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Terror, Trauma and the Transhuman: Exploring Possible Representations of Kristang / Portuguese-Eurasian Identity Erasure in Kevin Martens Wong's *Altered Straits* and Stuart Danker's *Tinhead City, KL*

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Introduction

Two of three Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian novels longlisted or shortlisted for and published under the prestigious Singaporean Epigram Books Fiction Prize since its commencement in 2015, *Altered Straits* by the author (2017) and *Tinhead City, KL* by Stuart Danker (2021) are not simply two of the first and few pioneering full-length works of Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian speculative fiction, but further share an unusual and highly specific constellation of themes and imagery despite distinct narratives and contexts, especially when it comes to their main antagonists: the Concordance in *Altered Straits* and Mutiara Corp in *Tinhead City, KL*. What underlies both novels' shared unconscious fascination with monstrous, terrifying representations of authoritarian, clinically post-human cyborg collectives that dispense fatal, rational and brutal punishment and death on their own 'logical' terms?

This chapter considers how both novels arguably suggest and highlight deeper, unconscious self-reflexive fears about the elision, suppression and destruction of one's own identity and place in the world, especially salient for the mutable and hybrid Creole Kristang community, for whom static, mechanically sterile perfection and

stasis can now be glimpsed through the novels as anathema to our inner realities. Rather than representing a straightforward fear of the transhuman or posthuman, therefore, the chapter argues that the image of the relentless, pathologically-perfection-oriented cyborg hive-mind or collective is instead a more complex fear of a particular kind of speculative future, one in which individual (Kristang) agency, identity, complexity and distinction are not just systematically weeded out, but castigated, oppressed, and, in the worst cases, eliminated.

A Community Relentlessly under Siege: The Contested Identity Space of the Kristang/ Portuguese-Eurasian people of Southeast Asia

The Kristang or Portuguese-Eurasians are a mixed creole/ indigenous community descended from coercive intermarriages between arriving Portuguese invaders and local Malay residents in Melaka starting from the early 16th century, after the city was conquered by a Portuguese fleet led by Afonso du Albuquerque in August 1511, and poorly represented (and often misrepresented) in the academic literature. Originally called *casados* (ironically meaning 'married'), we are therefore relatively unique in the world due not only to such hybridisation, but to the fundamentally dissonant belief systems and epistemologies that we also trace our lineage from, though quite often unevenly: the Portuguese brought with them Roman Catholic Christianity, with possible further (though much less marked or overt) influence from the Dutch Reformed Church after Melaka was seized by the Dutch in January 1641, while in Melaka, Islam had already been ascendant for more than a century by the time Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, the first documented Portuguese soldier to reach Melaka, arrived with his crew in 1509. Although it remains unclear, and a subject of ongoing scholarship, as to when exactly Portuguese *casado* coalesced into the more Creole and diverse *Kristang*, which as an identity category also expanded to include Dutch-Eurasians, it appears that by the time Melaka was traded to the British in the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty, this had been solidified, for under the subsequent British administration across Malaya and the new trading post of Singapore founded in 1819, Kristang, 'Portuguese' or what would eventually become known as Lower Six identity would become a distinct and marginalised subaltern underclass within a wider emerging Eurasian supra-identity. In contrast to the Anglo-Indian, British-Eurasian or Upper Ten identity that

was characterised by fairer skin, a strong command of English and an ability, therefore, to aspire to and perform British middle-class identity, the Kristang, in comparison, were initially seen as illegitimate, coarse, hypersexual and unrefined, overly disinterested in the civilising aims of the British, and therefore of being taken seriously as contributors to the European ideals of Southeast Asian colonization.

However, in large part thanks to what appear to be the efforts of a group of Kristang people led by my great-great-great-grandfather, Edwin John Tessensohn, O.B.E. (1855-1926), the community underwent what seems to have been a studious and deliberate (re)invigoration and elevation starting from the late 1880s up until September 1926, when Edwin passed away: festivals, Eurasian-owned newspapers, appeals to priests to preach to the mostly Roman Catholic community in Kristang instead of metropolitan Portuguese, and a 40-year Kristang theatrical tradition at the centre of Singapore sponsored by Edwin all culminated in the foundation of the Singapore Eurasian Association in 1918, and thereafter of Edwin himself becoming one of the first local people ever elected to government in January 1923 as a Straits Settlements Legislative Councillor. His death left not only a vacuum in grassroots Kristang efforts that colonial powers appear to have quickly sought to reclaim through formation of Melaka's Portuguese Settlement, but which also finally galvanised other Eurasian communities into action, including Melaka, which only started its own Eurasian Association in 1934.

Unfortunately, the horrors of the Japanese Occupation meant that this energy quickly dissipated, and that stereotypes about the Kristang would persist into the post-World War II era and Malayan independence, with the community continuing to face rampant stigmatization and pressure to again not just be more active, but to excessively demonstrate their loyalty to the new nations of Malaysia and Singapore from the 1960s, when the British finally left Southeast Asia for good. In Malaysia, the community's hybrid, 'half-coloniser' nature has constantly put it at odds with Malaysian nation-building efforts that have sought to reindigenise the country for local people (even though we are absolutely local as well), while in Singapore, our close ties to Catholic social justice movements and the fact of our ancestry as being half-European and half-Asian made it difficult for Singapore's first paternalistic Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (in power 1965-1990) to ever trust

us fully, which culminated in a huge wave of Kristang and Eurasian emigration from the 1960s to the 1980s, and a second wave of covert counter-institutional grassroots work among the community that appears to have been led by my great-grandmother Mabel Martens née Tessensohn (1905-1999), Edwin's granddaughter and my great-grandmother, in the early 1980s. This provoked the Singapore state to institute the anti-democratic and illiberal Operation Spectrum in May 1987, which appears to have detained and falsely accused random grassroots social workers of colluding in a Marxist conspiracy for no other reason than to terrify the entire population into submission—an effort which succeeded so well with the Kristang that the state was thereafter able to institute what appears to have been a covert takeover of Edwin Tessensohn's previously generally independent Singapore Eurasian Association in 1989, which has since remained largely state-aligned, and which unfortunately oversaw almost the near-extinction of Kristang culture and awareness by 2015.

In 2016, unknowingly following in my great-grandmother and great-great-great-grandfather's footsteps, I initiated language revitalisation efforts for the Kristang language as a bright-eyed linguistics undergraduate and Singapore Ministry of Education Teaching Scholar interested in making a difference for my community that I otherwise knew very little about, having been raised 'aracially' by my family and with almost no knowledge of the tortured history above; I simultaneously published my first novel, *Altered Straits*, after it had been longlisted for the inaugural 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize. It has only been with the benefit of hindsight that I have been able to recognise that all of these efforts were allowed to very coincidentally and fortuitously emerge after Lee Kuan Yew passed away in March 2015; it has also only been in the last year following sustained sexual, psychoemotional and institutional abuse in 2019 and resigning from MOE that I have finally been able to full intertwined all of the facets of my identity, excavate the history provided above, and reestablish myself as the openly gay and non-binary scholar-leader of the contemporary Kristang community in Singapore, at last consciously and self-reflexively continuing in the footsteps of my ancestors.

Under my leadership, a wider, fuller and very accelerated negotiation of what it means to be Kristang has flourished in dialogue with our context in Singapore, in spite of what, as of late 2022, still seemed to be ongoing covert institutional efforts

to repress this. Through this contextualised and contemporised reclamation, we especially seek to reclaim what Marisa C. Gaspar and other academics writing outside of Singapore and Malaysia have noted about our community, namely that:

> the multiple identities of the Kristang began to assume a more essential nature, and the previous 'Creole' identity aspect, with more explicitly Malay elements, was suppressed while they 'exaggeratedly' adopted a new Portuguese identity (77).

The alienation that the above project, which appears to have been encouraged by European and/or elite-adjacent individuals and institutions who were terrified of the implications of a mixed creole people claiming descent from both Christianity and Islam in a part of the world they had (and have) very little control over, is absolutely staggering. Informally, a sizeable number of people in my generation in the community (I was born in 1992) are almost completely disenfranchised from Kristang and Eurasian identity to a very high degree; there is almost no affective connection with what it means to be Kristang or Eurasian, because many of us have almost no idea what that means following the concerted efforts of various parties to ensure that our real identity is either almost completely subsumed into a romanticized and heavily-Orientalising neo-Portuguese ideal, as in Melaka, or is absent, ignored, elided and in some cases prevented from reaching the public view, as in Singapore. It has only been with the benefit of hindsight that I have been able to notice how this has manifested in *Altered Straits*, which was written before I regained that affective connection, and my own knowledge of the community's history, to what it meant for me to be Kristang in 2022; *Altered* is still fundamentally a Kristang or Eurasian text, but as fellow Kristang writer Arin Alycia Fong notes about my work in her 2020 Master's thesis:

> Kevin Martens Wong's mytho-dystopian science fiction novel *Altered Straits* is anexample of a renewed way to write about Eurasianess without explicitly writing about Eurasian culture. He does this through the lens of queerness and an anxiety towards loss and erasure of personal agency, identity, a way of life, an anxiety that is both unique to Eurasian sensibility and relatable to the survival of other cultures in a destructive world (85).

I wholeheartedly agree with Fong, except for any implicatures, accidental or intentional, that I did all of or any of the above

intentionally. In other words, Fong essentially performs what I think is a very successful psychoanalysis of my own unconscious, mostly unrecognised psychoemotional state at the time I wrote *Altered Straits*: I had not yet come to terms with the loss and erasure of Kristang personal agency, identity, and way of life because, well, it had been papered over and covered up, and in 2017 I had yet to uncover most of it, despite having been in the public eye for more than a year with the Kristang language revitalisation effort. I did not know, then, that I was the descendant of whoever I might be descended from in the community; I did not even fully consciously recognise my own legitimate claim to being Kristang, still being worried that having a Chinese surname and father would somehow preclude me from being part of a mixed, hybridised, porous culture (!) that had also intermarried with the communities around them for generations in both Melaka and Singapore—fears that were also encouraged by people and community leaders in the former, who I believe secretly feared that I was another attempt by the Singapore state to further dismantle the Kristang community due to my position at the time as a Teaching Scholar.

Part of my own positionality in exploring my work, therefore, and the writing of other contemporary Kristang writers, is to uncover how and why the dissociation from myself was so compelling and powerful that *I did not even think or feel or recognise or observe that I was dissociated from myself*. Having also spent the last year on pioneering research into the Kristang model of the human psyche, known as the Osura Pesuasang ('the (Bone-)Structure of Personhood') and into assembling, for the first time and against once again countervailing institutional pressure, a first approach to Kristang literature (Wong, 'Towards a Kristang / Portuguese-Eurasian literature'), I have also sought to understand more of how the community's intergenerational trauma, and the particular mechanisms via which this trauma compels such powerful dissociation, might manifest in our writing and creative work. In doing so, therefore, I have also looked for patterns in symbols, themes and narrative form that might help further unpack these questions, and in so doing I hence also found strong commonalities between my own novel *Altered Straits* and the debut novel of fellow Kristang writer Stuart Danker: *Tinhead City, KL*, which synchronously is also a work of speculative fiction, was also published by Epigram following a similar pathway of being longlisted for the Epigram Book Fiction Prize in 2020, three years after *Altered Straits* was, and is also set in the Malayan

Peninsula and its immediate surrounds.

As a people, we are also arguably forced, if not gratuitously impelled, by the circumstances of our community's formation and ancestry to constantly question what is real and what is imagined: in other scholarly work, I have identified this as the Lembransa Krismatra ('Dreaming Thinking'), or a uniquely Kristang way of epistemological self-reflexivity that allows us to deal with this constant, emergent uncertainty by learning to become very comfortable with paradox, and—like many other colonised and indigenous peoples—to be extremely and highly metacognitive and attuned to dissonances in our sensory and abstract environment *without often letting on that we are*, if we are aware that we are distinct in this way, or (more commonly) realising that many other people are not. Fellow Kristang writer Simone Lazaroo, a very successful novelist in her own right based in Australia and writing from her deeply moving and at times lonely experience as part of the wider Kristang diaspora, exemplifies this in her own scholarly autoethnographic treatment of her writing:

> In retrospect, I see that the writing of my first novel, *The World Waiting to be Made*, was partly an attempt to answer recurrent questions about "where we came from". … When I began writing that first novel, I drew initially on my parents' anecdotes about my Singaporean experiences. … Such anecdotes loomed larger than my own very sparse personal memories of my Singaporean home, for my parents told these familial stories with such affective force that the anecdotes themselves had the power of strong personal memory for me. (103-104)

This is not to say that only Kristang or Eurasian writers have a unique and unassailable moratorium on being self-reflexive; rather, it is to highlight that self-reflexivity, and the questioning of the self, come so readily to us, and are arguably even a central and recurring facet of what it means to write as a Kristang or a Eurasian writer, because our entire identity is built upon a history of dissonance, fragmentation, mutability and intercultural collision and catalytic transformation.

The Terrifying Transhuman: The Concordance in *Altered Straits* and the Justicars of Mutiara Corp in *Tinhead City, KL*

Thus, the immediate and striking comparison that one observes between *Altered Straits* and *Tinhead City, KL* is that both are not merely very clearly cyberpunk and dystopian in their speculative

narratives, but seem to employ an intriguing conceit for their central antagonists: the archetype of the monstrous, sociopathic transhuman hive-mind, organisation or artificial intelligence. A tell-tale sign that this archetype is strongly related to Kristang identity appears in *Altered Straits*, where I unconsciously and completely unintentionally chose to represent the means by which the Concordance, the hive-mind in *Altered Straits*, assimilates a new victim using a metaphor that also happens to be one of the strongest and most well-known symbols of Kristang identity:

> Some time before the country retreated underground, Titus had learnt from his mother how to devein prawns in the sun-dappled kitchen of their 14th-story flat in Teban Gardens. She'd stood behind him, her hands guiding his.
>
> *Take your knife, steady in your hands, and make a small incision along the back of the prawn. See the vein? Now you gently lift it out with the blunt end of your knife, and once you have it between your fingers, tug it out.*
>
> The Concordance wanted the nervous system intact in order to ensure the neuro-cybernetic uplink took full effect. Or something like that (23-24).

So connected is the image of the prawn to Kristang identity is that an insider name for ourselves, derogatory when used by outsiders, is *geragok*, or shrimp; this passage also further calls to mind the informal reasoning behind why we are called *geragok*, due to our storied history as fisherfolk along the Straits of Malacca seeking shrimp, which are also made into a spicy paste known as *belachan*. That I inadvertently subverted this entire image and archetype, without ever once considering or recognising the connection to Kristang identity while the book was being written or edited, strongly suggests that this is more than a mere coincidence, and that both the Concordance and Mutiara Corp are more than mere simplistic refashionings of Dune's Omnius, Terminator's Skynet or Star Trek's Borg.

What is this archetype signalling, then? The Concordance seem to be preoccupied with bizarre, twisted ideas of perfection and the happiness and contentment that emanates from or alongside it, to the extent that I often write that "the only emotion the Concordance felt, as it always did, was wordless, soundless, euphoric joy" (121). The Justicars and Mutiara Corp of *Tinhead City, KL*, meanwhile, at first seem to privilege a different set of interests, also possibly suggesting therefore either a different

personal predisposition or insecurity, or a different collective one, considering that *Altered Straits* is set in a similarly hyper-authoritarian Singapore that has nonetheless outlasted much of the world in fighting back against the Concordance*,* whereas *Tinhead City, KL* is set in a dystopian Malaysia where Mutiara Corp has taken over KL and much of its surrounds, and. A strong hint of this is immediately apparent when we are first offered a wider glimpse of the dystopia Zachary Ti lives in:

> He strode through the tunnels, the metallic odours a stark reminder of where he was—the underbelly of KL, a city known only by those two letters. They had stood for something once, but ever since Mutiara Corp took over and seceded from the rest of the country, only the letters remained as a reminder of what this place was called (5).

Again, although we are never given a clear indication whether Zach is meant to be Kristang (and do not technically need one for the narrative to advance), this is an environment that our community is arguably quite adapted to, having often ourselves in such sites whether physically or metaphorically. And with the subsequent oppressive and heavy-handed treatment that Zachary and his peers find themselves on the receiving end of from the Justicars, who enforce Mutiara Corp's intentions and goals with intense, instantaneous, seemingly arbitrary and very often lethal violence and punishment, one immediately gets a clear sense that in *Tinhead City, KL*, Mutiara Corp is more an embodiment of the emptiness and severe, hyper-traumatising arbitrariness of notions of punishment and castigation, paradoxically seeking to enforce justice while only generating more inequality and cruelty instead.

Yet beneath those ostensibly different directions lies a deeper and more profound parallel, which we also glimpsed earlier in Simone Lazaroo's excavation of her own work: ultimately, all three texts grapple with a profound fear of emptiness, of a deep and devastating sadness, and a void at the centre of one's being that consumes memory, personhood and identity. The Justicars in *Tinhead City, KL* are as inhuman and as coldly and logically sadistic as the savagely clinical Concordance are in *Altered Straits*, despite their name suggesting otherwise; likewise, many of Zach's companions like Maggie and Nazli are dispatched as cruelly and as suddenly as Titus's boyfriend Akash is in *Altered*, again for seemingly arbitrary, random and inhuman decisions that are undertaken in the name of a logic or rationality that is

inconceivable to the protagonists.

I therefore hypothesise that both works are our own authors' efforts to negotiate the multiple layers of erasure and trauma that have collected over generations of marginalisation and institutional abuse, and which ultimately every Kristang writer comes to terms with in their own right. Rather than a straightforward categorisation of the Concordance and the Justicars as representations of either personal or collective trauma, we can take the middle route, and identify them as both: an underlying, collective resistance or defiance against emptiness and entropic loss that appears to be common to almost all Kristang work, and personal or context-specific fears about being imperfect or uncovering the wrong kind of happiness in *Altered Straits*, and of a failure to fairly and rationally account for oneself, treat others and the self with equality and respect and/or to seek redress for oneself in *Tinhead City, KL*. In the former, perfection is the empty or null space, the *lugah skizbi* (ground zero in base-16); in the latter, it is justice.

Conclusion

How do we know, still, that this is necessarily an attempt to negotiate collective-level trauma and projection? I would argue that both novels' decisions to select a faceless, indefatigable hive-mind or organisation as their primary antagonist further very strongly suggest that this is collective-level trauma that is being articulated; this, as well, is likely why this is not a straightforward interpretation of the transhuman as being something evil or terrible in itself, but rather, a representation of the continuing efforts to colonise and over-rationalise the Kristang identity into something static and categorizable—a central concern in Singapore's over-essentialising race-based frameworks—or something that can finally be recognised as either black-and-white good or bad, desirable or undesirable, coloniser or colonised, as has been the struggle for many Kristang people living in Malaysia since independence. Fong argues that in *Altered Straits*:

> the instability of temporality, corporeality, and cognition correlates with the novel's central tensions between a homogeneity imposed by authorities—the state—and the endless pluralities of individual selfhood. The speculative, the mythic, creates space for submerged, alternative histories to thrive. (85)

I would go a step further and argue that in both mine and Stuart's stories, we see that the speculative story itself, as a mirror

into that deeper Dreaming Ocean of our own psyches, individual and collective, offers almost limitless prospects for the excavation and reinvigoration of not just submerged, alternative histories, but the real history as well—one that cannot be completely erased or assimilated or lethally-injected, and which lives on, even in fragments, in the ways we represent ourselves, whether we are aware of how we are doing so or not.

> "Han," the boy says again, and his brother wipes the tears from Naufal's eyes—a futile gesture, of course, since his hands are already wet, but it is symbolic, and real, and Naufal can feel his touch. (Wong, *Altered Straits* 90)

Gradually, therefore, it is also through writing that we come to transcend ourselves, and find our own numinous approaches to who we really are.

> It took a big man to venture into the unknown, to do what was right…and there would be scars—both outside and inside—to forever remind him of those lessons too. (Danker 227)

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