Ly speaks and films from multiple sites of marginality that require an intersectional approach to bring to light facets of identity that would otherwise be subsumed under over-deterministic categories of race, ethnicity and religion in Malaysia. Seen from an intersectional perspective, queer Chinese Malaysian women have limited representational currency; they are marginalised in feminist discourse on Malaysian women and invisible in debates on queer politics in Malaysia. However, through the creative medium of film, the multiply marginalised 'subaltern' is able to speak and convey a testimonial on gender and sexuality that challenges the normative construction of Malaysian femininity.

### Concluding remarks

33. Empowered by political claims to knowing and experiencing queer femininity in Malaysia, the short films by Mien Ly come with a authorial signature that has an 'ethnographic' quality. They are film texts produced by a non-white woman whose articulations about femininity and female desire invert the normative paradigm of the First World feminist and male ethnographer who speak from a framework of imperialist and patriarchal authority. In addition to labelling Third World female filmmakers as 'speaking subalterns,' Gwendolyn Audrey Foster writes that their cinematic medium is a creative 'testimony,' a site for a 'de-objectified postcolonial tongue/camera.'<sup>[39]</sup>
34. Although, in this paper I have not challenged the problematic presuppositions of feminism and queer theory that have traditionally separated the two, I have made inroads in thinking about how they may converge to produce a localised articulation of queer theory in Malaysia. I have also proposed that a feminist approach to queer theory can illuminate androcentric and sexist biases and the effacement of political and creative contributions by queer women in Malaysia feminist activism. A decolonisation of queer theory informed by feminism can take the lead from the intellectual and political trajectory of Third World Feminism which addresses two projects. The first project 'is one of deconstructing and dismantling' of hegemonic discourses; the second consists of 'building and constructing' the 'formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist (and queer) concerns and strategies.'<sup>[40]</sup>
35. Finally, feminist approaches to queer theory in Malaysia can situate culture and knowledge production by Malaysian queers and feminists within a context that is beleaguered by legal

repercussions and hostile to minorities and women's rights. The making of independent films as political critique is a strategy deployed by small-scale media activists and by Mien Ly in her short films as discussed above. As a feminist independent filmmaker, her films about queer identities and female sexuality bring to light issues and identities frequently marginalised and effaced at the intersection of gender and sexuality in a local context overdetermined by ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. Through their snapshots and vision, the state of multiple marginalities presented in Mien Ly's short films activate the idea of queerness that is 'open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations.'<sup>[41]</sup>

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I would like to thank Mien Ly and Jun Zubillaga Pow for their generosity and kind advice.

## Notes

[1] The term 'Third World' is a much contested term in feminist research for its potentially homogenising and Eurocentric biases that may preclude transnational forms of identifications. Nonetheless, the term 'Third World' is used here to contrast the structural inequalities between 'First World' and 'postcolonial 'Third World' feminist knowledge production.

[2] See Khoo Gaik Cheng's discussion on the portrayal of Malay female sexuality in Malaysian cinema in *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006, pp. 125–57.

[3] Sara Ahmed, 'Towards a queer phenomenology,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 12, no. 4 (2006): 543–74, p. 543.

[4] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses,' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Anne Russo and Lourdes Torres, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 51–80. p. 51.

[5] See Fran Martin, Peter Jackson, Mark McLelland and Audrey Yue (eds), *AsiaPacificqueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008, pp. 6–7.

[6] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* vol. 14 (1989): 139–67, p. 141.

[7] Julian C.H. Lee, 'Sexuality rights activism in Malaysia: The case of Seksualiti Merdeka,' in *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michele Ford, New York and London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 170–86.

[8] Elizabeth Weed, 'Introduction,' in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Weed and Naomi Schor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. vii–xiii, p. viii; Judith Butler, 'Against proper objects,' in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Weed and Schor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 1–30, p. 1.

[9] Weed, 'Introduction,' p. viii.

[10] Steven Seidman, *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 140.

[11] Butler, 'Against proper objects,' p. 1.

[12] See Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, 'Towards a field of intersectionality studies: theory, applications, and praxis,' in *Signs* vol. 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810; pp. 786–87.

[13] Audre Lorde, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,' in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 25–28. p. 26.

[14] For further discussion on the intersection of queer theory and race, see Ian Barnard's *Queer Race: Cultural*

*Invention in the racial politics of Queer Theory*, New York: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 6. Also see Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose, 'Introduction,' in *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film*, ed. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997, pp.xv–xxxiii, p. xx; and John C. Hawley, 'Introduction,' in *Postcolonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2001, pp.1–18.

[15] In November 2014, a court of appeal ruling in Malaysia overturned the Sharia legislated ban on cross-dressing, see [Zurairi AR](#), 'Watershed for Muslim transgenders as court rules anti-cross dressing Shariah law unconstitutional,' in *Malay Mail Online* (7 November 2014), online: <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/watershed-for-muslim-transgenders-as-court-rules-anti-crossdressing-shariah>(accessed 18 November 2014).

[16] See Olivia Khoo's discussion on the cultivation of queer discourse buoyed by Malaysia's emerging information media technologies in the 1990s and early 2000s in 'Sexing the city: Malaysia's new "cyberlaws" and Cyberjaya's queer success,' in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 222–44, pp. 222–23.

[17] Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'Just-Do-It-(Yourself): Independent filmmaking in Malaysia,' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 8, no. 2, (2007): 227–47. p. 228.

[18] Khoo, 'Just-Do-It-(Yourself),' p. 228.

[19] Khoo, 'Just-Do-It-(Yourself),' p. 229.

[20] For more on how HerStory relates to Seksualiti Merdeka, see Lee, 'Sexuality rights activism in Malaysia,' p. 175.

[21] In interview with Mien Ly, London, 8 October 2013.

[22] Julia Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film,' in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol. 3, issue 4 (1978): 507–23. p. 515.

[23] Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film,' p. 516.

[24] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,' *Screen* vol. 16, no. 2 (Autumn 1975): 6–18, quoted in Jane Gaines, 'Women and representation,' *Jump Cut* no. 29 (1984): 25–27, p. 25.

[25] Joanne B.Y. Lim, 'Video blogging and youth activism in Malaysia,' *The International Communication Gazette* vol. 75, no. 3 (2013): 300–21, p. 301.

[26] Amy Lawrence, 'Women's voices in Third World Cinema,' in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 406–20, pp. 414–15.

[27] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, 'Third World women's cinema: If the subalterns speak, will we listen?,' in *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film*, ed. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose, New York: Taylor and Francis, 1997, pp. 213–26, p. 217.

[28] 'They are damn *kam ching*' roughly translates as 'They get along really well' in creolised Malaysian English.

[29] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 1.

[30] For further details on legal prohibition against homosexuality and sodomy in Malaysia, see Olivia Khoo, 'Sexing the city,' pp. 231–32, Lee, 'Sexuality rights activism in Malaysia,' pp. 170–74, and Shanon Shah, 'The Malay dilemma: negotiating sexual diversity in a Muslim-majority Commonwealth state,' in *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, ed. Corrine Lennox and Matthew Waites, London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2013, pp. 261–86.

[31] While studies on gay and transfemale identities predominate the literature on queer or LGBT culture in Malaysia, a few studies have explored the lived experiences of butch lesbian and transmale or '*pengkids*'. Ismail Baba's 'Gay and



lesbian couples in Malaysia' in *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 30, issues 3–4, (2001): 143–63, is one of the earliest of such studies. See also Yuenmei Wong's article, 'Islam, sexuality, and the marginal positioning of pengkids and their girlfriends in Malaysia,' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* vol. 16, issue 4, (2012): 435–48.

[32] The case of Azizah and Rohana, two women who married with the former 'impersonating' as a man courted media interest in 1996. While Azizah's ability to pass as a man was met with incredulity and moral condemnation, she was only charged with impersonation as there are no laws against lesbianism in Malaysia. See Maznah Mohamad, Cecilia Ng and Tan Beng Hui's *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*, London: Routledge 2003, pp. 142–44.

[33] Feminist activists in Malaysia have traditionally aligned themselves with other social justice movements, adopting causes outside conventional feminist and women's issues. See Mohamad, Ng and Hui, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*; and Alicia Izharuddin's 'The use of English in contemporary Malaysian feminist activism,' in *Analyze: Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* issue 1, no. 15 (2013): 1–15, p. 5.

[34] See Lee, 'Sexuality rights activism in Malaysia,' pp. 178–79 on the furore elicited by the 'It Gets Better' project in Malaysia in late 2010 featuring an openly gay young Malay-Muslim man.

[35] Jasbir Puar, 'A transnational feminist critique of queer tourism,' in *Antipode* vol. 34, issue 5 (2002): 935–46, p. 942.

[36] Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 10.

[37] Clive Kessler, 'Archaism and modernity: Contemporary Malay political culture,' in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, Kensington, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1992, pp. 133–57, pp. 143–46.

[38] Kessler argues that attempts by non-Malays to contest their cultural identity are interpreted as threats to the established political order and the majority's cultural identity ('Archaism and modernity,' pp. 137–38.)

[39] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, 'Third World women's cinema: If the subalterns speak, will we listen?', in *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film*, ed. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Bose, New York: Taylor and Francis, 1997, pp. 213–26, p. 217.

[40] Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses,' p. 51.

[41] David L. Eng, Judith Halbestam and Josésteban Muñoz, 'Introduction,' to *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?*, in *Social Text* vol. 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 1–17.

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