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**Review of  
Nine (ed.), *Straits  
Eclectic***

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The title of this volume of essays is derived from architecture. In his memoir-cum-cultural critique, Soon-Tzu Speechley describes his stay in the Sun Yat-Sen Museum at 120 Armenian Street, George Town, Penang. The building is “a fine example of the so-called Straits Eclectic shophouse, a Malayan building style that fused Chinese forms with Western ornament, incorporating climate adaptations from the Indian sub-continent and Malay Archipelago” (52). By and large, this book lives up to this aesthetic: the writings in this collection are a fusion of diverse voices, experiences, influences, and worldviews, all coming together in an eclectic ensemble of Malaysian creative nonfiction.

The subject matter is Malaysia, as the reference to the Straits evinces. Editor Nine sets out to probe the issue of Malaysian identity, asking rhetorically “What does it mean to be Malaysian? Who counts, and who doesn’t?” (1)? Tired of the clichéd narratives of doom and gloom circulating around these questions, her call for deeper perspectives on the subject yielded thirteen fresh, original responses from writers whose contemplations range from diaspora and heritage to racial stereotypes and online identities.

It goes without saying that the essayists here are all young, talented, highly-educated, well-travelled, well-read, tech-savvy, urbane, and, above all, self-consciously so. As Sally Sloth puts it in her piece “Young and Disillusioned in Malaysia:” “The trouble with privilege is that it is difficult to see in your own mirror. [...] Our dreams were not so much limited by financial constraints as they were by actual desire. Yet, once in a while glancing down from the gold-flecked ivory tower, most of us stare blindly into the horizon of our own future perspectives, rather than catching the eye of the farmer, laboring under the pitiless heat of the sun” (45). It is fair to say that Sloth and her like-minded contributors in this book do not shy away from interrogating their own privileged position and the blinkered viewpoint that constitutes its greatest pitfall. Driven by a profound engagement with lived personal and social realities, the essayists here share a common motivation: the unending quest for self-understanding, justice, home, and belonging. Certainly, what also makes the essays here stand out are the ways in which they express the aspirations of an emerging generation of young Malaysian writers and commentators.

Genre-wise, this volume is a study in creative nonfiction and the fluidity of form and style that characterizes the so-called fourth genre. The pieces here display the candid, conversational, and reflective tone of the personal essay. Some incorporate aspects of socio-cultural criticism, literary journalism, memoir, travelogue, humour, and so on. Invariably, all hinge on the creation of a voice, the singular ‘I’-narrator: a self which is often plagued by self-doubt and yet which touches the reader with its honesty and vulnerability.

The telling of one’s inner story is an intimate act. In baring her soul to the reader in “Understanding Return,” Lily Jamaludin, child of a diplomat, confesses that her return to Malaysia after spending her childhood and adolescence abroad was fraught with misgivings. Resisting the notion of fixed, stable identities, and drawing from her own personal observations and experiences, she asserts: “We do not fit into a box of identity categories. [...] I often find children of diplomats trying to make themselves more Malay, or Muslim, or

Malaysian upon returning. [...] We must return not to claim or absorb national identities, but rather, to recreate and re-envision them” (8, 9).

The desire to create new narratives of home, identity, and belonging is a major theme that is taken up in various ways by the other essays in this collection. In “The Gap Must Be Narrowed: Reflections of a Sabahan in Klang Valley,” Rayner S. Y. relates his move from Sabah, East Malaysia, to peninsular West Malaysia and wonders why East Malaysia on the island of Borneo has been relegated to the margins of national consciousness. Rayner also notes that the inordinate emphasis paid to the Klang Valley, where the capital city is located, results in a wide gap between the metropolitan centre and the peripheral rest of the country. He notes that “One of the perils of being far from the centre in a centralised country is the lack of ability to affect the narrative of the country we are supposed to call our own. The term ‘lain-lain’ evokes a bitter feeling for many natives of Sabah and Sarawak” (13). Broadly, “*lain-lain*,” the Malay term for “others,” attests to the racial politics that has been the bane of Malaysian society for far too long. It can be argued that although the indigenous peoples of East Malaysia are considered *bumiputera* (sons of the soil), they remain marked as “other” minorities.

For Azira Aziz, being a member of the dominant, majority group does not guarantee equality. The title of her essay “Malaysian First, Muslim Second, Malay Third” subtly criticises the ironic practice of declaring allegiances in order of importance as is wont among certain political quarters. Her allegiance is to the downtrodden of society. In her memoir, Azira chronicles her family and community’s long and bitter struggle for compensation and recognition as rightful occupiers of prime Kampung Baru land in the heart of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. She underscores the injustice that the *bumiputera* have had to endure: “As we are constitutional Malays, one may be forgiven for believing that as beneficiaries of bumiputera rights we would enjoy the protection of the government [...] but nothing could be further from the truth” (94). Ironically, the policies that were meant to rescue the Malays from the cycle of poverty served to benefit the wealthy and powerful élite, and notions of communal identity and welfare were used to justify the unjust treatment of the villagers. Azira’s social activism stems from a keen sense of justice for and solidarity with her multi-racial extended family and society: “identifying myself as a Malaysian first [...] means that what hurts my fellow Malaysians hurts me too, just like my experiences of being on the unintended receiving end of blatant racism, being of Chinese-Indian-Malay mixed heritage, hurt me” (97).

New narratives of identity can also be pondered through “ghostly” encounters and self-lampoonery. In “A Slice of Heaven,” Ho Yi Jian imagines a dialogue with his late grandfather over matters like language, tradition, family, and awkward attempts at being “Chinese” several generations on in Malaysia. The poignant and often humorous encounter that frames his ruminations leads to the discovery that it doesn’t really matter if one has lost one’s mother tongue or performs the Ching Ming rites wrongly or finds it hard to fit in, so long as one makes the best out of it and finds one’s slice of heaven in Malaysia as his forebears did.

All in all, the young voices reverberating in this book of essays come across as deeply personal, bold, compassionate, and above all, hopeful. Fully mindful of their stake in the nation, theirs is a compelling narrative that inspires with its frankness and sincerity.