Same-sex sexual acts became headline news in Malaysia in 1998 when the then deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, was deposed and charged with sodomy (Spaeth 1998). Anwar had been highly critical of corruption and cronyism within his own party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), while openly expressing disagreement with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s economic policies. Many saw the sodomy charge and imprisonment as political retribution from the prime minister (Berman 2008). The trials imprinted upon the collective psyche of the nation the criminality of the act, the stigma of the accusation and the otherness of homosexuals in Malaysia.

In 2008, troubled by the stigma but inspired by civil society movements, my colleagues and I, who ran an arts centre called The Annexe Gallery in downtown Kuala Lumpur, felt the time was ripe for a sexuality rights festival (Tan 2008). Consisting of a programme of forums, concerts, theatre, workshops, film screenings and talks, Seksualiti Merdeka was organised by a loose coalition of artists, activists, academics, volunteers and NGOs. We built our platform on discussing and celebrating the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, with principles such as sexual rights, bodily autonomy, and freedom from discrimination based primarily upon the Yogyakarta Principles (on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) (Yogyakarta Principles 2007) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Seksualiti Merdeka quickly gained the support of international organisations based in Malaysia, such as Amnesty International and the United Nations, as well as many local NGOs, including progressive Muslim group Sisters in Islam, human rights organisation SUARAM, Women’s Aid Organisation and the Malaysian Bar Council (Parthiban 2012; Lim 2011). Many of these groups rose together with growing civil society movements that emerged after Anwar’s sacking. According to Parthiban (2012), these movements represent a critical cosmopolitanism uniting Malaysians across ethnic borders. The most sizeable of these is Bersih (literally, Clean), the Movement for Clean and Fair Elections (see Govindasamy, this volume). Bersih was viewed as a threat to the present government precisely because it undermined the legitimacy of the regime’s mandate while seemingly advancing the cause of the opposition. Any association with this movement therefore risked the wrath of the government.
In November 2011, Seksualiti Merdeka’s organisers took that risk and invited Bersih chairperson Ambiga Sreenevasan to officiate at our launch, hoping that we could tap into the growing political consciousness of Malaysians signalled by the popularity of Bersih. News of Ambiga’s involvement quickly attracted the attention of pro-government NGOs such as Malay-rights group Perkasa, which called Ambiga the ‘antichrist’ for ‘promoting deviant teachings in encouraging homosexuality’ (Hafiz 2011a). The nexus from Seksualiti Merdeka to Ambiga, Ambiga to Bersih, and Bersih to the opposition coalition lined up the usual suspects in so fortuitous a way as to allow the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) to target Anwar by shooting through Seksualiti Merdeka and the LGBTs (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). The mounting campaign against LGBTs and sustained insinuation of Anwar’s support for LGBTs carried on right up to the general election held eighteen months later.

Following a number of public protests against Seksualiti Merdeka, the police announced the festival was banned (Star 2011). The police later claimed they received up to 154 police reports against the festival (Borneo Post 2011). Reasons for the ban included that many groups were protesting against the programme, fears that ‘the programme could create disharmony, enmity and disturb public order’, that ‘the law in the country did not recognise any deviationist activity that could destroy the practice of religious freedom’, and that the festival ‘threatens national security’ (Goodman 2011).

Responding to the ban, Seksualiti Merdeka immediately released a press statement titled ‘Stop Inciting Hatred Against Us! We Are Citizens of Malaysia’ (Seksualiti Merdeka 2011). The statement begins:

We are saddened that many Malaysians, including people’s elected representatives, have seen fit to relentlessly persecute, stigmatise and discriminate all those who have found a safe space to dialogue and share information and knowledge on human rights during Seksualiti Merdeka’s events.

We are Malaysian citizens who are being denied our rights to our identity and self-determination.

After strongly asserting our citizenship, the statement goes on to appeal to a variety of rights frameworks to which we felt entitled: Malaysia’s federal constitution, the National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, the UDHR and the United Nations Charter. The statement’s three demands are that the authorities ‘condemn all forms of discrimination, stigmatisation and threats of violence and murder in the name of any religion or belief system’; ‘uphold the human rights of the LGBTIQ community’; and ‘uphold our right to conduct peaceful forums, workshops and performances’. The statement then announces the cancellation of all public events of the festival. It ends with a note of regret for the attacks on Ambiga, and finally, thanks our supporters. The expression of thanks was strategic, to remind the authorities that we were not alone, but were part of a growing movement. Portions of this statement were reproduced in many news sites and online media.

Identification as against

It was not until the ban of Seksualiti Merdeka that the term ‘LGBT’ became popular in the media, even though the organisers themselves more frequently employed ‘LGBTIQ’, adding intersex and queer. Previously, derogatory terms from the vernacular denoting ‘inverted’ (songsang), ‘soft men’ (lelaki lembut), ‘hard women’ (wanita keras), ‘social ills’ (gejala-gejala sosial) or even specifically forms of ‘transgenderism’ (bapuk, ah kua), were more common in the
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Many of these terms reveal the slippage between same-sex sexual attraction and gender non-conformity (Ismail 2001), representing the vague, fluid and unbounded ways many Malaysians view the myriad manifestations of non-normative gender and sexual expression. But this lack of clarity provides an interesting lens to understand the complex constitution of our subjectivities and subversive potential of our sexual desires.

As state actors spoke out against LGBTs as threats to the nation, and Seksualiti Merdeka responded by defending LGBTs, many in Malaysia found themselves confronted by a term that seemed to promise freedom and threaten them all at once. So, do they want to be identified by this term? And if they do, should they embrace the politics implicit in its deployment? With whom should they align themselves? The gay imaginary is not always so homogenous as sexual rights activists imagine. Malaysian gays who refuse subjection to the term ‘LGBT’ and its implied politics can redeploy the term to distance themselves from the project. Self-identified gays perhaps define for themselves what it means for them to be gay and to be citizens, and whether they want to utilise citizenship norms or sexual rights to get there. Queer theorist Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick said, ‘to identify as must always include multiple processes of identification with. It also involves identification as against’ (Sedgwick 1990: 60). So, some Malaysian LGBTs who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender could also find themselves resisting human rights because the politics appear counterintuitive to their own survival strategies or antithetical to their political stances.

The contestation over the potential for sexual citizenship in the public is therefore crucial for LGBTs in Malaysia in the way they imagine their place within the nation. Sexual citizenship is not a single theory, but a lens through which to collate various conflicting frameworks through which marginalised sexual subjects demand the rights of full citizenship. But what is citizenship? Formulating citizenship not as a status granted by the state, but as a process claimed by marginalised communities, prominent citizenship theorist Engin Isin proposes new activist figures, ‘who enact political subjectivities and transform themselves and others into citizens by articulating ever-changing and expanding rights’ (Isin 2009: 368). He calls this process acts of citizenship. Sexual rights activists of Seksualiti Merdeka, deemed as threats to the nation, perform such acts of citizenships.

But what about the gays who resist us? Literature on ‘tacit subjects’ (Decena 2008) and closeted self-identified gays in different countries often analyses such sexual subjectivities through ethnographic lenses rather than political ones. Caught between the state that denies their belonging and activists who are forcing them out into public, these subjects are often reduced in research to a no-man’s-land between the battlefronts. While these studies do not discount their agency in choosing to remain in the closet, they nonetheless contain their subjects’ discourse within a scale so small that their agency seems to bear little imprint across the varying scales upon which acts of citizenship are enacted.

I offer a discourse analysis of texts by Malaysian sexual rights activists and those who resist them to demonstrate that speaking out against sexual rights politics has implications for the work of activists, and therefore constitutes acts of citizenship. This chapter looks specifically at two online texts:

1. ‘Open Letter to Seksualiti Merdeka’ published on gay blog Malaysian Gay Love, which hosted chats and video channels in which young Malaysians sometimes engaged in cyber sex (Malaysian Gay Love 2011). This website is now defunct.
2. ‘Does Your Seksualiti Need Merdeka-ing?’, an opinion piece published on online news site The Malaysian Insider as well as the writer’s own blog. The writer uses the pseudonym of TykeOnABike (2011).
In the former, a group which claimed to represent the Malaysian Gay Love website demanded that Seksualiti Merdeka not disgrace the country and respect the position of Islam in Malaysia. They admit to being homosexuals but believe that homosexuals should practise ‘homosexual activities’ in private. There are three major areas in which they claim that Seksualiti Merdeka disgraces Malaysia: in the conflation of religion and the nation; in terms of Malaysia’s position among other countries, and particularly, among other Islamic countries; and finally, on the issue of the public/private nature of homosexuality. In the second piece, the writer describes himself as part of an affluent and fashionable gay scene, in which his many gay friends are accepted by families, have good jobs, are able to afford material comfort and are therefore not living in fear, as claimed by Seksualiti Merdeka. He suggests that instead of highlighting differences, the political struggles of gays should be premised on similarities with straight people.

Excluded from any form of human rights

As the Malaysian government deployed anti-colonial discourse to demonise LGBTs as traitors to the nation, sexual rights activists responded by bolstering our citizenship claims with a range of norms from international frameworks, local human rights bodies and the federal constitution. Seksualiti Merdeka organisers built much of their case around being persecuted, stigmatised and discriminated. According to Angela Kuga Thas (2013: 2), this victimisation discourse comes from a ‘traditional way of pushing for social change and social justice’, and the amount of sympathy it evokes depends greatly on the strength of the evidence of violence. But what if the violence is deemed as justified? Subjects required to adopt the subjectivities of victimhood in order to secure justice are always already approaching the state as its victims. Human rights victims are therefore resubmitting themselves within a system that is complicit with their victimisation. Oppression is then doubly reinforced from both state and non-state actors as they draw legitimisation from each other for their actions. Feeling empowered by a government that upholds Islam, therefore, those making threats to Seksualiti Merdeka may feel justified, even expected, to do so. According to them, LGBTs are already sinners, purveyors of ‘animal culture’ (Fernandez 2011), deserving to be punished and persecuted, even by extra-legal means. As Joseph Goh (2012: 149) points out:

The act of tagging the festival as a promotion of the ‘culture of animals’ effectively renders all queer folk and their allies as little more than beasts. Consequently, queer folk are excluded from any form of human rights by virtue of their gender and sexual identities – how could any effort in support of human rights achieve real cogency if they are made on behalf of animals?

Does this mean, then, the pleas of victims fall on deaf ears locally? Or could this statement be performed for a different audience, perhaps a transnational one? Could the organisers be trying to rally the global community of human rights networks against the government of Malaysia? Could this be a script in which two parties – local sexual rights activists and transnational networks – perform a dialogue for the viewing of another audience, the Malaysian government?

Having found ourselves abjected as citizens within our countries but interpellated as ‘human’ within international human rights frameworks, sexual rights activists deployed the norms and attendant politics of the global stage. But Malaysian sexual rights activists were not necessarily trying to set international human rights norms in opposition to local norms.
Instead, by appearing to be in conversation with both international and local human rights networks, these norms were performed with the goal of shaming the Malaysian government for complicity in persecution. It also reminded the state of the fact that it has already subscribed to the very same international norms, as a member of the United Nations. It is in the nature of performances, however, to be susceptible to (deliberate) misreadings. It does not help that Western LGBT rights activists sometimes declaim about universal rights as if they are fighting for the rights of all LGBTs in all countries, making the uncritical assumption that their historical route for the acquisition of rights is one everyone else should travel, too. It also does not help that the highly publicised nature of their local battles, for example marriage equality in the US and UK, becomes mistaken as the agenda for LGBTs elsewhere, giving the impression that some of us are naively advocating for marriage rights while our very identities are still deemed illegal.

The Malaysian government, therefore, easily misrepresented this dialogue with transnational rights instruments as an act of collusion between sexual rights activists and Western liberal forces to undermine Islam. In this, the government, too, deployed victimisation discourse – except that the victim in their version was not the government, but the nation, its Muslim majority and Islam itself. The success of the government’s discourse can be seen in how Malaysian Gay Love expresses the same defensive attitude on behalf of Islam and the nation.

**Don’t disgrace our country**

Acutely aware of the bias that casts us as supporters of Western imperialist projects, and hoping to demonstrate that sexual rights are not alien to a local conception of justice, Seksualiti Merdeka organisers increasingly appealed to local norms. For this reason, we turned to the federal constitution first in our press statement. Constitutionalism is an emerging platform among Malaysian activists, including members of the Malaysian Bar and Bersih. Many of these activists have criticised Barisan Nasional policies, statements and practices for being unconstitutional. According to Malaysian academic Khoo Gaik Cheng (2013: 1), elements of Malaysian civil society have invoked the discourse of citizenship and constitutional rights to counter the dominant politics of race perpetuated by the National Front (Barisan Nasional) . . . that constitutional patriotism manifests itself as ‘creative acts of citizenship’ that energise democracy, and in its attempt at forming alternative but ultimately patriotic forms of solidarity, constitutional patriotism becomes a constituting process of citizen-making.

By appealing to the constitution before drawing on the UDHR, Malaysian sexual rights activists were attempting to draw the boundaries of citizenship to include ourselves and the rights we claim. By subsuming our rights within the borders of constitutionalism and citizenship, the statement recognises the nation-state as the author of our subjection and the recogniser of our rights. Even Seksualiti Merdeka’s name, meaning Sexuality Independence or Independent Sexuality, calls attention to this bonding of borders of state and of bodies: the word ‘Merdeka’ is the same Sanskrit word used in Malaysia to mark Independence Day. By conflating sexual autonomy with the nation’s autonomy, Seksualiti Merdeka signifies that the nation’s independence and its people’s independence are co-extensive. Read on its own, this fusion of nation and sexuality has the force of a declaration of independence: that the emancipation of sexual citizens is parallel to the nation’s independence – and by extension, that the
independence project is incomplete without the freedom of sexual subjects. UMNO, which has positioned itself as the party that fought for Malaysia’s independence, naturally greets any challenge to its narrative as heresy.

An appeal to constitutionalism therefore forces Barisan Nasional into the defensive. Hence, de facto law Minister Nazri Aziz offered a creative interpretation to construe homosexuality as unconstitutional:

> According to Article 3 of the constitution, there is a general statement that says Islam is the religion of the federation. . . . What it means is that even though certain acts are determined as within the rights of the constitution but are against Islam, they are inconsistent as far as Islam is concerned.

(Hafiz 2011b)

Article 3 of the constitution provides that ‘Islam is the religion of the Federation’, though scholars agree that according to its original framers, this shall not imply the State is not a secular state’ (cited in Fernando 2006). Disregarding that Nazri Aziz’s interpretation would render even eating pork and drinking alcohol unconstitutional in Malaysia, his remark seems to be an effect of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad’s declaration in 2002 that Malaysia is an ‘Islamic fundamentalist state’ (CNN 2002).

Some scholars believe that the Malaysian government’s growing Islamisation is not simply to secure the unity of Muslims within the country, but also to align Malaysian Muslims within a global polity of fellow believers – the ummah – thereby gaining membership in a fraternity of an even larger imagined community (Barr and Govindasamy 2010). If liberal civil society voices represent a localised mobilisation of transnational discourse, so does the image of a stable Islamic polity. The advent of the Arab Spring has destabilised this global unity, however, fuelling the Malaysian government’s paranoia regarding the possibility of similar revolutions in Malaysia should critical voices go unchecked. As Parthiban Muniandy points out, the activism of Seksualiti Merdeka, Bersih, and progressive Islamic women activists signals a ‘democratisation of Islamic discourses, engendered by increasing fragmentation of Islamic authority’ (Parthiban 2012: 584). This multi-vocality of Islamic discourses threatens and undermines the state’s authorisation of a monolithic Islam and its position as guardian of that unity. Hence, Prime Minister Najib Razak, hoping to demonise all forms of plurality, insisted, ‘LGBTs, pluralism, liberalism – all these “isms” are against Islam and it is compulsory for us to fight these’ (Hafiz 2012).

Echoing this script, then, the Malaysian Gay Love editors’ first salvo in their letter to Seksualiti Merdeka (2011) is that ‘the official religion of the country is Islam as provided by the Federal Constitution’. This statement aligns the letter immediately with two axes of affiliation, the nation and the global ummah. The letter speaks strongly against Seksualiti Merdeka for disgracing the country and Islam, and diminishing others’ opinions of the country and Islam. In fact, it mentions this concern three times:

1. ‘. . . if this programme is carried out, it will bring disgrace and diminish the opinions of other nationalities towards Islam and this country’.
2. ‘Don’t disgrace our country.’
3. ‘We apologise if this letter upsets you. But our team consisting of citizens of all races agree that this programme will only disgrace Malaysia.’

It further exhorts: ‘You must understand that Malaysia is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). As a citizen of Malaysia you should put the people and the
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country first.’ Promotion of the rights of homosexuals, it seems, has the force of separating Islam from the foundation of Malaysia, and thus alienating Malaysia from the OIC, and by extension, the global ʿummah. Furthermore, throughout the letter, the way Islam and the country are mentioned in relation to each other suggests a certain amount of slippage between the two. The letter begins with a reminder of the position of Islam within the federal constitution, implying that Islam is at the core of the nation and thereby equating the nation with Islam. When the writers further urge that as Malaysian citizens, we should ‘put the people and the country first’, they are not deploying a plural, cosmopolitan definition of ‘people’, but rather a unified ʿummah represented by the majority, a ‘people’ who have agreed to put the nation (and Islam) first, and who have therefore been empowered to represent the imaginary. For these sexual subjects, to be a citizen is to surrender to the national ideology. This means that both sexual rights activists and the gays who resist them similarly appealed to the logic of the nation-state and performed its scripts in hopes of being read as citizens. But it also means that both believed there is a possibility to become part of the nation if only their preferred scripts are followed.

Respect other religions

By asking the secular nation, a constitutional monarchy, to recognise the human rights of LGBTs, Seksualiti Merdeka and its supporters were deemed as touting a (per)version of Islam, as if demanding of it to adopt what is, according to most believers, clearly not permissible. Framing the promotion of LGBT recognition as a ‘deviant teaching’ and a ‘new religion’ portrays Seksualiti Merdeka as directly contravening the government’s singular version of Islam (Hafiz 2011a). The logic that regards an assertion of citizenship as an attack on Islam reveals the slippage between nation and religion.

For the deputy inspector general of police, this concern was enough to justify a ban, ostensibly to protect national security. The national security in question, then, is a state of accord – not a threat of a military incursion by external forces, but of fragmentation of the nation’s unity by internal forces. It demonstrates the import of the unifying discourse of religion in the construction of the national imaginary. This imaginary is productive in many ways, not the least in constituting the identity of the people, who can then brandish this identity as a political tool (Frith 2000), and, significantly, as a tool to determine who do not belong and who are enemies. Kamarulnizam Abdullah (1999: 275) explains the nexus of national security threats in Malaysia this way:

Security in the context of Malaysia, as mentioned earlier in this article, reflects the idea of state security and not of national security in the traditional sense. The object of this security is, in large part, the government itself. . . . However, security of a government here will also refer to the security of a regime. The regime refers to the government-led party, that is, UMNO, which is a major factor in Malaysia’s political stability.

By positioning itself as defender of the Malays and of Islam, UMNO effectively solders the ideological production of the social imaginary to its foundation. In this way, the defender of Islam becomes its symbol: threatening the symbol is seen as a threat against Islam. The party and its ideology are now conjoined, their fates bound together. As the government entrenches a politicised Islam in its discourse, it styles dissenters as dissenting against Islam itself. This leads to its deployment of an anti-colonial rhetoric when dealing with critics. As Shanon Shah (2013: 276) notes, ‘many movements that question the Malaysian government’s commitment
to democracy and fundamental liberties (as enshrined in the Federal Constitution) are cast as “foreign plots” and “threats to Islam”. He reminds us, however, that ‘this rhetoric is linked to authoritarianism’. A threat to UMNO’s authority becomes refashioned as a threat to the nation; but instead of risking exposure of this self-serving agenda, all UMNO needs to do is mask all threats to it as threats to Islam.

Having constructed the national imaginary as part of a monolithic global Islam, UMNO is able to wield this norm as a weapon against its opposition and dissidents. Hence, the request not to offend Muslim sensitivities, or to ‘respect other religions’ as in the letter from Malaysian Gay Love, is not a treaty for reciprocal respect. It is a warning: it serves to remind us who is in charge. The Muslim homosexuals of Malaysian Gay Love are then affirming their allegiance to the national ideology of the country as well as the global community of fellow believers, which they deploy in earnest, believing Islam and Malaysia are truly under threat by Western liberal human rights forces. The self-identified homosexual Muslims from Malaysian Gay Love, who state in their letter, ‘Our decision is final’, seem to be asserting their dominance among Malaysian homosexuals: non-Muslim homosexuals who accept their subordination to this social contract, can, like them, become citizens. Their ‘requests’, therefore, articulate the political hegemony they hope to continue to enjoy within the national imaginary, so long as Seksualiti Merdeka does not compromise their performance of the heteronormative nationalist script. Malaysian homosexuals who subscribe to ethno-religious nationalist ideologies, therefore, can have political investments antithetical to the projects of sexual rights activists. Any critique of the oppressive norms they are complicit in sustaining, then, must begin with an appreciation of their political affiliations, without presuming their alliance with other homosexuals. I propose that it is possible to initiate a critical engagement with them based upon their political subjectivities, beginning with ‘affirm[ing] the values of dialogue, freedom of expression, and basic human dignity and rights’ through interpretations of Islam (Shah 2013: 278).

‘We have jobs. We have family. We have responsibilities.’

While the advancement of Islam is regularly touted as the nation’s main priority, Michael Barr and Anantha Raman Govindasamy (2010: 294–95) argue that Islamisation is a tool in service of [the] ethnic agenda, a program of hegemony designed to reinforce Malay occupation at the heart of Malaysia’s nation-building project and to condition non-Malays and non-Muslims to accept their assimilation into the Malaysian nation as subordinate, peripheral partners.

Citizens who are abased in the nationalist imaginary have to accept the political supremacy of the Malay and their own abjection. This social contract, however, would receive little support if it did not also offer non-Malays, particularly economically dominant Chinese, compensation for political subordination. In this section, I argue that some marginal sexual subjects, much like non-Malays, have learned to focus their energies on participation in the economy and the market. For them, economic citizenship offers a way of belonging to a nation that would not claim them as her own.

TykeOnABike’s article ‘Does Your Seksualiti Need Merdeka-ing?’ provides a great illustration of the possibility for marginal subjects to enjoy rewards in exchange for their subservience to the market and the nation. He responds at length to Seksualiti Merdeka’s promotional material that proclaims ‘our firm belief that all Malaysians have the right to live and love
without fear’. Asking, ‘Are we truly a community that is oppressed and constantly living in fear?’, TykeOnABike answers by pointing out gays who go to Bukit Bintang, a highly gentrified district in Kuala Lumpur full of swanky cafés, malls and five-star hotels. Their list of visible attributes, he writes, are: ‘perfectly styled hair’, ‘unusually fashionable take on casual wear’, ‘gym-toned body’, ‘iPhone4’, ‘leather folio bound iPad’ and ‘Mini Cooper’. He adds:

They live thriving, successful lives within a social network (and often, net worth) comparable to, if not better than many a straight man’s. . . . So call me blind or perhaps a bit presumptuous, but from where I stand, this simply doesn’t seem like a community living on the brink of fear.

He assumes that material accumulation is proof that Malaysian gays are not living in fear, as if social anxiety and material consumption were inversely proportional; and more pertinently, he provides a portrait of a gay scene that appears homogenously affluent. David Evans (1993) calls this the ‘material construction of sexuality’, where to be gay is to consume the culture of commoditised sexuality, and to be so appeased as to relinquish the struggle for equality. This conformity to a market-driven image of being gay is crucial to TykeOnABike’s later point:

The fight for acceptance and tolerance is not won by emphasising our differences. . . . It is won, I reckon, by proving to naysayers that at the end of the day, save for our choice of partners for life, homosexuals are really no different from the average straight bloke or lass strolling the streets of Kuala Lumpur. . . . We have jobs. We have family. We have responsibilities.

He flattens sexual diversity into a desire for conformity to heteronormative citizenship: family, job security and responsibilities. His descriptions of what successful gays look like, then, takes on a prescriptive tenor. In the context of the article, he marks desirable gay subjects as those who do not ‘need to scream it out loud at every opportunity’ but instead quietly enjoy the privileges that economic citizenship has to offer. In other words, they are allowed in public because they are not public about it. By extension, bad gays are the ‘divas’ who scream, who are too public.

The gays described by TykeOnABike, excluded from full citizenship by ethno-religious nationalism, have nonetheless found a home in the nation’s market, not unlike the economic citizenship proffered to non-bumiputera in Malaysia through the social contract or ‘ethnic bargain’:

The ethnic bargain encapsulated the communal settlement in which the Chinese agreed not to challenge bumiputera political dominance with the quid pro quo that they would acquire citizenship rights, continue with their way of life and that their economic dominance would be unaffected.

(Tan 2001: 950)

Muslim homosexuals are called to prioritise and defend their nationalism if they want to become citizens, therefore, while both Muslim and non-Muslim gays can also protect their vulnerable position through economic participation. As TykeOnABike suggests, the economy offers a form of social insurance against other effects of disenfranchisement, so long as one’s financial means are not threatened. But political gays could end up threatening this economic
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security by being too public. Such gays must remain quiet and accept their reduced rights within the realm allowed to them: in the market. Just like politically connected and economically empowered elites from the Chinese community, financially secure gays like TykeOnABike have an interest in sustaining the political culture that has guaranteed their survival, and furthermore, which they are complicit in sustaining. Like Malaysian Gay Love’s editors, his request to serve the ‘gay agenda’ quietly is also a kind of warning. A dialogue with him, then, needs to highlight the economic inequalities that prevent poorer queer subjects from achieving the same social insurance affluent gays presently enjoy. At the same time, sexual rights activists could resist careless claims of representing all LGBTs, and focus on securing rights for self-representation for all, but especially for socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

A bed big enough

My attempt here to produce knowledge about subjects who have already refused sexual rights activists’ earlier attempts to represent them gives rise to the potential for doubly misconstruing their subjectivities and thereby further denying their agency. In assessing my position, I accept part of Joseph Massad’s critique of Arab LGBT activists, whom he accuses of being ‘native informants’ to the Gay International, a term he uses for Western gay rights activists trying to liberate gays and lesbians in non-Western societies. He writes that ‘[i]t is the discourse of the Gay International that both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology’ (Massad 2002: 363). Arguing that same-sex practices in the Arab world have historically been tolerated without the need to name them through Western sexual epistemologies, Massad blames activists and Gay International for causing the Arab state to crack down on sexual subjects. Meanwhile, he problematically assumes there is some ahistorical past of Arab sexuality that can be reclaimed, ignores that the state’s legal instrument is itself a Western construct, and denies the rights of those who do identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. He is right, however, in borrowing Foucault’s notion of ‘incitement to discourse’.

Incited by the discourse of the same sexual epistemologies, some Malaysian gays found themselves part of a political debate which they felt compelled to resist. As a sexual rights activist, I acknowledge our role in this incitement to discourse. But the discourse incited is not necessarily unproductive. The portrait of our subjectivities is incomplete if we disregard the multiplicity of sexual and gendered subjectivities in Malaysia, the citizenship discourses posited by politicians and enacted by citizens, our aspirations towards a future freedom based on any number of these different, even self-conflicting, political investments, and our desires to belong – which, much like our desires for intimacy, fluctuate through inchoate impulses and counter-discourses at once seductive and threatening.

Finally, I welcome Sedgwick’s invitation to reparative, as opposed to paranoid, reading of discourse. She asks, ‘What does a hermeneutics of suspicion and exposure have to say about social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence?’ (Sedgwick 2003: 140). This question speaks to this project: the work of sexual rights activists has made Malaysian sexual dissidents visible and placed them within the state’s gaze; the effort at knowledge production here risks repeating that outcome. To read reparatively is to realise that ‘there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones’. It is to read with hope, because then ‘the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present’ (Sedgwick 2003: 146). I concede that my own investments in self-representation are mired in my
investments for the equality of sexual minorities in Malaysia. Both have framed my readings of the subjects in this project. They are suffused with my hope for a future markedly different from the present, a future in which we attend to rather than dismiss each other’s norms and resistances, a future in which subjects are not denied spaces to be the kind of citizens they want to be, sexual or otherwise. As we lay ourselves down to awkward sleep with one another tonight, may we make a bed out of this nation big enough for all to rise as citizens tomorrow.

Note
1 This chapter is adapted from my dissertation for an MA in Gender, Sexuality & Culture, at Birkbeck College, University of London, completed on 27 September 2013. The original title is ‘Sexual Citizenship in Conflict: Malaysian Sexual Rights Activists and the Gays Who Resist Them’. I am grateful for the supervision of Silvia Posocco; the guidance of the professors of the modules, Kate Nichols, Matt Cook, Eddie Bruce-Jones and Amber Jacobs; the Sexuality Summer School of Manchester University; as well as the advice of Rahul Rao, Alicia Izharuddin and Lee Jiahui.

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