Pursuing the Global in a Local Setting: Particularistic Silences in the Teaching, Deconstructing, Researching, and Writing of Asian History*

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Abstract: This essay draws on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's idea of "silencing the Past" to explore three historical episodes and their implications for teaching history. Firstly, it critiques William Bundy's biased Cold War account of the Vietnam War, revealing the author's political agenda and its impact on historical interpretation. Secondly, it reflects on the complexities of conducting oral history of survivors of the Second World War, considering both personal experiences and potential state agendas. Lastly, it examines British imperialism through a local lens, highlighting present-day concerns in a modern metropolis. These episodes illustrate the interconnectedness of global and local history in the classroom, prompting questions about narrative construction, counter narratives, and pedagogical approaches. By delving into these topics, this essay aims to enrich the teaching of Asian history, particularly in the context of Singapore.

Keywords: Historicity, History Pedagogy, Historiography, Oral History, Sino-U.S. Rapprochement, Imperialism, Second World War, Vietnam War, Singapore

When the archives of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing were made available to foreign researchers in 2004, it was undoubtedly a pivotal event for Cold War historians. Materials start from 1949, but sources from 1955 to 1960 were only made available in May 2006. Up to 80 percent of the archive is declassified. Researchers can print most materials for a fee. Researchers are, however, prohibited from printing materials that either have significant handwritings of Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai, or memoranda of conversations that are verbatim records of their speeches. These materials are usually the most valuable and researchers have to endure the rigors of manually copying them in an unheated room.[1] This archive, however, has again become inaccessible to researchers, though there seems to be improved access according to a recent

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[1] Sulin Zhang, "The Declassification of Chinese Foreign Ministry Archival Materials: A Brief Introduction," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 16 (Fall 2007 - Winter 2008), 11.

research report by Daniel Balazs.[2]

This restrictive archival situation is what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "silencing the past."[3] In his seminal book, Trouillot wrote, *inter alia*, about one type of silencing: fact retrieval. I assigned Trouillot's book in a mandatory Social Science freshman course which I was teaching, because I sorely felt the bite of Trouillot's observations as I specialize in Sino-U.S. Relations. Yet, I also realize how useful Trouillot's insights are today. In this era of misinformation and fake news, it is even more important to delineate the subtleties of various "silences" in history.[4] As Eric Hobsbawm wryly points out, it is the responsibility of historians "to remember what others forget."[5] Indeed, I now can sketch several historical themes, which are close to my intellectual beliefs, to demonstrate to my various classes how they can use the insights bequeathed by Trouillot for themselves as well as in my various history classes.

But, we are anticipating Trouillot here. The main arguments of *Silencing the Past* consist of the multiple lines of inquiry. As Trouillot succinctly puts it "the past – or, more accurately, pastness – is a position."[6] What this means is that narratives and discourses speak strongly about the underlying "differential exercise of power."[7] The lay person can simply understand this as history being generally the product of "winners." Hence, Trouillot is interested in what is left out. In a programmatic way, Trouillot proceeds to delineate the different junctures at which alternate narratives become "silenced." There are four types of silences: sources, archives, retrieval, and "retrospective significance."[8] It will now become apparent that history making can leak like a sieve, either intentionally or otherwise. When one maps the concerns of Trouillot onto a seemingly prosaic topic such as the history of Somapah Road in Singapore, one obtains unexpected results.

This essay explores three inter-related though disparate episodes of Asian history teaching, deconstructing, and writing (broadly conceived) that are informed by Trouillot's conceptual framework of "silences." Each case study brings its own type of silences to the table. The first case study concerns my professional academic area of interest: U.S.-East

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[2] Kazushi Minami, "China's Foreign Ministry Archive: Open or Closed?" October 2, 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-foreign-ministry-archive-open-or-closed; S. A. Smith, "Rethinking the History of Maoist China," in *A Companion to Chinese History*, ed. Michael Szonyi (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2017), 181; Daniel Balazs, "Archival Research in China: Where There's a Will, There's a Way," *Texas National Security Review*, January 27, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/archival-research-in-china-where-theres-a-will-theres-a-way/.

[3] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

[4] Kevin M. Levin, "The Remedy for the Spread of Fake News? History Teachers," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 6, 2016, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remedy-spread-fake-news-history-teachers-180961310/.

[5] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 3.

[6] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.

[7] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.

[8] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

Asian relations.[9] I look at a particularly troubling book, authored by William Bundy, arguably one of the prime architects of the Vietnam War, which was on the reading list for my East Asia Nexus class. Bundy's narrative silences on Nixon's efforts to ending the Vietnam War are interrogated. The two other case studies are local to Singapore, where I am based. One covers my misadventures in recovering history at its source – oral history. As experiences of the Second World War figure heavily in Singapore's national discourse, my encounters magnify the vicissitudes of constructing a narrative. How much can one person's story diverge from the national narrative in which the war is part of a shared Singaporean identity? What is lost when one adheres to national discourse? Finally, I reconsider the history of a nineteenth-century Indian businessman who had without a doubt some importance in his time in colonial Singapore, but whose presence is all but forgotten in the modern metropolis. Was the silencing of this Indian pioneer deliberate? Why was his story recovered, leading to a revival in the narrative of pioneers?

Performing a Cold War Critique in a Local Classroom

One unforgettable passage written by a celebrated Singaporean writer, Lee Wei Ling, the only daughter of Lee Kuan Yew, perhaps gives the perfect example as to how a significant global event was viewed via a local lens. In the aftermath of the fall of Saigon in 1975, the statesman grimly gathered his family in his bedroom and spelled out the personal implications of that occasion. "Mama and I will stay here [in Singapore] to the bitter end. Hsien Loong is already in the SAF [Singapore Armed Forces] and must do his duty." Lee pessimistically pronounced, "but the three of you need not feel obliged to stay."[10] Lee was, of course, well known for his firm views of the domino theory, whereby communist states would overrun other nations such as Thailand and Malaysia because of the U.S.'s lack of will to use force to stop the spread of communism, and its general reluctance to engage in Southeast Asia.[11]

In hindsight, the most momentous event in the Vietnam imbroglio happened three years before the fall of Saigon – the Sino-U.S. Rapprochement. Once the U.S. had reached out to Beijing, the political ground beneath most U.S. allies in Asia shifted.[12] In the sixty-eighth session of the Diet, the Japanese foreign minister Takeo Fukuda announced that

[9] I model this section on a couple of similar classroom critiques from two very different fields. See Catherine Bell, "Religion through Ritual," in *Teaching Ritual*, ed. Catherine Bell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 177-191; and Benjamin Elman, "The 'Rise' of Japan and the 'Fall' of China after 1895," in *The Chinese Chameleon Revisited: From the Jesuits to Zhang Yimou*, ed. Zheng Yangwen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 143-171.

[10] Lee Hsien Loong was an artillery officer in the Singapore Armed Forces. See Wei Ling Lee, *A Hakka Woman's Singapore Stories: My Life as a Daughter, Doctor, and Diehard Singaporean* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2016), 167.

[11] Interview, David Cox with Lee Kuan Yew, May 1975, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky1975050f.pdf; Cheng Guan Ang, "Singapore and the Vietnam War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009): 374.

[12] Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 185.

"the People's Republic of China is one of Japan's most important neighbors, and normalizing relations with them is the most important issue for the future of Japan's diplomacy." He further recommended that "I believe that the establishment of normal relations between Japan and China as soon as possible is not only in the interest of both countries, but also for the stability and order of the international community as a whole."[13] Little wonder that smaller nations in Southeast Asia also followed suit and established relations with China after the fall of Saigon. A pair of scholars wryly noted that "the rush to normalize ties with Beijing was triggered by the perception that with the United States withdrawal, non-communist Southeast Asia had lost a critical countervailing force and bulwark against the threat of communism."[14]

To examine the intricate relationship between Vietnam War and Sino-U.S. Rapprochement, for my current upper-level undergraduate East Asian Nexus class, I chose William Bundy's *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in The Nixon Presidency*.[15] Bundy, that unapologetic critic of President Richard Nixon's presidency, had been a foreign affairs advisor to both presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. As one of the prime architects of the Vietnam War, Bundy would surely have opinions aplenty about the successor administration. Mainly, I wish to illustrate Trouillot's observation that "humans participate in history both as actors and as narrators."[16] To that end, I assigned different chapters of his book to different groups of students, and we also accumulated numerous professional book reviews on his tome. The latter, in my opinion, is a much-neglected pedagogic source in the conduct of history lessons. I supplement this reading package with excerpts from other critical sources. The objective of the seminar is to look at how practitioners critique an academic book, and to have students formulate their own arguments and opinions of the assigned text.

In his preface, Bundy makes abundantly clear the main thesis of his book. "Deception," he declares, "was a hallmark of Nixon's handling of foreign policy throughout his presidency."[17] My students easily found that such straightforward allegation of Nixon's "crookedness" in foreign policy apparently struck a happy chord with numerous reviewers. Mark Feeney, at the *Boston Globe*, generously ascertained Bundy's work as being "judicious and comprehensive." Another partisan reviewer even smugly observed that Bundy's book would bring "grim smiles of satisfaction to Establishment bureaucrats…who can now wave Bundy's book and say, 'We would have told them so!'"[18] Scholarly reviewers

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[13] Speech, Takeo Fukuda, 68th Diet (Standing Session). January 29, 1972, https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/fam/19720129.SXJ.html. Translation by the author.
[14] Cheng Guan Ang and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "The Fall of Saigon: Southeast Asian Perspectives," April 21, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-fall-of-saigon-southeast-asian-perspectives/.
[15] William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in The Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998).
[16] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past,* 2.
[17] Bundy, xiii.
[18] Mark Feeney, "The Guilty Abroad," review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *The Boston Globe*, July 12, 1998, C1; James Hershberg, "Presidential Deceptions and Diplomatic Errors," review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *The Washington Post*, June 28, 1998, X01.

were, by contrast, generally reserved about Bundy's book. Stephen R. Lyne wondered if such "predetermined and superficial thesis" really weakened the "substance" of Bundy's analysis. Elsewhere, according to Francis J. Gavin, the book did not "remotely approach those levels of fairness, logic and evidence."[19]

Most of my students found it tough to reconcile such stark differences of opinion vis-à-vis the very nature of Nixon's presidency. For my class, I focused on three interrelated areas. First would be the phenomenon of secrecy in U.S. foreign policy. Obviously, such an enquiry undermines Bundy's main thesis on the uniqueness of Nixon's deceptive foreign policy. Another area worth inquiring into sprang from an interesting quote from Lewis Sorley's biography of General Creighton Abrams. The protagonist, in his last days before he succumbed to cancer, allegedly whispered to a former aide, "nobody will ever know the goddam mess Westmoreland left me in Vietnam."[20] Similarly, the political legacy that Nixon inherited from Johnson might be instructive on the amount of leeway Nixon had during his first term. A final area concerns the nature of Nixon's famous Sino-U.S. Rapprochement apropos of "Triangulation." Was it a masterstroke of Realpolitik? Or was it just a series of piecemeal opportunistic diplomatic coups?

Although Nixon, the "Chronic Campaigner," possessed an elemental need to deceive, my students found that he was not alone in his inclination. Lyndon B. Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam War equally fit into Bundy's categorization. Robert Dallek, the biographer of Johnson, found that his pattern of deception sprung from the "force of habit or of a pattern of political behavior dating from early in his career." At the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, Johnson ordered that no "loud public signal of a change in policy" should be made. As for the increase of ground troops in 1966, Johnson again obfuscated issues by announcing the increase of soldiers a month at a time, thus avoiding the impression of a sharp increase of ground troops.[21]

In fact, the term "credibility gap" resulted from Johnson's conduct of the war. Only Undersecretary of State George Ball advised Johnson against a war of attrition against the Viet Cong. The rest of the cabinet strongly advised Johnson to crush that "pissant" North Vietnam.[22] William Bundy, then the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, was part of this war caucus. For students in my East Asian Nexus class, it is not difficult to see why "predecessors" were seldom mentioned.

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[19] Stephen R. Lyne, review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *Harvard International Review* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 77-78; Francis J. Gavin, "Acheson, Nixon and the Politics of Deception," review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 340.
[20] Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: From the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam and Beyond: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of his Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 373.
[21] Robert Dallek, *Hail to the Chief: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 196.
[22] John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997), 934; Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 110.

In reality, Nixon was a minority president who faced a "deeply divided Congress in no mood to grant the new president" any leeway especially vis-à-vis foreign policy.[23] Jerel Rosati succinctly sums up Nixon's predicament:

> a domestic political environment that was dramatically changing due to the civil rights movement and the failure of Vietnam, which destroyed the anti-Communist consensus throughout the country that was the basis for America's cold war policies and exposed U.S. foreign policy to a more politicized process with greater expectations that it can be more responsive to democratic practice.[24]

Bundy, curiously enough, gave a thorough account of Nixon's Congressional woes, but he did not acknowledge the source of this "Congressional Revolt."[25] Instead, he adroitly placed the blame squarely on Nixon's Cambodian Incursion and the secret B-52 bombings. "The key factor" for Bundy "was that Congress and the people were rebelling at last against inadequate participation and consultation, most of all because of their sense that the president had never really leveled with them."[26]

According to some of my students, this was a disingenuous charge. While Nixon's action did trigger adverse Congressional reactions, it was in retrospective an accumulation of frustration with executive privilege which started with Democratic senator J. William Fulbright's book *Arrogance of Power* (1966), a popular dissent with Johnson's war policies.[27] As columnist David Broder of *The Washington Post* put it, "the men and the movement that broke Lyndon Johnson's authority in 1968 are out to break Richard Nixon in 1969. The likelihood is great that they will succeed again, for breaking a president is, like most feats, easier to accomplish the second time round."[28] The "forbearance" shown to in particular to Kennedy was totally withdrawn from Nixon by the eastern liberals in the media.[29] Historian Melvin Small, analyzing journalistic trends from 1954 to 1978, discovered that Nixon received the most unfavorable coverage on at least two national newspapers and one national TV network.[30]

China's rapprochement was, of course, the crown jewel in Nixon's realpolitik. It began with Nixon practicing "linkage" on the Soviet Union. Essentially it was a series of calculated moves to coerce the Soviets into cooperating on certain global issues (such as the

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[23] Gavin, "Acheson, Nixon and the Politics of Deception," 340.
[24] Jerel Rosati, review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (September 1999): 727.
[25] Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, 394.
[26] Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, 517.
[27] Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, 935.
[28] William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Belmont Books, 1975), 171.
[29] Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 650; Michael Barone, "Nixon's America," *U.S. News and World Report* (September 20, 1999): 20-27.
[30] Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 227.

Vietnam War) by promising some economic incentives and a workable, flexible diplomacy in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). As early as 1969, Nixon communicated to Secretary of State Rogers and Secretary of Defense Laird, "the great issues are fundamentally inter-related...crisis or confrontation [with the Soviets] in one place and real cooperation in another cannot be sustained simultaneously."[31] If the Soviets proved mulish, my students discovered that Nixon had an ace up his sleeve: the China Card.[32]

But Bundy discounted this and declared that the China rapprochement could have happened "regardless of who sat in the White House." Also, he dismissed the importance of China as a factor in "Triangulation" vis-à-vis the 1972 Soviet Summit. Instead, he believed that Willy Brandt's pending ratification of his Ostpolitik in the Bundestag was the "central" factor that made the Soviets continue with the Summit. The testimonies of Georgi Arbatov and Anatoly Dobrynin were cited as evidence. [33]

Once their curiosity was piqued, my students wanted to find out more about the opinions of other important Soviet officials. Although we lack the language training and access to declassified files, we do have translated memoirs by former Soviet personnel. For example, the memoirs of Arkady N. Shevchenko, a Soviet diplomat to the United Nations (UN), who defected to the U.S. in the early 1980s, are easily available. A quick check in the extensive bibliography of Bundy's book reveals that Shevchenko's memoir is listed. To quote Shevchenko's important observations,

> When Kissinger began his triangular diplomacy by secretly visiting Peking in July 1971, it was a *shock* to the Soviet leadership. Gromyko went about for weeks with a black expression. After Nixon's trip to China in February 1972, and the announcement of the Shanghai Communiqué, there was a heated meeting of the Politburo…Brezhnev had given Gromyko a thorough dressing-down for not anticipating the American-Chinese rapprochement."[34]

Bundy seemed to have conveniently missed certain important points and had not used the evidence with total candor. Plainly speaking, the Soviet leadership was extremely distressed by Nixon's China Card.[35]

China, in other words, had always been the central problem for the Soviets. Brandt's Ostpolitik was only part of the solution. The other part of the solution was surely détente with the Americans. In fact, the Soviets even subtly sought U.S. acquiescence for a limited nuclear attack on China in 1970.[36] Given the Soviets' pathological fear of China, the specter

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[31] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 136.
[32] Min Chen, *The Strategic Triangle and Regional Conflicts* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 74.
[33] Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, 244, 321.
[34] Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 266-267.
[35] Kissinger recalled that before he joined the Nixon administration, "senior [Soviet] communists told me of their anxiety that the Chinese would begin moving towards us, and that thus would create a totally new situation." See Winston Lord, *Kissinger on Kissinger: Reflections on Diplomacy, Grand Strategy, and Leadership* (New York: All Points Books, 2019), 53.
[36] Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 306.

of a Sino-American rapprochement might have prompted the Soviets to be cooperative.[37] Indeed they even turned a blind eye to Nixon's mining of Haiphong harbor, so eager were they for the May 1972 Summit. Hence, it is difficult if not impossible to accept Bundy's view that the effect of Nixon's China Card was negligible in the 1972 Soviet Summit.[38]

Nevertheless, Bundy presented a valuable if biased "impressive synthesis of secondary works and memoirs."[39] My students generally found that discussions on Nixon's opposition on the domestic front were well informed, but Southeast Asian concerns were glaringly thin by comparison. Budny's recount and analysis of Nixon's deliberations on the SALT agreements had the necessary nuances and simplicity to be easy to grasp. In comparison, his understanding of the bureaucratic structure, which Nixon constructed around his foreign policy apparatus and its implications, could only be gleamed from a knowledgeable Washington insider.

In the final analysis, Bundy's pregnant silences are a function of his politics. As such, Bundy's book paled in comparison with other scholarly analyses such as Jeffery Kimball's *Nixon's Vietnam War*. Bundy's "most serious flaw is that the discretion of the former official prevails over the historian's consuming quest."[40] In fact, Trouillot succinctly pointed out that "'the legacy of the past' may not be anything bequeathed by the past itself."[41] Robert Kagan minced no words in describing Bundy's alleged motive,

> Nixon's colossal failure as president had the effect of washing away memories of the liberal establishment's own colossal failure. It even provided a kind of backhanded vindication. The liberal establishment may have erred, even seriously erred, in Vietnam; but at least they were not crooks.[42]

At its best, Bundy's account stands as an intelligent, passionate response to Nixon's and Kissinger's memoirs. At its worst, Bundy emerges from his book as an embittered, partisan, establishment veteran who disapproved of everything Nixon had said or done despite the fact that this "Red Baiter" ended the Vietnam War. The teaching moment in my class is to highlight the bias inherent in the officials of previous administrations. This perfectly echoes Trouillot's highlighting of "the past [as] a position."[43]

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[37] Pompidou told Nixon that the Soviets "fear China most … they felt they could do nothing against China which was indestructible." Cited in *The Kissinger Transcripts: Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow*, ed. William Burr (New York: The New Press, 1998), 35.
[38] "[The Soviets] needed it more than the United States, especially since Nixon had concluded a very successful summit with their archenemies, the Chinese, in February. The President was correct…" See Small, *Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 89, 118.
[39] Hershberg, "Presidential Deceptions and Diplomatic Errors," X01.
[40] Garry Woodard, review of *A Tangled Web*, by William Bundy, H-Diplo, *H-Net Reviews*, August 1999, http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=22196935440749, 7.
[41] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 17.
[42] Robert Kagan, "Disestablishment," review of *A Tangled Web* by William Bundy, *The New Republic*, August 17, 1998, 30.
[43] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past,* 15.

(Re)Discovering Self-Identity with Oral and Local History

The Second World War is another historical topic with deep local resonances in Asia. As late as 2018, researchers were still uncovering evidence of additional mass graves from the war in Singapore. Recent attempts to rename a historical museum inadvertently stirred up a hornet's nest.[44] But as the years go by, the younger grandparents no longer have the experiences of the war. Yet the Second World War remains critical in the official narrative. Trouillot mentions a sociological phenomenon which is particularly salient here: "the collective subjects who supposedly remember did not exist as such at the time of the events they claim to remember…rather, their constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past. As such, they do not succeed such a past: they are its contemporaries."[45] In Singapore, political leaders have found the global event of the Second World War appropriate for fostering a common story of the people of Singapore, called *The Singapore Story*.

The incentive to use pain to stimulate nationalism is not new. "More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing," pointed out the nineteenth-century French intellectual Ernest Renan. "In the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having *suffered*, enjoyed, and hoped together."[46] The war, it appears, is one lever which is exercised by the state to evoke such a shared heritage. As far back as 1997, Lee Hsien Loong, then Singapore Deputy Prime Minister, spelled out the parameters of *The Singapore Story* at the inauguration of the National Education program:

> As a British colony, from 1942 to 1945 for 3½ years of the Japanese Occupation we suffered a traumatic experience of cruelty, brutality, hunger, and deprivation. We lived through the post-war years of Communist-inspired unrest and upheaval. […] The Singapore Story is based on historical facts. We are not talking about an idealized, legendary account or a founding myth, but of an accurate understanding of what happened in the past and what this history means for us today. It is objective history, seen from a Singapore standpoint.[47]

In short, this is the general mandate for history educators in Singapore. What are the realities on the ground?

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[44] Melody Zaccheus, "More War Graves beneath Ground of Bukit Brown," *The Straits Times*, May 2, 2018, B2; Zaccheus, "Naming of Gallery: 'Never any Intention to Cause Pain," *The Straits Times*, February 18, 2017, A3.
[45] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 16.
[46] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 19.
[47] BG Lee Hsien Loong, Speech, Launch of National Education, May 17, 1997, 5, 11, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/1997051607/lhl19970517s.pdf.

I find oral history an ideal pedagogic tool to induce historical empathy. Both my former secondary school and junior college students (1999-2005) interviewed family elders to great effect. The act of collecting oral interviews with old folks on their war experiences was especially transformative and poignant for students who were mostly disinterested at first. I simply could not assign this project to my students if I had not walked the talk. Posing as an educational leader who led from the front, I "heroically" did one oral history interview. The following is an unenviable account of my misadventures. Much of my travails corresponded with my students' experiences.

Like my students, I faced one major difficulty in conducting interviews. My command of the Southern Chinese dialects is weak due to the Singapore government's past language policies, which frowned upon dialects on major televised mediums. Hence, it was with great apprehension that I interviewed my first old man, Mr. Tang (pseudonym). But before I go into my experiences of interviewing Tang, I would like to highlight the sea of difference, which has happened as the result of the Internet revolution.

Back in 1999, any potential investigator into Singapore's wartime past had to contend with many obstacles. The Singapore National Archives' website was unreliable. One could also plough through the catalogue published by the archives.[48] As a general sign of amateurish endeavors, the catalogue only has name entries with a brief description of the reel. The sore lack of an index meant that one had to go through the thick catalogue with a fine comb. By early 2002, all that had changed; the official portal had useful thematic subdivisions. CORD (Collection of Oral History Recording Database) was immensely useful. Nowadays, entries can be easily searched by just using keywords restricted to the oral reels. More critically, there are PDF copies of selected transcripts.[49]

In the library, there are also several oral history books related to the war. The Singapore National Archives' *The Japanese Occupation: Singapore 1942-45* (1985) is outdated and pictures heavy. The *Oral History Manual* (1992) has a sample questionnaire, which is valuable, which I armed myself with in my interview. As a sign of the times, the National Archives published an updated version of oral history manual, *Memories and Reflections: The Singapore Experience: Documenting a Nation's History through Oral History*, in 2007.[50] The Oral History Department also conducts an annual workshop on the practice of conducting oral interviews.

Nonetheless, my first oral interview was nothing short of a disaster. Once the interview started, all rules and sample questions were chucked out of the window. (Similarly, I remembered grading one student's interview report which cheerily quoted "no plan can go

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[48] *Syonan: Singapore under the Japanese: A Catalogue of Oral History Interviews* (Singapore: Oral History Department, 1986).

[49] See for example the revamped website, "Home - Oral History Interviews," National Archives of Singapore, n.d., https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/.

[50] National Archives (Singapore), *The Japanese Occupation: Singapore, 1942-1945* (Singapore: National Archives Singapore, 1985); Daniel Chew, *Oral History Manual*, rev. ed. (Singapore: Oral History Department, 1992); Oral History Centre (Singapore), *Memories & Reflections: The Singapore Experience: Documenting a Nation's History Through Oral History* (Singapore: Oral History Centre, 2007).

farther than the first battle,"[51] when his interview went south as well.) For one, Mr. Tang was as energetic as Lee Kuan Yew; in fact, he was just as forceful. He insisted that he would talk and do his household chores at the same time. So up and down I shadowed him around the house. Also, he would suddenly lurch to another topic only marginally connected to the war, e.g., his search for a wife. As it turned out, he was engaged in gathering materials for an herbal-chicken soup boiled especially for his granddaughter and me. (Oh yes, that was how long the interview took.) More importantly, Tang had no concept of dates; he waved me off "Hello? That was very long ago!" He often took references from the year when "he had a toothache" or "Tek Pui sold me that *** bicycle." Even more alarming, he sometimes referred to the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation's Japanese Occupation soap operas starring Xiang Yun. With a twinkle of the eye, he would ask me if I wanted dramatic events like those. He was somewhat deflated when I insisted on mundane things such as vegetable and egg prices.[52]

Upon reflection and in the process of transcribing the oral tape (no MP3 recorder at that time), Tang was kind of anxious for my interview to be successful. But some of the events were completely counterfactual to the historical narratives.[53] (I was on a naïve theory proving mission.) He would gently reproach me, "this is real life mah, ah boy. You think textbook, har?" Some incidents were so outrageous that I was forced to dig up numerous memoirs of Singaporeans published just to crosscheck. But once I delved into it, some things were even more incredible in the memoirs. For example, one chap spent a better part of the war gambling and having a whale of a time with the Japanese. He was none for the worse after the war.[54] In the midst of my literature search, John Boyle's *China and Japan at War: The Politics of Collaboration* (1972) became significant. I actually stumbled upon an interpretative insight not discussed by Singapore scholars: collaboration in war.[55] This is surely a major silence in Singapore's history of the Second World War. Nor does it sit well with the national discourse of suffering and heroism in *The Singapore Story*. By mechanically following a standardized national narrative of the war, one belies the inherent

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[51] Helmuth von Moltke, "Therefore no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force," see *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel Hughes (New York: Random House, 1993), 92.

[52] The fickleness of human memory is well documented. Gaynor Kavanagh has noted, "When we reveal our memories we narrate them to an audience, if only of one, and become storytellers with our memories organised and presented accordingly. Such memories are added to the 'repertoire' and brought out for 'performance.' See "Making Histories, Making Memories," In *Making Histories in Museums*, ed. Gaynor Kavanagh (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 8.

[53] Yang Huei Pang, "The Tangled Web of Wartime Collaboration and Survival in Singapore: A Chinese Farmer's Experience," in *Reflections and Interpretations: Oral History Centre 25th Anniversary Publication*, ed. Daniel Chew (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, National Heritage Board, 2005), 227-255.

[54] Chor Boon Goh, *Living Hell: Story of a WWII Survivor at the Death Railway* (Singapore: Asiapac Books, 1999), 101.

[55] John Hunter Boyle, *China and Japan at War, 1937-1945: The Politics of Collaboration* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972); Timothy Brook, "Hesitating before the Judgment of History," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2012): 103–114, doi: 10.1017/S0021911811002932; Timothy Brook, *Great State: China and the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

cacophony of disjointed noises in its making. In a single-minded pursuit of "national cohesion," one may invariably deprive "students from intellectual encounters with their world that would sharpen their critical abilities."[56] From another perspective, a resultant lack of such reflexivity is not uncommon. "Solidarity is produced by people acting together," quipped one commentator, "not by people thinking together."[57] Although the promotion of solidarity should not come at the expense of critical mindedness, it is challenging to compete against the exigent demands of society.[58] Yet given the potential instrumentality of oral history to disrupt the official narratives, reintroducing such practices at appropriate junctures can even enliven, "adding texture and heart," to standard accounts.[59]

An Indian Subject of the British Raj

In addition, how does one account for another related global phenomenon – British imperialism? After all, the British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced in his broadcast that the fall of Singapore was a "a British and Imperial defeat."[60] Pax Britannia was a reality for many people (whether they were willing subjects is beside the point) from the sixteenth century onwards. Just how does one research on any subject of the Empire in Singapore when that history is predetermined in *The Singapore Story* manner? A little context is instructive here: back in 2016, the National Gallery of Singapore was soundly lambasted for having the nerve of naming its charity ball "The Empire Ball."[61] While the experiences of the Second World War are valorized, colonial pasts are "disciplined" to fit a narrative, which largely downplays the latter.

The texture of such "governmentality" exercised by the state is explained in various places by French philosopher Michel Foucault:

> Government did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of

[56] William L. Griffen and John Marciano, *Teaching the Vietnam War* (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1979), 163.
[57] David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 76.
[58] Piet van der Ploeg and Laurence Guérin, "Questioning Participation and Solidarity as Goals of Citizenship Education," *Critical Review* 28, no. 2 (2016): 250; Henri Pettersson, "The Conflicting Ideals of Democracy and Critical Thinking in Citizenship Education," *Philosophy of Education* 75 (2019): 356; Henry A. Giroux, "Critical Theory and Rationality in Citizenship Education," *Curriculum Inquiry* 10, no. 4 (1980): 333.
[59] Nabilah Said, "Seniors share their wartime stories of courage, resilience," *The Straits Times*, September 19, 2017, D2.
[60] Winston Churchill, Speech, "Singapore Has Fallen," February 15, 1942, in *Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches*, ed. Winston S. Churchill (London: Pimlico, 2004), 329.
[61] Henedick Chng, "The Syonan Gallery, Empire Ball, and the Singaporean Identity," *Mothership.sg*, (February 13, 2017), https://mothership.sg/2017/02/the-syonan-gallery-empire-ball-and-the-singaporean-identity/.

> action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.[62]

Both Foucault and Trouillot call out the silencing of certain narratives, pointing out how the realization of silences can in turn transform into an intentional effort in directing or channeling "the possibilities of action" of citizens.

Indeed, one prominent Singaporean establishment figure gave a pithy formula on how locals can assess the British experience. The rubric appears to be "60 per cent 'good' and 40 per cent 'bad.'"[63] Such ambivalence is shrewdly calculated, for example when the first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew accepted the pragmatic advice from his Dutch economic advisor, Albert Winsemius in 1961, and decided against removing the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles near Victoria Memorial Hall. Keeping the statue was symbolic and useful in attracting Western expertise and investors who were largely leery of the ultra-nationalism of newly independent countries.[64] The license to *reshape* Singapore's colonial past for its present needs was further elaborated on by Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam in 1984:

> Raffles founded Singapore. This is a fact. It is also a fact that the British ruled Singapore for 146 years. We may detest imperial rule but, as with Roman imperial rule in Britain, British imperial rule had both positive and negative aspects. It was both oppressive and liberationist. The intelligent and responsible anti-imperialist should, once the battle was won, retain and improve upon what is positive in imperialism while discarding its reactionary and oppressive features.[65]

This leads to my next point. When I was requested to "elaborate" on the history of Somapah Road ahead of the official opening of Singapore's University of Technology and Design (SUTD), for the edification of my students and colleagues, I was beset by trepidations. Another colleague, surely a master tactician, encouraged his students to produce a documentary on the same topic.[66] As a practitioner of history, I could not realistically worm out of this commission. But apart from a middling knowledge of a few

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[62] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 789.
[63] Yunzhou Lan, "Dui yingguo zhimintongzhi xinjiapo xu tongmei liucheng bao sicheng bian," [Tommy Koh: British Colonial Rule of Singapore '60 per cent Good and 40 per cent Bad'] *Lianhe Zaobao,* February 20, 2019, 4.
[64] Kuan Yew Lee, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Edition, 2000), 50.
[65] Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, Speech. Second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), Seminar on "Adaptive Reuse: Integrating Traditional Areas into the Modern Urban Fabric," Shangri-La Hotel, April 28, 1984, 7, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/19840428_0001.pdf; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 15-18.
[66] Patrick Khoo et al., "Somapah," SUTD Non-fiction film lab, Singapore University of Technology and Design, August 18, 2018, https://vimeo.com/sandeepray/somapah.

grisly wartime vignettes about the February 1942 massacre of anti-Japanese "elements" by the Japanese military on Upper Changi Road, I was floundering for an interpretative angle.[67] Thankfully, this terrifying conundrum transformed into one of the most interesting cerebral forays for me personally. By using Trouillot's insights, I can share with my students what is missing, and what is reconstructed in Singapore's search for a modern national narrative.

For all intents and purposes, one distinctive feature of Somapah Road is its "curve" (see Figure 1). Just as European visitors to the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 in Paris commented extensively on the curves of Balinese dancers in the Dutch kampung exhibit, visitors to SUTD (from January 2015, when the university started operations at the new campus, to September 2017, when Somapah Road was straightened) had also much to say about our curve, albeit in a different manner.[68] For example, one parent complained, much to the mirth of his daughter, that the curve of Somapah affected the driving of his Porsche. Jests aside, prominent Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul once postulated the contentious process through which Thailand came to delineate its borders via modern maps; we can similarly talk about how literally the "curve" of Somapah is gone, "rationalized" with the march of progress.[69]

At least one resident public intellectual at SUTD has tried his best to argue for the retention of the curve as it partially traces the intersecting boundaries of two villages (Somapah Village and Mata Ikan Village, both long gone now) to Singaporean authorities, but to no avail. When the Downtown Line (underground metro) started operation officially on October 21, 2017, the adjacent Somapah Road had also been straightened a couple of weeks earlier. So, while the curve of Somapah generated a lot of chatter, the contrasting deafening silence in the aftermath of the rationalization of its curve is indicative of how we Singaporeans march in lock step with modernization *à la* the Max Weber's Iron Cage way.[70] With every "straightening" of curves, we seem to lose a little of ourselves.

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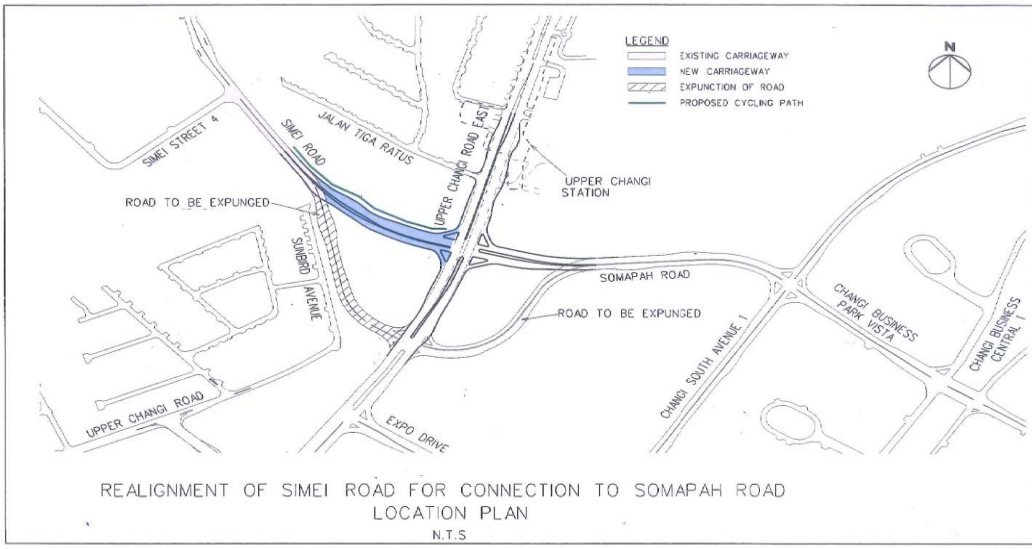
[67] Mamoru Shinozaki, *Syonan - My Story: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore* (Singapore: Times Books, 1982), 28-32.
[68] Marieke Bloembergen, *Colonial Spectacles: The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931*, trans. Beverly Jackson (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), 137.
[69] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).
[70] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1930; reprint, London: Routledge, 2001), 123.

Figure 1: The Original Curve of Somapah Road



Source: "Realignment of Simei Road for Connection to Somapah Road Location Plan," Land Transport Authority, accessed November 13, 2017, https://www.lta.gov.sg/data/apps/news/roads/2016/11112016_Realignment%20works%20along%20Simei%20Road.pdf.

The most obvious physical erasure or concealment of Somapah's history stems from a perfunctory announcement by the Land Transport Authority on August 19, 2011, that the new Mass Rapid Transit station would be named "Upper Changi." It is unclear what the percentage was of people who bothered voting for the name Somapah, which was one of the choices. No documentary evidence is readily available about the debates which the National Heritage Board, the Urban Redevelopment Board, the Housing and Development Board, and the advisers and grassroots of the respective constituencies had vis-à-vis the naming of the MRT station. But at least one netizen by the moniker "agongkia," in one of the forum pages, admitted that Somapah was the name of his choice.[71] But who exactly was Somapah?

At least six prominent sources are available for a historian. Kandasamy Ratnam, a descendent of Appasamy Kandasamy, published his family history, *Singapura at the turn of the last century* (2017) online, and it used to have a couple of relevant chapters; the National Library Board's Infopedia has an entry "Somapah" (2016); local geographers Victor Savage and Brenda Yeoh's *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics* (2013) has a single entry; curator Nalina Gopal has published a short essay on Somapah's son W. L. S. Basapa (2013); the Basapa family maintains the site, "The Basapas of Singapore"

[71] "Okay, on my love for Somapah…, I had actually voted for the name to be call Somapah Station and even propose that Expo Station should be rename Gulega Station somewhere in the net. But somehow I later deleted my comments as I try not to be everywhere." See, Agongkia, June 9, 2011, (1703 hrs), comment on "Memories of the Lost World that was Somapah Village," December 16, 2010, https://thelongnwindingroad.wordpress.com/2010/12/16/memories-of-the-lost-world-that-was-somapah-village/#comments.

(2010); and finally, a documentary "Pioneers of Singapore" was aired on Singapore television in the 1990s.[72] Impressively, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong even cited Somapah in his speech at the opening of the Indian Heritage Centre on May 7, 2015: "There had been many others as well, Mr. Hunmah Somapah, Rajabali Jumabhoy, etc. We might not remember their names, but their names are inscribed in many places all over Singapore."[73]

It turns out that the eponymous road was named after Hunmah Somapah (1870? – 1919) who was locally educated at St. Joseph Institution. His father Hunmapah (d. 1906) was a skilled migrant from Mysore, India. From the official website maintained by the Basapa family, one can gather that whether Hunmapah was a former convict or skilled laborer was a contentious issue.[74] Was Hunmapah a victim of a family feud? Was he a political detainee who ran afoul of British authorities in the British Raj? These cannot be determined, but when Hunmapah died in 1906, he owned "three adjoining properties along Race Course Road (numbers 35-39) … [and] several more properties." Hunmah Somapah, who had been working at the Singapore Municipality for twenty years as a bill collector and cashier, resigned upon his father's death to go into private business as a broker and commission agent. Apart from managing and expanding his father's properties, Somapah morphed into a shrewd businessman and a respected leader of his ethnic community. As a former civil servant and comprador, Somapah was wise in the ways of his colonial masters. He lent his social prominence to causes central to his ethnic community by lobbying the Governor of the Straits Settlement, Arthur Henderson Young, for Deepavali to be recognized as a public holiday. He also indulged in extensive philanthropy. Free meals for the poor were started at the Sri Krishna Temple; in fact, Somapah Village, where SUTD now stands, was a low rent housing project created by this pioneer entrepreneur. When he died in 1919, he left an estate that was estimated to be worth the princely sum of ten million Singapore dollars.

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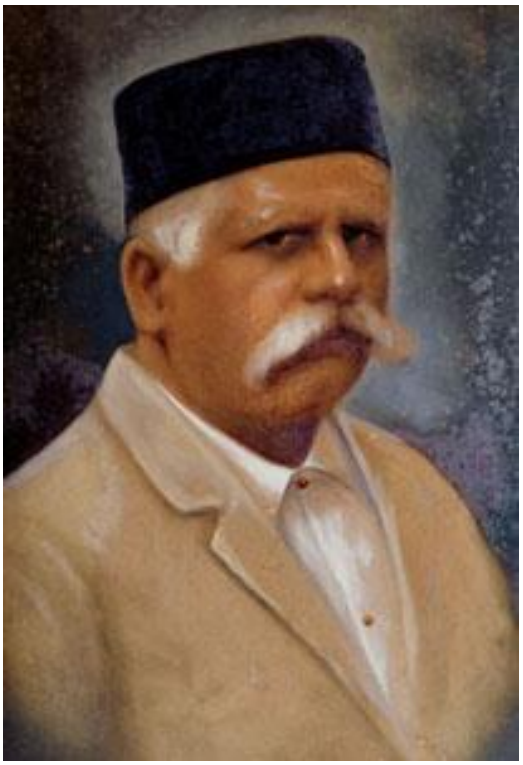
[72] All information about Somapah are curated from the following sources: Joe Ratnam, *Singapura at the Turn of the Last Century*, accessed November 7, 2017, https://singapurasite.wordpress.com/; Nalina Gopal, "Finding Basapa - In Search of a Pioneer and his Story," *Be Muse* 6, no. 2 (July-September 2013); *The Basapas of Singapore*, last modified 2024, http://www.singaporebasapa.com/; Stephanie Ho and Jaime Koh, "Somapah," *Singapore Infopedia*, October 18, 2016, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-10-20_110927.html; Victor R. Savage, Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2013), 353.

[73] Lee Hsien Loong, Speech, Opening of the Indian Heritage Centre, May 7, 2015, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/transcript-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-speech-opening-indian-heritage-centre-7-may.

[74] There is a common, albeit erroneous and racist stereotype that some Indians in Singapore are descended from colonial convicts. See Frank S. Marryat, "Indian Convicts," in *Travellers' Singapore*, ed. John Bastin (1848; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 53-56; John Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore: Gradual Disappearance of Untouchability, 1872-1965* (London: Routledge, 2015), 78-80.

Figure 2. Hunmah Somapah



Source: "Hunmah Somapah," accessed November 13, 2017, http://www.singaporebasapa.com/Photo%20Gallery%2001.html.

Somapah's Horatio Alger trajectory is illustrative on many levels about life in colonial Singapore and the Straits Settlement. Rapid ascent to the commanding heights of society was possible.[75] Within a generation, with useful business ties to the colonial establishment (he was after all a bill collector), shrewd investments (he was also a part time broker even when he was working at the municipality), and calculated land purchases at the periphery of Singapore (Somapah purchased extensive tracts in the underdeveloped east of Singapore: Punggol, Changi, Paya Lebar and Tampines), a second generation migrant could amass a fortune that was unimaginable by local standards. Who says only Hong Kong can produce Li Ka-shings? Are there rivals to those old moneyed American families such as the Astors, Delanos, and Cabots? Gilded Age historian Henry Adams sardonically captured the dilemmas of the nouveau riche. "What did they do with their money? What could they do with it that was different from what other men did?" asked Adams, "To spend it in charity and public works was doubtless praiseworthy, but was it wise?"[76] Indeed, a similar dynamic

[75] Another wealthy contemporary who had a similar meteoric rise would be Tan Kah-kee. See Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 272.
[76] Henry Adams, *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 17.

operated for Somapah's family. His son William Lawrence Soma Basapa (1893-1943) was famous for maintaining a world-renowned zoo at Punggol, northeast of Singapore, for close to two decades.

So why did the transport authorities persist in naming that MRT station "Upper Changi" rather than naming it "Somapah" to maintain the name of the old village as well as referring to the Indian businessman? One possible reason could be simply that the wheels of government bureaucracy are run by "informed" personnel. When transport officials ran their poll in December 2010, official knowledge of Somapah was in its infancy. The deafening silence in terms of sources and archives demonstrated simply that the subject of Somapah did not "satisfy vital material and symbolic interests" for the state.[77] So at that juncture only the Basapa family would have been interested in keeping alive memories about their illustrious forebears.[78] For the authorities, the deed of the land had long passed into other hands, and to purchase the land for strategic development was the primary concern in a fast-changing society. Even state curator Nalina Gopal had trouble tracking down the descendants of Somapah. With the passing of Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015, Singaporeans, who were for so long bound to Weberian charismatic leadership, found it necessary to actively seek out literally other "pioneers," an arguably Freudian act in preserving the self and identity.[79] Hence, a floodgate to information on other pioneers "relevant" to authorities was opened, leaving this historian quite breathless. The latter observation underscores again Trouillot's note about factual retrieval and "retrospective significance."[80]

On the one hand, the Singapore government's definition of "pioneer generation" at once both silences and promotes the concept of "pioneer."[81] Simply put, the immediate question is, "a pioneer of what?" Was Somapah a pioneer at the time of colonial Singapore or is he a pioneer for all Singaporeans today? For example, one can turn to the official website of the Pioneer Generation.[82] The website, itself is a master class in data-visualization, and features an excerpt from Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong:

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[77] Pierre Bourdieu argues that an "official relationship" must be actively maintained, but it boils down to the material usefulness of the relationship. See *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1977), 37-38.

[78] David Thelen observes, "how people together searched for common memories to meet *present* needs, how they first recognize such a memory and then agreed, disagreed or negotiated over its meaning, and finally how they preserved and absorbed that meaning into ongoing concerns." See "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (1989): 1123.

[79] "Sexual needs are not capable of uniting men in the same way as are the demands of self-preservation." See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (1913; reprint, London, Routledge Classics, 2001), 86; on the instability of charismatic leadership, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 2, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 1114-1115.

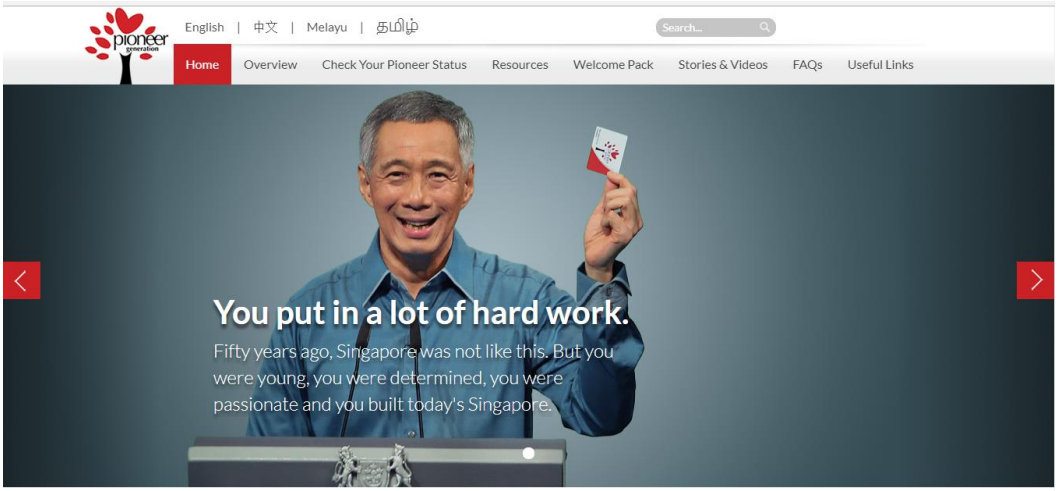
[80] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

[81] In addition, one can see how the "pioneer" concept performs an "appeal to instincts of sacrifice while simultaneously arousing a sense of continuing life." See Raymond Cohen, *Theatre of Power* (London: Longman, 1987), 213.

[82] The "Pioneer Generation," launched in 2014, is a social welfare scheme which aims to provide affordable medical and healthcare for Singapore's older generation. See "Pioneer Generation," Singapore Government, accessed November 13, 2017, https://www.pioneers.sg/en-sg/Pages/Home.aspx.

"You put in a lot of hard work. Fifty years ago, Singapore was not like this. But you were young, you were determined, you were passionate and you built today's Singapore" (see Figure 3). Singapore's august gatekeepers maintain the window at "fifty years" or "born on or before 31 December 1949; Aged 65 and above in 2014." Based on this official classification, the emphasis seems to be functionally on current Singaporeans who are still around, not so much on the historical pioneers who made their mark during the colonial period. For Somapah, perhaps there is special providence in the resurgence of interest in this colonial Indian pioneer, but in the final analysis, the fluid configuration of Singapore's pioneers rests on its saliency in serving the state's current sociopolitical needs.[83]

Figure 3: Pioneer Generation Website



Source: "Pioneer Generation," Singapore Government, accessed November 13, 2017, https://www.pioneers.sg/en-sg/Pages/Home.aspx.

Conclusion

This essay has utilized the concepts of historicity and silences, developed by Trouillot, in three episodes which concern history teaching, making, and writing. In the first instance, I conducted a classroom critique of a partisan Cold War account of the Vietnam War. The real teaching moment arrived when I was able to point out the trenchant political "position" of the author which in turn over-determined the outcome of their historical enquiry. Secondly, I reflected on the gains and losses of conducting oral history on survivors'

[83] Analogous fluidity or instability in historical interpretations and meanings are discussed by scholars. Stephanie Anderson, "The Stories Nations Tell: Sites of Pedagogy, Historical Consciousness, and National Narratives," *Canadian Journal of Education* 40, no. 1 (2017): 13; Lloyd Kramer, "Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 1 (1997): 527; Marc Jason Gilbert, "When Heroism is Not Enough: Three Women Warriors of Vietnam, Their Historians and World History," *World History Connected*, June 2007, https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/4.3/gilbert.html.

experiences of the Second World War. Using my experiences as a foil, I drew up a thick description of my encounters and speculated on the possible social engineering credits the state might stand to gain with a prolonged focus on the war as a shared experience for the nation. Finally, I moved on to another transnational theme, British imperialism. In a reflexive exercise, I sought to write up an Indian subject of the British Raj operating in Singapore. I found the subject's "historical relevance" to be embedded in Singapore's intense concern with national development and modernity, rather than any discussions about colonialism.

These three episodes have demonstrated how global topics are interrelated with local concerns. While the Vietnam War may have been the folly of at least three U.S. presidencies, anxious Southeast Asian nations (as well as Lee Kuan Yew's family) were preparing for the worst – the final fall of the dominoes to Communism. Similarly, the Second World War may have been the domain of the "Greatest Generation," as coined by journalist Tom Brokaw, yet Singapore saw instead the saliency of turning the war into a shibboleth for engineering a collective social consciousness in the late 1990s.[84] Through such positioning, the complexity of collecting history seemed at once shortchanged and compromised. Likewise, accounts of British imperialism are sanitized. Prominent colonial Indian subjects such as Somapah were initially given short shrift. His dramatic story was all but forgotten, and then resuscitated again, albeit shorn off any colonial vestiges. Somapah is now transmogrified into a Singapore historical pioneer, no longer berthed in the past as a subject of the distant British Raj. Thus, the saliency of each global event – the Cold War, the Second World War, and colonialism – could be usefully undergirded by local perspectives.

Using the insights of Trouillot, our students learn that history making is a stubbornly political process. According to Trouillot, "[power] precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation."[85] This insight is critical and timely. Among and around us are rich institutional memories of common people who are at the receiving end of governmental policies. Whether the state incorporates its citizens' experiences into the national narrative or simply imposes its account from above has an immeasurable impact on the sociopolitical identity of the metropolis. By the same measure, how Singapore defines itself as a country is inadvertently rooted in Singaporeans' perceptions of the past. Singaporeans are surrounded by unspoken memories, dreams, and struggles, both literally and figuratively; in other words, the stuff of human experiences, and specifically nation-building. "Most young men and women at the century's end," as Hobsbawm is wont to lament, "grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in."[86] Yet increasingly, the proverbial

[84] "One is inclined to believe that the *collective consciousness* is the entire social consciousness, that is, co-terminous with the psychological life of society." Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (1893; reprint, London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), 39; Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).
[85] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 29.
[86] Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 3.

Habermas-like "intermeshed" civil society has taken a participatory role in museum exhibits, public commemoration, and history making from the ground up.[87] Hitherto, one Singaporean intellectual, Tan Tai Yong, advocates "some conversation with the community" to inculcate historical consciousness. "This can be done in schools," Tan writes, "but also through self-discovery in family and community efforts."[88] Hence, French historian Marc Ferro veraciously noted that "history has many hearths and academics are not the sole history teachers in the land."[89] History teaching, making, and writing in Singapore has evolved beyond the confines of official academia, and has the potential to take a more dynamic path in its development.[90]

[87] For some salient international examples of participatory museum education, see Fiona McLean, "Museums and the Representation of Identity," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Peter Howard and B. J. Graham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 293; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989), 176.

[88] For Singaporean historian Tan Tai Yong's interview, see Yan Liang Lim, "Monuments Warrant a Conversation, Too," *The Straits Times*, November 29, 2014, D4; Tai Yong Tan, "History's Many Shades of Grey," *The Straits Times*, September 15, 2014, A20.

[89] Cited in Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 20; French historian Pierre Nora noted, "Only such a history, at once scholarly and accessible to the wider public, is capable of responding to the needs of the moment." See Peter Lambert and Phillipp Schofield, "History and Power," in *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, ed. Peter Lambert and Phillipp Schofield (London: Routledge, 2004), 291.

[90] This is to answer Wang Gungwu's question, "So do historians have to wait till everyone concerned is dead, every archive opened and, …[they are] only left with the reinterpreting and refuting of what has been written [?]" See "Contemporary and National History: A Double Challenge," in *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, ed. Gungwu Wang (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 13.