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## De-mastering Historical Narrative in Robert Yeo's *The Eye of History*

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### and Kee Thuan Chye's *We Could \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch*

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*The master narratives of History—the offspring of a marriage between colonial modes of control and the Enlightenment view of the inevitable progress of mankind—are included in the major targets of the kind of postmodern thought expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard who is highly suspicious of any comprehensive system of thought, Carlingian, Hegelian, Marxist, or otherwise. Postcolonial thinking, though divided in all sorts of ways, is relatively unified in agreement with Lyotard's stance. It also calls for the recognition of the open-ended use of historiographical terminology. Such words as "Europe" and "the East" are, after all "hyperreal terms" that "refer to figures of the imagination whose geographical [and historical] referents remain somewhat indeterminate" (Chakrabarty, 1996, p. 233). This paper examines the work of two Southeast Asian dramatists who make their own kind of indeterminate history. Both Robert Yeo in Singapore (*The Eye of History*, 1992) and Kee Thuan Chye in Malaysia (*We Could \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch*, 1994) undercut history as master narrative, both in the colonial and postcolonial senses. They also subscribe to the postmodern notion that in history, as in other expressive arts, medium is the message and that any kind of seemingly authoritative voice ought not to go unquestioned.*

Influential Postcolonial theorist Spivak (1995) argues that, common sense aside, you can change the past. Her cause, according to Parry (1995), is to invent an "alternative narrative of colonialism" which includes a deconstructive "upheaval of texts ... directed at challenging the authority of the received historical record and restoring the effaced signs of native consciousness.... Her account ... disposes of the old story by dispersing the fixed unitary categories on which this depended" (p. 38). Yeo and Kee join her and Jean-Francois Lyotard, distrusting all metanarratives in history or in dialectics. Their joint project is to undermine what has been accepted as history, to recreate it, and to show that in the presentation of "truth" and "fact" the medium is the message. Yeo and Kee are able, as witting or unwitting followers of Lyotard, to provide a "flexibility of narrative knowledge—in which the aesthetic, cognitive and moral are interwoven" (Sarup, 1989, pp. 132–3). Being Singaporean and Malaysian, the two playwrights have an additional task: at the same time as deflating colonial historical centrality and the grand narratives that have served it, they must also question the metanarratives expounded by their own largely benign but controlling postcolonial governments.

Yeo's *The Eye of History* (1992) and Kee's *We Could \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch* (1994) are both historical fantasies drawing from historical "certainties" which they undercut, devalue, deconstruct. Both plays ultimately present the idea that history is as much fiction as fact, and that as it is presented, can hide more than it reveals. In a *Sunday Times* interview with Joanna Abishegam (1994) Kee makes his stance clear: "We are all recipients of manipulated truth...." But lest the audience feels the play is simply going to highlight the errors of official colonial history, he goes on to add

the inevitability of individual and collective collusion, in that we “are manipulators ourselves.” When both plays select a major colonial historical figure on which to base their action, the dramatists are as interested in deconstructing history at the same time as presenting it. They are also interested in the collusion of the audience in their historical reinvention, so they undercut traditional modes of presentation in an effort to shake the audience out of a state of passive observation.

### A Simple Colonial Story

*We Could \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch*, staged twice in 1994, bases its action on the 1875 death of the first British Resident appointed to Malaya. The assignment of J. W. W. Birch to Perak by the Governor of the Straits Settlements was, it almost goes without saying, to ensure that local sultans, ministers, and chiefs acted only in the best interests of the British Empire. This was more difficult than it first appeared. Perak, which possessed one of the most productive tin mines in the world, was troubled by internal dissent: economic and political schisms threatened the stability of the whole region. Rival Chinese secret societies (the Ghee Hin and Hai San) fought for legitimate and illegitimate control of the tin and related industries. While the Chinese were warring over control of production and commerce, the Malay chiefs were engaged in a political crisis of succession. Raja Ismail was unexpectedly selected to be the new Sultan on the death of Sultan Ali of Perak in 1871. The expected successor, Raja Abdullah, asked the British to intervene both in the Chinese tin wars and in the political crisis. The resultant Pangkor Treaty of 1874, negotiated by Governor Sir Andrew Clarke, was really the first major signal that the British were serious about control of the Malay states. The Treaty installed Abdullah as Sultan gave the British Resident strong “advisory” powers, which were more coercive than consultative and severely limited the influence of the Mentri (the Chief Minister who appointed Raja Ismail in the first instance). This is the background to the play, but after the first few moments the audience is alerted to the fact that the play is going to do something other than tell a simple colonial story.

The play begins in darkness with a voice-over retelling the bare bones of the above narrative, which is well-known historical fact. Just as the audience hears that not all the chiefs attended the conference in Pangkor (presumably some of those who supported Ismail did not attend) the equipment falters and the narrative ceases. The following are stage directions from the script. The taped message

gets wonky and dies out. Long silence, as if there is a technical hitch and the lights are not coming on. Then just as the audience are getting anxious [Kee is an expert at making his audience uneasy], the stage lights suddenly come on to reveal the ACTORS PLAYING SIR ANDREW CLARKE, SULTAN ABDULLAH, TAN KIN CHENG and AN ENSEMBLE OF CHIEFS INCLUDING THE MANTRI, all dressed in period costume. The actors are caught unawares. At this point music should start up but it doesn't. Everybody is waiting for everybody else to make the first move. One actor gestures to another. Finally, ACTOR PLAYING SIR ANDREW CLARKE shouts, “Music please.” The music, ‘Rule Britannia’, comes on. But it's too loud. (Kee, 1994, pp. 27–8)

History is first presented in *Birch* as chaos, disintegration—a poor, inefficient simulacrum of the “real” thing. This sets the mood for the whole play, which repeatedly moves in and out of time past and present and in and out of the conventions of dramatic illusion. Furthermore, the actors themselves will move in and out of character. The audience is never allowed to relax into a conventional suspension of disbelief, nor allowed to become passive observers of their own supposedly well-known history.

### A Humorous Tribute?

Yeo, in *The Eye of History*, also bases his play on foundational history as he conjures on to the stage the two giants of colonial and postcolonial Singapore, the so-called founder of Singapore, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, and his modern counterpart Lee Kuan Yew. Yeo sets the play in 1981 when the now Minister Mentor was the incumbent Prime Minister. 1981 also marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Raffles' birth. While it is essential for Kee's vision that the actors drop character: it is essential in Yeo that they don't. The postmodern, postcolonial intentions of his play and Kee's are similar—the questioning of historical truth with a simultaneous recreation of it—but the style of presentation is as disparate as is the overall tone. While Yeo lulls his audience into his humorous and whimsical world where time and place are reinvented, Kee gives his audience a good shake down with his bold, aggressive drama. He is not quite as openly didactic in *Birch* as he is in his Orwellian *1984 Here and Now*, which protests against Malaysian racist legislation, self-censorship, the Internal Security Act, and double standards (see Watt, 2001 for a description of the drama as a protest play). The sheer audacity of his approach, what the reviewer in *The New Straits Times* called the play's "powerful multi-dimensional discourse," keeps the audience wriggling in their seats. While Kee almost assaults his audience's expectations, Yeo knowingly seduces them into his theatrical fantasy.

Although Yeo's play ostensibly purports to be just good fun, this paper will argue that it is far more than that. Performed only once in 1992 and still to be published in its own right, *The Eye of History* opens with a singular disclaimer: "This play is intended as a humourous tribute to two of the principal makers of our history. It does not aim to denigrate anyone, historical or otherwise" (p. ii). William Peterson (2001) takes Yeo at his word:

In spite of the inherent risk in staging a living icon such as Lee, there can be little doubt that Yeo's play constitutes no threat to the current regime, valorizing, as it does, the great foundational myths of colonial and postcolonial Singapore. (p. 74)

Several points can be made about Yeo's disclaimer, and Peterson's seemingly outward acceptance of the spirit in which it is offered. What is the "inherent risk" alluded to by Peterson? Does he imply possible censure from the government and/or even imprisonment under the Internal Security Act? And from Yeo's perspective why write the disclaimer at all? If anyone was going to take offence at the presentation of the great man on the local stage, a disclaimer is not going to change that kind of objection. In Yeo's disclaimer we have a clue to the method he is going to employ throughout the play. Before the play begins, Lee Kuan Yew is reduced from "living icon" to nomination as "otherwise," hardly within the spirit of the lexicon of valorization Peterson sees as characteristic of the play. Just as Kee starts his play with a signal of deconstructive intention, Yeo forewarns that in humanizing great men he is going to revise how the audience views them.

Of course Yeo has to be careful when he puts a representation of Lee on stage: when he tried to mount a production of the politically sensitive *One Year Back Home* a decade or so before *The Eye of History*, the normal two week licensing procedure took 18 months (Watt, 2001; Yeo, 1990, 2001). Like Kee's *1984 Here and Now*, *One Year Back Home* demanded the right to discuss the controversial Internal Security Act and politics *per se*, something the long-serving parties in power in Singapore and Malaysia have insisted should only be the concern of elected members of parliament. The Controller of Undesirable Publications objected, among other things, to the fact that Lee Kuan Yew was named in the text of *One Year Back Home* and that performance would not be possible unless the name was removed. An alternative reading of *The Eye of History* to Peterson's

suggests that what Yeo is doing is seducing his audience into a seemingly non-confrontational text, while at the same time presenting, as comedy can, many powerful ideas, including criticism of the People's Action Party which had been under Lee's strong leadership since 1959. Yeo laces the phrase "principal makers of our history," which also comes from his disclaimer, with fine irony: what sort of "making" will the audience behold? Does Yeo "make" another kind of history by metaphorically knocking Raffles off his perch, and, by implication, doing the same thing to Lee? As in *Birch*, Yeo uses other characters he includes to question and undermine the veracity of a well-accepted and authoritative narrative. It is the contention of this paper that the play only pretends to be an encomium to both icons.

Playing as crucial a role in *The Eye of History* as the two great men, is another figure in the form of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir. The central section of the play, when Lee meets Raffles, was initially a one-act play. Yeo's inclusion of the Malay scholar came several years later when the one-act play was being transformed into a full-length work. Below Yeo is talking to Ronald Klein (2001). When revising the play

I created the character that I have been interested in for a long time, Munshi Abdullah. Historically speaking, he is very important because he was one of Raffles' Malay scribes. He wrote a book which is recognized as a Malay classic of the last century called *Hikayat Abdullah*.

I wanted to update a picture of him, so make him comment on a fantasy meeting between Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Sir Thomas Raffles in which Raffles stepped down from his statue in order to talk to Lee Kuan Yew. (p. 145)

In this way Yeo introduces a second kind of history maker, the observer and recorder. In a real sense both playwrights themselves become the third kind of makers of history as they reshape stories that previously have been presented as fact.

One of the strains of postmodern thought is its promise to deliver "the *possibility* of knowing differently" (Gandhi, 1998, p. 41) from the masterful epistemological narratives that come through Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx. This possibility of knowing differently in *Eye* and *Birch* comes through a constant undermining of historical authority which features in both plays. The first step in the process of "knowing differently" is, naturally, making the audience uneasy with orthodox views which they have inherited and accepted with little thought.

### History and Fiction

Kee refuses to allow the audience the perception of one Mr. Birch. There are several different Birches in this play. He is the political pragmatist who knows everything he does is in the interests of the Crown, and that if the natives benefit that is a happy coincidence. He is the idealistic man of vision who tries to bring law and order to a decadent and fragmented state. He is the altruist who wishes to eradicate the tradition of debtor enslavement. If a man could not pay back a loan he and his family became slaves to the lender until they could pay the debt back, which was often never. Another Birch is the usurper of local traditions and the catalyst for disintegration of the old ways. He rescues one of the slaves, Kuntum, from having to provide sexual favors to her master, then seduces her himself. He saves her from the violence of an enraged and sexually frustrated master, then beats her himself when she informs a third party of their sexual intercourse. All of this historical and ethical uncertainty makes his character hard to pin down for the audience. Each Birch "tale" presents the possibility of a different man. Furthermore, the actor playing Birch also moves in and out of character, rendering him as little more than a set of contradictory constructs.

Kee intersperses short, seemingly naturalistic representations of historical events with

discussions about them by the actors who drop character. In one such scene Sir Andrew Clarke has been debating the right of succession with the Mantri, who still insists that Raja Abdullah is not fit to govern, though his argument is impotent in the face of growing British hegemony. The narrative flow is disrupted by the actor playing Mantri who, after a conventional dramatic exit, returns to ask, “Wait a minute. Is this how it really happened in history?” The other actors on stage also drop out of character to ponder the problem. The question is too much for the actor playing Clarke (or he could be seen as the actor playing the actor playing Clarke) who eschews participation in the theoretical discussion: “Excuse me I have to go and prepare for my next role.” The remaining actors muse on the elusiveness of historical truth, but they do so quoting primary sources written by Birch’s contemporaries:

Actor/M: What about historical truth, Mano?

Actor/S: Truth depends on who is telling the history and what he is trying to get across, who his audience are. History can even be manipulated to convey opposing truths. You can screw around with history laa.

Actor/M: So how do we tell what is the real truth?

Actor/S: Now, you know of course that the man sent to be British Resident of Perak was James W. W. Birch.

Actor/M: Yes that is historically true.

Actor/S: Listen to what his colleague Frank Swettenham wrote about him. (*He produces a book and reads from it*) “In Mr Birch the British Government has lost one of its most courageous, able, and zealous officers.” Is this the absolute truth? How about this? (*He produces another book*) Written by his successor, Sir Hugh Low: “Mr Birch was violent, drank, and did some high-handed things.” Mmm, is this true too?

(*ACTOR/S shrugs, throws the book away and exits, followed by ACTOR/M...*) (pp. 30–1)

The act of throwing away the history book is both symbolic and actual and it is typical of the comedy Kee employs at key moments in the action. In his informative introduction to the published script of *Birch*, Yeo sees the strength of Kee’s dialectic lying in its arrangement and rearrangement of perspectives which determine mutually exclusive meanings. Yeo (1995) comments on the extract above:

This extract makes evident what I mean about the medium being the message. The message, clearly, is that “History is fiction” and that the actor who says it questions the character he is playing—the Sultan. By stepping out of character he technically reinforces the notion that history is fiction. The real person subverts the created persona, deconstructs him but in a self-aware manner; at the same time, this scene is itself a construct, a truth.... The abolition of the old theatre of illusion ... frees the critical faculty of the audience and absolves the playwright from being cramped by narrow and rigid conventions that the pretence of presenting real happenings imposes. (p. 17)

Kee goes to great lengths not to give his own representations of history the illusion of authority and completion: he wants to stress the subjectivity of his own history to reveal the level of subjectivity which colors all history. This comment is delivered early in the play:

ACTOR/S: History? What history? We are creating fiction, Yatim. This is fiction. History is fiction. (p. 30)

Towards the middle of the play, the out-of-character actors are reading a contemporary newspaper about current corruption in government. Kee reminds the audience that the modes of corruption and self-serving politics characteristic of the colonial crisis around the death of Birch are also very much part of contemporary Malaysia. The play records a number of notable examples of contemporary governmental misuse of authority at ministerial level, and the misrepresentation of those events in the media. In other words Kee shows how “truth” in contemporary history is corrupted while it is

actually happening:

ACTOR/DS: Ei, Mano, what is that all about?  
 ACTOR/S: History.  
 ACTOR/DS: According to whom?  
 ACTOR/S: The newspapers.  
 ACTOR/DS: Do you believe everything you read in the newspapers?  
 ACTOR/S: Don't you?  
 ACTOR/L: Listen to this Yatim.  
 ACTOR/S: More history. (p. 39)

At this point in the play, Kee notes that the content should be changed to include a current example of the misuse of power by government or other powers that be. Kee draws the audience towards the idea that contemporary reporting of an incident will color it in particular ways in the best interests of the party or parties involved. In one production the actors talked about three newspapers in the late 80s which had their publishing permits withdrawn despite a Cabinet minister's assurance that free speech is a right in a democracy. In the second production, the above was replaced by the discussion of the official cover-up of a sex scandal involving a prominent politician. It is important to Kee that something be included of a contemporary nature, so that the audience can see the corruption of "fact" as it is happening. If truth is hard to find for those contemporary to an incident, how much more elusive is distant historical "truth"?

Towards the end of the play there are at least three occasions when an actor asks a question like "Did that actually happen in history...?" and the answer given is along the lines of "Depends on whose history." Another actor admits with a modicum of shame or reticence that the plot and its arguments are "tampering with history" (p. 59). Kee and Yeo would concur.

### Abdullah's Great Mistake

While Kee stresses that the medium is the message, and plays with the idea of subjective histories, Yeo delineates the limits of historical authority in the presentation of grand narratives which are, in fact, flawed. Half of the first act of *The Eye of History* is problematic for any director since it is made up of monologues which don't fulfill audience expectations for dramatic action. Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (and his translator Hill) are awarded large amounts of time in Act One, for specific thematic reasons.

Of mixed Arabic and Tamil blood, Abdullah was born in Melaka in 1795 and died in what is now Saudi Arabia while on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1852. His claim to fame rests on the variety of original work he produced, his facility with several languages including Arabic, Tamil, Malay, and English, and on the conversational style of his prose which departed from the more lavish formality of classic Malay prose. He is best known for the autobiographical *Hikayat Abdullah*, a rare source on the early history of Singapore, since he was close to Raffles as interpreter and scribe. Yeo's inclusion of this highly respected scholar opens the cracks of uncertainty in the minds of his audience when he reveals errors made in his original text. Munshi Abdullah provides a first-hand account of the settlement of Singapore and the roles played by the founding fathers. If the main aim of *The Eye of History* is the reinvention of Lee and Raffles—the deconstruction and reconstruction of their mythos—why does Yeo spend so much time on Munshi Abdullah? The answer lies in his presentation of the Munshi's mistakes. Yeo can only do what he will with Lee and Raffles after he clears the decks of a view of history as ongoing, authoritative narrative.

Yeo undermines the whole notion of historical authority and certainty by stressing what I have

called Abdullah's Great Mistake (Watt, 2005). Early in his opening monologue the Munshi mentions the limitations of all human knowledge, especially knowledge that purports to support a holistic philosophical system. Much "assumed cleverness" he reminds, in a somewhat overly-humble declaration of his own limitations and weaknesses, "is not the result of learning but an incoherent hotch-potch of information ... picked up all over the place." He takes this generalization about human cleverness to a specific mention of inaccurate presentation of history which can so easily be colored by fictitious invention. Like Kee, he is going to talk about what is happening in present-day Singapore and how contemporary attitudes change the way history is observed: "All this is especially true nowadays. Since Singapore has become a settlement, grasshoppers have become eagles, bed-bugs tortoises and earth-worms serpents." Later in the play this list will be extended to include two very clever but ordinary men who have been presented in an unduly reductive and heroic light. These strange transformations, suggests the Munshi "have their origin in [contemporary] material wealth and position" (Yeo, 1992, pp. 2–3). In Kee's fragmented Malaysia, corruption and self-serving politics also despoil any chance there might be of political or historical heroism—there are only different kinds of materialism and different kinds of abuse of power. Altruists in Kee have no power at all.

Abdullah's first monologue presents the bare bones of the foundation of Singapore, the part played by Raffles, Col. Farquhar who was going to be the first British Resident there, and by the distant Lord Hastings, Governor-General in India. The East India company did not wish to financially support the settlement in such an inauspicious location, so Raffles and Farquhar were given permission to found the settlement only if they met the cost themselves. Abdullah records, incorrectly, that Raffles did not accompany the first landing at Singapore. He writes that he was in Aceh Pidir at the time of the landing and that it was Farquhar who first set foot on the island. If a contemporary observer who was there could make such a fundamental mistake, it calls into question the authority of much orthodox history. Abdullah's Great Mistake on who first landed in Singapore is mentioned two or three times in the play. The first is by the translator of the *Hikayat*, orientalist A. H. Hill, who makes an appearance in Act One to contradict the Munshi. "The truth of the matter" he asserts, "is that Raffles' party, which included Farquhar, had gone to the Karumin Islands and found them unsuitable for the establishment of a port." Later in the day on 28 January 1819, "Raffles landed near the mouth of the Singapore River, on the north bank. Why then does Abdullah assert so positively that Raffles was not there on the first landing...?" (p. 14). The Great Mistake is also brought up by Lee Kuan Yew later in Act Three:

- PM: Parliament House is now located on the north bank of the Singapore River near where Tuan Raffles and Col Farquhar first landed in 1819.
- ABD: Do you mean the house which belonged to Mr Maxwell and which Mr Coleman built for him in 1826–27?
- PM: I believe it is the same house. We've renovated it extensively and Parliament now meets there. But I'm curious that in your autobiography you mention that Col Farquhar and not Tuan Raffles first landed in Singapore. (PM picks up the book to flip to the relevant pages.) Here is what you said, "On arrival he, that is Col Farquhar, went ashore from the ship's landing boat together with the Malacca men whom he had taken with him. He reached the open space on which they have now built the Court and found it covered with myrtle and rhododendron...." (pp. 37–8)

Like Kee, Yeo also quotes from primary sources to show that they can be contradictory and inaccurate, yet they can hold sway for centuries. When Abdullah admits to what he calls his "most grievous mistake" and asserts that he "should have checked his informants," Yeo questions the inviolability of text and the irreversibility of history. If such a mistake can issue from a first-hand

account, what then can be said for third and fourth hand histories? They are different kinds of fiction, different kinds of narrative. Lee assures the injured historian, with a hint of irony from Yeo, that error notwithstanding his is still the best source for events in 1819 and the years which followed. He later repeats his qualified compliment telling the historian that he is “generally accurate.” Lest we take Lee at his word, Yeo includes other errors that are not so quite so grievous:

Abdullah’s unreliability (and more importantly, the kind of authoritative primary source material he represents) is further stressed through Yeo’s inclusion of what might be called Abdullah’s Little Mistakes. Recording six instead of seven, he is wrong about the number of vessels which sailed into Singapore waters on that fateful and happy day in 1819. He “kept separate two components of the voyage from Penang which actually merged before the flotilla reached Singapore.” He is incorrect about who nominated Singapore as a suitable site: “In giving credit to Farquhar, he even says that it was at Farquhar’s suggestion that they look at Singapore Island: this of course, was not so: the suggestion was made by Capt. Daniel Ross. (Watt, 2005, pp. 63–4)

While Yeo plays with the revelation of these errors, the audience enjoys watching authority squirm as expected. Abdullah also shamefacedly admits to pro-British bias in his work, while at the same time criticizing Lee for allowing warped and dull histories to be taught in Singaporean schools. “I myself, in the *Hikayat*, have been guilty of admiring the British more than I should, but at least my book was written by one person with strong convictions. And I was lucky enough to have been present at historic times.” The audience has already seen that that is no guarantee of “truthful” reporting. After he admits to his British bias, he excuses himself by admitting to those other shapers of historical truth—“strong convictions” (p. 42). He then goes on the offensive, alleging that all biographies of Lee have been unreliable because they have been written either with a pro or an anti sentiment, in other words from the perspective of “strong convictions.” There are obviously strong convictions and strong convictions:

ABD: ... I have also been reading books about you, Perdana Mentri, by Mr Josey and Mr George.  
 PM: Have you? And what do you think of them?  
 ABD: There is a Malay saying, “Sometimes the prahu goes best when there is no wind.”  
 PM: Am I to understand you to mean the both Josey and George could be more objective?  
 ABD: How well you read my proverb. You will agree that biographies of you have been written by friend and foe. One is anxious to explain and justify what you do and the other to condemn it. This does not make for good writing. (p. 44)

Once again, as with Kee, histories being written at the time of the play’s production are presented as flawed and lacking in authority. As the curtain drops on this scene, we are left with the comic suggestion Abdullah gives to the PM that he should be commissioned to write the definitive biography of the Prime Minister at some future date. That, he suggests with some measure of dramatic irony, would ensure unbiased, accurate recording.

### Hidden Histories

While both Yeo and Kee undermine the notion of historical certainty, their plays are also interested in the idea of hidden histories, though in quite different ways and for quite different reasons. By its very nature a historical account is selective, and grand narratives can hide as much as they reveal. In *We Can \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch* Kee uses his main female characters to stand for previously silent individuals who played a part in a history that never acknowledged them, never gave them a voice.

Kee’s approach to hidden history is through the inclusion of two women who have never previously figured in the Birch story. The first is Kuntum the wife of debtor slave Siputum, and

as such is the lowest of the low in the household of Datuk Sagor. The second is Mastura, the questioning but dutiful daughter of Maharaja Lela, one of the leaders of the plot to assassinate Birch, later hanged for the offense. Feminist scholars remind us that to be female and native is to be the ultimate other on the fringes of the colonial margin: women are doubly colonized by the imperial force and by their own culture, both of which disallow voice. Kee gives Mastura a relatively modern feminist perspective when she, in the gentlest possible way, questions her father. She asks him why she cannot explore the world like men do and discover new horizons:

MASTURA: ... Why am I not allowed to do the same?

LELA: Have you heard of other girls in this village doing that kind of thing?

MASTURA: Can that be reason enough for me to live like a frog under a coconut shell? Is it to be my lot in life to know so little of the world? How can I find fulfillment if I live in a well and yet am aware that the sky I see is wide and full of wonders that I will never experience?

LELA: You will fulfill yourself by fulfilling your husband.

MASTURA: But how can I fulfill my husband if I do not first fulfill myself? (p. 33)

The Maharaja finds himself caught between his desire to indulge his daughter and the irksome habit she has of voicing her concerns, knowing that silence is the most desirable trait in a woman: "I do not hear your mother complaining all these years we have been together." As the play approaches its climax, Lela becomes increasingly concerned over his daughter's demanding a voice both for herself and for the runaway slaves (including Kuntum):

MASTURA: In why must some men have masters? In the eyes of God, are we not all equal?

LELA: Mastura, your speech is too direct. That is not what we are used to.

MASTURA: Would not a slave seek to be equal and escape to a life of freedom?

LELA: Enough of this foolish talk!

MASTURA: If they run away, must they be tracked down like animals?

LELA: (*slaps her*) Enough! I did not bring you up so you can talk back to me! (pp. 60–1)

Mastura, one of Kee's major voices from the realm of hidden history, is a somewhat idealistic and almost sentimental character whose inclusion in the play is somewhat puzzling. Unlike other performers she remains in character all the time, so exists outside the play's own deconstructive elements. Yeo (1995) is quite correct when he places *Birch* generically within the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* tradition which stresses its own artifice, thus inhibiting uncritical or extravagant emotional involvement in a staged illusion. Brecht and Kee rupture the imaginary fourth wall in an effort to minimize sentimental involvement and maximize the political message. Kee's message is always important to him: "what I wrote was aimed at making a proposition for a better society. Transcending that, it was also bringing out human values that were more important than some of the laws in society" (Woo, 2001). Yet Mastura's attractive archness and her cleverly presented lament are out of kilter with the alienation effect characteristic of the play as a whole. In an engaging, deliberately baffling, self-contradictory and challenging play there is, in my view, something too simplistic about Mastura. She perhaps belongs to the invention of a class of character that, according to Sari Suleri, oversimplifies the formerly hidden feminine voice in history:

The coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman* ... almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for 'the good.' Such metaphoricity cannot exactly be called essentialist, but it certainly functions as an impediment to a reading that attempts to look beyond obvious questions of good and evil. (Suleri, 1992. p. 273)

The invention of Mastura furthers the "iconic" representation of women which oversimplifies the complexities of being in any historical period, and plays into the hands of those who regard history

dualistically in a naïve splitting of all into good or evil. In other words, if overuse of the Great Man theory of history has reduced the complexities of historical causality, then the invention of the Great Woman is going to do the same thing for feminist and postcolonial scholarship.

While this could be argued in Mastura's case (Kee Thuan Chye would have something to say by way of rebuttal) his other representative from the world of hidden history, Kuntum, is a masterful creation who thoroughly unsettles the audience and refuses to fall into any neat ethical, social or historiographical category. She is central to the Brechtian spirit of the play rather than existing outside it.

The idea of a woman being "doubly colonized" became a commonplace in 1980's feminist/postcolonial writing, accentuating that she was limited and imprisoned by both patriarchal and colonial forces. This kind of double colonization can certainly be seen working in the presentation of Mastura. Kee takes this one step further with Kuntum who can be seen to be "triply colonized" by colonial forces, by patriarchal structures and by class. She is a native, colonized slave who is serving in the house of Datuk Sagor. Unlike Mastura, her character is clothed in a moral ambiguity that is problematic for the audience. Participating fully in the play's use of the alienation effect, she drops out of character even before we know her full story, refusing to allow the audience the sentimental connection we find with Mastura. The sexually frustrated Sagor who is spurned by Kuntum's loyalty to Islamic marital and sexual codes takes it out on her husband Siputum:

SAGOR: Tear the nails off your thumbs.

SIPUTUM: Both of them, Datuk?

SAGOR: Both of them.

KUNTUM: No!

SAGOR: Shut up!

*(SAGOR strikes and kicks her. SIPUTUM watches, helpless.)*

SIPUTUM: *(dropping out of character)* I say, Yatim, this is getting melodramatic.

KUNTUM: *(dropping out of character)* Ya laa.

SAGOR: *(dropping out of character)* But this kind of thing happens all the time, doesn't it?

KUNTUM: Okay lah.

*(Sagor goes back to striking KUNTUM until he is satisfied.)*

SAGOR: Wash the floor.

*(SAGOR and SIPUTUM go.)*

KUNTUM: My husband borrowed money to start a business. But the business closed down and he couldn't pay back. He became a slave to Datuk. I also became Datuk's property. But he doesn't own me completely. He wants something from me which I will not give him. Every day he asks me for it and when I refuse he takes his anger out on me.... How can the Datuk ask me to go against tradition and religion?

(pp. 44–5)

The movement from past into present both in dialogue and in the use of verb tense, and the admission that we are all play-acting, reduce the audience's uncritical sentimental response and highlights the idea that "... this kind of thing happens all the time, doesn't it?" In this way Kee can have his philosophic cake and eat it. Art and reality are separate. Art and reality are not separate.

Kuntum eventually takes advantage of Birch's unannounced offer to take care of debtor slaves who flee from their masters. Birch's motives are unclear: perhaps his offering safety to the slaves is altruistic, perhaps it is a way to annoy the Datuks and assert his own power. Kee throws the audience into ethically gray territory when Kuntum almost immediately gives to Birch what she

has been refusing to give Sagor. Did Kuntum refuse Sagor because of religious scruples, or is it her only way of asserting any independence? Or does Sagor simply not seduce her in the kind of way she would like? The ifs, whys and maybes of hidden history multiply on Kee's stage:

ACTOR/DS: Did that actually happen in history, Mony?

ACTOR/L: Depends on whose history....

ACTOR/DS: But this is tampering with history, Mony.

ACTOR/L: This is fiction, Yatim.

ACTOR/DS: Don't you think she's given too major a role for a fictitious character? And why does she give in to Birch when all this time she's supposed to be a pure woman faithful to her husband? She rejected the Datuk. Is that because Birch is a *Mat Salleh*? (p. 59)

Kuntum bursts in on this conversation, delivering an apologia as the character, then speaking irreverently as the actor. Kuntum's role resists the simple dualism encapsulated in Mastura, and through his multi-level presentation of her character avoids any recourse the audience might have to what Suleri calls "the banality of easy dichotomies" which limits the reach of both postcolonial and feminist criticism. Kuntum's history and mere presence forces us to break the bounds of simplistic moralizing—there is no conventional ethical system into which she can fit:

KUNTUM: Is it wrong for me to want the nice things in life? Even if it's for a short time? I didn't do this for anything else. That man was kind to me, he took care of me. I have not been treated like this for so long. My husband couldn't, the Datuk kept us apart. Anyway, I resisted as long as I could. I was scared. But I felt good. I am only a human being. (*Drops out of character and, playfully*) It's not true, you know, that the *Mat Salleh*'s one is always bigger. (p. 59–60)

Through the inclusion of this kind of fictitious and one might say fatuous history, which includes Kuntum's irreverence, Kee counteracts the Hegelian view of history as enlightenment in the spiritual, philosophical and nationalistic senses. Kee's history openly obfuscates issues and deliberately frustrates the cast and crew which presents it and the audience which observes it. According to Lela Gandhi (1998), Hegelian "History" is "the vehicle of rational self-consciousness through which the incomplete human spirit progressively acquires an improved sense of its own totality" (p. 105). Kee argues that the more hidden histories we are exposed to the less likely we are to see anything in "totality," and that "totality" is something institutions, including governments, use to meet their own ends.

When *Birch* was being written there was (and is) a call for a return to religious fundamentalism in Malaysia including the introduction of the highly controversial Hudud laws. Kuntum's difficult moral dilemma is an indirect reference to the kind of sexist dangers inherent in a different law for men and women. In his earlier play, *1984 Here and Now* (1987), Kee also based some of his dramatic tension on the link between sexual ambiguity and religious fundamentalism. Though he does not make direct mention of it, when writing *Birch* the fundamentalist Islamic party PAS gained power in the state of Kelantan: its main platform is to replace Malaysia's Western-based law with Islamic law. Suleri's description of the Hudud laws in Pakistan have devastating implications for women like Kuntum who seemingly must face their reintroduction in parts of Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> The issues that Kee includes have direct relevance for the audience watching the plays. His hidden histories are

1. For information on the current Malaysian situation see "Amendments made to bill," *The Straits Times* (9 July 2002); "Police deal blow to PAS hudud laws," *The Straits Times* (11 July 2002); "Terengganu hudud laws expected to be gazetted by Dec 31," *New Straits Times* (18 Sept. 2002).

as much about revealing contemporary problems as they are about recorrecting historical deficits from the past. At the same time he gives a voice to the voiceless as he toys with this Hegelian paradigm retold by Gandhi:

In his elaboration of the ‘master-slave relationship’, Hegel maintains that the master and slave are, initially locked in a compulsive struggle-unto-death. This goes on until the weak-willed slave, preferring life to liberty, accepts his subjection to the victorious master. When these two antagonists finally face each other after battle, only the master is recognizable. The slave, on the other hand, is now a dependent ‘thing’ whose existence is shaped by, and as, the conquering Other. (pp. 16–7)

In *Birch* the narrative worm turns and the slave becomes a larger than life survivor, while the two masters, Birch and Maharaja Lela, ultimately meet their deaths in the colonial struggle. Yeo, by comparison, seems to give his two masters a new lease of life while Kee is killing his off.

### Reinventing Raffles and Lee

In Singapore, 200 years of selective history has been presented in the largely reductive form of two heroic men, Raffles and Lee, both of whom presided over the first and second somewhat artificial inventions of the state. Yeo’s revelation of a hidden history posits the possibility of things not included in myth: personality, humanity, strengths and weaknesses, and contradictions. J. G. Farrell (1982), notes that Raffles invented Singapore one morning very early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by looking at a map. “Here,” he said to himself, “we must have a city, half-way between India and China” (p. 9). Though more went into Raffles’ thought processes than this, Farrell’s idea includes the arbitrary nature of choice. The second artificial invention of Singapore began either in 1965 when the island was expelled from the two-year old Malaysian nation, or it may have begun in 1959 when the People’s Action Party under Lee Kuan Yew, ironically in concert with local communist and other left wing factions, first won control of the legislative assembly. When the history of Singapore is encapsulated in the heroic form of two individuals it subscribes to Carlyle’s Great Man theory and its later more complex Hegelian articulation. George Novack (2005) argues that the Great Man theory grew out the defunct and theologically naïve Great God theory, merely shifting power from a deity or deities and putting it in the hands of a chosen few. Carlyle articulates this shift: “Universal history, the history of what man has accomplished in the world, is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here.” Hegel takes this one step further, arguing that the historical process can be understood rationally, and, furthermore, that it contains a rationality of its own. In this view “It had an imminent logic which unfolded in a law-governed manner defined by the dialectical process.” A Great Man who became the fulcrum on which history turned, much like Napoleon, was deemed by Hegel to be a “worldhistorical soul.” Crouch’s (1998) definition is helpful here:

These people were like seed pods, carrying and knowing the “germ” of the “necessary next stage” into which the spirit would reshape mankind and other matter. They were the first to perceive the need for, and nature of, the required synthesis, and act on it. They were driven by a host of private reasons to uphold only one goal: bringing out the new, higher form and imposing it on human society.

At first sight it seems that Robert Yeo is celebrating this theory when encapsulating a sense of nationhood in the two great men, much as does Lee himself when he titles his two volume autobiography not the “Lee Kuan Yew Story” but *The Singapore Story*—I am the nation and the nation is me. Carlyle and Hegel would recognize the spirit of their theoretical stance in this title.

Other world leaders, who tend to favor the Great Man theory for obvious reasons, take up the cry on the blurb of the first edition of the Lee memoirs (1998). Kiichi Miyazawa, former Japanese Prime Minister, agrees that *The Singapore Story* “is the personal history of a man who, almost single-handedly, built a great nation from a small island....” David Lange, former NZ PM, writes that Lee created a nation “in his own image” envying this skill. Margaret Thatcher, in characteristic hyperbolic mode, insists that “He was never wrong.” Jacques Chirac also subscribes to the Great Man theory on Lee’s behalf: “For a country to rise from the threshold of subsistence to one of the highest living standards in the world in 30 years is no common achievement. At the root of this success lies the genius of one man....” As mentioned early in the paper, Yeo prefaces the unpublished text of *The Eye of History* with the statement that the play is “intended as a humorous tribute to two of the principal makers of our history....” Does this mean his play ascribes to the Great Men theory? In *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (2001), which includes the only commentary on *The Eye of History* published outside Singapore, William Peterson suggests that that it does. It is easy to recognize Hegelian notions reflected in his view of the play. In the

meeting of two of Singapore’s greatest minds, Yeo combines historical ‘fact’ with the great foundational myth that constitutes a cornerstone in the edifice of a unified national identity. In fact, by linking the two icons of national identity and tying them simultaneously to Singapore’s past and present, the play takes the process a step further by articulating a nationalist discourse that Bhabha identifies as one that ‘produces the idea of the national as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation....’ Yeo’s play proposes a “continuous narrative of national progress.” (pp. 66–7)

Peterson goes on to argue that the play “valorizes” the “great foundational myths of colonial and postcolonial Singapore.” There is, however, an alternative reading of his play (Watt, 2005), which argues that the play does not support the Hegelian notion, and that Yeo ultimately does not provide an encomium to the Great Men. He deconstructs the mythos of the two heroes and (while at the same time allowing for their remarkable contribution) humanizes them. Yeo’s Raffles and Lee are not Great Men. They are simply great men.

Running contrary to convention, Yeo deliberately makes the statue of Raffles an object of fun. Statues are normally very serious business. In colonial enterprise the role of a statue is to express the authority of the grand colonial narrative in physical form. Only the Merlion in Singapore would equal the statue of Raffles as an object of national and cultural importance. Bhabha (1994) provides some ideas on the importance of stereotypification of colonial subject and colonial master. In his view, the colonial Other has to be reduced to a highly limited and fixed entity. Thus posited the colonial subject can be understood and, theoretically at least, contained. To accomplish this the colonial master must also give the commensurate impression of the “fixity” of colonial power itself. Both notions must exist outside or beyond the powers of empiricism which could challenge them. They rely on excess, orthodoxy and restriction. What better way to present unchangeable colonial potency than through a heroic statue? Uncountable statues of colonial figures can be found in public places and public buildings throughout the world, for they represent unchanging authority and the continuity of power. Undermine a famous colonial statue, and the colonial enterprise itself is consequently diminished. This is what the audience sees happening in *The Eye of History*.

In a delightfully comic scene, which Yeo cleverly places between his Abdullah and Hill monologues, workmen representing the three major racial groups in Singapore are employed in the installation of a new Raffles statue. The delightful tomfoolery of the workers undercuts the seriousness with which the statue should be viewed, but they don’t know that since their personal histories have other priorities. One of them even confuses the identity of the great man being

represented:

Chinese: Oh, this one statue of Raffles ah?  
 Indian: You mean you dunno?  
 Chinese: I thought—  
 Indian: You thought what?  
 Chinese: I thought statue of Lee Kuan Yew.  
 Indian: Joker you.

In his own way, as does Kee, Yeo gives a voice to the voiceless when he presents the clowning workmen in their attractive illiteracy. Yeo has always used Singlish in his drama, when it was rarely used at all in the 70s and 80s, and in the 90s when the government strongly disapproved of its use on TV and stage. Here the workmen are trying to read the inscription which is written in four languages. This dialogue is not important in and of itself, but it does set a tone in the play which is the reverse of the intention of statues, a tone that Yeo will exploit to the full:

Chinese: I think we can put cement now.  
 Indian: Hey, got words man. See what it says. (He bends to read.)

*(The Malay and Chinese workmen walk around.)*

Malay: Yes, this side also got. Malay words.  
 Chinese: This side too, in Chinese.  
 Indian: What does it say?  
 Chinese: Sorry lah, in Chinese, I can't read Chinese.

This might be a subtle reference to Lee Kuan Yew himself who had to learn Chinese after he came to power.

Indian: Susah lah you, Chinese can't read Mandarin.  
 Chinese: What you think you so clever ah? Here got all these curly, curly words, must be Tamil. Ok you read, smart guy.  
 Indian: Sorry lah, I can't read Tamil.  
 Chinese: So who's the smart guy? Tamil can't read Tamil.  
 Indian: What so bad about that? Singapore don't have speak Tamil campaign, if got sure I can speak Tamil. But Singapore got "Speak Mandarin Campaign" what, so you better learn, ok?  
 Malay: Here you two, come, here got Malay words, I read to you. No need Speak Malay Campaign. (pp. 7–9)

After the statue is uncovered the men try to adopt the famous Raffles pose: serious but benign imperial frown, one leg resolutely placed in front of the other, arms in the act of being folded in the act of wise deliberation. They are interrupted by the supervisor who informs them that all is in order with the installation, except that the statue is facing the wrong way. The director of the play exploits this deflation of the heroic by having the colonial hero sail weightlessly into the fly space at the end of the scene, something that pleased the audience greatly. Before we even meet the great man on stage in human form, the weight has already literally and figuratively gone out of the colonial symbol. Already the heroic iconic view of the mighty founder is visually and thematically under question, and the holistic certainty of colonial potency flounders. The heroic view of colonial enterprise is accomplished, according to Prakash (mirroring Bhabha) "through some identity—individual, class or structure—which resists further decomposition" (Dirlik, 1996, p. 298).

Yeo continues to "decompose" the iconic reputation of Raffles. He presents him in very human terms, and though quite likeable on the whole he is also, at times, precocious, smug, narcissistic and arrogant. He talks down to Lee one moment then claims him as an equal the next, and Lee,

for much of the play, is put on the defensive (something that takes the weight out of his statuesque reputation). Throughout the play, Raffles sounds like someone in a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta or in a Noël Coward comedy of manners. He complains that he left his pedestal outside the old Victoria Concert Hall because he got tired of hearing too much continental music and not enough Elgar or even Andrew Lloyd Weber. His major complaint when he meets Lee, however, is that despite everything named in his honor in and around Singapore, there is no national holiday to celebrate his birthday. He flatters Lee by pairing them, pointing out that no great historical figure is safe from revisionism (a delightful irony when Yeo is doing just that at the very time Raffles expresses his fear of it):

- SR: I am ever grateful that I have in you a ruler who takes a long and enlightened view of history and places the contributions of people like myself in perspective. Who knows what will happen if someone else should come along, some anti-history, anti-British demagogue and altogether denies my part in the founding of Singapore. You've known that sort of thing to happen, I'm sure, people who rewrite history to suit their own aims.
- PM: But of course Sir Stamford.
- SR: I would be very careful if I were you, Prime Minister. It could happen to you. (p. 29)

This speech reminds the audience of an earlier one wherein Lee Kuan Yew admits to the manipulation of the historical for pragmatic ends, so he already belongs to the group who “rewrite history to suit their own aims.” In this earlier conversation Raffles is lamenting the PAP’s poor record of conservation and lamenting that rebuilding is removing “all traces of history which began with” Raffles’ landing. “I admit,” replies Lee, that the “conservation record is mixed” but “in our attitude to history we are pragmatic.... we must move history. We do not erase her but we shift her, so that history can be created anew....” (p. 22).

Yeo does include an encomium to Raffles early in the play (directly out of Abdullah’s *Hikayat*) but this ultimately jars with the audience because this paragon is not the Raffles they meet in the play. This one seems to come out of an oral formulaic mode of representing a mythical narrative hero:

He was broad of brow, a sign of his care and thoroughness; roundheaded with a projecting forehead, showing his intelligence. He had light brown hair, indicative of bravery; large ears, the mark of a ready listener.... He treated everyone with proper deference, giving each his proper title when she spoke.... He spoke in smiles.... (p. 15)

Lee himself quotes this towards the end of the play by way of a mild retort against Raffles’ attitude. He also deliberately irks the colonial founder by suggesting he should share some of the historical limelight, by repeating Abdullah’s suggestion that Farquhar (another representative of forgotten history in this play) should be honored accordingly:

- PM: I’m glad you agree. I thought I might put up a statue of him next to yours beside Parliament House. (*Raffles is taken aback and his tea cup rattles.*)
- SR: Next to me Prime Minister?
- PM: Yes, what do you think? He is next to you, in a historic sense, wouldn’t you agree?
- SR: Yes, but ... (*Pause*) He is next to me in history, as you say, but whoever heard of two statues side by side? By all means erect a statue to Farquhar but couldn’t you put it up somewhere else? (p. 49)

This subjectively invented, narcissistic Raffles is Yeo’s alone, and this is his point: such a representation has as much historical legitimacy as the more heroic 200 year-old legend. In

rewriting Raffles, Yeo is actually joining a revisionist trend among local historians. Baker (1999) argues that the hagiographication of Raffles, who was only in the colony for a few days, has resulted in downplaying Farquhar's role, the man actually responsible for the establishment and growth of the settlement. Furthermore, the cost of establishing the settlement was born equally by Raffles and Farquhar, the latter more than the former being regarded by locals, according to Abdullah, as "our ruler." Chew (1991) allows for Raffles' understanding of the location and potential of Singapore but suggests that the man himself exaggerated his foresight. Had Lord Hastings in India not ordered the search for a secure harbor, the settlement may never have happened. Abdullah's record, delivered in the play, also records that it was Captain Ross who first suggested to Raffles that the harbor at Singapore might serve their purpose well.

### A Subjective Lee Kuan Yew

Hannah Pandian who reviewed the first performance of *The Eye of History* for *The Straits Times* (1992, Jan 11) recognized that it was the act of "making" histories that was the point of the play, not the supporting of a clichéd myth. Yeo, she writes, "managed to keep his theme of subjective histories afloat right through the production, so much so that one wonders whether the eye of history could be read as the 'I' of history." Undercutting the authoritative Raffles reduces the power of imperial narrative, and questions the foundations of Singaporean national identity, and by assiduously pairing Lee with him throughout the play Yeo leads the audience towards and examination of their contemporary leader in a new light. As Peterson rightly notes "... the equation 'Raffles equals Singapore' could be extended to 'Raffles equals Lee Kuan Yew equals Singapore'..." (p. 75). If Raffles is taken from his pedestal and humanized, so too is Lee.

In his rewriting of Lee, Yeo speaks through Abdullah who mentions that the problem with assessing Lee's contribution to Singapore is that, to date, published commentaries are extreme, either blackening him entirely or treating him as a living icon of genius. In other words we are back in a reductive historical world of black and white, good and evil which Kee generally eschews in *Birch*. In revising the Great Man theory through rewriting Raffles and Lee, Yeo does not argue that a person cannot be great but that he or she needs to be allowed to be human. On the whole, the reviews of the play did not know what to say about Lee's human presence on the stage, so they mostly said nothing about his being there at all. This would be a bit like reviewing a performance of *Richard III* without mentioning the lead character at all. A sizeable three-column piece "Eyepopping History" in *Business Times* (9 Jan 1992), for example, mentions Lee only once in passing, avoiding any serious discussion of personal or political implications of Yeo's reinvention. The press in Singapore are well-versed in commenting on and recording encomiums to the great leader so their silence is articulate. When the curtain rises on Lee's Istana office for the first time, what does the audience see? The K. K. Seet production of the play first shows Lee from behind, as he bends over a golf ball during putting practice in his office. In the production I watched, Lee missed the golf put three times, something all too human for a superhero. Neil Simon's view of comedy reflects this situation and Yeo's play as a whole. He suggests that "incongruity" is the essence of humor combined with the "puncturing of balloons of pomposity" (Bryer, 1995, p. 225). It is an exaggeration to suggest that Yeo present his Lee as a out-and-out pompous individual (the playwright clearly admires him), but when he is defending himself against Raffles' criticisms he approaches being a little too self-congratulatory.

There is nothing more incongruous than a great man telling you he has accomplished great things. Some of the valorization of Lee in the play comes from Lee himself. Abdullah fawns on

Lee throughout the play, and when it suits him so too does Raffles (but usually to confirm his own potency). Lee lauds his own success with land reclamation and the recession of the sea coast. He confirms his success at making Singapore a working multicultural state where all races live largely in harmony. Outside the play, Yeo personally feels that racial harmony in Singapore is one of the PAP's great successes. We can see this working in the presentation of the three workmen mentioned above who represent the forces of racial harmony and cooperation. Not all Singaporeans agree: race in the nation is always a tricky subject. "Nothing is harder to write about in Singapore than race," suggests social critic Cherian George (2000, p. 159). His chapter "Neglected Nationhood" argues that the strained and artificial nature of multiculturalism in Singapore is a timely rejoinder to Lee's confidence. Yeo's audience would not, I suggest, respond unequivocally to Lee's confidence about racial harmony.

Lee also mentions his achievement on taking the island to "world city" from "kampong" in one generation (a kampong is a traditional Malay village). He forgets to add that Singapore, boasting many lavish and impressive colonial buildings and a long and successful economic history, had been for over 150 years one of the jewels in the crown of British Asian possessions. Yeo (in correspondence with the author) argues that with some reservations he has great admiration for Lee, pointing out that Lee has always acknowledged the contributions of his colleagues in the great work done. I wonder, though, why this aspect of Lee's generosity was not included in the play nor in the cover blurb of his autobiography?

Yeo uses other ploys to humanize the great leader. For most of the play he is on the defensive, responding to Raffles' agenda rather than setting his own. The play includes a number of direct criticisms of the PAP decades in office, and although done in a good humored way leaves no room for doubt. The prevailing notion that wealth is equal to position, intelligence and wisdom alarms Abdullah when observing contemporary trends in the nation. Already mentioned is Raffles' perception of the government's poor record on preservation. Yeo mentions several times in the play the government's manipulation of historical detail both to suit their own pragmatic aims and to shape national educational policy. In the play, Lee shamelessly and pragmatically admits to such. There is also criticism of the Singaporean work ethic where people from all walks of life simply have to work too hard, the criticism of which the first director of the play saw as important to audience reaction and the success of the play (Seet & Sankaran, 2001). It is also telling that Yeo has not excised Teh Cheang Wan from the text. Two or three years after the play was written, the man most responsible for national building projects and development in the PAP government, Teh was discovered in the act of taking large bribes. This discovery, together with his consequent suicide, dramatically suggested that the PAP though tough on corruption was, like all governments, unable to eradicate it.

Pandian's review in *The Straits Times* was the only review to admit that there was something discomfiting in the presentation of Lee for the audience: "Mr Lee came across as a gentle, apologetic, pondering figure.... Many, it seems had not expected this tepid portrayal: 'Too mild, too gentle,' someone muttered after the performance...."

All of this does not add up to the valorization Peterson senses at the heart of the play. For the sake of comparison, here is one example of the kind of lavish praise heaped on the worthy leader. It comes from the introduction to *Lee Kuan Yew in His Own Words* (Rodriguez, 2003), a compilation of extracts of Lee's public speeches from 1959 to 1970:

Lee Kuan Yew—Senior Minister, Prime Minister, Politician, Global Statesman, Visionary ... the list goes on. There is no end to the numerous accolades that one can shower upon his eminent leader, credited to be one of

our century's greatest intellectuals.... This book will inspire and motivate you. It will jolt you. It will engage you. It will serve as a grim reminder of the many risks taken and the numerous sacrifices that Lee Kuan Yew made for you and me. (p. i)

Yeo tries in his play to allow for the great contribution Lee has made, yet he manages, thankfully, to avoid this kind of hyperbole.

Yeo and Kee unsettle, entertain and challenge their audiences in different ways. They give voice to small people not included in grand narratives, and provide a different set of voices for great men in old stories. They present cautionary tales that suggest the Great Man theory, now out of fashion, deserves to be so. They give voice to important figures in history who have been constrained and limited by their mythical inclusion in grand narratives, or by their omission in such. The characters in the two plays are allowed to inhabit previously uncharted artistic, psychological, narrative and historiographical territory. Yeo and Kee present history as fiction, revealing that it is all too easy for anyone else, governments included, to do the same thing. They have had a double bind: they, like all postcolonial writers have to work towards the expression of local voices and hidden histories, but they have also had to challenge official histories of their own basically decent but powerful single party states that see the arbitration of truth as their territory. Officially sanctioned territory sits more comfortably with Carlyle's view of history and Hegel's master narratives than it does with this postmodern notion which weaves in and out of *We Could \*\*\*\* You Mr Birch* and *The Eye of History*: "We are all recipients of manipulated truth and are manipulators ourselves."

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