

THROUGH THE WESTERN EYES: ANALYSING THE STRATEGY OF SUBVERSION IN YEE I-LANN'S *PICTURING POWER* (2013) PHOTOMONTAGES

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Photography is a hybrid tool of the artistic and scientific process in which the inception and revolution had grown alongside colonialism. Colonial photography serves as objective historical documentation, and at the same time, it also alludes to an illusion of European superiority over the colonised Others. Many contemporary artists took notice of certain tropes in the preserved images of the past and began to incorporate them into their works as a way to address and examine the colonial authority. This paper aims to study the strategy of subversion in photomontage created by Malaysian artist, Yee I-Lann. Photomontage is an artistic technique that combines several photographs for artistic effect. The juxtaposition of these images create incongruities that can either change or subvert our perceptions and expectations of these photographs. The focus of this paper will be on Yee I-Lann's *Picturing Power* (2013), a collection of eight digital photomontages referencing the history of photography as it relates to the development of colonialism in Southeast Asia and its contemporary legacy. By using historical mimesis (altering and appropriating the archival images), the paper will argue that the artist exposes the hidden message of Western imperialism within these still images. In conclusion, this paper hopes that by studying this series of photomontages, it will present a reengagement with the past through subverting our perspectives of these historical images.

Keywords: art history, colonialism, photography, photomontage, postcolonial

Introduction

Photography heavily participates in the representational construction of history. This medium is developed in Europe at the height of colonialism and

amongst the first subjects of the lens were colonised people around the world. There has been a great deal of scholarly and critical work that discussed the intimate bond between colonialism and photography. Christopher Morton and Elizabeth Edwards write on the complex historical relationship between photography and anthropology, and in particular the strong emergence of the contemporary relevance of historical images that “thinking through photography” contributes to a more nuanced historical understanding of the nature of cultural engagement, cross-cultural encounter, and experience. Photography is characterised by a series of “overlapping, simultaneous, and often contested strategies to understand complex visual practices” (Morton & Edwards, 2016, p. 20).

In *The Burden of Representation* (1988) John Tagg studies the role of photography in the representation of history. He traces intersecting ways in which photography was involved in maintaining social class hierarchies through the delineation of, for instance, prisoners or the poor. He insists on the need to trace the complex relations between representation, knowledge, and ideology in terms which takes account of fundamental class interest at stake. In his essay ‘The Currency of Photograph’ Tagg’s critique of how photography is used by the state hinges, not around the “power of the camera” in its capacity as a technology used for surveillance but “the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register as truth” (Tagg, 1988, p. 64). His title metaphorically references the notion of the photograph as a symbolic exchange, while simultaneously referring to the values implicated in such an exchange. Thus he discusses the relationship of the photograph to reality, the constitution of photographic meaning, the social utility of photographs, and the institutional frameworks within which they are produced and consumed. Likewise, recent reappraisals of use of photography within social anthropology, and within the records of colonial travellers implicated in European imperialism, have drawn attention to the political and ideological implications of using photography to define social types viewed as different or Other. Such definitional uses of image contributed to the legitimisation of the colonial rule.

Colonial photography in a way is our connection to the past. It provides us a window or a cipher to a time where foreign power rules a different land. The nature of the relationship between colonial rule and photography cannot be easily and predictably organised. It would be unwise to predict how different academic disciplines might approach these images when reading the photographs. A social historian might be expected to

privilege 'evidence' and 'context', or the art historian form over content (Hartmann, Silvester, & Hayes, 1998, p. 5) and in recent years, colonial photography has garnered interest of analysis from many branches of academic disciplines in which inevitably lead to scavenging the archives and unearthing overlooked materials that expose the intricacy of these relationships. The different takes and readings of colonial photographs frame the context of this paper. How does a postcolonial artist interpret these colonial images and in what way she presents her view of the world? These questions lead to the selected work of Yee I-Lann in her series of photomontages entitled *Picturing Power* (2013).

The Artist

Yee I-Lann was born in 1971 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. In 1992 she graduated in visual arts at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. Her practice seeks connections between landscape, perception and cultural identity by incorporating various media including photography, installation, and video. Yee I-Lann has exhibited widely in Malaysia and internationally. In our increasingly globalised world, Yee's metaphor and the impact of her work extend beyond the borders of the post-colonial world. With the facility a historian applies to connecting faraway, polarised dots, Yee's prowess lies in her ability to fuse past and present and local and universal referents.

Dada and Subversion

The overtly political *Picturing Power* (2013) folds found images of Malaysians and British from the early 1900s into stark, surrealistic panoramas that surface past inequalities, continued tensions, and a less than optimistic hope for an integrated future. Yee I-Lann's photomontage *Picturing Power* is an emphatic act of subversion. Her black-and-white photomontages, made from two centuries of archival images of the Dutch and British colonisation of Malaysia, present a reengagement with reality through a new language of alterity. For Yee, the exposure and visibility of the past create a vocabulary that focuses on emancipation and justice. In the series, we could trace how Yee's photomontage could be seen as influenced by the Berlin Dada artists who developed the anarchistic style of highly avant-garde art whose aim was to subvert and undermine the value system of the ruling establishment. The appropriation of the mass media provided endless fodder for the Dadaists scathing critiques, and the disjunctive cuts of photomontage effectively

captured the fissures and shocks of modernity. If “meaning” could be manipulated and changed, then “meaning” is arbitrary and it was the task of an activist and political artist (the very definition of Dada) to undermine the faith in meaning, especially the “truth” conveyed through photography. (Willette, 2011).

In order to understand the subversion in Yee’s work, we have to understand the Dada movement and the contribution of the Berlin Dadaist to mainstream art (which is ironic considering Dada manifest itself as an anti-art, anti-bourgeois movement). Dada achieved what constitutes a commonly-held expectation for postmodern art: a subversion of the prevalent ideology. Dada’s aesthetic, marked by its mockery of materialistic and nationalistic attitudes, proved a powerful influence on post-Dada artists. Dada’s strategies of subversion by humor work to debunk ideology, including the very ideology or myth of art that animates the Dada movements with all its paradoxical force.

It is worth to point out that when discussing the influence of Dada in postcolonialism, there is very little or no mention of Dada in the postcolonial field. This partly because many critics think that Dada is considered too Eurocentric especially in its inception as it was the reaction to the World War I. If the aftermath of the war had left many people questioning the order that had governed them and led them to the war, one can argue that this is the area Dada and postcolonialism share their similarities -- which is opposing and criticising the rules of powerful authority whether it is a postwar reaction to a system that failed them or studying the effects of centuries of colonial subjugation. This created the avant-garde movement that persuades many artistic experiments as a way to break the tradition or mainstream influences that still being used today even by postcolonial artists. Out of the many avant-garde practices introduced by Dada, photomontage is probably one of Dada’s most significant contribution to the visual art. The photomontage innovations were based on the premised of the late 19th-century work of commercial photographers, which included double exposure, timed exposures, and darkroom techniques such as masking, burning and dodging. The significant difference between the early manipulation of images and those of the 20th-century avant-garde photographers is that the latter emphasises its fracture by making it apparent that the photographic image is always a construct (Peres, 2014, p. 64). This gives photomontage its biggest advantage: the appearance of falseness or unnatural which is the opposite of the lifelike and objective quality that photography often celebrated.

Many contemporary artists decades after the fall of Dada have been experimenting further with the ability of this technique, as John Berger

describes, 'to demystify things' for didactic use of photomontage for social and political comment. Photomontage has an ability to disrupt the images that these authorities use to represent themselves to us, appropriating the symbols that those in power, for example, use to represent their undertakings, and displacing these into situations that hint at the true nature of their ideologies. In this way, photomontage has another power which straight photography invariably lacks, an ability to penetrate the surface of things and reveal the mechanisms underneath. This is the power of photomontage at its rare best when the appearance of things themselves reveal how they deceive us. In the case of Yee I-Lann's *Picturing Power*, the mechanism that needs to be deconstructed and demystified is the colonial ideology hidden deep within the archive of colonial photography.

Nostalgic references to historical periods is a hallmark of postmodern art. Yee has taken a postmodernist approach in this work by appropriating colonial images to engage with ideologies and myth of colonialism. The difference that separates her work from others is that she appropriates the archival images taken by Westerners which is not readily available or largely forgotten. This plays into the part in which colonial photography is made and restricted to the Western eyes. Yee has decidedly manipulated the images to highlight the implicitness of power structure embedded within and at the same time showing how the western power would interpret them. Ultimately, Yee subverted these images by shifting from a supposedly objective medium to the point of view primarily articulated through the white western European masculine consciousness.

Colonial Gaze

Susan Sontag in her critique of photography reminds us of the purpose of the image and the role that the historian plays in understanding the past due to that particular image. Photographs are not windows of a transparent view of the world as it is, or, as it was. Photographs are evidence of the often spurious and the incomplete view of the dominant ideologies and social arrangements. Photographs fabricate and confirm these myths and arrangements (Sontag, 1977). Nevertheless, it must be noted that photography has consequently created a new set of relations and changed humans' conceptions of themselves irrevocably.

When colonial powers considered their subject, they often employed what could be called the "colonial gaze": that is, they saw the colonies through eyes that were blurred by misinformation, misconceptions, and stereotypes.

Since the 1970s, scholars such as Edward Said have cast this in terms of the imperialist viewing the “Other,” arguing that colonial powers construct conceptualisations of subject peoples that serve the interests of those who rule.

Scholars of imperialism and colonialism have adopted and employed the notion of “the gaze” as rooted in Michel Foucault’s philosophy of the exercise of institutional power through individual bodies and the normalisation of customary behaviours. The “gaze” in imperial context denotes a biased, even nefarious, practice known as surveillance. The “gaze” so conceived is an assertion of power by one party over the other and the prerogative to gaze and the tools and technologies that make it possible are monopolised by the state, the colonial power, or whatever institution or individual is in a position of dominance.

Everett Taylor Atkins argues that the acts of gazing and being gazed at fundamentally transformed both the observer and the observed. As “the lens through which the ‘Other’ is interpreted and subsequently depicted,” the gaze generates information, which in turn produces knowledge about those who are dominated. Hegemonic parties seek and use this knowledge to better manage and “discipline” populations under their control. In other words, no gathering of data in the context of unequal power is “innocent,” no matter how well-intentioned, sympathetic, or magnanimous the gazers may be. Colonial studies thus conceived typically imply that the very acts of observation, data collection, and intellectual elucidation are affirmations of supremacy, cloaked in the self-deluded rhetoric of scientific detachment and neutrality. In much postmodern discourse, this fact alone invalidates both the veracity of the knowledge gathered and the morality of the enterprise of knowing an “other.” (Atkins, 2010, p. 4)

Self and Other

In Figure 1 “Picturing Power: Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect views and freeze points of view to be reflective of one’s kind” (2013), shrouded black figures posed as 19th-century photographers are juxtaposed with a comic scene of colonisers standing below large, overturned tables. Bansie Vasvani comments on how the eight images from *Picturing Power* use historical mimesis to expose colonial inequities as a constructive expunging exercise.

Set against a stark white background, these incongruous figures symbolize colonial suppression. In Yee’s work,

recurring images of tables represent transactions, power, and control. The inversion of these objects becomes a strong metaphor for the reversion of power from centuries of repression. More importantly, the dark, haunting, ghost-like figures appear to be voyeurs looking into the past and upending memories of hard times and the subjugation of the colonized. Here the artist's language demands a heightened level of representation that is both humorous and an articulated negative critique. (Vasvani, 2014)

The ghost-like figures of the photographer serve as a man sitting at a table as he studies the results for, as the title suggests, "to be reflective of one's kind." This piece takes a sarcastic jab at the colonial British's obsession to categorise, record and document everything. At the same time, she asserts through the title that this obsession to capture the image of Other can lead to some religious contemplation or a philosophical debate of their existence and their role in the world. The underlying irony of this work is how the colonisers view the colonised through a self-created filter of superiority and civilised mannerisms. This leads to a bias in their portrayal of the colonised people and ultimately of themselves.

Figure 1: Picturing Power: Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect views and freeze points of view to be reflective of one's kind (2013), Giclée print on Hahnemüle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper. 25 x 71 inches (63 x 180 cm)



Image courtesy of the artist

The practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another defined colonial discourse. Here, Yee refers to the use of photography itself in justification of colonialism. The legitimacy of colonialism has been a longstanding concern for political and moral philosophers in the

Western tradition. Bourgeois ideology in nineteenth-century Europe derived its power from its claims to universality to the superiority of the free market, the rationalist heritage of the Enlightenment, the orderly structures of states, and the rightness of self-rule but colonisation necessarily implied the rule of one particular people over another. Thus, images circulating the West plays a vital role in uniting foreign power for the colonial expansion.

Allan Sekula investigates various nineteenth-century photographs of the body and identifies a fundamental tension is developing between uses of photography to fulfill a bourgeois conception of the Self and uses that seek to establish and delimit the terrain of the Other (Sekula, 1981, pp. 15-25). While the dual purposes of photography that Sekula highlights are pertinent, they are not necessarily different uses. Michael Hayes points out that photography could establish the concept of self as a colonising viewer while simultaneously representing the terrain of the other. The effect of transformations in the science of representation that were that was to reposition the body of the colonisers and the colonised in terms of vision, truth, and science (Hayes, 2013, p. 173).

By reading the arrangement of colonial images which is reinforced by the ironic title, Yee demonstrates how the colonialist assumptions about the stereotype of the others can be reversed and redirected back on to the ideology of colonial values. In his discussion of the use of colonial photography in historical surrealism, David Bate comments on how surrealistic artists manipulate the photographic image to attack the ideology of colonialism. They take to task the common-sense assumptions of a colonialist culture (charity, piety, the Christian good, etc.) and reinvest them to show the implicit racism, making colonialist values visible (Bate, 2004, p. 224). Thus, in order to subvert the ideology, the artist firstly must make the necessary effort to detect and define the means of imperialism, by disrupting the identification system of cultural logic which enables the ideology of imperialism to function. The signs of colonialist thought of the Other as primitive, inferior, exotic, etc. and Self as superior, civilised, knowledgeable, etc. are subject to scrutiny as the unconscious thought of colonialism. The mimetic quality of the photomontages combined with the long-winded serves this end justly.

Superiority and Inferiority

In "Picturing Power: Wherein one nods with political sympathy and says I understand you better than you understand yourself, I'm just here to help you help yourself" (2013), hundreds of natives line up in quiet acquiescence behind

one of their oppressors, portraying life in the colonies at the time. Yee's ironic titles, dripping with sarcasm, compel the viewer to visualise an era of dogmatic coercion.

Figure 2: Picturing Power: Wherein one nods with political sympathy and says I understand you better than you understand yourself, I'm just here to help you help yourself, 2013

Giclée print on Hahnemüle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper 25 x 25 inches (63 x 63 cm)



Image courtesy of the artist

The composite images of a white man wearing uniforms with pith helmets and the long line of natives squatting behind their leader who sits next to him symbolised the unwieldy power of the coloniser over a subjugated group masked behind the facade of peaceful and civilised negotiation. The colonisers presented themselves as the far superior beneficiary figure who extend their hands to aid the primitive, uncivilised natives. The

ideological fantasy construction of the Other and the Self, as the supplement to the discourse which sustains the colonialist culture, is critiqued by emulating the very assumptions upon which colonialism depended.

This image has a strong hint of the imperialist interpretation of "The White Man's Burden" (1899) which proposes that the white man has a moral obligation to rule the non-white peoples of the Earth while encouraging their economic, cultural, and social progress through colonialism. The theme of colonial stereotypes is at the core of much English literatures such as George Orwell's *Burmese Days* and E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*. Forster provided a particularly insightful analysis of how such stereotypical images served to solidify the colonial community and set the coloniser apart from the native. Both authors also stressed a perceptual gap created by the images, making meaningful communication between the worlds of coloniser and the colonised all but impossible (Lebow, 2007, p. 40).

To justify the colonisation of people, images need to be created so that the subjugation makes sense. These images become the identity of the colonised. There are many images used such as primitive, uneducated, and barbaric but one universal image that has been put on native people, especially in South East Asia, is laziness. This image is a good example of how the coloniser justifies his actions. This image becomes the excuse for the colonial situation because without such images the actions of the colonialist would appear shocking. The image of the lazy native is a useful myth on many levels; it raises the coloniser and humbles the colonised. It becomes a beautiful justification for the coloniser's privilege. The image is that the colonised are unbearably lazy; in contrast, the coloniser is always in action. It implies that the employment of the colonised is not very profitable, therefore justifying the unbearable wages paid to them.

Many stereotypes can be seen as universal or common western clichés, i.e., whether they were spread as 'universal knowledge' across the borders of the English Empire and were finally adopted by other European countries

With almost monotonous regularity, colonial natives have been described as indolent and complacent, cowardly but brazenly rash, violent, uncivilized, and incapable of hard work. On the more complimentary side, they have been characterized as hospitable, good-natured possessing a natural talent for song and dance, and frequently as curious but incapable of a prolonged span attention. In short, the

image of simple creatures in need of paternal domination emerged very clearly. (Lebow, 2007, p. 41).

Through *Picturing Power* Yee I-Lann explores the ideologies behind these still images of the colonial time by highlighting and exaggerating the images and myths of the colonised. The function of myth as a significant element in colonial ideology is illustrated by recourse to historical and sociological examples. In its historical empirical manifestation, the colonial ideology utilised the idea of the lazy native to justify compulsion and unjust practices in the mobilisation of labor in the colonies. It portrayed a negative image of the natives and their society to justify and rationalise European conquest and domination of the area. It distorted elements of social and human reality to ensure a comfortable construction of the ideology. The pieces of ideas patched together to construct the picture of native society are displayed in the photomontages.

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native* first published in 1977, Syed Hussein Alatas analyses the origins and functions of such myths in the creation and reinforcement of colonial ideology and capitalism. The negative image of the people subjugated by Western colonial powers, which dominated the colonial ideology, was drawn by cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty methodologies. The general negative image was not the result of scholarship. Those who proclaimed the people of the area indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish, were not scholars (Alatas, 2013, p. 112). But this myth of the native laziness which was consolidated by the British in the Malay consciousness under colonial rule has taken an ironic twist in later time. In his book, Alatas also points out that the Malay politicians, mainly the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) who wanted to advance the Malay people into a modern setting, creating a new class to be involved in business and commerce has been responsible for propagating this theory. The unique factor about the UMNO ideology is the strong element of self-degradation. Historically speaking, the ideologies of ruling classes the world over contain a strong element of self-assertion, of pride of the group and its achievement. However, the same cannot be applied to the UMNO ideology. The self-reproach and self-degradation reflect their position in the economic set up inherited from colonial capitalism. They feel inferior because the criteria of measurement are derived from colonial capitalism (Alatas, 2013. p. 153).

The theme of the inferiority of the Other continues to persist in a postcolonial era which left many Malay and natives at a disadvantage and

open to exploitation either by a foreign power or the ruling class themselves. The Malay elites and politicians' exploitation of this colonial legacy for their gain is shown in Figure 3 "Picturing Power: Wherein one's legacy comes full circle and posits that you too can exploit and subjugate and fluff yourself up in a splendid game of your jolly adventure", comprising an office chair, a potted tropical plant in a pristine white room with a half-naked native woman outside a window. This work can be seen as a representation of the vicious cycle of dominance and inequalities that many ex-colonised countries are facing after the Western imperialistic left. The empty chair symbolises a seat of power that can easily be replaced by anyone even the former colonised people who seek to exploit the nation for their gain while the naked native woman represents the colonial dogma that continues to exist even after independence. The colonial legacy that haunts the present day Malaysia is a recurring theme in many Yee's works. Coincidentally, many of the issues that have been raised by this collection of photomontages can be seen as a continuation of Yee I-Lann's older works such as the installation of "YB" as part of her "Orang Besar Series" (2010) and another series entitled "Tabled" (2013).

Figure 3: Picturing Power: Wherein one's legacy comes full circle and posits that you too can exploit and subjugate and fluff yourself up in a splendid game of one's jolly adventure, 2013

Giclée print on Hahnemüle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper. 25 x 35.5 inches (63 x 90 cm)



Image courtesy of the artist

Image of Exotic women

Figure 4: Picturing Power: Wherein one cultivates cultural codes, the noble endeavors of mankind and thereby puts them in their place, 2013
Giclée print on Hahnemüle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Fine Art, 310 gsm 100% cotton rag paper 25 x 71 inches (63 x 180 cm)

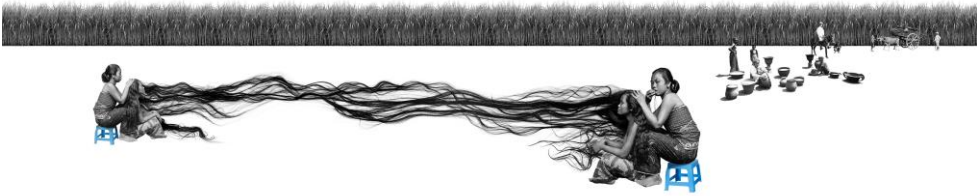


Image courtesy of the artist

In Figure 4 "Picturing Power: Wherein one cultivates cultural codes, the noble endeavors of mankind and thereby puts them in their place" (2013) presents the native woman whose long tresses transform her into the stereotypical mythological enchantress. She was portrayed against a backdrop of sugar plantations, which were the most lucrative colonial trade. The sugar plantation as the background framed this work as it is ideologically linked with notions of an exotic-erotic, primitive colonial otherness. The female figure with her lengthy, unruly hair is symbolic of the classic temptress who had to be controlled. This trope of exoticism of the women from the colonised world presented the obsession in colonial discourse with the female body. Yee deliberately wove the elements of exoticism and mythical allure in her work to emphasise the Western voyeurism of the unsuspecting natives in their natural "habitat." This theme formed a key thread through various colonial media forms. These representations were emblematic of both the allure of the exotic female body and conversely of deeper innate fears in Western culture towards women's bodies. The West, in both its conception of the Orient and the colonial project, projected and aggrandised its sexual fantasies and fears.

Western patriarchal views and fears toward the female body and the feminine also formed a key thread in the conception and understanding of Orientalism and the colonisation project in general. These fears were confirmed by the written and visual description of the Other. There is a distinct juncture between these two views of the "Other," and that imperialism and gender were closely linked in some ways. Because imperialistic nations typically have patriarchal social structures, the fact that women in subject lands often did not conform to the gender constructs of the dominant imperial culture was used to explain the "uncivilised" nature of their society. Similarly, conquering countries often attributed "feminine" characteristics to all subject peoples as a means of explaining characteristics that from the colonial point of view were unfamiliar and undesirable. Men of the colonised country were often seen as unmanly, lazy and brutish while the women were stereotyped as overly sexualised, erotic and active sexual participants who highly contrasted to the puritanical submissiveness of their European counterparts. This tends to throw into high relief the notion that the "masculine" characteristics of the conquering nation are naturally dominant, thereby legitimising colonial rule as a reflection of male superiority which was seen as "natural" in society over the inferior feminine Other.

Conclusion

In recent years, the photographic archive has become a locus of an investigation by contemporary artists. These artistic investigations interpret, contest, redefine and reinvent our understanding of archives, both their structures and materials. Appropriation and parody are key devices in many uses of the archive. Here, it is important to foreground the operative logic of these projects and the ethnographic methods underlying them. Okwui Enwezor elucidates that artist serves as the historic agent of memory, while the archive emerges as a place in which concerns with the past are touched by the astringent vapors of death, destruction, and degeneration. Yet, against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument (Enwezor, 2008).

Central to the work of many artists, and rarely considered by historians and history educators, is the multi-modal and emotional quality of the historical record. Nostalgia is inseparable from the past, and the past is represented as memory. The grainy washed out quality of the black and white

photographs evokes a sense poignancy and sentimentality inside the viewers as these old photographs represent of a period long gone when everything seems simpler to categorise and define the roles of participants in comparison to the messy, highly competitive and globalised world we are currently living. Yee has essentially subverted these elements of nostalgia to expose the layers of the hypocrisy of colonial administration in a humorous, ironic way by appropriating these images in a series of photomontage. Yee was able to move away from the strict narrative of historical linearity, manipulate the photographic materials, and tell a greater political, philosophical, sociological, and artistic truth. By taking the preserved images of the colonial past from their original contexts and rearranging them (or portions of them) in new combinations with other images, she altered one truth to tell another one.

Contemporary artists whose work addresses the people, places, and events of the past employ their ability to reframe our understanding of historical research and its methods. Artist can challenge the linear narrative of the past and the idea of the objective of representation of history. In particular, artists who question how we speak about the past in term of truth, subjectivity, and authenticity often are engaged in the subversive function of art as Carol Becker states “not to be politely absorbed but rather to challenge and disrupt” (Becker, 2014, p. 127). Artists such as Yee I-Lann open new ways of thinking about how we engage in the complexity of history: its multiple layers, contradictions, and tensions. These artists also offer tangible evidence that history is a subjective field of study, reflecting the unique perspectives, biases, opinions, and fallible memories of its author (Desai, Hamlin, & Mattson, 2009, p. 50).

Such manipulations of the colonial image can be viewed as subversive acts and strategies that postcolonial artists have identified and employ in their work to find a way to negotiate with the entangled web of colonial memory and at the same time examining the effect of colonialism in identity formation in the post-colonial era.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and USM (RUI) Grant (1001/PSENI/816285) for the fund that has enabled the authors to present this paper in “East/West : Ruptures & Convergences: An International Conference” organised by the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1 - 2 December 2016.

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