Edith Cowan University

Research Online

Research outputs 2014 to 2021

2-1-2021

'We cannot heal what we will not face': Dismantling the cultural trauma and the May '98 riots in Rani P collaborations' Chinese whispers

Alberta Natasia Adji
Edith Cowan University

Marcella Polain
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013

 Part of the Asian Studies Commons, Illustration Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

10.1080/21504857.2021.1880456
This is an author's accepted manuscript of: Adji, N. A., & Polain, M. (2021). 'We cannot heal what we will not face': Dismantling the cultural trauma and the May '98 riots in Rani P collaborations' Chinese whispers. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*,13(1).
https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2021.1880456
This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/9558

‘We cannot heal what we will not face’: Dismantling the Cultural Trauma and the May ’98 Riots in Rani P Collaborations’ *Chinese Whispers*

Alberta Natasia Adji and Marcella Polain

School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

Abstract

In May 1998, ethnic riots and widespread sexual violence occurred in several major Indonesian cities. Chinese-Indonesians were targeted and, since then, there has been an interest in feminist visual art created by Chinese-Indonesian diaspora in Australia. This article explores *Chinese Whispers*, a digital graphic novel by Rani Pramesti, a Chinese-Javanese-Indonesian actor and Melbourne-based performance maker, and her team of Indonesian-Australian collaborators. Applying solemn imagery, it narrates a young woman’s attempts at understanding cultural trauma that has marked both personal and public identities of Chinese-Indonesians. Imbued with black-and-white illustrations and interview transcripts, the digital graphic novel tries to answer questions regarding hatred and violence toward Chinese-Indonesians against the backdrop of political turmoil. This article assists in understanding the significance of Indonesian digital graphic narratives as a channel through which the targeted community can discuss their shared trauma and reflexive awareness by visualising cultural conflict.

Keywords: *Chinese Whispers*; Rani P Collaborations; digital graphic novel; cultural trauma; the Indonesian May ’98 Riots

The May ’98 riots and the cultural trauma

> They are designated as people of ‘Chinese’ descent, who were born in Indonesia. They have been deeply Indonesianised, and carry Indonesian passports, but they are discriminated against by virtue of their being ‘non-*pribumi*’ (non-indigenous). They have moved and resided over an extended period in another country, feel at home there, but are generally treated in their country of residence as permanent ‘outsiders’, and have no desire to be otherwise. Many of the Chinese Indonesians living in Sydney or Melbourne, generally feel ‘at home’ within their most immediate environment there. But they would not definitively, exclusively or nationalistically ‘call Australia home’. In Australia, they are neither simply or unambiguously ‘Indonesian’ nor ‘Chinese’ ethnics, although paradoxically, they are also both. (Ariel Heryanto, an Indonesian humanities scholar, in “Ethnic Diasporas or Cosmopolitans?”, 2004, 27)

> To tell the stories of individuals affected by the May 1998 violence is to produce a picture of events that is less deterministic or analytical than the one to be gleaned from journalistic or fact-finding reports … each individual victim’s narrative about the violence is unique. Their memories are colored by trauma, ongoing fears, and the distance of time. Furthermore, retelling their narrative itself generates a further process of remembrance and representation. (Jemma Purdey in “Problematizing the Place of Victims in Reformasi Indonesia”, 2002, 620-621)

Rani P Collaborations’ digital graphic novel *Chinese Whispers* (2018) depicts the personal experiences of Rani, a young woman who witnessed the May 1998 ethnic violence and horrific mass rapes that erupted across several major Indonesian cities (Jakarta, Surabaya,

Medan, Palembang, and Solo). *Chinese Whispers* (2018) initially started as a performance installation under the same title in the Footscray Community Arts Centre's Emerging Cultural Leaders program in 2013 and later premiered at the 2014 Melbourne Fringe Festival in Footscray, Narrm, winning two awards: Best Live Art Award and Innovation in Culturally Diverse Practice Award (Jing 2018). However, due to the limited audience that the performance installation attracted, Pramesti formed a collaboration of Indonesian-Australian artists to create the bilingual, digital graphic novel version of *Chinese Whispers* so that an international audience can access to it and receive her messages (Jing 2018). Pramesti and her collaborators used a series of panels display bold black-and-white drawings, with characters and events against the grey and dark-spotted background, to highlight how rape victims, mostly Chinese-Indonesian young women, are still deeply traumatised by the gang-rapes and other brutal sexually violent conduct during the three-day riots, and that their cases have not received enough news coverage nor any compensation from the government. The English version of this digital graphic novel was launched at the 2018 Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Bali, Indonesia (Jing 2018). In *Chinese Whispers*, Pramesti visualises the longstanding trauma of the 1998 tragedy in a style that is reminiscent of her work for other artistic performance installations, like *Sedih // Sunno* (2015-2016) and *Surat-Surat* (*Letters*) (2017-2019), which include an interactive multi-sensory maze experience for the audience (P Collaborations 2019).

When asked in an interview why she still considers the issue a crucial one despite having been able to live safely in Australia for decades, Pramesti claims that she notices that the May '98 riots are still considered 'a very sensitive topic' by many Chinese-Indonesian diaspora communities in Australia, and that 'it is a memory that is largely left unaddressed in Indonesia today' (Blakkarly 2014). To support this argument, Indonesian humanities scholar Ariel Heryanto suggests how the old problems remain:

> There has been no complete reversal of the status of this long stigmatised ethnic group. Racial prejudice between the so-called Chinese Indonesians and their fellow nationals (especially in the western and central parts of the archipelago) is alive and kicking both ways (2004, 32).

Pramesti's work corresponds to Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy's assertion that a trauma narrative simply 'captures the traumatic event, conveys the horror of the experience to others, and conducts the emotion from teller to reader' (2007, 192). The creation of *Chinese Whispers* is also in line with Avram Bornstein's tenet that 'injury, trauma, and response are

not limited to an individual's intrapsychic experience but are relational experiences that can spread to people who are not direct victims, even to generations born after the injuring act' (2001, 566). Also relevant here is Cathy Caruth's concept that 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: Not as a simple understanding of the past of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves' (1995, 11).

In order to understand the May 1998 Riot, a brief summary of the historical context of Chinese Indonesians to identify and describe the root and the nature of the issue is required. The Chinese have endured discrimination and attacks in Indonesia since Dutch colonisation from 1595 to 1945. The Chinese first came to the Indonesian archipelago for trading purposes and already resided in Java and coastal areas of the Maluku Islands, Sulawesi, Sumatra and Kalimantan before the arrival of the Dutch (Chong 2016, 96-97). Many Chinese who came in pre-colonial times could assimilate into the indigenous population since they, too, were Muslims. However, this assimilation stopped when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) took control during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Under Dutch colonial rule, the people in Indonesia were categorised 'into Christians and non-Christians and on a racial basis, westerners (Europeans) and non-westerners (non-Europeans)' (Chong 2016, 97).

Following the collapse of VOC in 1800, this categorisation was re-established by the Dutch government in 1816 (following a temporary Dutch government hold under Herman Willem Daendels between 1808 and 1811 and a short British rule under Thomas Stamford Raffles between 1811 and 1816), when they established three groups to divide the Dutch East Indies population: Europeans who constituted the upper level, the Foreign Orientals (the Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and Japanese) who formed the middle level, and the indigenous population who occupied the bottom level (Suryadinata 1993, 83). The Dutch gave the Chinese licenses to engage in the opium monopoly concession, and they established zoning and pass systems in 1835 and 1863 that restricted the Chinese from living among the indigenous people in order to prevent the Chinese and the indigenous from cooperating to challenge the Dutch authority (Suryadinata 1993, 81-82). The Chinese's position soon became ambivalent; they played a major part in the colony's economic growth, but they were also perceived with suspicion and prejudice by the indigenous population for their exclusivity and Chinese-ness (Chong 2016, 97-98). Many *pribumi* or indigenous people also doubted the

Chinese's loyalty to the Indies, and this begat anti-Chinese violence in some areas in Indonesia during the early years of Revolution (1945-1949).

Yet, this romanticised Revolution period (1945-49), which is also known as the *bersiaptijd* or *bersiap* (a time of readiness and of danger) period, Robert Cribb argues, surprisingly also begot what he calls a 'brief genocide', which included the mass killings of Dutch, Eurasians and other minorities such as Ambonese, Timorese, and Menadonese by a number of PRI (*Pemuda Republik Indonesia*, Youth of the Indonesian Republic) youths and TKR (now TRI, *Tentara Republik Indonesia*, Indonesian National Armed Forces) soldiers in East Java (2008, 424). This period of extreme violence and 'ethnic cleansing' saw about 25,000-30,000 Dutch, Eurasians and other minorities to be detained, interrogated, beat up, beheaded, sexually mutilated, and brutally murdered by 'educated, urban, politically conscious and active' indigenous nationalists in Java and Sumatra (Frederick 2012, 369-370). This particular detail of Indonesia's decolonisation history, which so far has never been mentioned or commemorated by the Indonesian government, William H. Frederick argues, was the result of the 'long-standing racial sensitivities and antagonisms' (2012, 374) and the victims' questionable nationalist loyalty, which confirms that ethnic identity is still seen as 'a reliable key to national loyalty' and Indonesian-ness (375). Frederick ruminates that this example of 'genocidal massacre' or 'decolonization violence' against Dutch and Eurasians 'must also be seen in a larger and often muddled context of violence against other Indonesians as well as Chinese' (2012, 376).

During the Sukarno years (1950-1965), many Chinese in Indonesia still maintained a strong sense of Chinese nationalism and the indigenous majority perceived the Chinese as a potential 'fifth column' for China (Suryadinata 1992, 167). The Chinese's dual citizenship made the indigenous majority uncomfortable, and the anti-Chinese sentiment significantly grew during the Suharto years or the New Order era (1966-1998), with many Chinese-Indonesians were accused of being Communist sympathisers. Anti-Chinese violence occurred nearing the end of 1967 and early 1968 in West Kalimantan, which killed between two thousand to five thousand Chinese people (Chong 2016, 100). Following this, Suharto's regime began issuing laws that banned public displays of Chinese characters, Chinese festivals or holidays, Chinese language schools and newspapers, and urging the Chinese to change their names into 'Indonesian-sounding names' (Chong 2016, 100).

In addition to having to provide a Citizenship Letter to obtain legal documents, Chinese-Indonesians were given 'unwritten barriers' that 'restricted the Chinese from politics, public service, military and entrance to public universities', which ensured Suharto's regime remained in power while preventing the Chinese from fully integrating into the indigenous majority (Chong 2016, 101). During this era, a substantial number of Chinese Indonesian tycoons (Sudono Salim, William Soerjadjaja, Mochtar Riady) emerged, formed an alliance with the ruling elite and were given privileged access to licenses, contracts and bank credits. Although they represented a small number of Chinese Indonesians, the indigenous majority already perceived that the Chinese were corrupt and opportunistic, and 'The Chinese had no means to rectify this impression since they were socially and politically weak' (Chong 2016, 101). The May 1998 Riots that broke out in several major cities conveyed the hatred successfully instilled in the *pribumi* by the Dutch during 350 years of colonisation, continued by the New Order era for 32 years, and which drives the indigenous population to take out their anger and dissatisfaction on the Chinese, whom they see as the government's proxy.

In the edited collection *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), Jeffrey C. Alexander states that: 'Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible scars upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (2004, 1). Many Chinese-Indonesian communities still strongly relate to this trauma since they understand that the May 98 riots were psychocultural, triggered by a certain cultural context. Similarly, Rani P Collaborations' *Chinese Whispers* tries to achieve three things simultaneously: encapsulate the complexities of cultural trauma born out of the riotous violence of May 1998, unravel the underlying political schemes at play, and provide a thorough and intimate rendering of one of the darkest spots in Indonesian history. Despite her condemnation of the mass gang rapes, Pramesti's work does not contain any explicit sexual violence, since she wants to respect the ever-present psychological trauma of the victims, as well as avoid the risk of voyeurism or any charge of exploiting or sensationalising rape. In this way, Pramesti aspires to address the 'really complex, confronting, and really uncomfortable' exploration of 'impunity, silence, denial, and the deliberate covering-up of the facts' surrounding the events that eventually the May '98 riots (Senanayake 2018), and this artistic decision affirms that Pramesti is striving to fight repression and inter-generational trauma, and create social change.

Relating faces, music, stand-in language, and narrative inscriptions/elision to cultural trauma

By referring to Arthur Neal's *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, Jeffrey C. Alexander has investigated the notions of cultural trauma, discerning what he calls as 'the process of trauma creation', where social groups or national societies 'identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others' (2004, 1). He has studied extensively the processes of how trauma is embedded in daily life and language—which he calls lay trauma—as it occurs 'when the traumatizing event interacts with human nature' and its need for 'security, order, love, and connection' (2004, 3). Alexander uses Neal's point of view that some national traumas have been produced by 'individual and collective reactions to a volcano-like event that shook the foundations of the social world' (Neal 1998, ix). An incident such as the May '98 Riots can deeply traumatise a collectivity (Chinese-Indonesians) since it was 'an extraordinary event' that has such 'an explosive quality' that it initiates 'disruption' and 'radical change… within a short period of time' (Neal 1998, 3, 9-10). Neal emphasises that 'Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option,' and 'holding an attitude of benign neglect' or 'cynical indifference' is harmful to the wellbeing of both the wronged community and the nation at large (1998, 4, 9-10). Indeed, traumatic events should be seen as specific pathways to progress because 'The very fact that a disruptive event has occurred' implies that 'new opportunities emerge for innovation and change' (Neal 1998, 18).

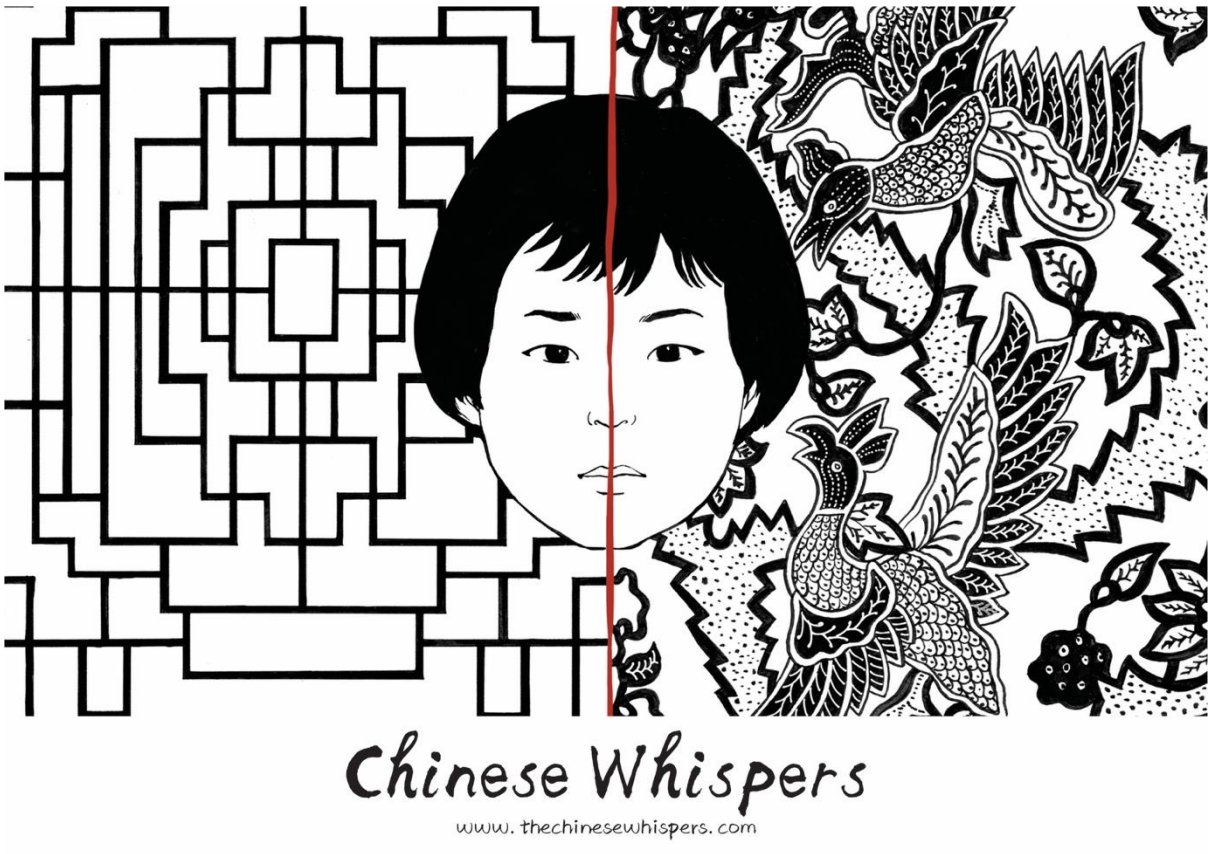

Figure 1. First page of Rani P Collaborations' digital graphic novel *Chinese Whispers*. Images provided courtesy of Rani P Collaborations, @ranipnews. Illustrated by @cindysaja

Chinese Whispers consists of two overarching but mutually sustainable landscapes: Pramesti's personal experience, and historic insight into the Chinese Indonesian context. The vertically first page of the digital graphic novel portrays the face of a short-haired Chinese young woman dissected by a long, blood-red line reminiscent of a knife-cut. This crude red line separates her face into two contrasting backgrounds: the left with the traditional Chinese geometric pattern depicting squares, straight lines and sharp corners; the right with phoenixes drawn in the Javanese batik motif portraying pinnate, dotted, and squama patterns (See Figure 1). All these images and motifs, penned in black on a white background, symbolise the divided identity and fractured sense of belonging that can be prompted by violence. This image is strongly associated with the 'torn' or conflicting nature and memories of being a *peranakan*: an actor belonging to both their ancestral Chinese and Native Indonesian culture but never being able or allowed to fuse them entirely into a coherent identity. This differences between the represented Chinese culture and Javanese culture forms a dichotomy of propriety and impropriety that is further explored through the story. The face represents Pramesti's as an innocent girl whose identity and fate are somehow moulded by external

factors beyond her control – as a *peranakan* with Javanese heritage who was forced to seek refuge and live in another country while still being haunted and troubled by the May 1998 Riot. The following section investigates the ways in which the illustrations, music, stand-in language, and narrative inscription/elision operate in Pramesti's digital graphic novel.

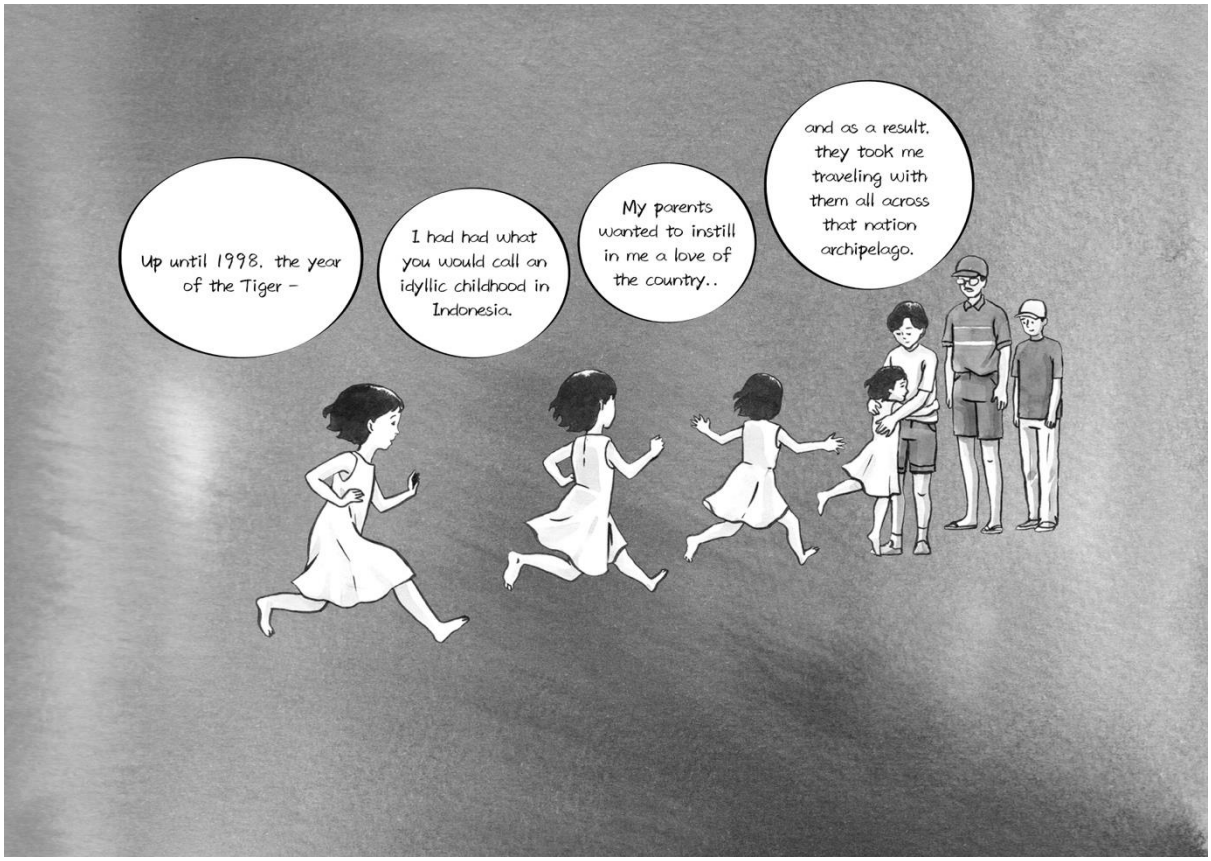

Figure 2. A young, fightened Rani runs to her moother. Images provided courtesy of Rani P Collaborations, @ranipnews. Illustrated by @cindysaja

The first chapter of the graphic novel begins with a scene of escape - a frightened young girl called Rani running into the loving arms of her mother, with her father and older brother watching and standing behind them against the blurred grey background (See Figure 2). Rani, who comes running from school after being told that there is a riot going on, nervously asks her mother whether they are Chinese. Her mother insists they are Indonesians. The narrator recounts that prior to the May '98 Riots, Rani and her family have had the opportunity to travel to many places in Indonesia as a way to imbue a sense of belonging and love for Indonesian culture. Already, this 'perfect' childhood has been infused with a sombre undertone, given Pramesti's consistent portrayal of the characters with gloomy faces and the

grey-coloured background. The narrator's tone turns serious when she describes this idyllic childhood disrupted by civil unrest involving burnings and lootings of Chinese-owned property, and systemic rapes and killings of hundreds of Chinese women in Jakarta, Medan, and other Indonesian cities. These cataclysmic social events eventually cause Rani's older brother to leave permanently for Australia and Rani herself to follow suit a year later. The illustrations, speech balloons and recorded narration offer the perspective of a girl narrator whose idyllic childhood was destroyed by intergenerational hate. This key technique is one that Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti have identified as the child's eye perspective that can play a significant role in making young people's life writing 'a poetics for representing trauma' and 'an aesthetic for writing about resistance' (2016, 64). This strategy also aims to 'remind the reader of her youthfulness; and to offer overt political commentary on youth issues' while establishing counterpublics (Douglas and Poletti, 2016, 28).

In the beginning of Chapter 2 ('Becoming a Witness'), Pramesti clarifies the broad ethnic identity of the perpetrators, but she does not give further detailed background regarding the culprits' exact ethnic identity; there are various local ethnic groups and religious affiliations in Indonesia. While narrating her brief summary of her permanent move from Jakarta to Melbourne when she was thirteen years old, Pramesti uses small, tilted, rectangular panels with flickering light-grey colour, but she switches to presenting some characters with borderless backgrounds to emphasise the importance of their individual narrations. Her consistent use of monochromes throughout implies that the events explored have happened far in the past; the muted greyscale and black-and-white also give a sense of gloom, tragedy, fear and threat: regardless of the freedom they have enjoyed throughout the Reformasi era, Chinese-Indonesians are aware they must be careful in expressing themselves since they might awaken enduring anti-Chinese sentiment (Budiman 2005, 100).

Language also plays a significant part in the development of the cultural trauma narrative, particularly as a substitute for what is not displayed visually. Starting with a monologue peppered with sounds of fury and whispers, Pramesti mostly makes use of Modernist stream-of-consciousness narration, a trait that is often used in writing trauma, including in graphic novels and comic books, 'to depict, as realistically as possible, the mental processes happening within a traumatized psyche' (Romero-Jódar 2017, 2). It shows the continuous flow of Pramesti's thoughts, reflections and conscious reactions to events throughout the novel. As suggested in its title, *Chinese Whispers* makes use of a series of

whispers from the several women interviewed to communicate the latent harms that lie beneath the current socio-cultural situation in Indonesia, which continue to prevent an open discussion.

These women interviewees vocalise some accusatory terms to the perpetrators. The first two terms were infamously used during Dutch colonisation to keep the Chinese and the Native Indonesians segregated: '*Vreemde-Oosterlingen, Inlander, Pribumi, Tiko*' (P Collaborations 2018). Still in the same chapter, the women vocalise a series of contemplative questions in whispers: 'Why is there still so much secrecy?', 'How can we talk about this?', 'Why don't the younger generation know?', 'What did it do to us?', 'How did it happen?', 'Why is there still so much fear?', 'Why is there still so much silence?' (P Collaborations 2018). Both forms of expression are thought-provoking; they suggest lingering trauma and internalised racism, for many Chinese-Indonesians they feel that they are still being watched and listened to by the ruling elites who are waiting for another chance to scrutinise and oppress them through large-scale violence. The first form of verbalisation is a risk: calling perpetrators names with derogatory language might trigger more hatred, antagonism and violence; from them, but it is also a bold move, the first step towards truth telling and justice for the victims. The second form of verbalisation, the series of questions are directly relevant to the deep-rooted cultural trauma and the stigma of the rape victims/survivors and their families. Autobiography/memoir scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* identify these particular techniques as addressing 'a multiplicity of interlocutors', when

> Narrator and addressee(s), then, are engaged in a communicative action that is fundamental to autobiographical acts and the kinds of intersubjective truth they construct. Attending to the addressee or implied reader of a life narrative allows us to observe subtle shifts in narrative intent. That attention allows us to consider the kind of reader the text asks us to be as we respond to such rhetorics of intent (2010, 69).

This verbalisation of mass violence as a racial or ethnic in nature is maintained throughout Chapter 3, 'Why Dig Up the Dirt?', where the pictures are blurred, and the gang rape stories are told with trepidation by narrator Karlina Supelli, who shares her first-hand experience of directly witnessing the brutality of the riots through riding in an ambulance.



Figure 3. Karlina Surpelli tells of her witnessing the brutality of the riots. Images provided courtesy of Rani P Collaborations, @ranipnews. Illustrated by @cindysaja

In Figure 3, the Indonesian male protesters are portrayed as brutal and ferocious figures who evidently like abusing their power. There are six panels that are arranged closely together on one page; three depicting the demonstrators have round edges while the other three displaying Karlina Supelli have square edges. The largest panel, which shows the scene where hundreds of people are scattered and running from something far away, possibly police shootings, indicates chaos caused by the civilians' fear of armed authorities. The colour-tone of this scene is light; shading on the streets, buildings and trees endows them with impending threat or danger. The other, smaller panel, containing some angry men with raised fists and protest signs, creates a sense of uneasiness or violent disturbance. The panels that depict Karlina Supelli are predominantly in light colour, and she is clad in a dark-coloured shirt with large necklaces and a twisted headband, giving her a feminine look. In the top right corner, there is a single close-up of a man's eyes full of anger and hate glaring straight at readers. A feeling of dread pervades the scene – why is it that the hatred of the Native Indonesians towards the Chinese-Indonesians endures so long? The gloomy grey colour both in the panels

and the background again confirms the undercurrent of anger and discontent that still runs deeply among the Native Indonesians.

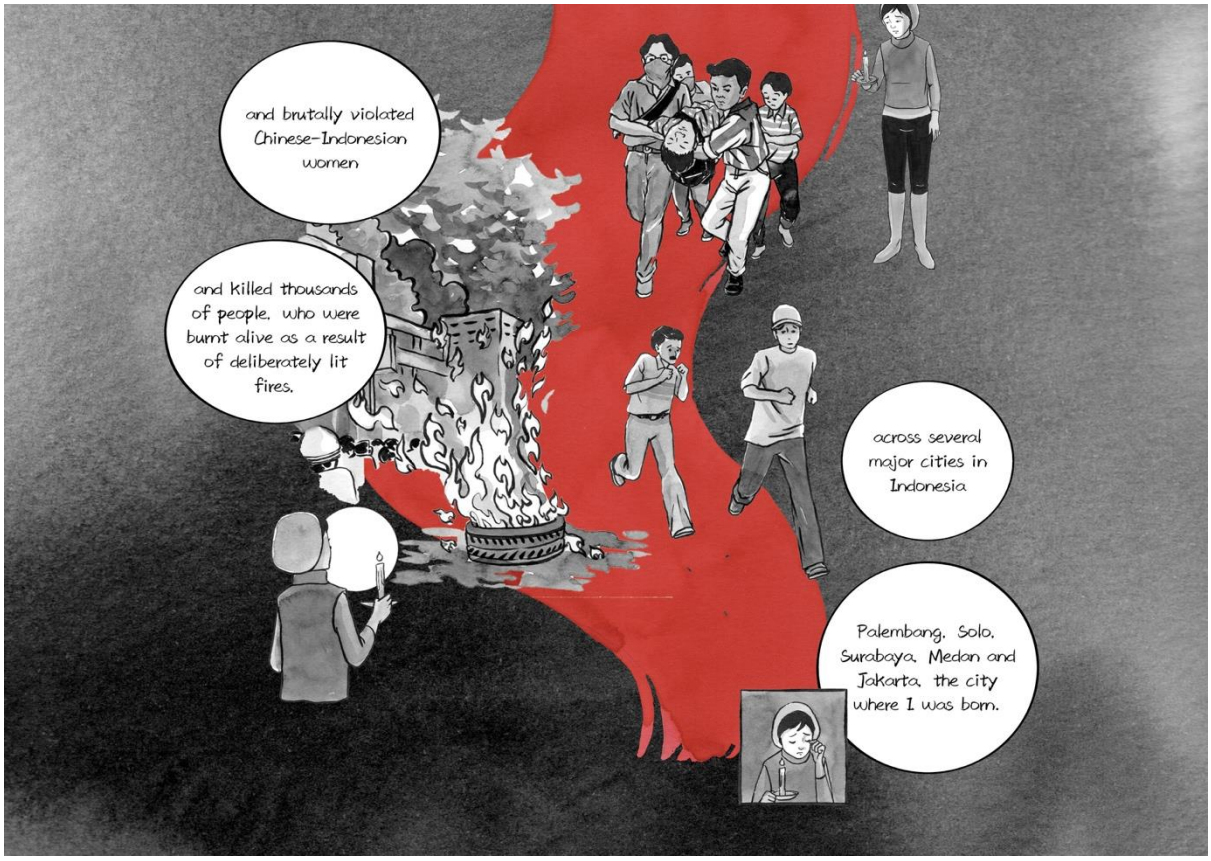

Figure 4. Images of the riots linked by a blood-red brush-stroke leading to a crying Rani. Images provided courtesy of Rani P Collaborations, @ranipnews. Illustrated by @cindysaja

In the following sequence, Pramesti manages visualisation of cultural trauma by including a panel in medium longshot where the three-day mass protests happened in Jakarta. Spectators can observe different mobs of students and laymen protesting in front of the People's Consultative Assembly building, as well as others either burning cars or buildings, running away from something, or carrying an unconscious woman. The perspective employed may remind observers of photographs taken by news media when the riots were in full swing. Pramesti connects them together in Figure 4 with a wide, thick blood-red brush stroke that curves down towards a tiny close-up of crying Rani. In the case of the May 1998 violence in Indonesia, it is safe to say that 'mass rapes may be designed to maximize trauma to survivors, witnesses, and the targeted community as a whole', and that 'sexual violence perpetrated in public or on a large scale is "intended to disable an enemy by destroying the bonds of family

and society" through the perpetration of trauma and stigma' (Reid-Cunningham 2008, 290). The systemic gang rapes, which occurred for three days during the violent riots in several cities throughout Indonesia, were mainly committed by Indonesian military units who targeted and sexually assaulted hundreds of Chinese-Indonesian women, leaving the survivors to 'suffer from serious psychological traumas' (Marching 2007, 18). Instead of only being a consequence of brutal conflicts, oftentimes rape is deliberately used as 'a strategy of political control … to terrorize and create a climate of fear' as well as 'to undermine and decentralize the movements that resist the government' (Primariantari 1999, 246). On top of this, 'mass rapes are combined with organized slaughter, looting, burning, pillaging, and starvation for exponential impact' (Reid-Cunningham 2008, 281), confirming that the May 1998 violence intentionally targeted the Chinese because of their position as 'outsiders' that threaten the domination of the majority group. It is essential for victims/survivors of oppression, who might one day become a target of another type of violation, to relive the traumatic event 'by testifying and giving voice', but these voices still have to be accompanied by a clear scholarly knowledge about the group's identity within the overarching political motives (Winarnita 2008, 15). Pramesti tries to respond to these circumstances by providing speech balloons full of scholarly interview excerpts with Dewi Anggraeni, a Chinese Indonesian senior journalist, scholar and columnist, in the Chapter 4, entitled 'Inheriting Hate'. These provide the political and socio-cultural explanations of latent and expressed hostility and resentment often aimed at Chinese Indonesians:

> There are reasons for the hate… In terms of the last 30 odd years of Suharto's rule, they were used. They were politically used by the regime. They were stripped of any political power, so they were completely dependent on the power elite. And so they were manipulated. A few of them would be given facilities so they become super rich. And they become the showcase. 'Here, the Chinese—look, they are so rich and you are so poor.' And they nurtured that image. So that when something happens, and people are dissatisfied with the power elite—because they are afraid to attack the power elite, because they're armed, they can attack the proxy. Those who collude with 'us', you know. Well, not all Chinese people colluded with the elite, but that's the image already made. So that's the reason.'
>
> The second reason is they themselves are not aware that that is going on. So many—not all of them—many of them behave, corroborate the image. They're ostentatious. They behave. They treat the non-Chinese people like dirt. Right? And this is not lost on the people. So it reinforces the image. So that's another reason. And they do even now still feel that they are actually superior to the 'Natives'. At that time there was no question they felt superior to the Natives. I want people to believe, to accept that they themselves are racist. Therefore, they can see why other people are racist towards them. That kind of understanding will start what I call the dismantling of the frame. As long as they still believe that they are not racist, other people are, then the frame will always be intact. (P Collaborations 2018)

Rani is seen lingering around the frame of her shrinking old box, but she is looking at the white square steppingstones laid out before her that lead to a large, luminous panel with Dewi Anggraeni standing in the middle of a forest road and looking at Rani from a distance. Pramesti visualises her meeting with Dewi Anggraeni through using light tone and landscape, framed in medium shots and close-ups, and mutable panel borders that serve as the accessible window frames opening a portal to another world of enlightenment or a moment of truth that connects viewers with specific times and events. Andrés Romero-Jódar states that, in accommodating 'the concept of time and its artistic representation', graphic novels change the size of panel frames in order to embody 'a movement in time' and 'a figurative movement through space' that give the characters a sense of walking down 'the stairs of time' (2017, 9). It is therefore possible for viewers to read the story through the perspective of a child walking into the fantastic—a world of wonders and freedom, an intriguing outlook that, consciously or unconsciously, sparks curiosity and wonder. Pramesti later switches back to the use of close-up panels and faces where Rani is seen touching her face and arm in a distasteful manner and voicing her disappointment for being born with such physical features—expressing her internalised racism as a woman of Chinese descent—which provides an intimate juxtaposition to the previous panel. This act of relentless self-questioning or self-investigation slowly leads to Pramesti understanding her place within a system of order and kinship and through which she implements her cultural group's systems of values, beliefs and relationships. By returning to Pramesti's narrative voice at the most sorrowful moment of the large-scale violence, Pramesti and her collaborators reaffirm that the narrative belongs to and reflects Pramesti's personal experiences.

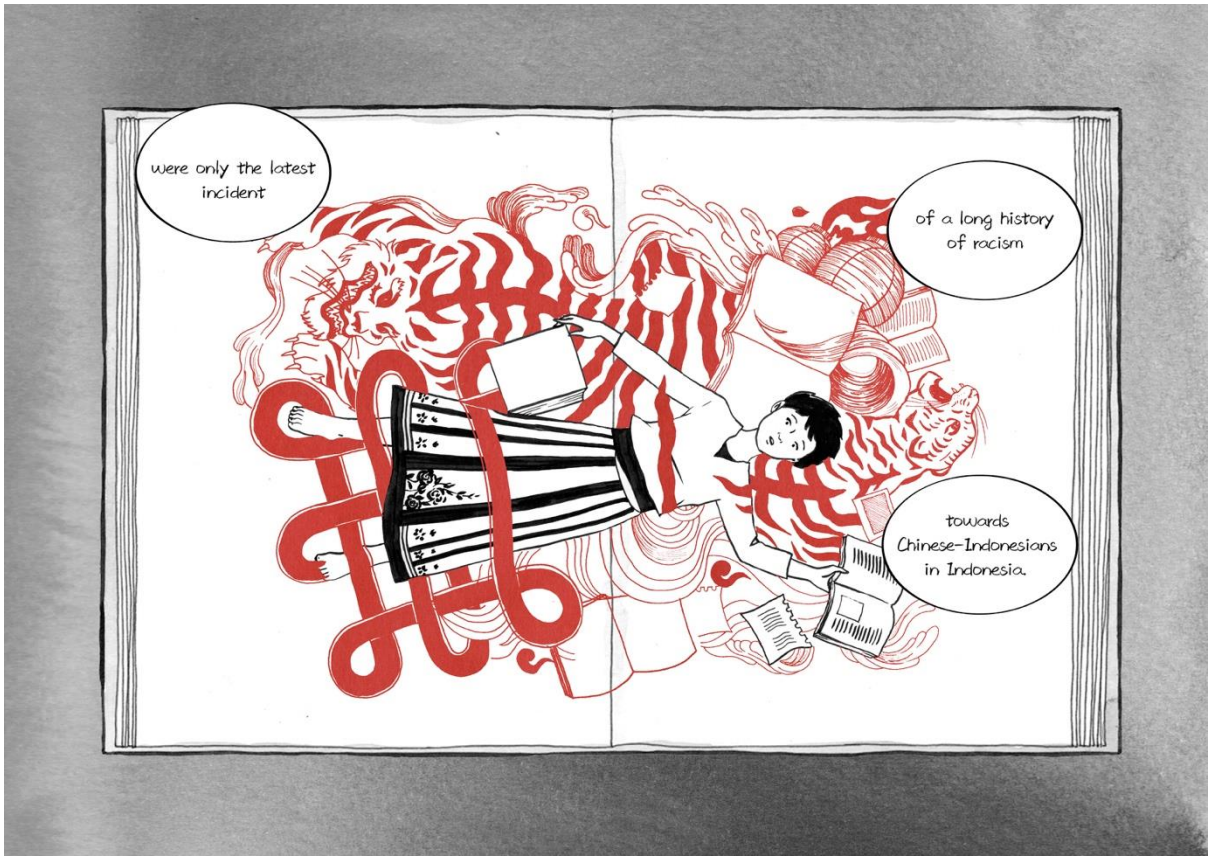

Figure 5. Rani is entangled in red tiger stripes; 1998, the year of the riot, was a year of the tiger. Images provided courtesy of Rani P Collaborations, @ranipnews. Illustrated by @cindysaja

In the next stage, Pramesti includes the image of the report document issued by the Habibie government's Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF, *Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta*), a special team appointed to investigate and identify the perpetrators of the May Riots of 1998. The investigation produced doubtful results and failed to bring justice for the victims (Purdey 2002, 606). In Figure 5, the TGPF report is shown to open and reveal a page showing black-and-white Rani being entangled in bright red tiger stripes (the year 1998 was the year of the tiger) that come from a blood-red painting behind her, consisting of two tiger heads, Chinese lampions, scattered books and documents, and rolling waves: 'So, I realised that the violence that erupted during the May Riots of 1998 were only the latest incident of a long history of racism' (P Collaborations 2018). In this sense, Pramesti's autobiographical acts align with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's concept of 'investigations into and processes of self-knowing' (2010, 69), as one's modes of inquiry and self-knowledge 'change over time and with cultural locations' by gaining more knowledge through performing relentless further studies and introspections (2010, 70).

The depicted socio-cultural artefacts characterise the historical complications of Chinese-Indonesians, long coloured with 'blood' or violent conflicts with the Native Indonesians. There are close-up panels showing numerous of Pramesti's facial expressions—sad, confused, mournful, depressed—which communicate hopelessness, disappointment, and acute grief as she realises Chinese-Indonesians still have a long fight for justice and to mend their antagonistic relationship with their Native Indonesian counterparts. Here, Pramesti portrays herself as the survivor/victim who represents hundreds of the rape victims and insists on acknowledging the traumatising events and experiences, as well as confronting the denials of the perpetrators, the government and their traditionalist supporters. The interaction between personal reflections and historical circumstances manifests in the interplay between illustrations and words on the page, giving viewers what trauma critic Dominick LaCapra has identified as 'a plausible feel' (2014, 13), that in some cases might develop into 'a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it' (2014, 22), thus directing them to commemorate the disturbing event. Jelin and Kaufman assert that the confrontation between 'the voices of those who call for commemoration, for remembrance of the disappearances and torment, for denunciation of the repressors, and those who make it their business to act as if nothing has happened here' is crucial, since any form of denial will never succeed in erasing or destroying the personalised memory of people (quoted in Alexander 2004, 7-8). Indeed, Pramesti's digital graphic novel has maintained all of the elements of the hero/heroine's mission: 'descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity' (Smith and Watson, 2010, 70).

Conclusion

The visual depiction of cultural trauma in *Chinese Whispers* provides an all-encompassing reading of the act of both mass protests and sexual violence – to counteract its official, narrow view. The focus on the faces of Rani, Dewi Anggraeni, Karlina Supelli, other female interviewees, as well as on the violent acts taking place during the riots, strives to preserve a balance—their tragedy needs validation without encouraging victimhood. The absence of explicit scenes of sexual violence avoids images of rape that could attract 'a misplaced and

inappropriate reading' (in't Veld 2018, 218). The emphasis on direct, plain language is highly efficient in translating the cruelty of the events but not in an accessible confronting way.

Chinese Whispers has adhered to these 'ethical standards' of trauma, but also bears witness to conventions that are culturally and historically specific such as 'collective suffering, politicized struggle, and communal survival' (Smith and Watson, 2010, 71). In addition to projecting the intimate and testimonial voice of the individual traumas and collective suffering into the art form, *Chinese Whispers* also challenges the general readers' assumption and warns them of the pitfalls of accepting the official view of the May '98 tragedy, which includes Chinese-Indonesians have colluded in reinforcing and repeating 'a cycle of violence' (Widianto 2019) between themselves and the Native Indonesians. Pramesti does not create an artwork that blindly defends the position of the Chinese-Indonesians and blames the Native Indonesians, but critically and carefully assesses the underlying reasons for such violent outbursts, demonstrating what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call 'methods of self-examination, introspection, and remembering encoded in them through generic conventions' (2010, 71).

Through constructing a digital graphic narrative than can only be accessed online, Pramesti proposes to use *Chinese Whispers* 'as a medium through which cultural memory is transmitted as well as the power of imagination to evoke the reader's empathic resonance across both time and space with distant suffering' (Liao 2018, 506). Moreover, Pramesti's viewpoint as a double minority woman refusing othering of rape victims concurrently positions her as an active, assertive agent who has solidly anchored her experiences and portrayed then through Rani. Her firm decision to take a stand against the traumatising sexual violence, and explore discriminatory undertones of relationships between Chinese and other Indonesians serves as an explicit manifestation of collective and individual identity. Pramesti's digital graphic novel stresses that silence about traumatic experience should not be interpreted as meaning the incident did not occur. Her work also suggests that to succeed its decolonisation and nation development process, Indonesia should take an honest look in the mirror of their complex forms of violence and uncover unpleasant truths of their history.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Rani Pramesti and @cindysaja for granting the reproduction of images here. This work was supported by a Higher Degree by Research Scholarship (HDRS) from Edith Cowan University.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Alberta Natasia Adji is a creative writing PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University, Australia. Her novel and exegesis are concerned with family history and trauma of Chinese Indonesians. She has recently published a short story in *Meniscus*, a piece of flash fiction in *TEXT Journal*, and refereed articles in journals such as *Life Writing*, *Prose Studies*, and *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Marcella Polain is a senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University and an Australian-resident poet, novelist, lyric essayist and short fiction writer. Her first novel, *The Edge of the World* (2007), has been translated into Romanian and Armenian and shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize for First Book 2007. She has published three collections of poems: *Dumbstruck* (1996), *Each Clear Night* (2000), and *Therapy Like Fish* (2008). Her most recent novel is *Driving into the Sun* (2019).

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma.” In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka, 1-30. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

Blakkarly, Jarni. 2014. “Rani Pramesti Talks Chinese Whispers.” *Peril*. 12 October. https://peril.com.au/topics/rani-pramesti-talks-chinese-whispers/

Bornstein, Avram. 2001. “Ethnography and the Politics of Prisoners in Palestine-Israel.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30: 546-574. doi: 10.1177.089124101129024268

Budiman, Arief. 2005. “Portrait of the Chinese in Post-Suharto Indonesia.” In *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*, edited by Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker, 95-104. Victoria: Monash University Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chong, Wu Ling. 2016. “Rethinking the Position of Ethnic Chinese Indonesians.” *Sejarah* 25 (2): 96-108. doi: https://doi.org/10.22452/sejarah.vol25no2.7

Cribb, Robert. 2008. “The brief genocide of Eurasians in Indonesia, 1945/46.” In *Empire, colony, genocide: conquest. Occupation, and subaltern resistance in world history*, edited by A. Dirk Moses, 424-436. New York: Berghahn Books.

Douglas, Kate, and Anna Poletti. 2016. *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Frederick, William H. 2012. “The killing of Dutch and Eurasians in Indonesia’s national revolution (1945-49): a ‘brief genocide’ reconsidered.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 14 (3-4): 359-380. doi: 10.1080/14623528.2012.719370

Heryanto, Ariel. 2004. “Ethnic Diasporas as Cosmopolitans? Indonesian Chineseness, Citizenship, and Pop Cultures.” In *Ethnicities, Diasporas and ‘Grounded’ Cosmopolitanisms in Asia*, 26-41. Proceedings of the Asia Research Institute Workshop on *Identities, Nations and Cosmopolitan Practice: Interrogating the Work of Pnina and Richard Werbner*. Singapore: National University of Singapore.

in't Veld, Laurike. 2018. "Reading presence and absence in *Fax from Sarajevo*'s rape narrative." *Journal of Graphic Novel and Comics* 9 (3): 214-228. doi: 10.1080/21504857.2018.1462222

Jing, Leah. 2018. "Interview #82 – Rani Pramesti." *Liminal*. 11 October. https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/rani-pramesti

LaCapra, Dominick. 2014. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Liao, Pei-Chen. 2018. "Life Writing, Cultural Memory, and Historical Mediation in Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*." *Life Writing* 15 (4): 505-521. doi: 10.1080/14484528.2018.1446666

MacCurdy, Marian Mesrobian. 2007. *The Mind's Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Marching, Soe Tjen. 2007. "The Mass Rape of the Ethnic Chinese in May 1998 and the War on Terror." *Pacific News* 27: 18-21. 12 October. http://www.pacific-geographies.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/pn27_marching.pdf

Neal, Arthur G. 1998. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe.

P Collaborations, Rani. 2019. "Performances Inspired by Deeply Personal Experiences of Indonesia." 11 October. http://ranip.com.au/performances/

P Collaborations, Rani. 2018. *The Chinese Whispers*. 21 July. https://thechinesewhispers.com/

Primariantari, Rudiah. 1999. "Women, Violence, and Gang Rape in Indonesia." *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law* 7 (2): 245-276. 12 October. https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/cjic7&div=19&g_sent=1&casa_token

=xQe6nU_6WlsAAAAA:fsxO7caSmiBrTyux8gln9AXfdGJRC2k_r3lHU_K2-UlRp04bMTcJ3Yuw0ZnOqgToBwH5xyyQ&collection=journals

Purdey, Jemma. 2002. "Problematizing the Place of Victims in Reformasi Indonesia: A Contested Truth about the May 1998 Violence." *Asia Survey* 42 (4): 605-622. doi: 10.1525/as.2002.42.4.605

Reid-Cunningham, Allison Ruby. 2008. "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide." *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3 (3): 279-296. doi: 10.1353/gsp.2011.0043

Romero-Jódar, Andrés. 2017. *The Trauma Graphic Novel*. New York and London: Routledge.

Senanayake, Devana. 2018. "'Chinese Whispers' Unpacks the Lasting Impact of May '98 Riots Through Women's Eyes." 18 October. https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/8x7me4/chinese-whispers-unpacks-the-lasting-impact-of-may-98-riots-through-womens-eyes

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Suryadinata, Leo. 1992. *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority and China*. Singapore: Heinemann Asia.

Suryadinata, Leo. 1993. "The State and Chinese Minority in Indonesia." In *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity: Essays on Society and Literature ion Indonesia, Malaysia & Singapore*, edited by Leo Suryadinata, 77-100. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Widianto, Stanley. 2019. "Is Indonesian democracy doomed to repeat a cycle of violence?" *South China Morning Post*, 19 June. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3015060/indonesian-democracy-doomed-repeat-cycle-violence

Winarnita, Monika Swasti. 2008. "Commemoration and Its Limitations: The Mass Rapes of Chinese Indonesian Women May 1998." 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies

Association of Australia in Melbourne 1-3 July 2018. 20 June.
https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/156652699.pdf