

Confabulation as Decolonial Pedagogy in Singapore Literature

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it seemed to us that during such times, no fiction could be stranger, or more exciting, than the truth

Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

LIYANA: So we can't imagine ourselves outside of imperial history?

SIEW: That would be indulging in counterfactuals.

LIYANA: Then why are we even here?

Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin, *Merdeka!* 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்

The Singapore Bicentennial and the Work of State Pedagogy

In 2019, the Singapore state unironically commenced a year-long commemoration of the bicentennial of the country's colonial founding with "SG200," a series of art exhibitions, interactive audiovisual productions, talks, community engagement projects, and other events. The first commissioned work was unveiled with great fanfare on January 2, 2019: the usually white polymarble statue of Singapore's colonial founder Sir Stamford Raffles had been papered over by the artist Teng Kai Wei to enable it to blend into the city skyline. Making Raffles invisible through this optical illusion, this symbolic gesture was ostensibly meant to question the colonizer's centrality to Singapore's modern mythmaking. The disappearing act of the statue was, however, merely a temporary publicity stunt. Quoting Kwame Nkrumah, online commentator Paul Jerusalem's humorous meme pointed out that Teng's work could be read subversively as a commentary on the neocolonial reality of Singapore's urban spaces, where the influence and legacy of the coloniality remain firmly entrenched even as they have become invisible or unremarkable to most.¹

The momentary erasure of Singapore's most famous colonial figure at the start of the Bicentennial wrapped up in his legacy reflects the contradictory

ways Singapore has begun to wrestle with its postindependence decision to overtly retain much of the material, symbolic, and political legacies of the British Empire. Indeed, two days after Teng's initial alteration of the Raffles statue, a new intervention entitled "The Arrivals" appeared, with the statues of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah, and Naraina Pillai being placed alongside Raffles. Not only were non-European migrants being celebrated, the Srivijayan prince from Palembang Sang Nila Utama was placed in front of Raffles and the others as a precolonial founder of Singapore in 1299.²

While other decolonizing and anticolonial movements have sought, in recent years, to destroy and remove statues of colonizers and slave-owners, the Singapore state's most recent approach appears to be to camouflage the centrality of its colonial history with the cosmetic addition of other marginal narratives. Minister Josephine Teo, cochair of the Singapore Bicentennial Ministerial Steering Committee, noted that the purpose of the Bicentennial was to uncover new materials and stories about Singapore's past and to develop "immersive and interactive techniques" to tell these stories (quoted in Kwa 475). More extensively, SG200 and its events functioned as a state-wide curriculum that enforced Singapore's neocolonial nation-building. Aware that solely focusing on colonialism might be out of step with the times, the organizers insisted that they were instead cognizant of the 700-year *longue durée* of Singapore's history, seemingly redefining the word "bicentennial" with nary a thought.

Nevertheless, the beginning of British colonial rule continued to be the undeniable fulcrum around which the national narrative was construed. In his speech for the launch of these commemorations, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was frank about the story he wanted to tell regarding the country's British colonial legacy:

1819 marked the beginning of a modern, outward-looking and multicultural Singapore. Without 1819, we may never have launched on the path to nationhood as we know it today. Without 1819, we would not have 1965, and we would certainly not have celebrated the success of SG50. 1819 made these possible. And this is why the Singapore Bicentennial is worth commemorating. ("Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong")

Lee credits colonialism with the birth of modernity, globalization, multiculturalism, and indeed, the independent Singaporean state. He further predicates the existence of the postcolonial nation on its colonial predecessor. As the official website puts it, it was a "sequel" to SG50, a state

celebration in 2015 of the jubilee of Singapore's independence. In constructing the *event* of the Singapore Bicentennial, the state attempted to control what colonialism signified for the postcolonial state.

Even though this may seem retrograde, it is perhaps not inaccurate in summing up Singapore's self-narration of postcolonial exceptionalism and continuity. As Philip Holden rightly posits, Raffles's arrival is seen as "an imposition of certain forms of necessary modern rationality – town planning, good governance, a commitment to free trade – that the postcolonial nation-state would realise in the fullness of time" (Holden 639). This discourse is an integral part of the dominant narrative of an orderly handover of power from the British colonial authorities to an elite English-educated ruling class. Aside from the more obvious visual markers of colonial architecture that were preserved in its central business district, the legal frameworks (including legislation retained from emergency colonial laws regarding detention without trial and restrictions on freedoms of assembly and expression), civil service, language, and systems of justice and governance are all deeply indebted to colonial legacies. Singapore's education policies and curricula continue to be intimately tied to colonial standards, with thousands of exam scripts for the standardized General Certificate of Education (GCE) level exams being assessed annually by the UK-based Cambridge Assessments. Celebrating the Bicentennial in these contexts becomes a logical pedagogical exercise, one that attempts to create coherence in the everyday lived experience of Singaporeans surrounded by these material and structural legacies.

In this chapter, I examine two highly successful and popular contemporary Singaporean texts that are not only exemplars of this growing contemporary literary and filmic archive but further evince a counter-pedagogical awareness that hinges upon what I theorize as dissident tactics of confabulation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines to confabulate as "to fabricate imaginary experiences as compensation for loss of memory" (*OED*, 2017). In the Singaporean context, my theorization of the term points to the role of the fictional in the face of wilful state-sponsored amnesia and suppression. Both Sonny Liew's Eisner award-winning graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015) and Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin's play *Merdeka | 獨立 | சுதந்திரம்* (2019) directly confront the state's self-narration. Both texts self-reflexively collate and examine historical documents, events, and artifacts by reenacting, reimagining, and crucially, inventing stories and characters. Liew's imaginary cartoonist and satirist Charlie Chan Hock Chye provides an artistic, visual, and narrational counterpoint to dominant state narratives. Told in

a pastiche-driven style, the *Künstlerroman* twines the artist's ultimate failure with his vividly imagined alternate pasts and futures, all tied to an instructive history of comic styles through the latter half of the twentieth century. Alfian and Neo's multilingual play follows a study group, Raffles Must Fall, who come together to investigate lesser-known anticolonial stories from Singapore's history. Using historical documents and speeches, the multiracial cast of actors create plays within the play: hyperdramatic, metatheatrical reenactments that ultimately employ the theater as a processual space of learning and unlearning. In the absence of formal curriculum reform toward the work of decolonization, I argue that con-fabulation is a crucial literary and pedagogical mode in these attempts toward creating and disseminating truly decolonial narratives of Singapore. It functions in the absence of a decolonizing literary curriculum in the country and of free and open space for artistic expression. It carefully sidesteps the state's desire for a "factual," fixed history, singular modes of narration, and its censorious instincts.

Thus, these texts stand in pointed contrast to the Singapore Bicentennial's "signature event": "From Singapore to Singaporean: The Bicentennial Experience @ Fort Canning." This audiovisual, theatrical, and filmic extravaganza was set, seemingly without irony, in a former British military installation. In an echo of how many colonial buildings in the city center have been gutted and repurposed, the creators of this multimedia exhibit remodeled the interior of the spaces to create purpose-built sets and produce a carefully scripted, immersive version of Singapore's history. Helmed by Michael Chiang, a playwright, and Beatrice Chia-Richmond, a theater director, who both have experience directing the annual National Day Parade, the two-part experience had a familiar arc of mystical beginnings, colonial vision, war-time suffering, and manifest destiny. "The Time Traveller" was divided into five acts (Beginnings, Arrival, Connectivity, Occupation, Destiny) like a classic play, while the accompanying "Pathfinder" was a series of nonguided exhibits set in a park, featuring maps, artifacts, and other more static objects. "The Time Traveller" employed live actors, surround screens and sound, and elaborate water and light features to provide what Gene Tan, the executive director of the Singapore Bicentennial Office, called *a history lesson* translated "to the mainstream audience in an emotional way" ("Creating the Bicentennial Experience"). Tellingly, the British Occupation is subsumed under the acts "Arrival" and "Connectivity," while – consistent with the dominant narrative – the Japanese Occupation during the World War II is depicted as the pivotal and violent

conflict in this history. Decolonization from British rule, on the other hand, is glossed over as part of Singapore's continuing trajectory as a successful global port city. The show represented an intensification of the cooptation of meaningful personal and collective narratives in service of the state's larger goal of affective nation-building. It was held up as a great success, with the official metrics recording over 760,000 visitors and their 97.3% approval rating. For the majority of its population, the Singapore state's power to shape its foundational myths through mass pedagogy is far-reaching.

The desire of the postcolonial nation-state or any nation-state to script its historical narratives is, of course, nothing new. The earnest tone adopted in the accompanying behind-the-scenes documentary about this lavish exhibit amply illustrates what Homi Bhabha notes in "Nation and Narration": that the nation-space is processual and "meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image" (Bhabha 3). Chiang, Chia-Richmond, and Tan repeatedly reiterate their desire to "create . . . emotion" in this "history lesson" and to construct "a very intimate encounter with Singapore," and further to define "what it means to be Singaporean" ("Creating the Bicentennial Experience"). The need for the state to constantly revise, revisit, and repeat the enduring narrative of Singapore's vulnerability and exceptionalism post-Empire reached a fever pitch during SG200.

But the tensions inherent in nation-building on a foundation of colonial development pose interesting conundrums. In their introduction to the seminal critical anthology *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (2008), Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang note how the country's history has been reverse engineered to "shape and disseminate a sense of national identity which privileges political identification at the level of the nation-state – a product of negotiations with historical identities" (Hong and Huang 1). Most crucially, they argue, "the history that the state tells of itself, and the degree of its success in getting its citizens to embrace that history as their own, are thus central to the process of its nation-building" (1). The use of a powerfully emotive and manipulative, multimedia-enhanced state storytelling apparatus represents an obvious manifestation of insecurity about the incoherence of a bicentennial narrative that purports to cover 700 years of history. In her analysis of more recent state attempts at storytelling during the Bicentennial, Cheng Nien Yuan cautions against accepting state-sanctioned plurality without skepticism: "unlike the

relatively straightforward top-down approach of Rajaratnam's era ('this is the past and we say so'), the storytelling state gives an illusion of democratic engagement and inclusivity of voices" (Cheng).

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan points out, in her critique of Bhabha's "DissemiNation": "The problem posed by the nation was never simply power. The problem is whose" (Srinivasan). In calling for "less subversion and more persuasion. Less disruption, more renewed solidarity. Less repetition with a difference and more pedagogy of difference," Srinivasan turns our attention to what Bhabha labels as "the unspoken tradition[s]" of "colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities . . . who will not be contained" (Bhabha, quoted by Srinivasan) by the state's singular narration. She posits that it is overdue for these traditions to be spoken and to be heard. A similar impetus toward decolonizing redress has meant that Singapore's lavish emphasis of its colonial histories during the Bicentennial led a new generation of scholars, activists, and artists to critique the accepted state pedagogy, asking the fraught and complex questions about what a decolonial Singapore might mean. In fact, the state's own extravagant and multifaceted attempts at consolidating the event of the Bicentennial led paradoxically to a slew of theatrical, artistic, and academic explorations of alternative modes of grappling with colonial and postcolonial history and historiography. This included a special interdisciplinary issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and an edited collection of critical essays, interviews, and historical documents entitled *Raffles Renounced: Towards a Merdeka History* (2021). Numerous plays were also written and performed in 2019, including The Necessary Stage's *Civilised*, Drama Box's *Tanah•Air 水•土*, and The Art of Strangers' *Miss British*.

These efforts have joined an increasing number of texts in the past decade – including Tan Pin Pin's banned documentary *To Singapore with Love* (2013), Jeremy Tiang's novel *State of Emergency* (2017), Alfian Sa'at's flash fictions *Malay Sketches* (2013), Alfian and Marcia Vanderstraaten's play *Hotel* (2015), Wong Souk Yee's novel *Death of A Perm Sec* (2017), Jason's Soo's documentary *Untracing the Conspiracy* (2015), and Suratman Markasan's novel *Penghulu* (2012) – that have reexamined suppressed episodes in Singapore's history. Collectively, this body of work offers a much-needed alternate national literary canon and remedial historiography that emphasizes anticolonial movements, Indigenous communities displaced by state development and control, and the loss of political rights such as a free press, the freedom to organize and assemble, and unfettered artistic expression.

“Of My Country, That Is Yet to Be”: The Multiplicity of National Narratives in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

In its first impulse, Sonny Liew’s graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is a text that seeks to educate the reader. On the surface, it is an introduction to “the art” of a neglected but vital comics artist in Singapore. The imaginary life and artistic tribulations of Charlie Chan Hock Chye, however, are pedagogical strategies that allow Liew to twine a primer on historic cartooning styles and genres with a self-reflexive accounting of Singapore’s repressed histories of anticolonial student uprisings, detentions, and exiles of political dissidents. Through the confabulated, fictional character of Charlie, the text not only delineates the vulnerable status of the artist and student in the authoritarian state but also presents alternate, confabulated histories and futures in Charlie’s unpublished, antiestablishment oeuvre. Crucially, Liew represents himself in the comic as an interlocuter drawn into the framing narrative of this work, asking questions of Charlie, presenting his work with commentary and research, and ultimately acting as both student and teacher. Much of the text has explanatory captions and, in one chapter, even footnotes in the form of a separate comic strip, where the comic-book rendition of Liew himself attempts to engage a skeptical, child-like Singaporean.

By interpolating himself into the narrative, Liew creates complex systems of meaning-making in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* that force the reader to engage with the story on multiple registers with critical distance and skepticism. We are learning from Charlie but also about his frailties, hubris, and failures through his art. Similarly, we are learning about various episodes from Singapore’s history as they are entwined with Charlie’s life story, his historical research, his artistic process, and his (and Liew’s) ambivalence. The confabulation of Charlie’s life is a satire of a nationalist *Bildungsroman*, since he ultimately fails in his ambition to be Singapore’s greatest comics artist. Yet it is also a failure that allows us to consider the grave tragedies hidden beneath Singapore’s glossy postcolonial success. The text poses a simple question: if Charlie is meant to be a forgotten artist, discovered and presented by Liew, then what else in the story of Singapore has been similarly neglected, buried, and censored?

Read all together in a dizzying palimpsest of historical documents, sketches, drafts, and comic strips of incredibly diverse styles, Liew’s book acts as an alternate literary curriculum that pairs Singapore’s political

history with a transnational, cosmopolitan set of artistic influences. The tropes of learning and questioning continue as a through thread in all the chapters. In the first two, we begin our education at the start of Charlie's journey as an artist where he privileges the "five foot way libraries" or "pavement libraries" of comic books (Liew 6–7) over the English language school system that he has been enrolled in. The very medium of drawing itself is seen as an act of studying (Liew 19). This archive of material provides a rich fodder for Charlie to create his confabulated, allegorical political cartoons. They also provide the opportunity of the text to illustrate the gaps and absences in Singapore's dominant history.

Each chapter of the text pairs a controversial episode in Singapore's modern history with Charlie's life and art. Liew's text weaves the confabulatory web of Charlie's life around crucial events such as anticolonial student protests the end of the Japanese Occupation and Malayan Emergency, Singapore's separation from Malaysia and the detention without trial of opposition politicians, and the censorship and suppression of a free press. Each unpublished or obscure comic that Charlie produces in response to the historical events happening around him holds up these events through the prisms of science fiction, satire, allegory, and counterfactual narratives. They refract the uncertainty that undercuts the official versions and the manipulation inherent in all storytelling. For instance, Charlie recounts the story of the sixteen-year-old student Chong Lon Chong, who was struck by a stray bullet during labor unrest in 1955 and later died of his wounds. The official version of events blames his death on the procommunist students who paraded him around to inflame the crowd, but Charlie pinpoints the unknowns in the actual reports of the incident. He notes, "not having been there to *see* and *hear* for ourselves, perhaps we can never really know the truth, asking 'what exactly is the story being told?'" (Liew 55). In doing so, the text reveals the confabulatory nature of the state's narratives themselves, even as they purport to be the factual accounting of events.

In the final chapter of Liew's text, Singapore's possible futures and presents intersect in a counterfactual version of its present in Charlie's comic "Days of August." In this version of Singapore, the skyline remains iconic and unchanged, yet Lee Kuan Yew's rival Lim Chin Siong is in power, and the former has taken himself into self-exile in Cambodia. In the subsequent narration, the text rewrites Singapore's history, in part as a homage to Philip K. Dick's *The Man in High Castle*, to create a Singapore where the ruling party's crackdowns and detentions of its socialist rivals

had never happened, and the latter had won the elections in 1963. Jini Kim Watson argues that Liew's text "knowingly plays on the fact that it is almost impossible to imagine the future of Singapore otherwise even *had* its political history turned out differently," pointing out that "the very task of *imagining*, from the present, the postcolonial state as vehicle of emancipative, redemptive futurity is at once absolute necessary and almost impossible" (Watson 182). Charlie makes a cameo as a successful artist in this alternate universe, who even has a gallery dedicated to his work. In other ways, Lim Chin Siong and Lee Kuan Yew's similarities are highlighted. In another interview depicted in the comic, Lim fends off questions about a "cult of personality" (Liew 277) that has arisen around his name. Liew's alternate history in "Days of August" thus reveals the official narrative of People's Action Party (PAP) dominance and inevitability as one that is arbitrary.

Liew's text seeks to flesh out these other possible paths and to confabulate alternate narratives of Singapore's history. In effect, this opens up the possibilities of how Singapore might have achieved decolonization in ways that did not leave power in the hands of an English educated elite, which was aligned with the British colonial project. Predictably, the Singapore state, with its unyielding pedagogical narrative of the birth of the nation, has been less than enthusiastic about *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. While the text initially benefited from a National Arts Council grant, this was quickly withdrawn due to what were deemed politically sensitive reasons.³ This grant withdrawal signaled the government's tacit disapproval of having the text taught in public schools or other state institutions of higher learning. The state thus foreclosed an opportunity to use the space of the literary classroom and curriculum to grapple with counterfactual speculative fiction that might challenge the dominant narrative.

This is not to say that the text is simply harboring a fantasy of paths not taken. What it is equally interested in is how storytelling comes to affect accepted realities and histories – what it calls "the power of the word, the image" (Liew 282). In "Days of August," the alternate world breaks down due to a specter that resembles a "man in white" – a young Lee Kuan Yew. Charlie's cameo is central to the action, since he is the artist who is writing an alternate history comic within the alternate Singapore. In a dizzying turn of events, the doubly fictional Charlie Chan is writing a comic of Singapore's actual history with Lee Kuan Yew in power. This Charlie sees this as a mission to assuage the anger of the alternate reality, his comic within a comic is one where "every panel [is] a prayer, a shot in the dark"

(Liew 282). The power of the “true” reality eventually triumphs, destroying the alternate Singapore and sending Charlie and Lim back into the past to preindependence Singapore in 1955. Only now, they have an awareness of their doomed futures – Charlie to a life of invisibility and Lim Chin Siong to one of persecution and ignominy. In this final section of the chapter, we return to the realist visual style that began *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, which documents preindependence Singapore. It is a careful graphic echo of the earlier part of the text that lends unity to the work but with one crucial alteration: a complex temporal and narrative awareness that suffuses these historical street scenes with greater weight and importance. Instead of the nostalgic reworking of the past that the graphic novel begins with, this historic version of Singapore is invested with a paradoxical sense of both inevitability and possibility.

If artistic confabulation in Singapore means to imagine otherwise in compensation for the amnesia of a state-driven narrative and urban landscape, Liew’s final challenge to the instrumentalization of nostalgia and Singapore’s preindependence past in official propaganda could not be more bittersweet. Lim and Charlie have returned to 1955 on the day of the Hock Lee Bus Incident, which was a conflict between the British colonial authorities and students and unionized workers. Charlie, now newly young again in his own comic, knows that he *would* “be a fool to go down that road again” (Liew 289). He says this in reference to both himself and Lim Chin Siong, since, as he tells him, “everything you were. Or are working towards . . . it all fails in the end. The P.A.P. and Lee Kuan Yew will win . . . and **nothing** we do now can alter the course of this history” (Liew 286). Surrounded by the sights and sounds of preindependence Singapore, Lim replies with the belief that “these things that we’re fighting for . . . the **welfare** of the workers, our **freedom**, our dignity . . . whatever the costs they’re still worth the while, are they not?” (Liew 287). Lim’s idealism and conviction are balanced by superimposed text boxes in the voice of the fictional Charlie, who sees the fixed path of Lim’s future even as his young self walks away from Charlie, literally down a street in 1950s Singapore. Forced to relive their choices and lives in “Days of August,” the characters move from the complexities of past conditional temporality, *what could have been*, to an incomplete present modality. Charlie knows that he will have to contend with the “harsh reality” of trying to make a living as an artist in Singapore but seeks instead in this final moment to dwell on the comics that he has “yet to draw,” a life he has “yet to live,” and of a Singapore “that is yet to be” (Liew 292–93).

“That Would Be Indulging in Counterfactuals”: Metatheatrical Reenactments in *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்

A similar desire to relive, reenact, and retell the nation’s narrative through self-reflexive and literary confabulations infuses Alfian Sa’at and Neo Hai Bin’s play *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம். The starting premise of the play is that the six characters belong to a reading group called “Raffles Must Fall.” They meet to share their research on anticolonial figures and stories from Singapore’s history, reenacting these little-known narratives and debating their significance to the body politic. The decolonizing pedagogical significance of this theatrical piece cannot be overstated. Indeed, numerous critics have cited its similarity to a “lecture” or “lesson,” with its long passages of direct quotation from historical texts, speeches, and documents (Kuttan; Bakchormeeboy). The play was written in response to the Bicentennial and directly troubles the centrality of the date of Singapore’s colonial founding. It reveals the arbitrary nature of 1819 as a defining moment in the founding of modern Singapore. Instead, through an alternate curriculum and a pedagogy of performative re-enactment, *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் provides a messy and complex lineage between colonial power and the contemporary authoritarian state.

Staged by the theater company Wild Rice on Singapore’s only thrust stage, *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் begins with a set where its actors are, according to the stage directions, “seated, as if in a classroom” (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 1). The trilingual title (Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil) signals the play’s reclamation of non-English forms of storytelling and concepts of decolonization and self-determination. In particular, the Malay word “Merdeka” is fraught with the history of its usage during the Malayan quest for independence from the British, as will be seen in the latter part of my analysis.

In the lively and fraught discussions that ensue amongst the characters about race, language, and history, the play creates a pedagogical space in Singapore that only exists in the theater. It is a space that is free from state-sponsored national education and is one where histories are contested and performed. Each of the characters brings up a particular historical episode or personage that they have been researching, and the group proceed to reenact the events in an exaggerated manner. This is followed by a metatheatrical analysis by the characters of each reenactment and its biases, constructions, imperfections, and lacunae. As the actors reenact scenes from suppressed histories, they begin to question whether decolonization and freedom are truly possible from such a fraught and compromised colonial past.

It is precisely from an attention to the gaps in the “facts,” the so-called “counterfactuals,” that *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* draws its confabulatory power. Its often campy reenactments allow us to hear the songs and speeches of the past and reevaluate visual signifiers such as the Raffles statue and other historical artifacts, and thus gives us an opportunity to experience these visual and aural signs in the flesh. In its curation of alternate moments of Singapore’s precolonial, colonial, and (post)colonial histories, it is doubly self-conscious as it performs history, quoting directly from archival and source materials and highlighting numerous possible interpretations of these accounts. In its eleven scenes, the production eschews a linear timeline, skipping 100 years back to Singapore’s Centenary celebrations, then sixty-five years ahead to S. Rajaratnam’s seminal speech, before moving at breakneck speed to 1812, and so on. The play continues in this vein, bypassing most of the officially emphasized dates and years with aplomb, enacting a new national canon.

Thus, if the state has control over the mainstream historical narrative discourse outside the stage-world, and further within the theater scene through censorship, the play-within-the-play in *Merdeka / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம்* opens up an alternative space in the mode of the self-conscious, sometimes melodramatic historical reenactment. In Singapore’s censorious context, the actors play characters who are acting as other characters and in doing so heighten the sense of theatricality, while questioning the ways in which histories are told and retold. The use of metatheater, a technique that highlights the theatricality of a piece of drama to critique the performance of history and to allow for skepticism at the framing of these narratives, stands in direct contrast to the state’s dominant narratives that brook no dissent. Unlike the state’s account, however, the play, in its historiographic metatheatrical way, remains conscious and suspicious of the national narrative and its literary conventions.

This is theater that is highly aware of the unforgiving regime it exists in. It repeatedly uses the structure of the play-within-the-play as a means to confabulate narratives in the face of suppressed histories, and to do so in a way that foregrounds the idea of history as performance. As Alexander Feldman argues:

There is always a power imbalance between those who inhabit the stage-world and those above, beyond and outside it. Within this authoritarian structure, however, the play-within-the-play creates a potentially subversive space, permitting the assertion and enactment of truths, through the mechanism of theatre, that challenge the status quo. (Feldman 14)

The playful, hyperdramatic nature of the historical reenactments of *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் allow it to literally “play” with history, to interrogate, parody, satirize, and give it a fluidity that is absent in the Singaporean context. It provides a knowing space in which the actors can challenge the orthodox histories that have been promoted and reclaim the suppressed histories that were inconvenient.

The conceit of a history reading group called “Raffles Must Fall” reenacting historical scenes and figures chosen for their affective, familial, political, and personal significance forces the audience to consider an alternate historiographical method. This is a way of narrating the nation that suggests echoes and resonances while resisting the desire for strict structures of cause and effect. It also enlarges Singapore’s erstwhile national borders, giving us important insights into the complexities of kinship in the precolonial Malay Archipelago, Raffles’s invasion and humiliation of the city and court of Yogyakarta, and the close ties between other anti-colonial movements and Singaporean activists.

The play acts as well as a form of close reading through its confabulation of some of the key anticolonial texts of the period. Here is where the political and the theatrical are brought together to suggest that both are performances to a certain extent and must be interrogated as such. Toward the end of the performance, it places two famous speeches almost side by side to weigh their words within and without their context. The first is a fiery speech given by the young Lee Kuan Yew on August 31, 1963 at a Malaysia Solidarity Day Mass Rally where he declares Singapore’s allegiance to its union with Malaysia and its independence from the colonial British authorities. The second is a quiet recitation of the Indonesian President Soekarno’s speech from the Bandung Conference of 1955. Lee’s speech recognizes the performativity of his own proclamation for the people of Singapore:

JARED (LEE KUAN YEW): We have the will to be a nation in our own right. That is the right that we the people of Singapore today proclaim.

Our act follows the traditions of the great anti-colonial revolutions in Asia . . . If we live up to our convictions, we will stand the test and judgment of history.

On the 16th we go on with Malaysia and we will survive, and prosper and flourish.

Merdeka! (*Audience follows*)

Merdeka! (*Audience follows*)

Merdeka! (*Audience follows*) (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 11)

Lee’s words attempt to will independent Singapore into being. It is an “act,” theatrical, performative, proclamatory, and political all at once.

The moment replayed here is a crucial one that blurs the lines between the aspirational dream and strategic reality of seeking decolonization. It is a moment where the fiction and theater of Singapore as a postcolonial nation begins as an utterance and ends as a speech act as the crowd joins in his call for freedom. But it is also an incredibly fraught moment – for all the freedom that Lee calls for, it is clear that the play *Merdeka* / 獨立 / சுதந்திரம் exists only because there is so little in terms of narrating a different tale of Singapore. Indeed, Lee had just managed to arrest and detain many of his political rivals without trial just six months earlier in Operation Coldstore.

True to its metatheatrical form, the actors have already set the audience up to understand their complicity in this troubled yet compelling moment. Breaking the fourth wall, the character Siew addresses the audience directly and asks them to rehearse repeating the word “Merdeka” in preparation for their involvement in the play. Collapsing the boundaries again between past and present, Siew asserts:

It is 1963. All of you, all of *us*, are at the Padang right now. We are attending a Malaysia Solidarity Day Mass Rally. Lee Kuan Yew is delivering a speech at the Padang. He is 39 years old. (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 11)

By switching deliberately to the present tense and to the first-person plural, Siew implicates and imbricates the audience in the play and in the country’s collective history. As the theatrical performance reenacts Lee’s speech, so does the audience step into the shoes of the audience in the Padang – to the point that their bodies and voices are coopted into the moment, into the utterance of Singapore’s independence. As the reenactment ends, the characters immediately begin analyzing the significance of this 1963 scene to the construction of the Singapore Story. Unlike most postcolonies that celebrate an Independence Day, Liyana points out, Singapore commemorates a National Day (August 9, 1965) that also marks the failure of its merger with Malaysia and its consequent vulnerability. The word that the audience were made to repeat so enthusiastically just a moment before takes on a quality of even greater hollowness.

By contrast, the actors read Soekarno’s Bandung Conference speech “as if it’s *not* a speech” (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 11). Taking his words out of the context of the highly politicized gathering, the actors focus only on the surface meaning of the words which note how “for us, colonialism is not something far and distant. We have known it in all of its ruthlessness. We have seen the immense human wastage it causes, the poverty it causes, and the heritage it leaves behind” (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 11). The actors take turn

to read portions of the speech, producing a polyphony of ordinary citizens who at the end quietly repeat “Merdeka,” a Malay word that means independence or freedom. The stage directions call for the final iteration of the word to be “*almost a whisper*” (Alfian and Neo, Sc. 11). Even as it was a rallying cry at the point of Singapore’s uncoupling from the British Empire, by the end of the text, it takes on a wistful resonance in the face of the postcolonial state’s continued authoritarian ways.

“Past Conditional Temporality”

In the epilogue to his memoir *From Third World to First* (2000), Lee Kuan Yew reflects on the sweep of history and what he views as Singapore’s improbable existence. To follow Lee’s account, every decision taken by him was one that was completely pragmatic, toward the goal of Singapore’s continued survival. Lee’s story, meant to echo the planned success of the city-state, is of the full triumph of twentieth-century high modernist ideology coupled with authoritarian determination. He locates Singapore’s success as part of the industrial revolution and European colonialism, “their inventions, technology, enterprise . . . the story of man’s search for new fields to increase his wealth and well-being” (Lee 689). He begins his story with the usual recourse to British colonialism and then ties Singapore’s progress to technological advancements and a calculative investment in human capital.

The single exception to this certainty lies in the last pages of his book. Here Lee allows himself a moment of retrospeculation, as he muses, “would I have been a different person if I had remained a lawyer and not gone into politics?” (Lee 688). He describes “the swirling currents of political changes” (Lee 685) that swept him along and rhetorically asks himself whether he *would have* continued on the path to Singapore’s founding leader if he had known the tribulations that lay ahead of him. This is a strange use of the past conditional tense in a relentless memoir full of confident and fateful anecdotes that purports to be a guide, a book that tells you “how to build a nation” (3). Indeed, without prior knowledge of what was to come, Lee says that he and his colleagues “pressed on, oblivious of the dangers ahead” (686). Yet the note of uncertainty that Lee strikes here at the end, his musing about alternate paths that might have lain in front of him, crucially stops short of the alternate histories and futures that Singapore might have had.

These suppressed histories are the starting point of the literary texts that I have read in this chapter, what Lisa Lowe calls “the *past conditional*

temporality of the ‘what could have been’” (Lowe 40). For the most part, Lee’s worldview had no time or space for what Lowe sees as the essential power of this temporality. He was only really interested in condemning “what could have been” as potential failure without the strict governance of the ruling party. In Lowe’s view, however, the past conditional temporality allows “a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science, and also the matters absent, entangled, and unavailable by its methods” (Lowe 40–41). Unlike the myriad catastrophic endings for Singapore that Lee often holds up as warnings, Lowe emphasizes the critical openness of this temporal mode and its important representation in literary fictions. Indeed, she writes, we must turn to what could have been “in order to reckon with the violence of affirmation and forgetting, in order to recognize that this particular violence continues to be reproduced in liberal humanist institutions, discourses, and practices today” (Lowe 41). In other words, “what could have been” is singularly crucial for examining the truths and paths *not* taken that underpin our current moment, since understanding them is the key to shaping what might be to come and preventing the inexorable drift of colonial legacies.

Both Liew’s graphic novel and Alfian and Neo’s play function as consciously decolonial pedagogies arising within a state where postcolonial national narratives are tightly restricted. Where the state seeks an orderly, completist narrative in five conventional acts with carefully managed affect, artistic practitioners such as Liew, Alfian, and Neo seek the confabulated, unfinished, and counterfactual. Alfian, Faris Joraimi, and Sai Siew Min write in the introduction to *Raffles Renounced: Towards a Merdeka History* that a “Merdeka history” is one that “not only untangles us from colonial narratives” but is also an approach to understanding Singapore’s history through an “emancipatory” approach that involves “empowering the plural, the non-elite and the oblique” (15). In the face of a controlled and controlling state pedagogy, it offers artistic and theatrical spaces for collective learning, contemplation, lacunae, and possibility. It demands of its students a commitment to uncertainty and ambivalence.

Notes

1. See www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=976056375921980&set=pb.100005528806960.-2207520000.
2. Philip Holden questions the official impetus of this work, since “the display concealed paradoxes: in its racialised divisions, it still followed the contours of

- colonial governance of subject peoples the British introduced, and it erased colonial violence” (Holden 632).
3. See <https://cblidf.org/2015/06/censorship-by-financial-sabotage-cartoonist-sonny-liew-loses-singapore-arts-grant/>.

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