

Asia Research Institute

Working Paper Series

No. 82

Singapore and its Tensed Pasts: History and Nation-building

Lysa Hong

Department of History
National University of Singapore

hishl@nus.edu.sg

January 2007

The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm. For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm.

Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee

Geoffrey Wade

Stephen Teo

Asia Research Institute

National University of Singapore

Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7, Level 4

5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Singapore and its Tensed Pasts: History and Nation-building

Hong Lysa

History, as the most basic definition of the discipline would have it, is the study of the past. Hence the injunction, if one is needed, from the history teacher to beginner students would be that they should write in the past tense as the events under consideration would have already taken place. However, this intuitive grammatical guideline is simplistic and even deceptive, hiding as it does the different relations of time involved in narrating the past. The word ‘tense’, from the Latin *tempus*, is used to show the time when the action of a verb takes place, and in the grammar of English language the past, present and future tenses have multiple aspects indicating the point of time when something happens, and the status of the happening at the point referred to — whether it or its effects are still taking place or are already completed.¹

The distinction between past and present is an essential component of the concept of time, and therefore fundamental to both historical consciousness and historical knowledge. The notion of the historical present requires temporal demarcation as well as evaluative definition and is in fact a programme, and ideological project;² the past, similarly programmatically determined then, is conditional of the present so identified, and at the same time constituted by it. As Jean Piaget put it neatly in a critique of Freud: what psychoanalysis yields is the subject’s current conception of his past, and not a direct knowledge of this past; the past is reconstructed in relation to the present just as the present is explained by the past, so too with history, whose coherence is achieved through relating segments of the past differently to the present.³ In other words, a range of past tense forms—the simple past, the perfect past, and the continuous past can be said to structure the historical narrative.

¹ Singapore Civil Service Institute, *Write it right: A reference grammar for written English* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1981) pp. 29-33.

² Jacques Le Goff, *History and memory*, translated by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

With the telling of the national past where the mission is to foster a sense of common destiny, necessitating a myth of origin and struggle to overcome obstacles and enemies, certain enduring characteristics are postulated, fundamental principles endlessly battled for enunciated, and lessons drawn from collective history pronounced. The future towards which the present has been mapped is to be assured on the basis of the particular struggles, defeats and triumphs that the collectivity could be said to have undergone. An examination of the project of formulating a national history in Singapore in the last two decades of the millennium will uncover the layers of grammatical tenses that have gone into its formulation.

While the literary and postcolonial turns may have dislodged the scientific claims of the regnant historicism, they have not necessarily overthrown the primacy of the history as a discipline. What has been brought to the surface is that history is a contested field of knowledge, and just as Partha Chatterjee has asked of the nation: ‘whose imagined community’ it is, so it has to be asked of a historical work: who it is who is dispensing the lessons of the past.⁴ While Chatterjee considers ‘the nation and its women’, ‘women and the nation’, ‘the nation and its peasants’ and ‘the nation and its outcasts’ in trying to resurrect the virtues of ‘the fragmentary, the local, and the subjugated in order to unmask the will to power that lies at the very heart of modern rationality and to decenter its epistemological and moral subject’⁵, national history in Singapore prides itself precisely on swallowing up the fragmentary, the local and the subjugated in a grand narrative of modern rationality in the name of the moral subject.

A MARTIAN’S VIEW OF SINGAPORE HISTORY

The assembling of a Singapore history has undergone a process of mutation. From the view that Singapore was, when Raffles landed in 1819, to all intents and purposes *tabula rasa*, and that what could be called the history of Singapore was divisive, as it recalled the distinct trajectories of the different ethnic migrant communities, the Singapore Story coalesced in the late 1990s, when the key moments in the country’s political history as an emerging post-colonial entity were identified and plotted into a national narrative. At the core of the concerns of attaining social cohesion and a sense of nationhood, is the irony that ‘the very

⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Chapter 1 ‘Whose Imagined Community?’ pp.3-13.

⁵ Ibid., Preface.

achievement of economic growth is at the same time corrosive of the sense of national purpose and solidarity that supports it',⁶ based as it is on an economy geared to attract foreign investment, as well as those officially endorsed as 'foreign talent'. As the country's pre-eminent leader, Lee Kuan Yew, put it to Singaporeans: 'Getting foreign talent to Singapore is the one critical factor that can make or break Singapore's future' for the country's population of 3 million just cannot 'toss up' enough talent on its own, and openness to talent is what it takes to be globally competitive.⁷ Intersecting with the privileging of the highly-mobile, temporarily-domiciled expatriate, is the emphasis on Singapore as an 'Asian' society with a value system distinct from the west.

For national history to foster national identity, it has to have resonance and credibility. As part of the celebrations of the country's 40th anniversary of independence, when Singapore was separated from the Federation of Malaysia of which it was a part from 1963-65, the government in 2003 commissioned British-based Lion Television to produce a documentary to be aired on cable television Discovery Networks Asia. It was billed in the local newspapers as 'a daring take on what really happened', giving the island's past 'a bold new look', and making 'bold assessments of historical figures'.⁸ The publicity for the programme highlighted its independent position from the government. The film's producers had full access to the national archives, and no government minister saw it before its official preview and release. A foreign production house was selected to make the point that 'This is not a Singapore documentary, it is a documentary about Singapore but made by an international company. We hope the final product will be fair and balanced, and tells our story in an engaging and convincing way'.⁹ A British director in the project who had not been to Singapore previously put his self-confessed initial ignorance to good effect, claiming that 'As for broaching sensitive topics, I could say, I'm innocent. I didn't know that this or that was a sensitive topic,

⁶ Kwok Kian Woon, 'Articulating the intangible', *The Business Times*, Weekend edition, 25-26 May 1996.

⁷ "Foreign talent 'key to S'pore's future'", *The Sunday Times*, 15 August 1999.

⁸ 'Bold new show on S'pore's history', *The Sunday Times*, 12 November 2005. The titillating promise of controversy in Singapore history turned out to be the blame which the documentary dished out on William Farquhar, 'the man entrusted by Raffles to manage the colony', for the rising rates of crime and opium addiction which occurred under his management.

⁹ Tommy Koh, chairman, National Heritage Board, cited in 'Multi-million-dollar documentary on history of Singapore to air next month', *Channel NewsAsia* 12 November 2005. This statement should be juxtaposed with Lee Hsien Loong's landmark speech launching the National Education programme which pronounced that the Singapore Story is based on historical facts, and is 'objective history, seen from a Singaporean standpoint'. 'Telling the Singapore Story', *Straits Times* (hereafter *ST*), 20 May 1997.

so I could go ahead and film it.’¹⁰ Nevertheless the documentary managed to stick to the ‘from mangrove backwater to metropolis’ line, with Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew as the transformers.

In fact, the need to proclaim the unfettered freedom, disinterestedness and hence objectivity of documentary film-makers is precisely a factor of the tight control that the Singapore government has imposed on the understanding of the country’s history. A graduate student researcher commenting on the state of the field noted that ‘a Martian with only the official script would think that there is only one political movement—the PAP; two important personalities in Singapore—Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew; and three dates—1819, 1942 and 1965—that are worth remembering’.¹¹ Even while assuring critics that history in schools should not be about memorizing facts, but historical investigation and inquiry skills, the Ministry of Education at the same time spelt out the ‘important lessons and values’ from the past that students should arrive at.¹²

PRE-TENSE: REVOLUTIONARY SONS OF RAFFLES

Michel-Rolph Trouillot has recommended the tracking of how history works through examining the processes and conditions involved in the production of specific narratives as being a more meaningful way of apprehending the power of the past than debate at the abstract level on the nature of history.¹³ In the process, it is evident that power precedes the narrative proper, contributing to its creation and its interpretation. The decision that Stamford Raffles be recognised as the founder of Singapore has at one level been defended by the

¹⁰ Tim Lambert, Lion Television producer, cited in ‘Film interview on S’pore’s separation stirs up MM’s memories’, *The Sunday Times*, 13 November 2005.

¹¹ ‘Telling the Singapore Storyies’, *ST* 18 February 2006. The year 1819 was that in which Stamford Raffles arrived in Singapore; 1942 marked the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Singapore, which stirred nationalist sentiments in the men who were to be politically active in the postwar years. Colonial rule ended in 1963 when Singapore became part of Malaysia, and its separation from the Federation in 1965 has been regarded as the year zero of the nation’s independence. Liew Khai Khiun, doctoral student at University of London made the wider observation in the feature story that the imposition of the Singapore Story on Singaporeans led many to feel that it is the story of the PAP rather than their stories.

¹² ‘Through the study of key defining moments such as the Japanese Occupation and our journey to nationhood, students learn values such as resilience and racial and religious harmony, and develop a sense of national pride and identity.’ Letter to the Editor by Director, Curriculum Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, *ST*, 4 August 2005.

¹³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 24-5.

government at an empirical level, on grounds that there is scant documentary evidence of significant settlement in the preceding two centuries. However, starting Singapore history with Raffles was more fundamentally an outcome of the power that preceded the narrative.

S. Rajaratnam, as director of the PAP's political bureau, first broached the subject of Raffles' place in Singapore history in 1969, at the opening of an exhibition to celebrate the party's fifteenth anniversary, which was also the 150th anniversary of Raffles' landing. Rajaratnam disclosed that when the PAP came to power in 1959, it was so anti-colonial that Raffles was ear-marked for removal, escaping that fate only by a narrow margin. It was thus that he was given an honourable place and that the 150th anniversary of the founding of Singapore by him was being celebrated. Rajaratnam concluded: 'We started off as an anti-colonial party. We have passed that stage: only Raffles remains'.¹⁴

The irony of the PAP as anti-colonial yet selecting Raffles as the nation's progenitor was addressed publicly by Rajaratnam again in 1983, this time at the 160th anniversary of the country's elite state school, Raffles Institution. Himself an alumnus, Rajaratnam noted that when he founded the school, the last thing on Raffles' mind was that it would 'turn out anti-imperialist agitators to seduce Singapore out of the British empire'. By his reckoning, Raffles Institution had nurtured the single largest group of anti-colonial politicians, its alumni making up 20 out of the then 75 members of parliament. Rajaratnam explained the choice made by portraying Raffles as an aberrant coloniser, thereby obscuring the logic of governing an entrepot port-city.¹⁵

True, Raffles was an imperialist but ...he did not loot the country he was in charge of. His rule was not marked by terror and savagery. He did not farm out the colony he founded for unbridled exploitation by friends and relatives... What lives on is his vision of Singapore as a great trading centre, open to all who are enterprising and willing to take their chances on the basis of merit and hard work.

¹⁴ *ST*, 7 August 1969.

¹⁵ 'Raja tells why we still honour Raffles; name', *ST* 25 May 1983.

The most comprehensive and wide-ranging explanation of the choice of Raffles as Singapore's founder was made by Rajaratnam in 1984, on the occasion of a national exhibition to commemorate 25 years of self-government. In that year also, the first ever set of school textbooks on Singapore history was issued, marking a turn from the earlier stand that Singapore's history was immigrant histories which marked differences, and was best to be forgotten in the new nation-state. Rajaratnam asserted that in 1965, when Singapore was severed from Malaysia, there was a debate as to who should be declared the founding father of Singapore, which 'ended abruptly' when the PAP government officially decided on the 'faithful servant of British imperialism', a step which was 'unprecedented in the history of anti-imperialist nationalism', and which 'completely mystified...many of our Third World friends'. Indeed, there were 'some well-meaning patriots in Singapore' who were all in favour of casting Raffles' statue into the Singapore River, but that to Rajaratnam would be dishonest in pretending that Singapore did not have a colonial past, despite his reservations that the more balanced assessment of imperialism was a heresy and an idiosyncratic aberration that could cast doubt on the PAP's anti-imperialism.¹⁶

He compared the PAP's choice of retaining Raffles with the 'old' Warsaw that the Polish communists rebuilt after its destruction by the Nazis during World War II, an acknowledgement on their part that vanquished feudalism, capitalism and Catholicism all left behind a worthy heritage that fuelled the spirit to defy the demands of the mighty Soviet Union.¹⁷ Rajaratnam also summoned the instance of Beijing's declaration at the time that, when the British departed from Hong Kong in 1997, the society that British imperialism built would not be interfered with for at least fifty years. To him this demonstrated the political and historical sensitivity of Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues, who had moved from the 'infantile slogan' of 'out with the imperialist past' to the 'more sophisticated approach' of 'Learn to use the imperial past wisely and imaginatively'.¹⁸

¹⁶ S. Rajaratnam, Speech delivered at the seminar on 'Adaptive re-use: integrating traditional areas into the modern urban fabric' on 28 April 1984, in *S. Rajaratnam: The prophetic and the political: Selected speeches and writings of S. Rajaratnam*, ed. Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Rajaratnam's polemical speeches on the place of Raffles in Singapore history are the key, if not only references on the subject. They are a defence of the PAP's anti-colonial credentials, particularly necessary as the most patent anti-colonialists in Singapore were not Raffles Institution alumni politicians, but the radical (mainly but not solely Chinese-medium school educated) students, graduates and trade union leaders who were detained without trial by the PAP. As Lee Kuan Yew revealed in his 2000 memoirs, it was Singapore's economic advisor at the time Albert Winsemius, a Dutchman, who pointed out that investors were waiting to see at the time what the new socialist government in Singapore was going to do to the statue of Raffles. Letting it remain, it was suggested, would be a symbol of public acceptance of the legacy of the British and would have a positive effect.¹⁹

In his 1969 speech, Rajaratnam had dated the debate on Raffles to 1959, when PAP rule commenced; in his 1984 speech, it was to 1965, at the separation from Malaysia. At neither time would the Lee Kuan Yew faction have been likely to have considered seriously toppling Raffles' statue. In 1959 they needed to distinguish themselves from their radical counterparts in order to win British confidence and assistance in defeating their own party members labelled as communists. The retention of the colonial landscape of power would have offered such an assurance to the British before 1963. In 1965, had such a debate as Rajaratnam described taken place at all within the PAP, the outcome would have been a foregone conclusion, for any anti-colonial action at a time when the Malaysia scheme incorporating Singapore had failed, would have strengthened the hand of President Sukarno of Indonesia, who had declared armed confrontation against the formation of Malaysia, to him a neo-colonialist creation. At the same time, the newly-independent island republic needed the continued presence of the British military bases for strategic, but also economic reasons. Hence Rajaratnam's claims can best be understood as apocryphal accounts told in a mock-revolutionary tone in the Cold War context in which decolonisation took place in Southeast Asia. The narrative of Raffles as founder of Singapore was thus pre-tense, settled on before the history could start to be told.

¹⁹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From third world to first: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2000), pp. 66-7.

A TENSED PAST: PLOTS UNCOVERED

A key ‘sensitivity’ in Singapore history is the issue of the detention of the PAP’s main challengers, its erstwhile left-wing members, who were wiped out as a political force when more than a hundred of them were detained without trial, on grounds of being communist subversives, a charge which they have consistently denied. The detentions were carried out in February 1963 ahead of the elections to be held in September, after merger with Malaysia in August of that year. In its first decade, the English-educated, middle-class professionals in the party leadership had seen the need to form a united front with the radical Chinese-speaking trade union and student union leaders in order to win over the largely working-class electorate. Having done that, Lee Kuan Yew and his faction of the party pushed for a merger with Malaysia, in no small part because the conservative, rightist Malaysian federal government would not have hesitated to put the leftists in detention indefinitely without trial. ‘Fighting the communists’ is thus the just cause that is the cornerstone of the PAP’s early history, while the obverse, which the official history does not permit, postulates that ‘(The Singapore Story) is not necessarily a battle between good and evil. It’s just different sides...one side won and one side lost, obviously’.²⁰

The side that won, however, has been insistent on impressing that the victory has been one over communism. The Ministry of Home Affairs’ publication of its history took pride in ‘the case of the subversive tombstone’,²¹ which demonstrates unequivocally the lengths to which unauthorized life histories were foreclosed.

Thirty-two year old Singaporean Tay Chay Wa, a senior official of the Malayan National Liberation Front was executed by the Malaysian authorities for illegal possession of firearms in 1983. His brother was subsequently charged under the Internal Security Act in Singapore with having under his control a subversive document which ‘called the people to take up arms against the government’, to wit, the inscription on his brother’s tombstone that he had erected,²² which read:

²⁰ Former political detainee Tan Jin Quee, ‘Telling the Singapore Stories’, *ST* 18 February 2006.

²¹ Felix Soh, *The Story of the home team* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2003) pp. 94-5.

²² Tan Chu Boon was sentenced to a year in jail, reduced to a month on appeal. *Ibid.*

‘Martyr Tan Chay Wa came from a poor peasant family. Having completed his secondary education, he worked as a factory hand.

In the Seventies, he joined the Malayan National Liberation Front (MNLF), as an organization led by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). He was subsequently promoted District Committee Member (DCM).

Under difficult circumstances, he used to appease his hunger by feeding on wild edible vegetables. He contributed all the money that he managed to save to the organization, thus manifesting amply the noble quality of a revolutionary warrior.

Under pursuit by the enemy, he fled to Johor State where he carried on with his work in total disregard of his own personal safety.

Unfortunately on 2 June 1979 he was arrested. While in prison, he was cruelly beaten up and subjected to coercive threats and inducement but he remained resolute and unflinchingly dauntless.

For the sake of the motherland’s liberation cause, he was hanged in Pudu Prison in Kuala Lumpur on 18 Jan 1983 and died a heroic death.

At the time of his death he was only 35. A few moments before his death, he wrote a heroic poem which read: ‘With heart filled with righteous indignation, I stood at the gallows and forcefully pen this poem with my blood, I want to air my grievances for a hundred years, unable to tell all the wrongs with blood. When will this gallows be destroyed to bring about a new heaven?’

This militant poem depicts his deep hatred against the old society and his boundless confidence as the victory over the motherland’s revolution. His glorious image will forever lie in the minds of the people. Martyr Tan Chay Wa’s spirit will live forever! ²³

²³ Translation from Chinese by *The Sunday Times*, 31 May 1983.

An Internal Security Department officer, a former member of an underground Marxist-Leninist-Maoist cell who had renounced Communism testified as expert witness that the words ‘motherland’s liberation cause’ referred to the Malaysian peninsula, and that ‘old society’ similarly referred to the governments of Malaysia and Singapore, while the defence had argued that the tombstone simply held out the deceased as worthy of admiration and emulation for having died for a cause, even if it was not one that others shared.²⁴ The material on the tombstone, even while it was deemed subversive, was given full airing in the press, for it admitted that the subject was a member of the Communist Party of Malaya. The obituary, a ritual piece of rhetoric, drained the life out of Tan Chay Wa as a person, in the same way as did the Internal Security strategy of reducing the subject to his calling ‘for a violent overthrow of the Singapore government’.

The ‘case of the subversive tombstone’, and similar more regular battles against Communism, critical though they were deemed by the authorities to the security and survival of Singapore, apparently did not necessarily make a deep impression on the population. The last Internal Security arrest for Communist activities was carried out in 1987, when 22 people were detained without trial, accused of involvement in a ‘Marxist conspiracy’. Unlike the earlier detainees, this group comprised middle-class English-educated professionals and Catholic social workers. In the Parliamentary debate that ensued, the ‘conspirators were assigned a genealogy which traced back to the unionists and radical politicians of the 1950s and 60s, as recruits from the Chinese-speaking ground had dried up with the government policy of closing non-English medium language schools.²⁵ The historical link was drawn on the authority of Lee Kuan Yew, as veteran anti-Communist combatant. In the Parliamentary debate on a motion tabled by an opposition party member calling for a rejection of the government’s actions against alleged subversive activities by Marxists and others, it was he who defended the action most vigorously, rather than the younger team which he was then grooming to take over when he stepped down as prime minister, and which had ordered the arrests. Lee spoke for over an hour, for the most part recounting his battle with the

²⁴ ‘Is inscription a eulogy or is it subversive?’ *ST*, 26 November 1983. The defendant was represented in court by J. B. Jeyaratnam, then also the only opposition member of parliament.

²⁵ This logic went on to postulate that reading Mao in translation was difficult and would not enthuse and fire the tertiary students proficient in English rather than Chinese, and thus the Communists, out to replenish membership, settled for their reading whatever literature the French or Italians read, or what the Filipinos were putting out in English. This was noted in Lee Kuan Yew’s speech during the Parliamentary debate on the proposed amendment to reject the actions of the government against alleged subversive activities by Marxists, the United States government and foreign interest groups, reported in *ST* 28 May 1988.

communists in the 1950s. The crux of the history lesson was: ‘you don’t argue with killer squads’.²⁶

Despite the gravity of the issue, Singaporeans did not seem to be galvanised into wanting to know their past. A Ministry of Education survey carried out in 1996 to gauge the level of knowledge on history revealed that ‘wild guesses’ on the causes of the Hock Lee bus riots in the mid-1950s proffered by the respondents, who included tertiary-level students, ranged from a rise in bus fares, poor working conditions, and low pay, to conflict between Chinese dialect groups. The answer which the newspaper report supplied as the correct one was “the riots were instigated by communists”.²⁷

While anti-communism remains central to the PAP’s autobiography, the position of the ideology as the most dangerous threat to the country’s well-being has declined in relative importance with the end of the Cold War. An unprecedented event in 2006 marked the passage of communism in Singapore history into the past perfect tense: ‘past without effect on the present.’ The ideology had been the greatest challenge to the government, but was no longer so. Two political detainees of the 1960s and 1970s were permitted to speak of their memories of incarceration at an arts forum. They declared that contrary to the charges under the Internal Security Act, they had never been communists, and spoke of the inhumane treatment that they claimed was meted out to them and their fellow detainees.

The official riposte in the form of a letter to the press by the Ministry of Home Affairs responding to newspaper commentaries did not refer to the harrowing accounts of their imprisonment, but reiterated that those who had been detained were not political dissidents or opposition members engaged in the democratic process, but ‘belonged to the Communist United Front which supported the Communist Party of Malaya, an underground organisation which used terror and violence to subvert the democratic process and overthrow the government of Singapore and Malaysia’.²⁸ They had been released when they renounced

²⁶ ‘Fight to stop the Communists from roping in English-educated’ *ST*, 28 May 1988. Lee said that one of his most vivid memories immediately after the 1955 elections was hearing a shot being fired in the building next to where celebrations were being held for the PAP’s victory in three of the four seats that they had contested. He noted that a young man, accused of being a running dog, had been executed by the Communists.

²⁷ *The Sunday Times*, 15 September 1996. Such a set answer does not encourage appreciation of the historical context of the early 1950s, when radical anti-colonial politics was on the ascent.

²⁸ Director, Corporate Communications Division, for Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, ‘Ex-detainees took part in Communist subversion’, Letter to Forum Editor, *ST*, 8 March 2006.

communism. The speakers' protestations of their innocence and victimization were dismissed as attempts to take advantage of young Singaporeans who had not lived through the period. The government had allowed them to put the past behind them, and to enjoy the prosperity of Singapore, but not to 'rewrite history'. Indeed it is capitalism in Singapore as shaped by the PAP and which has transformed the standard of living on the island, that has become the vindication of the party's record, in effect displacing the centrality of the 'battle against the communists' trope.

THE TENSED PRESENT: THE PLOT THICKENS

It was in 1996 that the government deemed it fit to apprise Singaporeans of the recent history of their country. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared 'After 31 years, more important than our economic success and the improvements in our lives, is the beginning of a Singapore identity and nation.'²⁹ Launching the National Education programme in 1997, Lee Hsien Loong noted that the common history syllabus for secondary school leavers designed by the Ministry of Education stopped in 1963, 'which perversely omits the vital period leading to our independence', and would be extended to 1971.³⁰ The year 1963 was that in which Singapore merged into the Federation of Malaysia, a stormy union which lasted only until August 1965. A 1996 survey found that students could not give the year in which Singapore became independent. They also had no idea for how long was their country a part of Malaysia; some even did not think that that had ever happened.³¹ The National Education project, while covering Singapore history from Stamford Raffles on, was foremost an exercise in exorcising the Malaysian years, but fixing their place in the Singapore Story. Indeed, 25 years after its separation from Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew concluded that Singapore would not have achieved independence by any other way than merger with Malaysia, for that painful experience has taught its people 'the lessons of life'-- 'they understood then what it was like to be trapped in a communal situation.' Singapore was not-Malaysia.³²

²⁹ *ST*, 10 August 1996.

³⁰ Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 'Developing a shared sense of nationhood', *Ministerial Speeches*, Vol. 21, No.3, May-June 1997.

³¹ *ST*, 24 July 1996.

³² 'PM: Merger taught Singaporeans the lessons of life', *ST*, 1 August 1990.

With the story and moral in place, the government was ready to disseminate 1963-1965 as history, necessary to instil the sense of distinctiveness between that nation and other ones. In 1996, Lee Kuan Yew aired his ‘musings’ on the possibility that Singapore might re-merge with Malaysia if the latter pursued the same policy of meritocracy as Singapore did, without any race being in a privileged position, and was similarly successful in maximizing economic benefits to its people. The government noted that while both Malaysians and Singaporeans responded negatively to the idea of merger, Malaysians were ‘vehemently’ against it, while the reaction of Singaporeans was only a ‘muted’ one, as they did not know much about the period³³ and were not able to articulate ‘the different fundamental ideals’ distinguishing the two countries: Singapore stood for ‘full and equal opportunity for every citizen to fulfil his potential, regardless of race, language, and religion, honest and transparent rules for both the private and public sector and the fact that no one is above the law’.³⁴ Goh Chok Tong followed up with the scenario that if the Singapore economy failed, the country would have to join Malaysia again.³⁵ Previously deemed too sensitive to talk about, the riots of July and September 1964 following the heightened racialisation of politics during the general elections of September 1963 were featured as having ‘so strained’ Malay-Chinese race relations that Malaysian prime minister Tengku Abdul Rahman decided that Singapore had to be separated from the Federation if bloodshed was to be avoided.³⁶ Race became the primordial fault-line in Singapore as a nation. Since the 1998 arrests of the ‘Marxist conspirators’, the Internal Security Act has been invoked mostly against those charged with religious extremism and terrorism, part of the global tensions which the government attributes to ‘fundamentalist Islamic extremism’.

RACING TOWARDS THE INEVITABLE

Racial consciousness has become an ontological fact of being Singaporean, if not of being human. Goh Chok Tong pronounced in the stative present tense, denoting that which is true for all time, that ‘We all want to be Singaporeans but to be very frank, in the end, it’s race

³³ Chua Lee Hoong, ‘Never too late for Singaporeans to learn about country’s past’, *ST*, 10 August 1996.

³⁴ BG Lee Hsien Loong’s speech to NUS students, *ST*, 18 July 1996.

³⁵ ‘Re-merger issue not intended to provoke our neighbour, says PM’, *Business Times* (Singapore), 9 September 1996. . While Lee’s remarks brought forth protests on the part of the Malaysian authorities who took them to be a criticism of the country’s system of government, Goh’s were seen as using Malaysia as a bogey to scare Singaporeans from being complacent over economic growth.

³⁶ *ST*, 22 July 1996.

and religion which will be stronger than nationality.³⁷ Such an admission of the limits to Singapore's nation-building efforts could well be read as a startlingly honest confession of failure on the part of the regime which holds racial harmony as its distinctiveness, but it was in fact a basis for the argument for having a strong government to hold the fissiparous racial divisions in check. Singaporeans have been told by a government minister that in 1999, when for the first time in its history a Singaporean leader's picture was put on the currency notes, that not everyone was pleased that Yusof Ishak, the first president, was selected. 'A few Chinese Singaporeans were not happy that a Malay face should be on our dollar. On the other hand, a Malay grassroots leader asked why Yusof Ishak was not shown wearing his *songkok*.³⁸ The moral of this vignette is that 'it is important that Yusof Ishak should be presented as a national leader and not only as a leader of the Malay community, wearing a suit and tie, not *baju kurong* and *songkok*.³⁹ Such innate jealousy over racial pre-eminence thus can only be managed at best, not overcome or dissolved. Lee Kuan Yew himself admitted to having reached the limits of using persuasion to achieve a multicultural Singapore, for 'the rate of intermingling and acceptance is faster among certain groups than others, pointing specifically to the Malay community as having come to be 'centred on a mosque more than the other social centres we have built.'⁴⁰ The issues were not simply symbolic ones, or related to religion. A government minister, in calling for greater racial interaction as a buffer against tensions, saw it fit to admonish those who had the impression that some communities sought financial help more frequently than others. He also stated that race should not be linked to socio-economic class, and that people should not 'ask their Malay grassroots leader to explain why it is that Malays are coming for help. These are fellow Singaporeans coming for help, so we do our best (to help them)'.⁴¹

The identification of Singaporeans along racial lines and the frailty of their coexistence as elaborated in official discourses have become a self-validating wisdom, and particularly heightened in 2001 following the 11 September suicide crashing of planes into New York's Twin Towers by Al-Queda terrorists. In 2002, 13 members of the Jemaah Islamiah in

³⁷ 'SAP schools are here to stay', *ST Weekly*, 9 February 2002.

³⁸ Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo, 'Highlight how Malays contributed to the nation', *ST*, 1 August 2002.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ST*, 2 July 2005.

⁴¹ 'Racial Differences: a reality we must acknowledge', says PM Lee, *Today*, 11 February 2006.

Singapore were arrested on the discovery of a bomb plot. The deputy prime minister suggested that if a bomb went off and if ‘radicalised Muslim Singaporeans’ were found to be responsible, distrust between the races would result, and that ‘there would be serious misunderstandings and distrust among the communities. There would be hate crimes against the Muslim community’.⁴² In line with this prognostication, a spokesman for the Singapore Buddhist Federation recalled in the press how the 1964 racial riots drove him to fight against a Malay friend: ‘We used to play football together. Then the riots happened. He charged at us, we charged at them.’ He went on to say that even at the present, interracial ties were often superficial, for ‘it’s very rare to have truly good friends from other racial groups. Do we really understand them?’

Malay community leaders on the other hand maintained that race relations had improved since the 1960s, for ‘we have done a lot more to promote understanding between the races’, and that ‘so many of us have been good neighbours for so long, the trust is there.’⁴³ Nevertheless, a Malay grassroots leader surmised that if the scenario noted above was to come to pass, resentment and suspicion towards Muslims would increase even if there were no hate crimes. He called for deeper interaction between communities, but also for more sensitivity to ‘minority communities’, citing the instance of Mandarin spoken at meetings even when Malays in attendance did not understand the language.⁴⁴

A plethora of initiatives was taken to generate greater interaction between the races. In 2002, Inter-Religious Confidence Circles were formed, comprising community, business and religious leaders ‘to provide a platform for confidence-building between different communities; Harmony Circles were drawn up for schools, workplaces and other local organizations. A Community Engagement Programme was announced in the wake of the Madrid and London bombings of 2004 and 2005 respectively ‘to forge a network of people from different races who will understand and trust each other and act as a buffer against racial tension, in case of terror strikes’.⁴⁵ A national security advertising campaign was drawn up,

⁴² Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, addressing the 20th anniversary of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. ‘Bomb blast here could put racial ties to the test’, *ST*, 17 December 2005.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

with ‘public ambassadors’ renowned in their own fields—from the media and sports to the arts and business—with a standing ‘separate from the Government’ to ‘voice public messages of resilience, of community bonding, or social harmony’, for which ‘a reputable market research or polling company to identify the candidates for public ambassadors’ was being sought, which was also to mount at least four focus group discussions on the candidates, with at least one discussion in each language.⁴⁶

The mother-tongue policy in schools was put in place in 1987, with all local schools being English-medium, and the ‘mother tongue’, defined according to the official racial categories, as a compulsory school subject.⁴⁷ Thus those who fell under the category of ‘Chinese’ had to learn Mandarin in school as the ‘mother tongue’, even if their household language was a Chinese dialect, Malay or English. This ‘mother-tongue’ school policy was the mainstay of the government’s claim to championing multiculturalism, observable through ‘cultural activities’ that are officially sanctioned, but organised by the racial groups themselves.⁴⁸ Beyond the sphere that is defined as culture, language is unmoored from race, and is purely instrumental. Hence, in 2005 when the Singapore leadership realized the importance of their being able to communicate with Malaysians and Indonesians, Lee Kuan Yew decided that Singapore should have a core group of 10-15 per cent non-Malays who can speak Malay fluently, to develop its links with countries in the region as one means of maintaining the country’s competitive edge. Key officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Singapore Armed Forces, the police and several other agencies were identified as needing to have competence in Bahasa Indonesia. At Chinese High, an elite boys’ school which taught English and Mandarin at first language level, students taking Malay as a third language of study got a chance to accompany Members of Parliament during their visits to public housing estates where Malay is used to communicate with Malay-speaking households.⁴⁹ To the

⁴⁶ ‘8 public envoys to beef up social harmony’, *ST* 22 May 2006.

⁴⁷ Malay-medium schools had all closed by 1976, while Tamil-medium ones suffered the same fate by 1982. Only Chinese-medium schools were still in operation before 1987, but their enrolment was less than 1 percent of all primary one enrolments. Nirmala Sreeram Purushotham, *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), p. 71.

⁴⁸ ‘Racial Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen’, in *Southeast Asian identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 34-5.

⁴⁹ ‘Learning Malay back on the agenda’, *ST*, 31 March 2005. Malay is the national language of Singapore, and one of the four official languages. It was promoted particularly between 1959, when the island attained internal self-government, and separation from Malaysia in 1965. During that period, bazaar Malay was the

question raised by a Malay businessman as to why the government saw the need to nurture such a group instead of helping more Malays to become professionals the reply was that the government ‘would also like to see more Malays become more involved in the region.’⁵⁰

The stative present, denoting what is true of all time and the habitual present, indicating an action currently going on, or a state currently existing, are blurred when employed with reference to race in Singapore history. It is taken as the fundamental reality that defines human beings, and hence the analytical structure that governs societies, in particular those that are racially heterogeneous. ‘Race’ is thus conceived of as being timeless, unchanging, inevitable and ahistorical. At best the divisions that it constitutes are managed; at worst the friction so caused ignites into racial conflagration, as happened in Singapore in 1964 between the Malays and Chinese. If racial tensions persist therefore, they are simply the outcome of the very nature of the demographic composition of the society. Each Singaporean is thus by definition a time bomb.⁵¹

The Malays, proportionately the least represented in the middle and upper middle classes and who have claims to indigenous status have ironically come to be most vulnerable to being identified with a ‘foreign’ motherland post-1965, just as the Chinese and Indian migrants to Singapore had been in earlier periods of history. Recognition of Singapore as part of a vibrant Malay world before the colonial period was regarded as dangerous admission of arguments for special privileges for the race based on indigeneity, as in Malaysia. Hence the pre-colonial period in Singapore history is relegated to the ‘past without effect on the present’. Singapore’s leaders valorised its colonial history positively, and saw the arrival of Stamford Raffles, servant of the East India Company, in 1819 as birth-time of modern Singapore, equalising the positions of the racial groups. The immediate pre-Raffles past is thus clearly written in the past perfect tense: ‘Singapore had been a Malay fishing village’, and would have remained one had it not been for its ‘founding’ by the British. Poet Alfian Sa’at, while disavowing any sympathy for nativism and special privileges, in delineating the contours of

everyday language of communication between people of different racial groups who did not speak English. By the 1980s, National Language was dropped from the school curriculum.

⁵⁰ ‘More non-Malay students studying Malay—but still not enough’, *ST*, 20 February 2005.

⁵¹ This imagery was used by the Deputy Prime Minister during the campaigns in the 2006 general elections to criticize an opposition party’s platform of abolishing racial quotas in the allocating of public housing, and dropping the Group Representation Constituency, large electoral constituencies represented by a team rather than by single members, and which have to be comprised of a designated number of Malay and/or Indian candidates. *ST*, 24 January 2006.

the discursive violence done to the Malay past and present has framed their entrapment in the past perfect tense in his memorable line: ‘if you want to live on this island, you must surrender all memory of having once been a prince’.⁵²

As with their Malay counterparts, Indian Singaporeans too had some of their own members detained on suspicion of terrorism in 2002. In fact, the leading figure in the group was an Indian Muslim Singaporean, ‘who looked like a neighbourhood prata man’, as the *ST* pointedly put it.⁵³ Non-Muslim Indians, especially those in the older age groups reportedly reacted to the arrests with ‘studied silence’, it was reported, most likely since the older members of the community felt that while they did a lot to support Singapore’s fight for independence, they had subsequently been sidelined.⁵⁴ However, the dynamics of the official discourse on Indians was to take a turn. By 2005, Singapore’s leaders were extolling India’s emergence as a major economic and geopolitical power. In line with this, Indian Singaporeans were urged to help Singapore to tap into the world’s second-most populous nation: ‘Just as our Chinese businessmen enjoy special *guanxi* in China, our Indians too have special knowledge, understanding of local culture, and family and business connections with India.’ Goh Chok Tong went on to give the community a glowing testimony: ‘you have distinguished yourselves in diverse fields like politics, medicine, law, education, business and other professions. You have done well not just at the very top. ...The entire community has also played an important role in Singapore’s development and nation-building. Your achievements are a testament to the two core principles fundamental to Singapore—meritocracy and multi-racialism’.⁵⁵ Indeed, so enormous was the potential of India’s economic liberalisation to Singapore that Singapore’s leaders harkened back to the 11th and 12th centuries, the golden age of the classical Indianised states of Southeast Asia, when they constructed their greatest monuments, just as Admiral Cheng Ho’s epic expeditions established trade and tribute, making a profound impact on the region’s development.⁵⁶

⁵² Alfian Sa’at, ‘Racist Apology’, *Tangent*, Number 5, October 2002, p. 218.

⁵³ ‘ISA arrests: the morning after and the aftershocks’, *ST*, 2 February 2002.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ ‘Build bridges with India, SM tells Indians here’, *ST*, 3 April 2005.

⁵⁶ Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, ‘Two civilisations meet again in S-E Asia’, *ST*, 17 December 2005.

As a minority immigrant group, the Indians in Singapore could by their economic success, otherwise largely associated with the majority Chinese, validate the state's claim to practising meritocracy and multiracialism. With the shift from communism to communalism as the core problem which the discourse on national history is written to contain, the Chinese in Singapore, homogenised and sanitised of competing or differential identities other than racial, are thus the ones who hold the fate of multicultural Singapore in their hands by their grace in restraining their democratic majoritarian rights. Prime Minister Lee himself reminded Singaporeans that:

As the majority community in Singapore, the Chinese play an important role in promoting and protecting harmonious community relations. The Chinese community should reach out to the other ethnic communities, bring everyone closer, and make the minority communities feel comfortable and at ease. Chinese Singaporeans have to make sure the minorities never feel overwhelmed by race.⁵⁷

So it was that in late 2006 at a community-level event for Singaporeans to celebrate Hari Raya, where a Member of Parliament was guest-of-honour, apparently the whole event, including community singing was conducted in Mandarin-Chinese and dialects.⁵⁸ This arrangement can be read as the Chinese reaching out to other ethnic communities as the prime minister has urged, but non-Chinese Singaporeans did not necessarily see it this way. In fact one of them wrote to the press to point that that they had been snubbed.

QUINTESSENTIALLY SINGAPORE: ESSENTIALLY CHINESE

The historical complexities of the Chinese migrant communities riven with dialect, ideological and class differentiation and competition have been dissolved into an essentialised ancestry of model citizenry. Whereas Nanyang University, founded and funded by the Chinese community in 1955 as the only Chinese-medium university in Southeast Asia

⁵⁷ 'PM upbeat on economy, but wants to step up racial ties', *ST*, 28 January 2006. The Prime Minister went on to urge Chinese Singaporeans then celebrating Chinese New Year to make an extra effort to involve their non-Chinese friends and neighbours in the festive celebrations.

⁵⁸ Lionel de Souza, "It's 'Hari Raya and block party' but everything is done in Chinese", On-line *ST* forum, 15 December 2006.

was a hotbed of radical anticolonialism which was suppressed by the PAP government, at its 50th anniversary, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke of the period in terms not of turbulence and rupture but of anodyne continuity:

The early Nantah students were keenly aware that they had benefited from the generosity of the society. They knew that had Nantah not been set up, most of them would have had no opportunity to pursue university education. They were grateful and wanted to live up to expectations of the community. Many saw themselves as Chinese intellectuals, whose tradition included a strong sense of mission to contribute to and better society. They followed closely what happened outside of the university and became actively involved in the process and politics of building our young nation... Whichever side they were on at that the time, they represented the finest spirits of their age, and Nantah epitomised what they were striving for... The Nantah spirit remains as relevant as ever. We should keep its flame alive, and nurture a strong sense of community and mutual support, not just in NTU, but also in our other local universities...and indeed in our society at large.⁵⁹

The seamless rendering of Nanyang University's radical history into one of admirable conformity to cultural and social norms is a complex move, coming as it does from the very same political party that had branded and arrested its student activists in the 1950s and 1960s as communist subversives. While it can possibly be seen as the government finally recognising that the radicals were a legitimate political force, in fact it potentially undercuts the critical edge and revisionist purpose of those historians dedicated to documenting precisely this assertion. The glaring absence of admission that the speech was an overturning of a tenaciously held government line which justified the traumatic dislocation of lives of individuals who had been demonised, detained and silenced compounds the weight of state power that has been brought to bear on them.

⁵⁹ 'The Nantah spirit remains as relevant as ever', *ST*, 2 September 2005.

The appropriation of the Nantah myth is part of the process of scripting the idealised immigrant and radical Chinese past, tugging it into the present perfect tense: completed action with results lasting into the present. Continuity links the present and that past; it is to be extolled and emulated as the national exemplar. The Chinese have become ur-Singaporeans; to be Singaporean, one has to be like the Chinese. The state's profession of multi-culturalism notwithstanding, Harvard professor Tu Wei-ming, of Taiwan origin and invited to Singapore as a consultant on Confucian values in 1982, put Singapore firmly in his grouping of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong as the symbolic universe of societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. He unproblematically conflated the two terms in the case of Singapore, claiming that the life orientation of each of these societies is based in Chinese culture, that is, they fully participate in the economic, political, and social life of a Chinese community or civilisation.⁶⁰

Certainly the sinicisation of the Singapore landscape has become a matter of course, the remedying of defect. Lee Kuan Yew on a trip to China praised Singaporeans enrolled in Beijing University, especially those who planned to return to Singapore to teach and help raise the standard of Mandarin Chinese. A Member of Parliament accompanying him remarked that the country needed a more 'natural environment' for Singaporeans to improve their Chinese (sic: Mandarin Chinese): 'If you go out to the shops and streets and you see and hear Chinese, you learn faster. We need more use of Chinese in the media and more street signs in Chinese'.⁶¹

The tangled web in which naturalising Mandarin Chinese in Singapore's multi-layered language setting is caught is well-exemplified by a vignette that captures the everyday complexities of language use, and that could happen only in Singapore. It involves the Chinese translation of the proposed Bayfront Mass Rapid Transit station. The Land Transport Authority had tossed up the name 'Bei Fu Lan', a phonetic transliteration of the English name, and which does not have any meaning. In letters that *ST* deemed as 'heartfelt, emotion-charged', the local Chinese press protested that such routine 'carelessness' betrayed the lack of respect for the language on the part of the monolingual English-educated (Chinese), and

⁶⁰ Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center', in "The living tree: The changing meaning of being Chinese today," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 120, no.2, Spring 1991.

⁶¹ 'China's rise 'will renew' interest in Chinese here' *ST*, 12 May 2006.

that inappropriate translations would make Singapore a laughing stock, especially as the proposed station is located in a tourist area. They called for a review of Chinese versions of other street names as well.

The Transport Authority then adopted the suggestion of a veteran translator to call the station ‘Hai Wan Fang’ in Chinese, literally ‘small boats bay’ to the satisfaction to those who raised concerns about the issue.⁶² However, settling for meaning over sound in turn betrays a carelessness in the context of multilingual Singapore, where not everyone is Mandarin-speaking, and monolingual Chinese speakers saying “Hai Wan Fang” for Bayfront would not be able to make sense to non-Chinese Singaporeans. This discussion on the question of translation took place exclusively in the Chinese press. Conceivably Malay and Indian Singaporeans would also have grounds for calling for a translation of the meaning of ‘Bayfront’ into Malay and Tamil, which would further break communication between Singaporeans who use different languages. The victory of the Chinese-language press on the issue marks clearly the restructured position of Chineseness in Singapore, though the Chinese language and culture lobby seems to be oblivious to this. The injustices of the past to which they allude and seek amends for is only permissible in the present, when it is they who are the model citizenry.

PRESENTING THE PAST

This essay has argued that contrary to the commonsensical understanding even on the part of historians, history is not necessarily articulated in the past tense. However it is not the first to make such a claim even where Singapore history is concerned. Such an insight has actually already been made by a popular history text on Singapore written to accompany the National Education exhibition. A note which introduces the book explains why it was written in the present tense:

⁶² “What’s in a name? Plenty, if it’s Bayfront”, *ST*, 14 July 2005. The translation “small boats bay” was provided by the *ST*.

Why is this ‘history’ in the present tense? Because history is never about what’s dead and gone. We are the products of history. The present tense conveys the immediacy and brings the reader back to the events of the time. It also gets the reader thinking about which parts of these realities are still with us today. Besides, everybody writes historical events in the past tense. Let’s try something different.⁶³

Arguably, it is popularised histories such as the above-cited volume, commissioned by a government agency, which is the most cognisant of the implications of the tenses that structure a historical narrative. Overtly dispensing lessons from the past for Singaporeans, it uses the present tense throughout— appropriately, for these ‘lessons’ are not so much derived from the past as in search of a past that would endow them with validity born of experience and specificity. The journey into nationhood, touted as one of self-discovery, is really one of concealment – one constituted by the subterranean shifts in the forms of the tenses used to structure it. The tensions in Singapore’s past begin and end in-tensely in the present political configuration.

⁶³ ‘A Note on the Text’, *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood* (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Board; Landmark Books, 1998). The first draft of the text was by freelance writer Lee Geok Boi.