



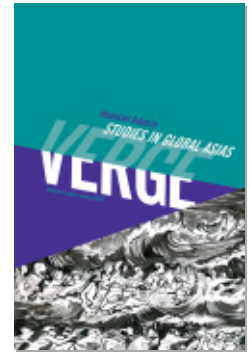
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Sheela Jane Menon

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## Diagnosing Malaysian Multiculturalism: Jo Kukathas and *The 1Malaysia Virus*

SHEELA JANE MENON

In August 2017, a selection of artists, writers, and activists gathered at the Kuala Lumpur Alternative Book Festival to deliver Manifestos for a Better Malaysia. The speakers, as imagined candidates for the position of prime minister, presented “manifestos” that critiqued state policies, satirized national culture, and articulated alternative visions for Malaysia’s future. The aspiring “candidates” included, among others, celebrated theater director and actor Jo Kukathas. This event was part of a weekend-long program that featured more than twenty independent book publishers, fifty “art and activism booths,” and panel discussions on a range of topics from national identity to the role of art in a time of crisis. Staged in a public space and risking censure from state authorities, this festival is indicative of the kind of grassroots art and activism that have become an important facet of public culture in Malaysia. Through diverse forms of civic engagement, including book festivals and public performances, Malaysians are voicing their increasing resistance to repressive government policies, systemic racial divisions, and the hypocrisy of state rhetoric extolling Malaysian multiculturalism.

I open with this spotlight on Manifestos for a Better Malaysia for two reasons. First, it illuminates how arts and civic engagement have become increasingly entwined in Malaysia during former prime minister Najib Razak’s tenure (2009–18). Second, it showcases how Kukathas’s award-winning work<sup>1</sup> is often situated at the intersection of protest and performance, engaging contemporary concerns surrounding civil rights, public policy, race relations, and national culture. In 1989—a period in the Malaysian theater scene marked by increasing racial and linguistic segregation—she cofounded Instant Café Theater (ICT), a small but vibrant theater collective led by a multiracial team. ICT dedicated itself to “using dark humor to comment on everything from the absurdity of contemporary society to tyranny, stupidity and corruption . . . forging theatre [that is] strongly committed to freedom of identity” (Instant Café Theater Company, n.d.). In an interview I conducted with Kukathas in March 2018, she reflected on ICT’s mission and the role of satire, saying, “I do believe that the whole point of satire is to make people angry. . . . It’s not just to give people some relief. It’s to provoke them into thinking, ‘why do we accept the status quo?’ And I think Instant Café always knew that was our role . . . but it was also important to ask whether or



**Figure 1.** Jo Kukathas as Ribena Berry. Promotional flyer for the Aiyoh What Lah? Awards from TimeOut.com.

not . . . we have been co-opted” (J. Kukathas, pers. comm., March 14, 2018). Kukathas’s comments and ICT’s mission statement indicate that these artists are committed to producing theater that is introspective and irreverent in its examination of Malaysian political and cultural life, while also continually reevaluating the nature of that work.

In this article, I focus on a 2012 performance<sup>2</sup> by Kukathas titled *The 1Malaysia Virus*. In the role of Ribena Berry, an ex-beauty queen of mixed Chinese and Indian heritage, Kukathas delivers an unflinching diagnosis of the effects of Malaysian multiculturalism on national politics and culture. Adopting the language of viral disease and metaphors of sickness, she details the state’s attempts to control Malaysian identity, illuminating the failures of Najib’s 1Malaysia campaign and of Malaysian multiculturalism more broadly. I read *The 1Malaysia Virus* as an example of what Diana Taylor (2003, 20) terms “the repertoire,” a performance that “enacts embodied memory.” As Ribena Berry, Kukathas revives memories of political corruption, cultural decay, and racial divisions, reinscribing these histories in the national consciousness. This performance—itsself a form of what this feature refers to as “memory work”—does not only

enact embodied memory; it also archives, replays, and transforms the failures of the state on stage. As Taylor has noted, “the relationship between the archive and the repertoire is not by definition antagonistic or oppositional” (36). Kukathas’s work, I argue, functions as a theatrical repertoire that archives national and cultural histories by enacting the characters, events, and perspectives that state multiculturalism conceals. Her performances suggest that memory—a refusal to comply with “state-sanctioned forgetting”—is central to an accurate diagnosis of the state of the nation and to political action.

Through both the actual performance and its online circulation, Kukathas requires her audience to “participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (Taylor 2003, 20). This act of participation is crucial to the archival dimensions of Kukathas’s performance. If this *Field Trip* feature asks, among other questions, how “‘memory work’ offer[s] alternative ways of seeing and experiencing justice, particularly when faced with profound belatedness and nonrecognition,” then one answer I propose here is that audiences’ participation in acts of collective memory makes possible the kinds of recognition denied by corrupt state systems. The creation, performance, and viewing of *The 1Malyasia Virus* engenders laughter and outrage precisely because it recognizes state dysfunction in both the past and present. As a result, the performance itself, as well as audiences’ engagement with it, disrupt state control and invigorate public debate about race, rights, and identity.

The Malaysian government’s attempts to navigate these debates have routinely garnered international media attention. Since 2015, for example, news outlets have chronicled the global 1MDB financial scandal and Najib’s ties to this fund,<sup>3</sup> state suppression of civil rights, and recurring public protests of these conditions. Daniel Goh and Philip Holden (2009, 1) have astutely observed how news coverage of Malaysia (and its neighbor, Singapore) “focuses on two apparently mutually contradictory areas. In economic terms, the two countries are frequently praised as success stories of modernization; in cultural terms, they are often seen as falling away from the principles of liberal democracy that are taken as representative of modernity.” This latter point—the demise of liberal democracy in Malaysia—is the result of a number of state mechanisms that explicitly compartmentalize Malaysian society on the basis of race, divisions that find their root in British colonial rule. Most notably, the state prioritizes the protection of Malay special rights through economic, educational, and religious policies that privilege this majority population while further marginalizing minority communities. These include not

only the Orang Asal,<sup>4</sup> the country's Indigenous peoples, but also Chinese, Indian, mixed-race, and immigrant communities.

Goh and Holden (2009, 8) explain that “the *ketuanan* Melayu ideology [advocating Malay supremacy] has survived to combine constructed indigeneity and political primacy in the figure of the *bumiputera* Malay.” Both the Malays and the Orang Asal are recognized by the Malaysian government as *bumiputera*—the indigenous “sons/daughters of the soil” (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 282). In the 1970s, the state instituted a series of affirmative action policies that were aimed at improving the sociopolitical status of *bumiputeras*. These initiatives were quickly corrupted, consolidating wealth and power among elite Malays while ignoring the needs of less privileged Malays and of the Orang Asal. At its most fundamental level, *ketuanan* Melayu functions as a “social contract” that reinforces the right of Malays to position themselves as Indigenous rulers. It entrenches “constructed indigeneity” in law and public policy through a contract that the Chinese and Indian political parties (the MCA and the MIC<sup>5</sup>) endorsed in 1957 as part of the negotiations for independence (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 282).

These racial, economic, and political hierarchies form the foundation of Malaysian multiculturalism. As Goh and Holden (2009, 3) note, “state multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia have institutionalized colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of political and social life to the extent that they constitute a common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others.” As I have argued elsewhere, state campaigns, legal systems, and development policies have facilitated this institutionalization of colonial identities in Malaysia.<sup>6</sup> For example, Najib's 1Malaysia platform and the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” tourism campaign celebrate the country's diversity and unity, advertise it as a hub for global investment, and assert that Malaysia is on the brink of attaining First World nation status.

I use the term *exceptional multiculturalism* to refer to this narrative, suggesting that Malaysia views itself as the epitome of Asian multiculturalism: a postcolonial nation in which racial harmony is bolstered by rapid development. This narrative strategically conceals the workings of *ketuanan* Melayu, the explicit compartmentalization of racial difference, and the aggressive enforcement of the Sedition Act.<sup>7</sup> It also attempts to mask the systemic exploitation of the Orang Asal, who are designated as “wards of the state” and whose ancestral lands can be legally appropriated by the government for development projects. Exceptional multiculturalism obscures these forms of state oppression while simultaneously extolling Malaysian diversity and development.

The last few decades have seen the expansion of Malaysian civic engagement, as the public has grown increasingly frustrated by these political and racial dynamics, most notably, the corruption of Najib's administration and ongoing civil rights violations. The country has seen the rise (and fall) of new opposition coalitions, a dramatic increase in electoral participation, recurring public protests, and the emergence of new social justice movements. Parti Keadlian Rakyat (PKR) was a crucial player in this upheaval. It was established in 2003, shortly after Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested as part of a controversial political struggle, and it was led for many years by Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar's wife.

The 2018 general elections brought with them a sea change referred to as Malaysia Baru, or New Malaysia. In a plot twist worthy of a soap opera, PKR and Wan Azizah allied themselves with Mahathir Mohamad, who had previously served as prime minister from 1981 to 2003 and who was responsible for ousting and jailing Anwar. During his tenure, Mahathir also reinforced racial divisions and cracked down on political opposition.<sup>8</sup> Despite this history, Mahathir was celebrated for his public criticism of Najib (formerly his protégé) and for appearing at public protests. Following this return to public life at the age of ninety-two, Mahathir joined Wan Azizah to lead Pakatan Harapan, the new opposition coalition that was attempting to unseat UMNO (Mahathir's former party) and Barisan Nasional (the coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957). On May 9, 2018, Pakatan Harapan defeated Barisan Nasional, and Mahathir and Wan Azizah were appointed prime minister and deputy prime minister, respectively. Shortly thereafter, Anwar Ibrahim was granted a royal pardon and released from prison, while Najib was arrested on charges related to the IMDB scandal.

In my interview with Kukathas, which took place a couple of months ahead of election day, she described some of these recent political developments with the kind of humor that makes her work so popular and so powerful: "Wan Azizah is like Princess Leia—she's going to lead the rebellion, and then suddenly Darth Vader turns up and says he's going to join the rebellion. And of course she's horrified, but then the choice is between him and Jabba the Hut" (J. Kukathas, pers. comm., March 14, 2018).

#### ■ **"WE MUST BE OUTRAGED, BUT WE MUST BE CLEVER"**

Malaysian audiences of diverse backgrounds celebrate the daring satire for which Kukathas and Instant Café are known precisely because their performances illuminate the absurdity of Malaysian political life as well



as the hypocrisy and corruption that infect it. Their work literally and figuratively embodies these conditions on stage, archiving their implications and consequences. As Kukathas explains, “I think we’re stand-ins for this idea of a stance—and the stance is to say that we must be outraged, but that we must be clever in how we display our outrage” (J. Kukathas, pers. comm., March 14, 2018). Ribena Berry exemplifies this sly, strategic outrage in performances like *The 1Malaysia Virus*. In the opening lines of this production, Kukathas invokes the virus as an extended metaphor to critique political corruption and dysfunction, linking it directly to state multiculturalism. She attributes an official designation to the 1Malaysia virus and describes its widespread effects: “the scientific name [of the 1Malaysia virus] is the 1S1M1S Virus-the 1Sex 1Money 1Scandal Virus. Yes, everywhere in Malaysia got a very bad outbreak of this virus” (Kukathas 2012). Emphasizing the rapidly spreading nature of the disease, Kukathas stresses that this national affliction is highly infectious. Her emphatic repetition of the word “virus,” combined with the irony of assigning it a scientific name, alludes to recent epidemics in Asia and around the world and the anxieties surrounding them.<sup>9</sup> Kukathas repurposes these anxieties, linking them to metaphors of illness routinely used by Malaysians themselves to describe contemporary conditions.

She goes on to suggest that the 1Malaysia virus infects the country’s political apparatus with sex scandals and rampant corruption, eroding Malaysians’ confidence in their own government:

Everywhere got this virus, everybody is getting very sick, especially the government is getting very sick. That’s why they’re getting to be very confusing and very confusion. Because they got sex on the brain. It’s true! Everywhere they see sex. But they’re very confused about sex. So, if you are an opposition politician and there is a sex scandal, they want you to resign. But, if you are government politician and you have a sex scandal, then they make you president of MCA. It’s true! Or else they send you to Oxford and Cambridge. It’s very confusing. Malaysia is very confusing. (Kukathas 2012)

Employing colloquial Malaysian English and concise juxtapositions, Kukathas alludes to Dr. Chua Soi Lek, Malaysia’s former health minister. In 2007, a sex video featuring Chua and his mistress was leaked to the public. Chua resigned from his position, only to make a rapid political comeback just three years later, when he was elected president of MCA, the main Chinese political party (Lim 2013). His trajectory is contrasted with that of Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister under Mahathir Mohamad’s first tenure as prime minister (1981–2003), and the “opposition politician” Kukathas is likely referencing here. Following emerging political differences in the late 1990s between Anwar and Mahathir,

Anwar was fired, charged with sodomy, and imprisoned. Since then, he has been acquitted and recharged multiple times over the last two decades, in what was internationally decried as a legal farce intended to stifle political opposition.

In her references to Chua and Anwar, Kukathas diagnoses the double standard that has come to define national politics: punitive measures against opposition leaders and recurring rewards for government politicians. Kukathas also emphasizes the veracity of this assertion, repeating the phrase “It’s true!” twice in this short segment. Through this refrain, which recurs at other key moments of the performance, she insists that the audience acknowledge the *truth*: that immorality and corruption have consumed the country’s parliament. Here, the archival nature of Kukathas’s work lies in its insistence that historical and contemporary truths are recognized and remembered. This memory work resists state narratives of harmony and diversity that attempt to forget and conceal these events. In a 2018 performance titled *On the Sofa*, Ribena Berry echoes this message when she offers Malaysians a “Survival Guide to Surviving in Malaysia.” She reminds them that “in Malaysia, NOBODY’s Time is Ever Up. Malaysia is like the Land Where Time Stood Still. Is true! See. Got so many dinosaur. Got the Mahathirsaurus. Got the Anwarsorous. Got the Razaksasorous. So scary.” Implicit here is the idea that to forget cycles of corruption and oppression is to facilitate the return of these political dinosaurs (Kukathas 2018).

According to Kukathas, the consequence of political and cultural amnesia is a kind of wanton disregard for norms and limits. Ribena Berry laments that the virus “makes me think I can do whatever I ‘one,’ whenever I ‘one,’ however I ‘one.’ And I ruined my reputation. That’s why now all the foreign investor don’t want to invest with me anymore. . . . I am too scandalous to attract all the rich public investors” (Kukathas 2012). Acting as a surrogate for the nation itself, Kukathas decries the loss of both moral and financial confidence in Malaysia. She positions her body and the Malaysian national body as interchangeable, suggesting that the 1Malaysia virus is an affliction that is experienced physically and metaphorically, individually and collectively. By exposing the nature of this diseased political system, Kukathas illuminates the stark contrast between visions of Malaysian exceptionalism and the realities of corruption and cronyism. This moment of the performance continues to resonate as the public follows the developments of the 1MDB trial proceedings.<sup>10</sup>

While Kukathas exposes the country’s deeply entrenched racial and political divisions, she never explicitly references the ways in which Malaysian multiculturalism impacts Indigenous lives and livelihoods. However, in archiving the corruption of political systems, she implicitly directs



attention to these contexts. For example, Kukathas suggests that the 1Malaysia virus infects “old timers” like Mahathir with particular ferocity, muddling their perception of truth, reality, and history:

Nowadays ah, none of us know what is a lie and what is the truth anymore . . . because Malaysian politics is very confusion. . . . So, even I am hoping I am not lying, but I cannot tell, because a lot of people are lying and they cannot tell. Especially our old PM. . . . Everything he cannot remember. It’s true. He’s got the virus very bad. . . . But not only he, ah! All the old timers got the virus very bad. They cannot remember . . . Renong, Ekran, Idris . . . Perwaja Steel. Everything they steal also cannot remember, is it? (Kukathas 2012)

Kukathas asserts that the 1Malaysia virus inhibits not only the memory of “old timer” politicians like Mahathir but also their ability to account for the corrupt deals they help broker. The irony is especially poignant here given Mahathir’s reelection in 2018. Additionally, Kukathas’s reference to Ekran calls attention to the development corporation, bailed out by Malaysian taxpayers to the tune of one billion ringgit (Kua 2013). This payment was a result of the government’s decision to assume responsibility for the Bakun dam project that had been awarded to Ekran (Kua 2013).

Construction of the dam resulted in the deforestation of approximately seven hundred square kilometers and the displacement of some ten thousand members of the Indigenous Penan community of Sarawak. The state promised that their resettlement in Sungai Asap would mean “a good life, with 10 acres of farmland, good schools, free electricity and clean water supplies” (Hindstrom 2014). Instead, each Penan household was given a small plot of farmland more than fifteen kilometers from Sungai Asap, making it costly and time consuming to travel between the resettlement site and their allotted farmland. In addition, the Penan are bereft of the natural resources that have sustained their communities for decades. Layo, a Penan woman affected by the forced displacement, explains, “The government made us sweet promises so we came, but now we are suffering. We have no money, no food, and no forest. Before we could get everything from the river and the forest, but here everything is about money. They cut off our water supply when we couldn’t afford to pay” (qtd. in Hindstrom 2014). The dam, under construction since the late 1990s, finally came online in 2011, approximately one year before Kukathas’s performance. Penan protests against the appalling living conditions in Sungai Asap are ongoing, as are other efforts by Orang Asal communities to block development projects impacting Indigenous communities and to seek legal recognition of their land rights in Malaysian courts.

This chain of events, especially as it impacts the Orang Asal, is not the explicit focus of this segment of the performance. However, Kukathas's allusions to Bakun and Ekran—symbols of corrupt and exploitative practices infected by the 1Malaysia virus—invite her audience to unearth the effects of these practices on Indigenous communities. In this sense, Kukathas's performance opens an avenue through which the examination of these histories and realities might function as an antidote to the 1Malaysia virus. Her listing of these corporations and her critiques of political memory challenge Malaysians to “participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge” by investigating the histories that the performance references (Taylor 2003, 20). The impact of these references emerges only with a clear understanding of the economic, political, and cultural contexts that she invokes; the audience is thus responsible for tracing these archival connections.

The online circulation of Kukathas's work extends this challenge to Malaysians living abroad and connecting online. The YouTube video of Kukathas's performance has earned more than 156,000 views; it has also been uploaded to a variety of online platforms, shared via email, and referenced in interviews and news clips. As a result, this performance has come to participate in what Zach Blas (2012, 29) terms a “swarm of viral hype.” Blas suggests that the idea of “the virus” is “the major trope of the postmodern condition. . . . To think the virus and the viral is to engage in their continuous states of flux, transformation, and movements” (30). Engaging the constant flux of Malaysian life, Kukathas's repertoire archives the corruption of state systems, embodies the racial divisions that frame daily life, and challenges audiences to investigate national histories. While her performance unmasks the hypocrisy of exceptional multiculturalism, the online circulation of her work expands the networks through which a viral engagement with Malaysian politics and culture is made possible.

**Sheela Jane Menon** is assistant professor of English at Dickinson College. She is currently working on her book manuscript, tentatively titled *Malaysian Multiculturalism: Reading Race in Contemporary Literature and Culture*.

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course at UT Austin on Media and Diaspora led me to begin this project, and her feedback on my early analysis of Kukathas' performance has been invaluable.

## ■ NOTES

1. Since entering the theater world in the late 1980s, Kukathas has won an Asian Public Intellectual fellowship from the Nippon Foundation, the Melbourne USA State Government Directors' Award, and numerous BOH Cameronian Arts Awards (RHA Media 2015). In June 2015, *Esquire Malaysia* featured an in-depth profile on Kukathas, describing her as a "luminary of the Malaysian arts scene" and an "award-winning director, playwright, and actor" (Delfino 2015). Later that year, she was named one of Malaysia's "Top Ten Women in Performing Arts" (RHA Media 2015).

2. Kukathas delivered this performance at a fund-raiser for the opposition party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and the video of her performance was uploaded to YouTube in May 2012 by *Media Rakyat*, the media arm of the party.

3. See, e.g., *Bloomberg's* recent overview of this saga, "A Guide to the Worldwide Probes of Malaysia's 1MDB Fund" (Shamim and Arnold 2018).

4. The term "Orang Asal" designates the Indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) as well as the Indigenous peoples of the Malaysian Peninsula, known as the Orang Asli (Nicholas, Engi, and Ping 2010, 6).

5. The Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress.

6. I've elaborated this argument more fully in an article recently published in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* (Menon 2018).

7. The government routinely uses the Sedition Act, a holdover of the colonial era, to silence various forms of dissent in politics and public life. As Human Rights Watch noted in 2014, the act "prohibits vague offenses such as uttering 'any seditious words' without defining what constitutes 'sedition' or 'seditious words.' It broadly outlaws any 'seditious tendency' that would 'bring into hatred or contempt or excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government'" (Human Rights Watch 2014). Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch, notes that "the Malaysian government is increasingly using the Sedition Act to instill fear and silence in political opponents and critics" (qtd. in Human Rights Watch 2014).

8. A detailed overview of this history is provided in Chin-Huat Wong's January 2018 op-ed in the *New York Times*, titled "Why Malaysia's Opposition Picked an Old Foe as Its New Leader."

9. These epidemics include, for example, H5N1 (mid-1990s), SARS (2002), Chikungunya (CHIKV, 2006), H1N1 (2009), and MERS (2012). In Malaysia, older and more familiar viruses like Dengue have been spreading with greater frequency, while countries across the globe have seen the rise of Ebola, Zika, and norovirus. Research and public debate about the origin and containment of these diseases is ongoing. A 2008 Reuters article, pointedly titled “Flu Comes Fresh from Asia Each Year, Study Finds,” summarizes influenza research by two teams of international scientists (Fox 2008). The findings suggest that “the tropics,” or, more specifically, East/Southeast Asia, might be the source of influenza viruses around the world. Media coverage of and anxieties about these epidemics have often invoked stereotypes that link diseases and diseased bodies with people of color, underdeveloped nations, and the Asian and African continents.

10. In July 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that US\$700 million was allegedly transferred into Prime Minister Najib Razak’s personal account from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). In the midst of protests calling for his resignation, Najib replaced his deputy prime minister, the attorney general leading local investigations, and other key members of his cabinet. In addition, the Malaysian government arrested prominent lawyers who were planning to assist with international investigations into the 1MDB scandal. Najib has maintained his innocence throughout this period, accusing the *Wall Street Journal* of participating in “political sabotage” to “undermine confidence in our economy, tarnish the government and remove a democratically-elected prime minister” (Najib, qtd. in *New York Times* 2015). Following the election of Mahathir and Wan Azizah, Najib was arrested and officially charged, and his trial began in April 2018. He is facing “three counts of criminal breach of trust, one for abuse of power and three for money laundering” (*Straits Times* 2020). In December 2019, Najib took the stand to defend himself against these charges, “maintain[ing] that he acted in the best interests of the country” (Shukry and Azmi 2019). The following month, voice recordings were released by Malaysia’s antigraft agency; they allegedly feature Najib “conspiring with senior officials to cover up the 1MDB scandal” (Teoh 2020). The trial is ongoing as of time of publication.

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## **Archiving the Affects of Canadian Multiculturalism**

CHRISTOPHER LEE

In fall 2015, the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body was found on a beach in Turkey, came to symbolize the desperate plight of Syrian refugees. Amid the widespread horror generated by the global circulation of this image, many Canadians were shocked to learn that Kurdi’s aunt, who lived in a suburb of Vancouver, had been trying to sponsor her extended family to immigrate to Canada (media reports offered conflicting reasons for why the application had been rejected). Coming in the midst of a national election campaign, the reluctance of the then Conservative government to offer more assistance to Syrian refugees sparked a public outcry that played a key role in the eventual defeat of the government and the victory of Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party. Particularly since the 2016 election in the United States, Trudeau has come to embody a Canadian exceptionalism that attributes progressive, enlightened values to the nation as a whole at a time of rising xenophobia around the world. In a more general sense, discourses of exceptionalism have been mobilized to endow the national body with universal, albeit abstract, social and political values. Meanwhile, the state, and certainly Trudeau