

Illustrating Childhood: Reading Lat's *Kampung Boy* series as a Bildungsroman for Children

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The graphic narrative is a medium through which children can be introduced to literary works in an accessible and engaging fashion. As John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* comments, “[s]eeing comes before words” (7). He continues, “[t]he child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (7). This pull towards the visual, the ability of the eye to non-verbally identify and decode the connotative meaning of images and the visceral connection between the eye which sees and the “I” who decodes the images, then, is what makes the graphic narrative a popular medium for encouraging children to read. We live in an image-saturated and dependent world. Images come at us at high volume and speed – literally, thousands of images a day in the form of advertisements, billboards, publicity, infomercials etc. in print and electronic media. Kevin Maness in “Teaching Media-Savvy Students about Popular Media” comments that contrary to common assumptions that children are “passive audiences of the media, lacking the critical, analytical skills to resist media manipulation” (46), most of them actually have quite well-honed media literacy skills “gained through years of informal media literacy training” (46) as a result of their exposure to and interaction with popular media. He continues that “[a]lthough these skills may be used unconsciously; they are effective and often sophisticated” (47) suggesting that most children’s visual literacy is high. Cultural and media theorist, Sut Jhally in “Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture” points out the embeddedness of what he calls the “image-system” (251) within social life. He observes that in order to properly carry out its function, the advertising industry in the first half of the twentieth century “literally...taught [consumer society] how to read the commercial messages” (250) that were being produced by the advertising industry. He concludes that “by the postwar period the education was complete” (250) and consumers had learned how to decode the visual/commodity image-system effectively. Jhally’s article, although written about advertising in 1990, points prophetically to the state of visual affairs in the twenty-first century, especially with the massive growth and popularity of social media. He says, “[a]s we head toward the twenty-first century, advertising is ubiquitous – it is the air that we breathe as we live our daily lives.” (250-1).¹ Now, in the twenty-first century, we could just as easily say the above about the presence of visual-content-loaded social media. Consequently, due to the “ubiquity” and embeddedness of image-systems within contemporary culture and the media, it would not be far-fetched to conclude that many

¹ Edmund B. Feldman is in agreement. He comments in “Visual Literacy,” that “our culture is increasingly represented and perceived in visual terms” (200).

children have a relatively strong ability to recognize, understand, and decode the images they see - a point in support of employing the graphic narrative as a medium to develop literary awareness in children.²

On the value of graphic narrative as a means of engaging young people's interest in literary work, Christina Sanchez has this to say: "by being mediators between young people and adults, between high and popular culture, comics and cartoons are ideally suited as an intrinsically motivating teaching material that can draw students' attention to demanding linguistic phenomena in a playful way" (276) because they focus attention on both text and image. While Sanchez is interested in the use of comics and cartoons for primarily linguistic teaching and acquisition, I would contend that graphic narratives are an effective medium through which to also encourage the development of a literary understanding of the text in children. The visual elements of the graphic narrative can be effectively used to assist young people in producing readings of mood, atmosphere, setting and sensuous imagery that can be read parallel to and in tandem or tension with the verbal text.

Images, as Berger reminds us, are not unmediated – he comments, "[e]very image embodies a way of seeing...The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception and appreciation of an image depends also on our own way of seeing" (10). Every image, thus, is not a transparent window conveying information but is always, already mediated, shaped and framed by the eye of the artist/author and also the eye of the receiver/reader. It is, in essence, always already a re-presentation – a semiotic encoding and decoding that produces meaning. Both the artist's "way of seeing" and the reader's "way of seeing" engage to produce meaning in the image. This aspect of our engagement with the image is important, especially in our production of meaning when we read imagistic texts like the graphic narrative, where a significant part of the story is told in the graphics. Importantly, Jhally also reminds us that "the grammar of ...images...is clearly different to the grammar of verbal or written language." (253). Edmund B. Feldman concurs. He points out, as Jhally does, that "visual communication ...relies on an innate grammar of images" (196) and that "[r]eading images ...involves a sampling or trial of several logical sequences before the viewer finds one that is capable of carrying him through a whole visual organization with some degree of formal, sensuous, or cognitive satisfaction" (198). The "grammar of images," as both Jhally and Feldman suggest, operates through our ability to perceive and understand visual signs – to take into account and "notice lines, shapes, colors, textures, and light intensities"

² Of course, this conclusion comes with many assumptions, the least not being that the societies and cultures involved are technologically developed enough for the multiple images-systems to exist within them, and that the children in question are able to participate in a visually rich environment.

(197) and then organize these into meaningful sequences of information. Feldman points out that this process in itself is common to both reading words as well as images but that the difference lies in the possibilities offered by images for creative, flexible, and multiple organizations of perceptions. Thus “more than one valid reading of an image is possible...testifying to the complexity of perceptual sequences that a reasonably interesting image can sustain” (198). This complexity and multiplicity of readings is often restricted in verbal representation because it is “necessary to *forget* what symbols look like and to remember only the sounds they stand for” (197) and then to “interpret the symbolic meanings of the words and their sequential or syntactic meanings based on their positions in a word string or sentence” (197). Thus, the decoding and interpretation of verbal meaning is strongly regulated by the symbolic meanings attached to the words, and sequential structure of syntax. This, we could argue, could limit the possible readings that could be generated from the text. Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn are in agreement, although more poetically so. They state:

Literature, both written and oral, is an exercise in sequential linearity. Texts are like a river, flowing on in a line, just like this one, from left to right, or from right to left, usually top to bottom, page to page to page. Pictures, on the other hand, are like lakes, not flowing at all, just lying there—meaningful surfaces, abstractions, reductions of three-dimensional events into two dimensional circumstances. When reading pictures, our eyes scan the surface, constructing temporal and meaningful sequences. As the picture remains static while the text flows past, our eyes are more or less free to roam, and thus the picture exists in a magical world in which time is not a line but a complex loop, and in which everything can acquire a temporal and causal connection to everything else:... pictures are not simply frozen events, but rather complex circumstances. (1 – 2)

Because the pictures are “static” they are present to the eye much more than the text – we are able to see the picture more wholly than the text whose form slips from our gaze as we proceed along the page. Thus, the image offers possibilities of interpretation and reinterpretation both in connection to and separate from the flowing text.

Furthermore, Feldman concludes that “[i]t is quite possible... that the formal and sensuous complexity of much visual imagery accounts for its emotive power” (199). Thus, the process of reading a graphic narrative is then not passive – a mere looking at pictures that reinforce words, or which are read like words - but an active “seeing” or perceiving of the nuances of the story through the image. The image often offers a richness and depth of detail that efficiently transcends words. The image does not merely tell a story, but at times, even many stories, and is also open to the discovery of details that provoke curiosity, evoke emotions, and captivate the attention.

In considering the nature of graphic narratives, Charles Hatfield in “Comic Art, Children’s Literature and the New Comic Studies” comments that early academic studies of graphic narratives (comics and cartoons) considered “that comics at best play a developmental role in the reading life of children, that they are by nature “easy” reading, and that the images in comics function either as crutches or distractions to the novice reader and are of little value in themselves” (364). Hatfield takes umbrage with this view as he considers that “comics can make for dense, complex reading” (364). This complexity of reading arises from the multi-modal nature of graphic narrative. Gayle Whitlock and Anna Poletti in “Self-Regarding Art” point to the levels of density inherent in the act of reading graphic narratives: what needs to be read are “[a]ll elements of line and white space, the plan of gutters and panels, changing perspectives and the strategic use of close-up” (xi) among others. Within the graphic narrative, Whitlock and Poletti claim, “[l]inguistic, audio, visual, gestural and spatial design elements interconnect in ‘co-presence’” (xi). These elements – the visual-literary/image-word – are not melted together into one representation but are instead read in tension with each other.

At this point a very brief discussion of Dual-Coding theory developed by Allan Paivio would be apropos. Paivio’s theory suggests there are essentially two distinct mental subsystems at work within the cognitive (reading) processes. These are the “verbal system” which is “specialized for dealing with language” (Sadoski, Paivio and Goetz 473) and the “nonverbal system” which is “specialized for the representation and processing of information concerning nonverbal objects and events” (473). According to Paivio, these two systems operate differently: “information in the verbal system is organized in a way that favors sequential, syntactic processing, whereas nonverbal information (especially the visual modality) is organized more in the form of holistic nested sets with information available for processing in a synchronous or parallel manner” (473). The systems however are interconnected and this, therefore, allows a great deal of flexibility and diversity within cognitive processes. What is interesting in Paivio’s theory is that the two separate subsystems – verbal and non-verbal – operate independently or parallel rather than dependently on each other, but with the capacity to facilitate interactions and interconnections that provide for an optimization of cognitive activity. In essence, “the verbal” and “the nonverbal” “interconnect in co-presence” as Whitlock and Poletti, quoted earlier, have asserted about the graphic narrative. In brief, Paivio’s Dual-Coding theory appears consonant with the theorizations of graphic narrative scholars about the ways in which graphic narratives are read.

Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven in “Graphic Narrative” remark that “graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language—the language of comics—that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page” (767). They continue,

We further understand graphic narrative as hybrid in the following sense: comics is a mass cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references; comics is multigeneric, composed, often ingeniously, from widely different genres and subgenres; and, most importantly, comics is constituted in verbal and visual narratives that do not merely synthesize. In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text, which also moves the reader forward in time. The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct. (769)

Chute and DeKoven make an interesting and important point – the graphics in a graphic narrative “tell” their own story (or even stories) – one(s) that may or may not coincide with the words on the page. The images, read semiotically (and symbolically), are open to multiple non-verbal interpretations both in tandem with and without the text on the page. This idea dispels notions of graphic narrative (or rather comics) as a merging together of literary word and the image, in which the image reinforces the word. As Bernniger, Ecke and Haberkorn contend, the graphic narrative “combines text and pictures into something quite unlike either” (2).

The graphic narrative, as Whitlock insists “[is] not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both” (968). A valuable manner of thinking about the nature of the graphic novel is presented by Marianne Hirsch – she uses the word “binocularity” to define the process of reading a graphic narrative as it “[asks] us to read back and forth between images and words...[revealing] the visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images” (qtd in Whitlock “Autographics” 966). This shuttling between image and text makes, as Whitlock points out, “an extraordinary demand on the reader to produce closure” (968) which is intended to “[draw] the passive ‘looker’ into the engagement (and demands) of reading” (968). The reader becomes, in essence, “a collaborator engaging in an active process of working through” (970) what Whitlock calls “the semiotics of sequential art” (970). Reading the graphic narrative, thus, requires active seeing and engagement on the part of the reader to produce meaning, rather than mere passive looking, something that critics of the genre, especially for children, as indicated earlier, have accused the medium of perpetuating.³

³ See Charles Hatfield’s article, “Comic Art, Children’s Literature and the New Comics Studies.”

An example of this kind of active seeing and engagement can clearly be seen in Lat's *Kampung Boy*⁴ series which masterfully depicts the life of its protagonist Mat from birth to early adulthood. The series traces his development, not only in terms of his physical growth but also his mental maturation and progress into adulthood during an eventful period of Malaysian history. As such, it is an eminently suitable series of work to introduce children to the concept of the bildungsroman and to encourage and enable them to develop engaged literary readings of texts.

Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, or rather, Lat, is a well-acclaimed⁵ Malaysian cartoonist with 26 volumes of work currently published. His *Kampung Boy* has been turned into a television cartoon series which has been shown on Astro Ria in Malaysia.⁶ Lat began his career as a cartoonist early – he was already publishing cartoons at the tender age of thirteen. He eventually went on to become an editorial cartoonist for one of the major English newspapers in Malaysia, the *New Straits Times*, and his career flourished from there on. The two volumes of Lat's cartoons selected for this study are *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*. Together these volumes focus on the process of growth and maturity of the protagonist, Mat, (a thinly veiled representation of the author himself), from birth to his early adulthood. The first volume to be examined here, Lat's *Kampung Boy*, details the story of Mat's birth and his experience growing up in a small village in Perak near a mining site. The graphic narrative portrays the significant markers of Mat's life as well as provides visual insight into the nuances of living in a small Malay village back in the 1950s and 1960s. *Town Boy* charts Mat's family's migration to Ipoh, a larger town, his teenage years as well as the cultural encounters he experienced which helped shape his identity.

The visual elements of the *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* graphic narratives convey, with vivid detail, the immediacy of the experiences that Lat's protagonist undergoes. The drawings focus attention on all the minutiae that flesh out the story much as verbal description creates and fleshes out the world within a novel. While it is undoubted that the background and universe of the novel can be evocatively created through words, the drawings in the graphic narrative provide a precise and vivid visual impression of the world of the narrative and as such enables us to forge an immediate connection to the world or universe of the narrative. Visual details, lines, shading, gutters, frames and

⁴ Kampung can be translated as village

⁵ Lat was awarded his *Datukship* in 1994 and since then has gone on to win the Fukuoka Asia Culture Prize (2002) as well as the Special Jury Award from the Malaysian Press Institute (2004).

⁶ It must be noted that the televised cartoon version of *Kampung Boy* is set not in the original time frame of the books but rather in so-called contemporary Malaysia. The characters, although drawn in Lat's inimitable style, tend to resemble American cartoon character stereotypes. Mat's father, for example, follows the stereotype of the "white working class man," with slight Homer Simpson overtones. For further information about characteristics of these stereotypes and their persistence in the media see Richard Butsch's "Ralph, Fred, Archie and Homer: Why Television Keeps Re-creating the White Male Working-Class Buffoon."

white spaces, fonts and font size provide opportunities for semiotic interpretations to be unpacked and which convey with visceral immediacy the impact of the scene.

A good example that illustrates this point can be found in Mat's recounting of his head-shaving ceremony (*adat cukur kepala*) in *Kampung Boy*. The scene is set within the village, specifically in front of Mat's father's house. The men and women in attendance are located on separate sides in the picture and the number of men outstrips that of the women. We are given the impression that the head-shaving ceremony is primarily a male function largely due to the much smaller number of women in attendance. Furthermore, the men are depicted as singing both happily and ceremoniously. We are shown both men and women wearing sarongs as their primary article of clothing. The drawings clearly indicate both how the sarongs are tied for each gender as well as the patterns associated with these genders - squares and stripes for men and florals, diagonals and other patterns for women. Furthermore, the traditional type of cradle used for babies in the village is also depicted in this drawing - a sarong suspended from the ceiling into which the child is placed and rocked. The placement of the child in this cloth cradle is also indicated. Further, we see the details of the *kampung* house which is made of wood and built on stilts. We are given a clear idea of the architectural structure of the house and the way the windows with wooden shutters are placed over gracefully carved wooden banisters with a very short fringe of a curtain at the top of the each window. We are also given an idea of the height of the house from the ground by Lat's illustration of people leaning against the house's supporting poles and the size of the household items that are stored under the house. A page later, the illustration of the communal meal shared by the people who have come to attend the head-shaving ceremony suggests not only the gendered nature of communal interaction but also a tacit separation of the sexes during "public" functions. At the meal, which is served on a mat on the floor around which people sit to eat, only the men are depicted in the drawing, suggesting that there are particular customs that govern male-female interactions.

The atmosphere and backdrop of the events transpiring are completely and concisely conveyed through the illustrations. We are brought into the world of the pre-Independence Malay *kampung* with its strong sense of community and connection with nature. The ambiance and setting with its sense of communal intimacy and solidarity or *muhibbah*, and the sense of liveliness and joy are clearly visually evoked in the graphic drawings. With the drawings the details can be vividly displayed on the page for the attention of the reader, as "meaningful surfaces, abstractions and reductions of three-dimensional events into two dimensional circumstances" (Berninger, Ecke, and Haberkorn 1) that hold the eye and allow us to "construct temporal and meaningful sequences" (1). A perusal of the illustrated page gives up its information at our attention and pleasure, and often continues to yield interpretative re-readings.

Kampung Boy tells the story of Mat's birth right up to his tenth year of life, covering the important cultural milestones for a Malay boy including his enrollment in religious school to learn to pronounce the Quaranic verses in Arabic, and his circumcision ceremony. It also provides details of his everyday life – playing, going to school, interacting with family, friends and classmates, doing chores and getting up to mischief with the Meor brothers (labelled the troublemakers by Mat's parents), ending finally with his passing the examinations required for him to be accepted into the boarding school in Ipoh and leaving home. This volume presents insights into the small close-knit Malay village community in which people are well known to each other. Life in the community is portrayed through the eyes of a growing Mat – at first, the pace of life in the village seems relaxed and rather care-free as he is allowed to run around and play with his friends for most of the day. As he grows older, Mat becomes far more aware of the financial realities experienced by his family and begins to take on more responsibilities – he helps out at the mosque, goes fishing to supplement the family diet and income, guards durian trees to prevent monkeys from stealing the fruit and does some illegal tin panning to earn some money – a move that ends with him being punished by his parents. The illustrations convey the childlike innocence and eventual growing awareness of the protagonist of the complexities of life through an often humorous depiction of the events of his life.

The comic exaggeration in the scenes where Mat's father chases him around the house and village after he comes home triumphantly bearing his illegally panned tin ore encourages laughter and minimizes the reality of the punishment which will come, highlighting instead the inappropriateness of this form of trying to be responsible in the family. A couple of pages after the amusing chase scene we are shown Mat lying wrapped up on the sleeping area next to his younger brother, overhearing his parents discussing his actions and punishment as well as his future and their hopes for him. The scene foregrounds Mat lying on his side, facing the reader while his parents sit as black shadowed figures in the background: his father's body, back turned to the audience, is hunched defensively while his mother is shown in profile facing his father, mouth open and hand raised as though in argument. This moment of eavesdropping by a sullen Mat (depicted with downturned mouth and bruised face) allows us to see beyond the pain he suffers as a result of parental disciplining, making us aware of the reluctant beginnings of Mat's understanding that his father has aspirations for him and that he can no longer indulge in the freedom of his childhood days. It marks the start of Mat's growing up. Towards the end, the narrative highlights Mat's constantly increasing awareness that he must become more responsible for his own actions and the outcome of his life and that this responsibility should take more socially appropriate forms – not stealing tin in a get-rich-quick scheme but rather, looking after the family land and studying hard so that he can further his education in town. By the end of the

graphic narrative, the childlike, carefree, gleeful Mat has begun to grow up into a more observant boy who recognizes that life is more complex than he had thought it previously.

In *Town Boy*, the second volume, Lat's protagonist begins to have closer encounters with non-Malay cultures primarily through his friendship with Frankie, a Chinese boy who attends the same school as he does. Previously in *Kampung Boy*, Mat is shown to be a somewhat solitary child hanging literally on the margins of group interaction within his small village community of children. *Town Boy*, on the other hand, documents Mat's growth into maturity and early adulthood, his development as an artist as well as all the attendant concerns of adolescence like discovering girls and falling in love.

Mat's experience of town life begins with his acceptance into a boarding school in Ipoh at the age of ten. Until his family moves to a low-cost housing scheme near Ipoh, he lives in a hostel while attending school. While Mat in the narrative appears thrilled at the idea of his family becoming townspeople, there is a hidden cost to the move – at the end of *Kampung Boy*, Mat indicates that his family house and surrounding lands would have to be sold to tin miners for the move to take place, suggesting not only the end of village life for Mat and his family but rather the end of the village itself. As such, Mat's family's move to the town implies a clear loss of connection to the communal way of life in the *kampung* as well as the connection to nature. In *Town Boy*, we see that Mat's family lives in far more isolated circumstances than previously – at 13, Mat's usual companion is his younger brother, whom he escorts around the town as a pastime. He has effectively no real circle of friends as he had had in the village. Nevertheless, Mat manages to make a good friend in Frankie, whose family runs a coffee shop in Ipoh. Through Frankie, Mat is introduced to both a glimpse of life for a Chinese shop-keeping family as well as Western culture in the form of rock and roll. A depiction of some of the cultural differences between family life for the Malays and the Chinese is shown through the illustrations of Mat's family kitchen and the living quarters of Frankie's family above the coffee shop which they run. Mat's family sits on a mat on the floor to have their meals, as is their practice in the *kampung* while Frankie's family dines downstairs at a table in their shop. Their meal is eaten with chopsticks whereas Mat's family use their hands as has been seen in the earlier volume, *Kampung Boy*. The mode of dress is also different – Mat's mother wears a sarong tied in the traditional manner, knotted above her breasts, while Frankie's mother wears a *samfoo* – a traditional Chinese blouse and trousers set.

In the untranslated exchange in Chinese between Frankie and his mother, and despite it, due to the details of the drawings, readers are able to gather that Frankie's desire to invite Mat to lunch with his family is thwarted due to cultural and religious differences surrounding food. Mat cannot eat pork

as he is Muslim and Chinese food tends to have pork in many of the dishes. Frankie then makes an arrangement with his younger brother to get something for Mat to eat that is non-pork based. It is only later when the two of them are alone, Frankie's younger brother having delivered a "kaya pau"⁷ for Mat, that the two youngsters begin to discuss cultural and religious differences. The tone of the encounter is neutral. Both boys are curious and accepting of cultural differences, treating the situation with some humour. When Mat asks Frankie if there is anything he cannot eat, he replies "Mutton!" Mat goes on to ask, "Why?...Because of religion?" to which Frankie replies, "No, because I cannot *tahan* the smell..."⁸(52),⁸ a response which provokes laughter in the reader. Lat's deliberate use of Chinese pictographic script to detail the conversations between Frankie and his family in these scenes, places the non-Chinese speaking/reading reader in the same position as Mat, suddenly bereft of verbal understanding and left carefully surveying the scene, that is, the non-verbal images on the pages for clues in order to "read" the meaning of the encounter. This moment within the graphic narrative, quite concretely supports the logic of both Paivio's theory of Dual-Coding and the ideas of graphic narrative scholars and artists about the reading processes produced within graphic narratives.

The episode of the lunch invitation, unlike much of the rest of the volume, is depicted both in a rare sequence of several frames within the page and across several pages. We are compelled to follow the narrative through the frames and pay special attention to the sequencing of both the images and text. The cultural encounter between Mat and Frankie provokes a moment of insight about how the two of them, both good friends, are actually separated by economic, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences that are largely premised on racial difference. Racial difference intervenes, in this episode, for the first time in the graphic narrative, as a categorical separator with respect to the idea of identity and community. Frankie's "easy" solution to the problem presented – getting Mat something "safe" and quintessentially Malaysian to eat while he has his own lunch - seems to suggest that while race and religion may create difference, consideration, dialogue about and understanding of this difference can be useful for consolidating inter-race relationships. Both the boys' open and innocent curiosity about their racial and religious differences coupled with the narrowed focus of the multiple frames within each of these pages highlight the importance of this moment of inter-cultural/racial tolerance and understanding not only for the boys themselves but also for readers familiar with the multicultural/racial nature of Malaysian society.

Race relations are a major consideration for Malaysia's multicultural population which is composed of Malays, Chinese, Indians, people of tribal origins and a blanket category of Others into

⁷ A steamed bun filled with coconut jam

⁸ Tahan can be translated as stand or bear.

which fall, among others, Eurasians, Singhalese and Punjabis. Lian Kwen Fee, in “Race and Racialization in Malaysia and Singapore,” points out that

“[t]he terms *bumiputera* [prince of the soil] and *kaum pendatang* [migrant community or newcomers] have been coined by the Malays, as the political majority, to ascribe and exclude the Chinese (and by default Indians) from a society they perceived to be increasingly appropriated by the latter in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (219)⁹

Lian continues,

These words have been quickly embedded in the language of racialization, in both public and private discourses, as the protagonists sought to assert themselves in the post-independence era. It comes as no surprise to even the most casual of observers of these two societies that race and ethnicity have been and continue to influence how Malaysians and Singaporeans conduct themselves at all levels—from the public and political discourse of racial politicking, decision-making and policy formation to the private and everyday discourse of where to eat, how to educate their children, where to worship, and how to relate to different peoples socially and professionally. (219)

The centralization of race as a primary category of identification within Malaysian society has created (for example, the 13 May 1969 race riots¹⁰ and the HINDRAF demonstrations of 2007¹¹ and 2011) and continues to create tension in the relationships between ethnic communities as there is race-based inequality through *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay privilege) in the conferring of political, legal, social and economic rights to citizens within the country.¹² Official national history contends that the Malays

⁹ Virginia Matheson Hooker explains, “[t]he definition of a Bumiputera (‘son of the soil’ or indigene) varies according to context. Following federation, Article 153 of the federal Constitution was amended to extend the special privileges reserved for Malays (but not *Orang Asli*) to the ‘natives’ of Sabah and Sarawak. Together with Malays throughout the federation, they became known as ‘Bumiputera’. When referring exclusively to peoples of peninsular Malaysia, the term sometimes includes *Orang Asli* and sometimes does not. In reality, the special benefits available to Bumiputera in peninsular Malaysia rarely reach *Orang Asli*. The indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, however, are unambiguously covered by the term” (227).

¹⁰ See Hooker, pp. 230 – 232.

¹¹ For example, see “Malaysia: International Religious Freedom Report 2007” and 2008 Human Rights Report: Malaysia” by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State. The demonstrations and their aftermath were also covered in the local Malaysian newspapers: see for example the *New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *The Sun* from this period.

¹² Timothy P. Daniels explains, “‘Malays’ are one of the “‘races’” of *Bumiputera*—sons of the soil—people assumed to be original inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. In fact, people often referred to the land in this region as *Tanah Melayu* or “Malay land.” As original inhabitants of the land, Malays hold a claim to the special status of people who fully belong, just as Chinese belong in China and Indians belong in India, Malays belong in Malaysia. They are the “generic” Malaysians, possessing not only legal citizenship, but default cultural citizenship as well. Stemming from their special status as full “‘belongers,” Malays are expected to be the

were the earliest inhabitants of the land and that the Chinese and Indians arrived largely as migrant labour under British rule in the nineteenth century.¹³

The centrality of the issue of race to post-Independence Malaysian national policies was intended to address perceived inequalities between the economic position of the Malays and the Chinese and Indians but its implementation has had serious effects on race relations within the country. As Lian points out,

one of the major consequences of the New Economic Policy in the early 1970s Malaysia is the institutionalization of race by the state construction of the preferential status of *bumiputera*, bestowed exclusively until recently on the Malays on account of their indigenous status. In effect, this is positive discrimination but the formalization of *bumiputera* status, that is, the practice of exclusionary citizenship, has proved to be most divisive for Malaysians and has dominated local political discourse over the past three decades. (226)

Consequently, as Timothy Daniels indicates, quoting John Rex's *Ethnic Minorities in the Modern Nation State*, "[c]ontemporary Malaysian society does not fit into the model of an "egalitarian or democratic multicultural" (Rex 1996:2) society" (xvi), a fact Malaysians are very aware of, and which often uneasily underlies their relationships with the different ethnic groups. Given the above, Lat's depiction of Mat and Frankie's open acceptance and exploration of their racial and religious differences could be seen as a hopeful and naïve delineation of the ideal approach to race relations within the country.

political and military rulers of Malaysia. The nine Malay Sultans, who elect one of themselves to be the "*Yang Dipertuan Agong*"—King—every five years, and Governors, in the four states without Sultans, are important symbols of sovereignty and political legitimacy. Melaka, Penang, Sabah, and Sarawak, are states with Malay Governors. In addition, the real paramount political power in the country is vested in a Malay Prime Minister and in each state with a Malay majority, which is every state except Penang, political power is vested in a Malay Chief Minister. In addition, Malays are expected to fill most positions in the government, armed forces and civil service. These "Malay" attributes of being the original inhabitants and political rulers and administrators raise the ranking of Malayness" (43 – 44).

¹³ Hooker in *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* comments, "[m]ost descriptions of the population of Malaysia include accounts of Chinese and Indian groups as if they were not settlers of long-standing in the region. This is based on the misapprehension that the majority of the forebears of Chinese and Indians, now living in Malaysia, migrated there in the mid or late 19th century. On these grounds, they are not considered as 'native' as others. This is misleading in the sense that during that same period there were also many migrants arriving from Java, Sumatra and other parts of Indonesia (at that time the Netherlands East Indies), but because their socioreligious organisation was recognizably similar to that of the Malays, they are regarded as 'Malays'. However, it is the customs and lifestyle of the Chinese and Indians which distinguish them from other groups rather than their date of arrival" (25 – 6). Hooker indicates that, although large-scale migration of Chinese and Indians to Malaysia occurred within the nineteenth century, their settled presence within the country can be traced back as far as the fourteenth century for the Chinese (26) and from at least first millennium BCE for the Indians (44).

Interracial and intercultural communication and relationships are not the only formative experiences which work towards developing Mat's identity as a young Malaysian growing up in just pre- and post-Independence Malaysia. Although Mat was exposed to certain amounts of Western culture in *Kampung Boy* (for example Western music played by a local band for a dance during a Malay wedding) his encounter with rock and roll through Frankie, in *Town Boy* proves later to be a significant formative influence on his identity. This is clearly depicted initially in the illustration where the boys use a badminton racket, a mop and a broom to lip-sync to the lyrics and simulate guitar-playing much to the consternation of Frankie's family, and also later in the narrative when Mat is seventeen and attempting to dress in a "cool" fashion. A classic example can be seen in the page where Mat and Frankie "and the boys would go down town to check out the cinemas" (102). All of the boys are depicted wearing sunglasses, some form of black or striped trousers and floral shirts. They are also shown standing with their hands in their pockets with one leg bent and casually crossed at the ankle – the Malaysian version of the epitome of the "cool kids." The influence of western cinema and music (both the James Dean and Elvis looks and body posture) suggests the multiple cultural elements involved in shaping and creating the Malaysian youth identity of the 1960s, something the contemporary Malaysian child open to multicultural influences can identify with despite the historical setting.

Returning briefly to the depiction of Frankie's living room, it is notable that the decorations and possessions – a record player, American music records, photographs of family members, some in traditional clothing, one with an Elvis haircut and another wearing a colonial outfit suggest the multicultural influences that shape and ultimately influence Frankie's identity. As a child growing up in newly independent Malaya (1957) and then Malaysia after the inclusion of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, with all of its colonial past and postcolonial present, Frankie, as depicted in *Town Boy*, highlights the plural nature of the Malaysian individual whose identity is formed by multiple cultural influences beyond the ethnic group to which s/he belongs, a reality which continues until today. Frankie, born in Malaya into a Chinese family, grows up within the Chinese culture, is educated in English at school, is influenced by American music and cinema, has a group of multiracial friends and ultimately goes to the United Kingdom for his higher education.

At the end of *Town Boy*, Lat depicts Mat rushing madly to the railway station to see Frankie as he is about to depart to England for further education. Frankie who has already boarded the train, gets off and the two of them have their last conversation separated by an iron gate. Their conversation points to the definitive parting of ways that they face as they teeter on the cusp of adulthood. They can only go this far together – the future is something each must traverse on his own. The iron gate separating them as they converse visually depicts the barrier that ends their friendship – it literally

obstructs a clear view of their faces as they talk, implying that they are hiding behind the stilted words that they utter. The last three pages, all containing a single frame, depict the physical distance now separating Mat and his best friend. They wave at each other, a tiny and distant Mat from behind an iron gate in the background, and Frankie, a black silhouette in the foreground, from the train. The frame suggests that his departure leaves a large Frankie-shaped hole in Mat's life. We literally see the blacking out of Frankie from Mat's existence: the pure black silhouette speaks visually to the sense of loss experienced by Mat at the departure of his friend. No light penetrates the dense blackness of the silhouette and its positioning almost at the centre of the frame implies Mat's desolation at the vanishing of a central figure in his life. The penultimate page heightens this sense of loss by depicting Mat in the corner of the frame as a tiny, almost imperceptible figure dwarfed by the iron gate in front of him, looking at the empty platform and train track which dominate both the frame and the foreground. The picture is indicative of Mat's feeling locked out of his relationship with Frankie and abandoned by his friend, as well as his recognition of his loss. The final frame shows us a small figure of Mat as seen from the portal of the railway station, riding his bicycle into the distance moving away from his last point of contact with Frankie, suggesting that his entrance into adulthood requires him to symbolically and painfully depart from childhood companionship and become a man on his own. The poignancy of Mat's emergence into maturity is visually encapsulated in these three stark frames which "speak" volumes without any words at all. No conversation takes place in these frames. The use of thick columns of opaque blackness within these images focuses attention on and evokes the protagonist's dark emotions. The pictures give lie to the words Mat and Frankie have just exchanged about "keep[ing] in touch" (*Town Boy* 189) for they emphasize for the reader Mat's painful recognition of the end of his childhood. To briefly reference Bernninger, Ecke and Haberkorn once more: "pictures are not simply frozen events, but rather complex circumstances" (2) which encourage us to actively read and interpret mood, ambiance and emotion alongside and in tension with the verbal text. The drawings in these last three pages, and generally for both volumes, *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*, pull us, with great visceral success, into a deeper connection with and understanding of the protagonist and his experiences of life, and they do it with as much success as a verbal description, if not more.

"Today," Feldman comments, "written language steadily recedes; the ratio of printed words to printed images grows smaller" (200), a circumstance that could appear anxiety-inspiring to those of us engaged in the teaching of literature, especially to the young. As the world becomes increasingly more image-systemic we must be willing to play with new tools like graphic work, comics, and cartoons to develop literary reading skills in children and to look actively at forms of narrative, like Lat's *Kampung Boy* series, that engage the contemporary young eye and mind.

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