Burnished Ornamentalism: Making Sense of History and the Visual Cultural Practices of Postcolonial Elite Schools in Globalizing Circumstances

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Abstract- This paper addresses the matter of the management and conservation of histories (“burnished ornamentalism”) in three school sites: in Barbados, India and Singapore respectively. These schools form part of a 5-year, 9-country study of postcolonial elite schools in globalizing circumstances—a flash point of articulation between these schools and profound change. This essay turns on this fundamental fact: that these schools, which are the products of societies marked historically by colonial and imperial encounters, are now driven forward by new energies associated with marketization, neoliberalism and globalization as these countries lurch forward unevenly towards a postdevelopmental era. This turn towards neoliberal globalization has precipitated radically new needs, interests, desires, capacities and competitive logics among the middle class and upwardly-mobile young and their parents in each of these societies that then press powerfully onto these elite schools and they cultivated pasts as they reside in school anthems, flags, emblems, banners and rituals of assembly, formal dress and decorum.

Keywords: postcolonial, elite schools, ornamentalism, globalization, transnational educational market.

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Abstract- This paper addresses the matter of the management and conservation of histories ("burnished ornamentalism") in three school sites: in Barbados, India and Singapore respectively. These schools form part of a 5-year, 9-country study of postcolonial elite schools in globalizing circumstances—a flash point of articulation between these schools and profound change. This essay turns on this fundamental fact: that these schools, which are the products of societies marked historically by colonial and imperial encounters, are now driven forward by new energies associated with marketization, neoliberalism and globalization as these countries lurch forward unevenly towards a postdevelopmental era. This turn towards neoliberal globalization has precipitated radically new needs, interests, desires, capacities and competitive logics among the middle class and upwardly-mobile young and their parents in each of these societies that then press powerfully onto these elite schools and they cultivated pasts as they reside in school anthems, flags, emblems, banners and rituals of assembly, formal dress and decorum. All of this is taking place in the glow of digitalization as these schools increasingly move online locating themselves in photo and video-sharing websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Flicker as well as websites that each individual school is creating to consecrate school heritage.

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The social world is accumulated history ... (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241)

If there is no suitable past it can always be invented. (Hobsbawn, 1998, p. 5).

For it’s Cloisters, Cloisters, all for Cloisters! (Old Cloisters’ School Song).

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Introduction

This essay addresses the matter of the dynamic uses of history that now define the strategic reaction of postcolonial elite schools (high performing, high stakes, secondary schools in former colonies) to changing educational markets and the revolution of rising expectations of school youngsters in Global South countries. With the advent of globalization, these youngsters now see their tertiary educational and professional futures as best fulfilled abroad—especially in North America (Ong, 2006; Rizvi, 2016; Kenway et al, 2017). It draws on research data from a 5-year, large-scale, field-based, ethnographic study of the way in which schools in nine different countries (Singapore, India, Barbados, Hong Kong, Australia, Northern Cyprus, Argentina, South Africa, and England) are currently preparing youngsters for globalization.

These schools under examination share one distinctive historical feature: they were all established during the high point of British colonial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the purpose of reproducing bureaucratic and economic elites in the colonies. The research project, conducted by a 6-member international research team, including the author, gathered data on the responses of these schools to globalization. Researchers employed ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews with administration officials, teaching staff and students, the shadowing of students, and textual evaluation of reams of school documents (strategic plans, textbooks, curricular outlines and brochures on school history) and online websites.

This essay specifically addresses the management and manipulation of school history and heritage symbols—what I am calling after David Cannadine (2002) “burnished ornamentalism,”—in three of the elite school sites in our international study: Old Cloisters of Barbados, Straits School in Singapore, and Rippon College in India. In what follows, I hope to shed light on the responses of these schools to globalization at a flash point of profound change. Given their historical backgrounds and dynamically changing present, I will probe deeply into the “tangled historicities” (Clifford, 2012, p. 425) registered in the visual and iconographic domains of these schools.
To illustrate this moment in which globalization is placing tremendous pressure on the accumulated history and heritage and the control over elite school narratives in these settings, I turn to a vignette distilled from our field research at Old Cloisters. Following the vignette, I will layout the context of present uses of history and heritage in these schools and outline the organization of this essay.

Disrupting Consecrated History and School Pasts

Vignette I

On a clear day in November 2014, we began our second-round visit to Old Cloisters. The principal, Mr. Crockett received our Barbados research team in an expansive wooden paneled conference room adjacent to his office. It was twenty minutes after eight in the morning. After a few pleasantries, Principal Crockett beckoned us to join him for ‘morning assembly’. We followed him across the school’s quadrangle in what would be a short walk under one of those impossibly azure Barbadian skies to the eastern end of the school grounds. There, we entered the school assembly hall, a neo-Georgian brick building, set apart from the rest of the school for both austere and celebratory gatherings of the entire student and faculty bodies. Here we were in the school’s most hallowed and consecrated space teeming with the nervous energy of school youngsters, their over-seeing prefects, and the school’s faculty and staff. As the school’s historian Tom Cross notes, the assembly hall is latent with symbols of an ornamental and cultivated past. Its emblems and its plaques, listing the names of the prestigious Barbados Scholarship holders, accompany portraits of its past white British schoolmasters going back to 1733. All this extraordinary aggregation of symbolism beams down from on high onto the contemporary school body comprised largely of Afro Barbadian youngsters. Picture then this layered scene of images latent with allusions to the colonial past, trophies of the present, and the iconography and highwater marks of the British public school in the postcolonial setting of Old Cloisters. Our focus, however, was drawn to one overwhelming object hanging in the middle of the wall behind the headmaster and his gathered party on the school dais. It was the Old Cloisters school crest. It seemed to pull the entire rolling set of images to a symbolic center and calm. In it two lions—one on top of the other—lay, raising their right paws in a gesture of regal glory.

(Taken from Fieldnotes on Second Round Visit to Old Cloisters)

Some form of this vignette would be repeated across virtually all our research sites. What does this aggregation of symbolism mean? What is its historical significance in present circumstances in which globalization, as I have noted earlier, is altering the social context and relationships of the elite schools in our study both internally and externally? How, ultimately, are postcolonial elite schools putting these extraordinary historical archives and cultural patrimony to work? Here, I call attention to the elite schools’ manipulation and modulation of history to meet present challenges and the pressure of globalizing change. Attention is especially paid to the choreographed practices of identity making conducted by these schools as they rearticulate and reinvent their symbolic inheritances in a project of hegemonic stabilization and affirmation.

And, what about those lions, seen in the vignette above, that seem to reside somewhere in the symbolic order of each of the elite schools in our international study? The principal emblems of each of the three research schools to be discussed in what follows recruit nature and transfer the symbolic moment of the powerful characteristics associated with the kings of beasts of the land and the air, the lion and the eagle, onto their institutional realm. This articulation of heraldry2 blends history into mythology where the line between fact and fiction disappears into an overwhelming assertion of distinction, distinctiveness and triumphalism. These guiding symbols of our research schools are coiled, pulsing with semiotically arranged tension and historical reference and significance. Like the braiding of systems of power that defined the colonial theater (the dynamic enlacement of the reciprocal projects of capitalism, colonialism, and civilization), these symbols are multidimensional recruiting meanings and practices, metaphor and ritual in the consecration of the enduring dominance of these schools in their respective contexts. These burnished symbols like W.B. Yeats in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ (2016, p. 267) bespeak an almost unquenchable longing for immortality, a wish to be primus inter pares, a dream of constant glory, and the codification of the gold standard that separates these schools from all the rest. The imaginary fervor for affiliation, these densely signifying associations consolidate, perfects a religious and moral righteousness that hums beneath the espoused program of secularism and cosmopolitanism that these schools articulate. Protestantism in the case of Straits School and Old Cloisters and Hinduism in the case of Rippon College are rich aspects of the allusive and imaginary heritage and universe of these schools that lend warrant to their success.

Religion is never really far away from school-based triumphalism. Religious calling, the sense of vocation and social obligation, and the unfolding of organic moral order deeply inform these schools. The hallowed use of space, the assembly halls at Old Cloisters, Straits School and across virtually all the

2 Heraldry is often defined as the code and scheme by which coats of arms and different types of armorial bearings are devised, described, and organized. The origins of heraldry are often traced to 12th century Europe and are claimed to reside in the practice of distinguishing participants in battle—a context in which the faces of combatants were often hidden. Much of the medieval imagery—with its hierarchical ordering and celebration of noble houses, tournaments and jousting—is still retained today in elite schools in post-developmental states—the bequeath of the metropolitan paradigm and the British public school culture transferred during the heyday of colonialism (Woodcock & Robinson 1988).
school sites, the presence of the temple and mosque at Rippon College, the chapels we know to exist in many of the elite school settings in the British metropole—all evoke and communicate a sense of a larger, disciplined order. Our research schools are spaces of elective affinity. It is in institutions like these all over the Global South that students are imbued with the sense of wonder and specialness of the school worlds that they are initiated into and that they inhabit. One is reminded of the painting of John Wesley preaching from his father’s grave found in the art collection at one of the elite schools we visited in our international study. Wesley is depicted speaking to his flock under a tree in a pastoral meadow (an open-air school) much like the prototypical teacher in the elite school. Each subject in the painting implicitly constitutes a vehicle of a particular role: the mother with her suckling baby, the milk maid milking the cows, the farmers with their scythes are frozen in time and responsibility. The painting summarizes the role of education in the Latin sense of ‘educare’, or leading out. The pedagogical subject of a school such as Rippon College or Straits is, by the iconography of the Wesley painting, encouraged to emulate this path of leading, modeling perseverance and overcoming, standing up as a beacon in the world. I will dwell on the imaginary and this use of symbolism and heraldry later in this essay. But what, above all, these symbols dynamically introduce is the active nature of tradition and the past in the contemporary history making of these schools. The elaboration and burnishing of these symbols are part of the larger investment in history and its strategic use that I will explore in what follows.

It was that extraordinarily insightful Marxist historian and precursor to the British cultural studies research tradition, Hobsbawm (1998), who, in his collection of essays titled On History, alerted us to the cultural work of hegemonic institutions on their traditions and historical markers. He specifically called attention to their dexterous present-use of the past: ‘The past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past it can always be invented...The past legitimizes. The past gives a more glorious background to the present’ (Hobsbawm, 1998, p. 5). Unlike Hobsbawm, I see no necessary opposition between ‘suitability’ and ‘invention’ in the practices of burnished ornamentalism in which these schools engage. Instead, I call attention to the postcolonial elite schools’ deployment of a strategic alchemy joining suitability to invention and s respectful of the past and present into a cultural program of class recruitment and class-making—a calculated and calibrated opening to a widening spectrum of class agents, even the newcomer, members of the gentrified working class, as in the case of Old Cloisters and Rippon College, rising up from the class peripheries of the lower orders.

In what follows, I draw out the present context in scenarios culled from our fieldwork in the domains of visual culture at our research schools that show the operationalization and fraught nature of the use of history and tradition in these settings. Hereafter the essay is organized in three sections. In Section One, I offer theoretical understanding of the work on history and on cultural inheritance as expressed as a form of what David Cannadine (2002) calls ‘ornamentalism’. I build out and expand this concept of ornamentalism by drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin (1968) who insists on the active nature of history in the present and the work of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall who point to the fracturing and discontinuous nature of postcolonial meaning making and its reception. In Section Two, I go more concretely into the ‘tangled historicities’ (Clifford, 2012, p. 425) that define these school contexts and the way these schools are navigating the challenges of the present. Here, I look at the concrete work of history in the school settings as articulated in modulated forms of periodization of what Anoop Nayak (2003) calls “past times,” “present times” and “future times.” In the orchestration of history as time and chronology, the schools attempt to impose order on the saturating meanings associated with their past and present and their anticipation of the future. The essay concludes (Section Three) with my attempt to answer the question what does this all mean? Where are these modulations and re-narrations of histories pointing schools toward in today’s fast changing contexts? What does this struggle over the iconography and the very souls of these schools mean for the reconstitution of social relations and the new choreographies of class in globalizing times?

Let’s look at two more vignettes that illustrate some of the ways in which these elite schools navigate the new environment of globalizing ambitions of contemporary school youngsters.

Vignette II

Our arrival at Rippon College in India brought us to an interface of present and past. Like Old Cloisters in Barbados, Rippon is a site of curation, but on a much grander scale—121 acres of well-manicured land as opposed to 13 in the Old Cloisters case. We came in off the dusty streets of Ripon City—busy with tuk-tuks, hucksters selling their ware, and the unending and undefined lanes of traffic—into the pastoral and orderly quiet of Rippon College. Entering from the streets into the Rippon College grounds was a very noticeable transition from the boisterous rough and tumble of the thoroughfare outside its walls marked by evidence of poverty and deprivation to the extraordinarily disciplined and beautiful space of this elite school full of markers of cultural endowment and refinement. Reconnoitering the grounds an extraordinary image stood out, a very modern looking fighter plane (F-15?) installed like a piece of sculpture in front of the Indo-Saracenic style administration building—representative of the hybrid...
colonial-indigenous style of architecture that defines some of the most important buildings in India erected during British rule. Here the fighter jet, gift of the Indian military in acknowledgement that the school produces many of its elite military figures and symbol of soaring modernity, is integrated into a landscape full of props and signage underscoring the school’s hallowed past. As sculpture, the modernity of the fighter jet is modulated and tonedin as a displayable museum piece, underscoring like the lions referred to at the beginning of this essay, the school’s patina of distinctiveness and its long relief of achievement. In the assertion of worldly greatness the discursive work of the jetfighter-as-sculpture transforms this iconic modern symbol into a historical pillar and marker.

Vignette III
In the Round 1 fieldwork at Straits School in 2011, our researchers were given a school tour that began in the old block where year 1-4 classrooms reside. It is also in the old block where some of the most rich and intense displays of colonial history of the school are embedded. We were brought to the administration office. On our way to a conference room we walked past a passageway where old photos of past principals were hung up on the walls. The photos of the principals were arranged in a linear and chronological manner, from colonial to a postcolonial moment. The postcolonial moment was apparent because it was when local Chinese principals were appointed. During the colonial period, all the principals were White.

Section One
1. Understanding the Work of History as a Form of Ornamentalism

These vignettes help underscore and build on the theoretical understanding of the work of history I develop hereafter. I seek to expand this discussion further here in order to explore the particular work that our research schools are doing with their pasts in the present. This takes on sharpened significance given the profound enmeshment of our schools in the colonial order elaborated by the British imperial system. On this topic, the writing of David Cannadine is particularly helpful. In his theory of ‘ornamentalism’, Cannadine maintains that hegemonic orders are choreographed and that the maintenance and renewal of class and racial relations in such orders are accompanied by tremendous investment in symbolic capital and its organization and disposition. Cannadine points specifically to the hegemonic work of anthems, honors, plaques, titles, regalia, costumes, uniforms, emblems and standards in creating a graded but unifying system of references that integrated all subjects in the periphery and the core alike into the British empire. As Cannadine notes: ‘the British honours system ...tied together the dominions of settlement, the Indian Empire and the tropical colonies in one integrated, ordered, titular, transracial hierarchy that no other empire could rival’ (2002, p. 90). In this graded order it could be argued not only that ‘all knew their place’, but many competed for elevation of status and value. The concept of ornamentalism echoes and builds on ideas developed in the work of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1979, 1983, 1994, 1999) and Eric Williams (1950, 1966). These scholars argued that colonial rule was articulated in the elaboration of a stratified cultural order (not simply a political and economic one), pointing further to the transfer of capitalistic and competitive energies deep into the cultural sphere. In this sense, as Williams (1950) argued these schools are cauldrons of class making, building out from their rituals, their cultural patrimony, and their high stakes educational practices records of accomplishment that are second to none in their capacity to shore up social elite class formation in their respective societies.

Cannadine’s theory of ornamentalism is very helpful in our attempts to understand developments in postcolonial elite schools. But I seek here to provide further amplification and illustration. I give special attention to what is often ignored as ritual and routine and what is also often set aside as the dead and inert life of the object world of school. I argue instead that one might in fact, paradoxically, see more deeply into the contradictions of the living present by evaluating the use of the past in contemporary times. In this regard, I look closely at what the elite schools in our international study are doing with their historical archives, preserved cultural objects, architecture, emblems, mottos, and their school curricula as they martial these cultural resources at the crossroads of profound change precipitated by globalization and attendant neoliberal imperatives. This change is articulated across the whole gamut of global forces, connections, and aspirations. And, it is in relation to and through these dynamics that these schools must now position and reposition themselves—acting and intervening in and responding to new globalizing circumstances that often cut at right angles to the historical narratives and the very social organization of these educational institutions linked to England. Globalizing developments have precipitated efforts on the part of these schools to mobilize their rich heritages and pasts as a material resource and not simply as a matter of indelible and inviolate tradition. History, then, I maintain in this context, cannot be reduced to the realm of epiphenomena, of codified narratives, consolidated pasts and securely linear school chronologies.

Drawing on David Cannadine (2002), I seek to understand this development as a process of what might be called ‘burnished ornamentalism’. I understand such ornamentalism as a set of practices that are profoundly linked to the constant recruiting of class subjects and the project of class making in the uncertain contemporary competitive environment in which globalization continues to place enormous pressure on
these old institutions now having to vie for market share and cultural dominance more vigorously than they have had to in the past. Here, I call attention to the active work on history, on cultural inheritance and its constant revivification and consecration conducted by our research schools. This is a process that involves three key practices.

a) Selective Emphasis

First, there is the practice of ‘selective emphasis’ in which traditions are subject to active choice work. This is the idea drawn from what Cannadine calls ‘the construction of affinities’ (2002, p. xix) and that Edward Said suggests is a process of binding a culture ‘affiliatively’ (Said, 1983, p. 25). Choice work involves processes of strategic refinement in which our research schools elect to retain aspects of the bequests of the ‘metropolitan model’ (Jemmott, 2006, p. 28), while rejecting or abandoning other features of the same symbolic system. For example, while Old Cloisters, in the last two decades, has abandoned the old Oxford and Cambridge GCE for local and regional examinations administered by the Caribbean Examination Council, the school holds firmly to the trove of inherited symbols, flags, bunting, crests that are borrowed from the heraldic traditions enshrined in the English public schools like Eton and universities such as Cambridge. The paradigmatic exercise of placing specific animals on emblems, crests, banners and flags is therefore ratified. The lion is chosen from nature and from the archive or list of all possible animals to represent the school’s sense of ascendancy and competitive spirit—accenting the distinctive qualities of strength, perseverance and conquering will associated with the king of beasts. The school is therefore able to assert two things at once: its participation in popular efforts to re-conceptualize identity in the now more nationalist post-independence era in Barbados while foregrounding its insistence on drilling down on its remarkable history of excellence and achievement linked to the metropolitan paradigm of elite schooling.

b) Janus Work

A second feature of the application of ornamentalism is the Janus work or double logic associated with the institutional use of these symbols whereby they help to organize and concentrate identities in the present by looking back to the past. Walter Benjamin had made this association with respect to Paul Klee’s painting, the Angelus Novus, the ‘angel of history’, who appears to move forward to the future even as he looks back buffeted by accumulation of tradition and the past (Benjamin 1968, p. 257). Schools such as Rippon College and Straits School are creatures of the past and of the present. Their identities are secured by drawing on their extraordinary vaults of history and symbolism.

We are reminded of this relationship as one enters the school campus at Straits. This complex is ultra modern in comparison with a school like Old Cloisters. Straits’ architectural construction invokes late international style, emphasizing clear geometric lines, the use of lots of glass and concrete, and a deep sensitivity to the environment and landscaped surroundings. But coupled with this demonstration of modernization, Straits reverentially maintains an eternal shrine to its founder in the atrium at the entrance of 1-4 complex. The patriarch’s bust is surrounded by fresh-cut flowers and is the most prominent object in a space where many of the school’s past leaders and alumni have portraits on the wall—a living gallery of great achievers to remind the present students of the core values of excellence that define the school.

c) Online Environments

The third feature of the elite school’s deployment of ornamentalism is linked to a rising use of dynamic online environments to represent the school brand. Each of these schools has, within the last decade or so, mounted its history, its stories of the past, its architectural distinctiveness, and its institutional face online. Videos on YouTube, photographs on Instagram, flicker and Facebook and official websites provide opportunities to extol past and present achievements and show off current activities and accomplishments. The effect is to create a blended environment in which the physical objects and tangible cultural practices of everyday life are conjoined with the online world and its capacity to amplify, pluralize, and circulate.

d) Postcolonial Discontinuities

The use of ornamentalism is not a singular or homogenous process however. There are contradictions and discontinuities despite the best efforts of coordination by the schools. Trying to understand this feature of the deployment of ornamentalism requires that one must recruit some of the insights of postcolonial theorists that foreground the ideological and cultural work of symbolism. Postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall call our attention to the play of tensions and excess of meaning within signifying processes associated with the use of history and tradition. History as heritage and borrowed and invented tradition is associated with Straits School, Rippon College and Old Cloisters, particularly in the production, marking and etching of gradations (what Homi Bhabha calls ‘discriminatory practices’ [1994, p. 111]) that internally stratify these schools while at the same time setting off these institutions and their
constituents as zones of exception and as a world apart from the rest of their societies.

In foregrounding the kind of unanticipated discontinuities that arise in the work of ornamentalism, Hall (1990) calls attention to heritage as postcolonial paradox in a venue outside of school but deeply relevant to our consideration of the work of history in these research settings. Hall discusses the politics of popular reception of the Jamaican coat of arms. One of the prominent features of this national emblem is that of an Amerindian figure holding up a shield displaying five pineapples. The image is supposed to represent the triumph of the indigenous over the colonial past. Hall points out that this image drawn from the past that is supposed to be a symbol of pride and resistance has been met with an ambivalent reception in contemporary Jamaica. Prominent in response to this national symbol, Hall (1990) calls attention to heritage as postcolonial discontinuities that arise in the work of ornamentalism, showing how the turns towards 'celebration' are not simply the result of ‘liberation’ from the past.

Significant too is the ambivalence that surrounds the national symbol is that of Rippon College in Jamaica. Prominent in response to this national symbol is orientation towards the past as inheritance—no matter what is articulated in espoused programs of knowledge and heritage triumphalism.

But these contradictions do not only exist at the point of reception. They exist within the postcolonial textual production and the texts themselves that navigate the past into the present and future. The striking example of another coat of arms in which ambivalence thrives is that of Rippon College in our study. Rippon College’s arms integrate heraldic elements (for example, the heraldic tenné suggestive of bhagwa color used on the Maratha standard, the wings and flames associated with the Pawars, the sun representing the Suryavanshis and the moon the Chandravanshis and so forth are all referenced in the Rippon College coat of arms) culled from the banners of the various independent states of nineteenth century Central India. These depictions were meant to cobble together a symbolic unity of cultural references generated from the imaginary universes of the different Central India states and native aristocratic representatives and drawing upon and martialing their collective indigenous energies into an enduring symbol of a triumphant and prosperous Rippon College. This is summarized in the Sanskrit words of the school’s motto, ‘Gyanameva Shakti’ (knowledge is power), inscribed at the base of the coat of arms. What is buried and unsaid in the elevation of these symbols as emblematic in Rippon College’s constant tending and burnishing of its image is that these celebratory emblems and standards associated with Central India’s princely kingdoms were actually assigned to these native constituencies by the British in 1877, a couple of decades after the famous Indian Mutiny in 1857. These symbolic markers of endogenous independence were also banners of complicity and political settlement facilitating an elaborate projection and spread of British colonial power into the subcontinent.

This attention to the cunning and ruse of history as it is played out in the periphery separates postcolonial theorists from most others writing on contemporary society. There is, then, a difference in thematic emphasis in the discussion of history by postcolonial scholars from that of the writing of mainstream thinkers who tend to foreground major figures as the coordinating forces in education and society. Postcolonial thinkers also separate themselves from the cultural Marxists who underscore class reproduction, the cultivation and elaboration of a cultural dominant and the making of historical formations within a national order. Instead, postcolonial theorists call attention to class making and the persistence of cultural imperialism and colonialism within the post-independence era and the ambivalent relationship of postcolonial subjects to historical objects and historical legacies. Together the various strands of postcolonial theory (Cannadine, Said, Hall and E. Williams) on the work of history as ornamentalism present us with important perspectives in our efforts to understand the ideological role of history in the practices of class making prosecuted by the elite schools in our international study. I now turn to a discussion of the concrete experiences and uses of history associated with Rippon College, Straits School and Old Cloisters.

Section Two

II. The Concrete Working of History

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way ‘it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory in a moment of danger. (Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 255)

Each of these schools reworks its particular historical heritage in the new contexts in which they and their societies are situated. It is therefore necessary, methodologically, to move between the past and the present of these schools. Each has evolved out of distinctive colonial pasts to be significant symbols of
modernization in their respective national environments, regions and the world. In this sense, scale, capacity and different histories of incorporation into colonialism and capitalism are worth remarking in the discussion of these schools and their respective historical contexts. For instance, the vastness of India, its rising economic power and influence, must be recognized and underscored along with its extraordinary history of endogenous aristocratic elite formation, its enormous population size, and the intensity of the growth of its new economy. All of this places the school we are examining in India, Rippon College, in a very specific location. The Rippon College context is then different from Old Cloisters in Barbados or Straits in Singapore. As large as India is Barbados is small. Barbados’ location in the center of the emergence of the British imperial economic development has long since waned, declining from the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Yet Barbados is a critical player in the Caribbean and Latin American region. It is one of the handful of third world nations in this region listed in UNDP’s high development column of HDI. Straits School, as its spanking new modernist structures indicate, is a beacon in a small country that has been one of the transcendent NICs. It is a third world nation that passed into first world status since the end of last century according to its legendary late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Yew, 2000). The sense that Singapore is a third world nation in this region listed in UNDP’s high development column of HDI. Straits School, as its spanking new modernist structures indicate, is a beacon in a small country that has been one of the transcendent NICs. It is a third world nation that passed into first world status since the end of last century according to its legendary late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Yew, 2000). The sense that Singapore is a global player has been absorbed into the sinews of Straits School. Proud of its past, it seeks to not only spotlight its remarkable achievement and success but to project its brand into the global arena.

a) Burnishing the Past

The past gives a more glorious background to the present. (Hobsbawn, 1998, p. 5)

Heraldry...is the shorthand of history. (Woodcock and Robinson, 1988, p. xii)

The eagle eye and gryphon strength

They led us to the fore

To reign supreme in every sphere

The sons of Singapore

(Straits School’s Anthem)

In the work of history in the post-independence elite school, the matter of time itself is a deeply signified and signifying property. In this context, time is to be understood as useable tradition, useable chronology—a key target of ornamentalism. One powerful sense of time in the elite schools under examination is endurance, persistence—the longue durée. These schools have long histories. All of them are over a century and some almost 300 years old. They all have official histories, histories that are written down. These schools are not just proud of their past, they seek to mobilize the past in the operationalization of the present and their anticipation of the future. The work of history then can be charted into a strategic periodization of past times, present times and future times. This strategic periodization is not at all to be understood as a linear march of time but rather the complex practices associated with martialing the storehouse of powerful signifying material and cultural residues inherited by the schools. Time in this sense is a protean system of meaning that comes to the aid of strategic engagement with the existential challenges that these schools are now facing. Their accumulated symbolic power and capital are thus, through periodization, deployed to mark off progress, to mark status and achievement in relation to others, and to emphasize, above all things, the shimmering elevation of the elite school above all comers.

As alluded to in the introduction history, as articulated in the postcolonial context of the elite schools of Old Cloisters, Rippon College, and Straits School, achieves its purest form in myth—a ‘type of speech’ (Barthes 1972, p. 109) that is densely codified and codifying. Its meanings are available and usable within a restricted register (Bernstein 1977) invoked by the exclusive fraternity of group members—in our study the privileged environs of a Rippon College or Straits School, or for that matter, Eton. History at work in this sense, then, is the materialization of myth, the work of revivification of symbols, the production of group feeling and the projection of distinctiveness. But myths are never fully anchored. They circulate and are circulated. They saturate deeply into the ideosphere of interested groups and institutions. Our elite schools are conduits and way stations of myth. Myth represents the deepest codification of the past—it stretches past time into eternity draining it of historical specificity and contradiction. Myth’s time is not linear time but circular time. Myth works through all periodizing frameworks at once: past time, present time and future time are encoded and braided into the mythical text all at once. Myth is prophetic, even as it operates as a marker of origins and a rulebook of present action.

Such is it with the symbolism associated with the iconicographic figure of the lion. Remarkably, each of these schools, as it is with Eton, foregrounds the lion symbol on their coat of arms. In these images, the featured lion tends to have its right paw aggressively raised— not held flat but erect, poised and in a manner, as we are told in books on heraldry, of signifying and asserting power and domination (Woodcock and Robinson, 1988). In the case of Rippon College’s coat of arms, the lion image is exalted above the two princes (Maratha and Rajput) standing on either side of a shield. We are like lions, ‘we are lions’ (nous sommes des lions, adapting Barthes’ Myologies). Two lions with paws raised occupy the center of Old Cloisters court of arms. And on the website of the school’s old scholars’
association, a photo of a pride of life-like lions appears on which is scrolled this guiding admonition: ‘Guardians of our Heritage’. At Straits School the mythical griffin reigned supreme. The griffin combines the king of birds, the eagle, with the king of beasts, the lion. Again, the griffin’s claws are raised. Through these images the schools semiotically recruit the powerful mysterious characteristics of these dominant creatures of the animal world to their institutions. The lion and the griffin are understood as great protectors of high valued and precious treasures. The power of these symbols echoes through the ages. The heritage of the school is not a thing of the past but a force in the present and the future. These schools project power and accomplishment. It is a compelling aspect of their marketing and appeal in the present.

If the lion and the griffin can be seen somehow as the distillation of the elite school’s identity—the summary and consolidation of its past time and essence of its present and future will to power—these symbols are not free standing and self-sufficient. They are articulated to other reinforcing symbols, objects, practices, and iconography that consolidate a discursive projection of the school as triumphant. Emblems, plaques, school mottos, school songs flags, bunting, the architecture of these schools channel the sense of continuity, near permanence, of Old Cloisters, Straits and Rippon College. The aura of school pasts is constructed, ornamentalized, not given. Photographs, busts, memorial friezes, gardens with dedication walls, and plaques celebrating the outstanding achievers of these schools going back to their earliest beginnings build this sense of the past continuous into the present.

Gates and entrances beckon and lead the visitor to highly orchestrated spaces. Old Cloisters’ wrought iron gates, for example, lead the visitor from its busy Mahogany Street entrance into staged and modulated space saturated with evident historical ruins from the colonial past. Right after the entrance from Mahogany Street, on the northeast quarter of Old Cloisters’ school grounds, looking to the left, the visitor’s attention is immediately drawn to a sand-colored memorial wall rising from a bed of lilac flowers. Emblazoned on this memorial wall are the names of all the great British headmasters of yesteryear—all of whom were educated in the citadels of learning in England. The political leaders that the school has produced over its long history are also foregrounded.

One is struck by a similar codification of the past at Straits School. As one enters the main building passing from its cone-like reception canopy that opens up into the school’s main atrium, one is attracted to the imposing bust of the school’s founder, General Straits. Here, too, one finds plaques and photographs of the school’s great progeny, among whom are prominent leaders of Singapore, preeminent in the school’s illustrious history and preeminent among world leaders.

In the receiving room in Rippon College’s spectacular main building, one is surrounded by paintings of the earliest board members and benefactors: the Rajputs, Nawabs and Maharajas of Central India. The building in which this receiving room is housed is itself one of the most noted examples of the Indo-Saracenic style of late colonial architecture surviving in India. In a key source written on Rippon College, the main building is described as a ‘perfect blend’ of ‘Indian and British heritage’.

While past times are articulated in all consuming images such as the griffin on the school crest and the school flag and in the celebratory display, pride and specialness mediated in history books, school magazines, and the special memorial releases in school bulletins, it is the online environment that now spawns and multiplies the glow and effect of inherited traditions. It is the online environment that renders a dynamic contemporary flair to the research schools’ symbolic universe. YouTube videos and Instagram, flicker and Facebook photos and uploaded files provide a modulated resource for the burnishing of image and the marketing of these schools. They are also the source of disavowal and markers of contradiction at the interface of the past and the present.

b) Under Pressure in Present Times

The present times of these schools bring new terms and new relationships to these hallowed objects and consecrated pasts. These powerful signifying objects, practices and rituals are in confluence with a new order of things. When these symbols are put under the pressure of the postcolonial moment and the momentum of globalization they appear contradictory. For instance, when faced with the postcolonial questions of relevance, origins, and the remaking of identities, these great symbols seem at times brittle or out of place, more mimetic and ironic (as Bhabha points out in his essay, ‘Of Mimicry and Man’, [1994]). Why are the symbols linked to Anglo-European and Greco-Roman imperial and monarchical systems and houses still so enduring in the present-day Singapore or India or Barbados? What particular cultural and ideological work do they do in the postcolonial context? How do they relate to the radical openness of these societies to globalizing energies? These questions bring us to present times.

While these schools revel in the selective traditions of the past times, they work as well to navigate the past into the present as they contend with the new challenges and orientations within the school body itself, the needs and aspirations of parents and students, that present times bring. Present times of the postcolonial setting are not so much markers of the period of the now or the new, as they are a concatenation of structures, experiences, practices, the active crosscurrents of needs and competitive interests and
orientations in the navigation of the existential circumstances of the postcolonial context. Present times are generated from contradictions within the school as well as from new dynamics taking place in the world outside as the rolling processes of globalization put these schools under the pressure of new circumstances. Present times, then, are times of change, precipitating repurposing and reorientation of ornamentalization.

One thing these schools must contend with is the fact that they are not the only option for youngsters and their parents. In this context, the past can be a weight upon the present. This often leads to reorientation. Take Old Cloisters in Barbados for example. Historically founded on the British public school model, with deep emphasis on the quadrivium and the trivium, the school built its reputation around the classics—the study of Greek and Roman language, literature and history. One of its early headmasters, a Mr. Lawless, was famous for his publication of the *Elements of Euclid* in 1892 while he was headmaster at the school.

But the great point of fruition of the classics was around the late 1930s when the school was beginning to open up to and knit a black lower middle class into its school body. It is from this more integrated Old Cloisters that a celebrated group of brilliant students called ‘the Rolls Royces’ were known for the speed at which they could translate Livy and Virgil into English (Jemmott, 2006). The Rolls Royces would become the lieutenants in a new era of class making. These students were largely Afro-Barbadian, part of a generation that would become the political leadership in the country. At one point in the 1960s one was Prime Minister and his former classmate would become his deputy. Both had distinguished themselves as Rolls Royce translators of Greek and Latin. Right until the 1980s, Old Cloisters sent some of its major talent in the classics to Oxford and Cambridge. The Rolls Royces represented the long-held desire of the colonial and postcolonial child to seek final achievement and cultural finishing in England.

By the turn of the new century, that began to change. Old Cloisters’ students have retreated from the classics emphasizing opting instead now for the sciences, technology and business. Out of some six curricular tracks for the sixth formers at the school, five are now designated exclusively to science and technology. Only one track is in arts and languages. Moreover, some students have voted with their feet for business, accounts and law pursuing these subjects outside of Old Cloisters, when necessary, with master teachers who offer extra lessons. The new rambunctious entrepreneurial desires and imaginations for exotic career futures within the contemporary youth communities now exceed the capacities of the school. This has resulted in strategic action on the part of students reflected in new curricular choices (the shift towards business, law, economics, accounts, communications studies, digital media studies and entrepreneurship, etc.) parked alongside the old liberal arts emphasis on the humanities that constitutes the historical bequeath to these schools. Deputy principal, Stuart Calmley, spoke of reorientation of the curriculum toward globalization and the school’s commitment to reproducing global citizens and global leaders:

The world has now become like a village. You know, before, we saw ourselves in the context of Barbados and what we can achieve and so on. But the reality is that today, and I think this is one of the things of all education here at Old Cloisters, we are not just preparing students to go into the Barbadian workforce, but we are preparing them really for globally… basically… to be able to go into jobs anywhere in the world because we have been saying to them that now globalization has taken place or is a continuing situation or issue. (Stuart Calmley, Deputy Principal of Old Cloisters, Interview, November 2011).

Perhaps even more driven by the goal of martialing history in efforts to retool is Rippon College. Founded as a school to provide British education to the sons of Central India’s indigenous aristocracy, Rippon College has felt the pressure to open up to a wider cross section of social groups, particularly the new commercial classes of Rippon City and its surroundings to and elements of the lower order. Like Old Cloisters and Straits School, the invocation of the meritocratic principle is a fundamental feature in the reframing of the historical narrative of the school. The administrators, teachers, and the students at each of these schools undertake choice work. They reject as well as embrace different aspects of the early history of eliteness associated with their institutions. They reject any notion of social snobbishness or the retention of any form of exclusion by class, ethnicity, or religion. They, nevertheless, retain this notion of separateness, of distinctiveness, built on achievement but enabled by the symbolic weight and furniture of cultural form, heraldry, architecture, etc. that help to define their school as the institution of excellence in their given setting. Each of these schools is affected by an aggressive context of competition for students and standing. In Barbados, Old Cloisters competes with 9 other older grammar schools and the Barbados Community College for students and standing. Singapore’s Straits School dominates a field in which others such as Chang Lee and Naples compete for outstanding students and notoriety.

But Rippon College now operates in an environment where the competitive pressure is quite extraordinary. New schools committed to twenty-first century skills are being built everyday in India. Rippon College is having to compete with schools that are being founded by the business and commercial classes such as the Mercedes Benz International School (Mercedes Benz, 2021), in Rajeev Ghandi Infotech Park in Hinjewadi, Pune, India. As Fazal Rizvi (2016) has observed, there is a growing belief that the older, long-established schools that emerged in the colonial era...
might not be up to the task of sustaining excellence in the present. Rippon, and schools like Straits and Old Cloisters, have accepted this challenge and have enhanced their infrastructure, curricula, website, and online presence and reworked their image. Official and unofficial videos, sometimes with very high-quality production values can be found online video-sharing websites like YouTube, Facebook, etc. They generate what Pierre Bourdieu (1993, p. 115) calls a ‘restricted’ economy or peer-driven universe promoting the elite school’s image. For Rippon College, a particularly prominent and insistent theme across all of these venues of publicity and representation is the theme of internationalism. Rippon is presented not only as a participant in a new global era but as a leader and coordinator in global education, a host for pivotal events (Such as the ‘Make a Difference’, Young Round Square Conference of 2011) and international students. In an online documentary on the school, this theme of internationalism is very prominent. Rippon is presented as an international harbor, a place for those who care about their fellow human beings across the world and the ecology and survival of the planet. Within this narrative, the school is depicted as a transformative place that builds on its rich cultural history to promote a multiculturalism and openness to all. As one student maintains in the online video: ‘I grew up in a very small town...and then I came to Rippon College...because I knew, I knew, I wanted to experience the entire world’. The video stresses the vigorousness and openness of the curriculum. Students can pursue national exams CBSE (Central Board Secondary Education) or the CIE, the Cambridge International Exam. Rippon’s extraordinary qualities make it a world leader in secondary education, according to the school principal. The online video refers to the school as ‘a diverse, multicultural oasis in the heart of India’. Signifying markers such as the idea of the open cosmopolitan campus fused to distinctive but accessible customs that can be shared by all, profound commitment to ecology, to individual expression, experimentalism and debate all underscore the specialness of Rippon College. Rippon College is both a distinctive institution, one of the few schools anywhere with its play of architectural heritage, as well as one that appeals to everyone. Here, the rhythm and duration of everyday life as depicted in the video reminds one of a cosmopolitan college that could be in Canada or the US or anywhere in Europe.

Straits’ official online video also proceeds by calling attention to its long history of distinction. Its distinctiveness is ‘forged in gryphon fire’. The reference to Prometheus, the notion of receptivity to change, and the emphasis on creativity are the defining themes of this carefully produced video. ‘To be at Straits School is really magical’, says one of the eager student representatives. Yet another proclaims, ‘I, myself, am in the Straits Academy of History. It is a kind of higher history’. There is the sense of elevated purpose and mission that is expressed by the Straits’ students—a sense that history making is a continuous feature of school life and that they can make that history as self-authorizing actors. Straits’ great tradition is recruited to the present where its creativity and excellence, we are told, allow it to build alliances to peer-like institutions in the G20 Schools and throughout the world.

We are one of the oldest schools in Singapore. We are a hundred and ninety years old.... And I think anyone who has actually travelled to Singapore would have heard of Straits’, notes the principal, Ms. Lim, in an online interview also published on the web as she invokes Straits’ status as primus inter pares—as the model for other institutions. In this sense the school is both one of the oldest and perhaps the most modern school in Singapore at the same time. And Straits understands itself as a model not just for Singapore but for schools around the world. It sees itself at the apogee of experimentation and as a world player par excellence. It is to be noted that the Straits ‘brand’, as the principal notes, now is circulating around the world. One area in which the brand is foregrounded is experimentation in teaching and classroom pedagogy. In the interview circulated on the YouTube video sharing website, Ms. Lim talks about the Straits approach to technological innovation and diffusion among her teaching faculty. ‘We want to allow our teachers to customize according to their needs’, the principal maintains. ‘Customization’ is actually central to the school’s strategy of constantly improving its stock of human capital and its vantage point in the educational universe. This customization is facilitated by Straits approach to diffusing technology and integrating it into the classroom. This is done in the form of hot housing pedagogical innovation in a high tech, experimental lab called the ‘Discovery Studio’. Here, experimentation with simulation, video games, touch-sensitive smart screens, ergonomic mechanical chairs for students outfitted with interactive technology, the use of Popplet for visualizing ideas, webbing and brainstorming all represent a very sophisticated and elevated investment in technology. The ‘Discovery Studio’ is like a hatchery for the gestation and trying out of pedagogical ideas that can later be introduced into the classroom and disseminated abroad, as Ms. Lim underscores in an online interview that took place at a conference on technology in the capital of one of the Asian tigers.

It is to be noted that Straits participates in the larger Singapore educational excellence branding effort. The Singapore approach to teaching mathematics for example has now been adopted in school districts in the US. Another material feature that is part of the school’s narrative is the history making fact that Straits has now usurped all the British elite schools, most notably Eton, as the top feeder school to Oxford and Cambridge universities. In a striking sense, Straits stands out even
from the sample of schools we are studying in our ‘elite schools in globalizing circumstances’ research project, in that it is projecting its forms of knowledge making into the metropolitan countries. No other school in our study in that it is projecting its forms of knowledge making into boundlessly deep, there are structural innovations, significantly decentered even though many aspects of that centered England as the chief benefactor, they seek the measure of the new times. The world that times. As these schools gear themselves for the future, triumphantly efficacious institutions in the present day.

assert their past achievements and distinctions, and to expand into the global arena. In all three of these cases, school leaders, students and stakeholders seek to assert their past achievements and distinctions, and to consolidate their hold on the narrative of their schools as triumphantly efficacious institutions in the present day. Past time and present times then stretch into future times. As these schools gear themselves for the future, they seek the measure of the new times. The world that centered England as the chief benefactor, beneficiary, and point of transacting and finishing the talent from the former colonies now has been significantly decentered even though many aspects of the English public-school model have been retained. The ambitions of students are more and more grounded in a neoliberal framework in which personal calculations, personal choice rule the day. School institutions are playing catch up with this transformed context and attempting to stay ahead of the game. School histories are being translated by students into personal histories of choice, pursuit of opportunity and openings for personal success. These elite schools are responding to the new global imaginary universe. At Old Cloisters, for example, some of its teachers and administrators are the driving force behind an International College Fair that brings representatives from Europe’s and North America’s leading universities to Barbados every November. They come in pursuit of academic talent from Old Cloisters and other leading elite schools on the island. At Straits School, where resources seem boundlessly deep, there are structural innovations, pedagogical and technological experimentation, new emphasis on co-curricular activity, and planned facilitation of student tours to elite colleges in US and Europe and China. At Rippon College, the school is being repositioned as a player in the international arena with its leadership role in Round Square. But, most insist, the future time, is the work of the imagination of the students. Here, the care of the self often usurps the care of the school and ornamentalism becomes as much an individual odyssey as an institutional exercise or set of practices.

c) Future Times

The eagle eye and gryphon strength
They led us to the fore
To reign supreme in ev’ry sphere
The sons of Singapore. (Straits’ School Song)

The present times of our research schools are brimful of propulsive competitive desires and ambitions. There is a yearning not only for continuity of educational and social dominance in their respective local, national, and regional contexts but there is the greater desire to expand into the global arena. In all three of these cases, school leaders, students and stakeholders seek to assert their past achievements and distinctions, and to consolidate their hold on the narrative of their schools as triumphantly efficacious institutions in the present day.

Joanna Latimer and Beverley Skeggs (2011) make the point that the imagination is a way of ruminating about the world that is always embedded in material purposes, practices and actions associated with class making and class recruitment. It is a way of ‘ordering’ time and space (p. 397) with the goal of preserving class privilege. Elite schools such as Straits or Old Cloisters are challenged all the time to order the narrative of their pasts and their ambitions for the future. This can often be a contested affair. For administrators and stakeholders invested in the continuity of excellence and the future success and prosperity of their schools, they must navigate the strong currents and waves of interests, needs and desires that challenge the organized capacities of the schools. Schools are not simply concrete buildings, spaces, and personnel. They live, perhaps most relentlessly, in private and public memories, representations and the imagination. Imagination is not unitary. It is a plural set of investments and impulses that transpire into specific actions, practices, special events, new buildings, new programs, broad strategic planning and programmatic direction and re-direction. It is here in these circumstances that our schools apply practices of ornamentalism, working relentlessly on heritage and cultural endowment to spark revivification and constant renewal of commitment and affiliation. It is here after Cannadine, these schools construct affinities. As administrators plan for the future, they must exercise custodianship over the past. Nowhere is this double tug of the past and the future experienced more than in the elite schools of our international study. Here, the past seems so all pervasively present in the visual domain and in the rhythm, duration, and organization of everyday life. Here, the future is so insistently the beckoning path forward. And, the only guarantor of continuity and persistence is the school’s continued cultivation of its accumulated habitus and class foundation in inherited metropolitan values and dispositions proffered from the past and relentlessly applied to the transactions of the present.
and the future: Auspicium Melioris Aevi (‘hope for a better age’ [Straits’ motto]).

Straits School is one such site of this tremendous play of energies. It is almost at the point of celebration of its bicentennial of existence. It has for almost two centuries established an enviable record of elite school achievement. And, according to its principal, there are those actors in China, in the United States, in Malaysia and throughout the world who want to copy its curricular and organizational model. For the principal and the alumni, the model and its future success have been and must be built upon a continuous sense of the past. This relationship must be elaborated into projects and programs. One such program that reflects this duality, the deep investment in the past and the wish to project a burnished image of the school into the future, is the school’s new multipurpose archival project—part time machine, part museum, part botanical garden. In the school’s old block, a designated place has been marked out for the construction of a museum. The school actually hired a consultant, an archeologist, to design and set up its contemporary heritage project. At the same time, there has been a donation drive, called ‘Museum and Artifact Donative Drive,’ that has been organized, inviting alumni, seniors, and relatives to donate artifacts to the museum. The principal describes the museum as a future project that will be built upon a continuous sense of the past: Auspicium Melioris Aevi (‘hope for a better age’ [Straits’ motto]).

And the heritage... For our anniversary, we have a series of things lined up. And one of them is called the 'Teacher Time Machine' as well as a project to bring back a lot of the artefacts and Old Boys mementos, things that they had, we are trying to get them to donate them back to the school. We have also brought back a lot of artefacts that we lent out to the national library—over 200 of them. So, we have moved one of the staff rooms to Level 2 and that whole place is now empty—so it is now going to be part of our archives and heritage. It is going to be an interactive space. Not a museum where you go in, look, and come out. It is just classroom space, but it will be surrounded by stories of the beginning of the institution in tandem with the history of Singapore. And we have also done some gardening behind. It is empty right now. But we will be planting plants that were part of the original botanic gardens and then we will have some of the history of the gardens. (Mrs Lim, Principal of Straits School, Singapore).

The museum is a future project that will be built to showcase the past. The teachers’ interest in a time machine echoes science fiction and the dual wish to preserve and embellish the past in order that their present-day pedagogy might be sustained into the future. The planned Straits School Museum gardens are based on the splendid botanical gardens of Singapore City, but they also reflect the strong contemporary wish to be ecological, to build green oases in suburban spaces, and to project into future the hopes and dreams of continued success and achievement at the school.

But future times are best or most strongly articulated in student aspirations, in school strategy and projections, their continued but changing investment in noblesse oblige and strategic social service, in the fraught engagement with technology, in the larger conversation about globalization and the knowledge economy that suffuses the educational context of all these settings, and their relentless embrace of entrepreneurism. The speed and intensity of aspiration that the students carry forward often bring them in collision with the schools and the narratives they so extol, and, in whose identities, they are so invested. Future times constitute the making of history, the modulation of history, adjustments, and the gleeful push that young people are making into the brave new world. Future times are therefore a form of history making through repositioning, self-investment and boosterism. Students’ perceptions of how the school’s past and present play into their narrative of the future—future life beyond the school, future professional life, future life of settling down—often place strain on the official story. School history fades into personal history, personal desire, and personal interest.

At the first student council interviews at Rippon College, students expressed great pride in the school’s past, its history, its teachers, and staff but some of them still found Rippon wanting. They felt that despite its investment in programs such as Round Square, that the school did not prepare them for a global future. The problem wasn’t the school. It was the ‘Indian educational system,’ one student, maintained (‘I’m not into Indian education because ... if I want to go outside...I need some knowledge of there too’ [Saba, first round interview, Rippon College]). They claim too that the school had placed blocks to their use of technology and their participation in the online world (‘I don’t see any reason why Facebook is banned...’ [Student 4, focus group 2 interview, Rippon College, March 2012]). For them globalization was best expressed in terms of their access to online communities, access to friends around the world beyond India:

CM: And the people who are your friends... are they mostly within India or outside India?

Student 1: Outside India, maximum.

CM: So most of your friends are outside India? So you’re getting your information—your connections from...

Student 1: Outside

CM: Outside of India. So it’s not only the exchange that is keeping you globally connected but also the technology.

Student 1: Yes, the technology....

CM: Right, so Facebook is a very important vehicle for kids to stay connected with the rest of the world?

Student 5: Facebook and Skype. (Student focus group 2, Ripon College)

Many in this group dreamt of professional futures that would be in commerce. There was very little
expression of identification with the aristocratic classes that were the benefactors and students at the Rippon College in its early years.

This theme of reworking the narrative of schooling for the future was also strongly present in the discourse of students at Old Cloisters. The generational gap over the future and past times was emphasized (‘Our school is perhaps the archetype of failing to keep up with the times’ [Blaise Pascal, round 2 student interview, Old Cloisters]). Teachers were noting that this crop of students were not like students in the past. Their investment in schooling was more defined now by an aggressive means-ends rationale. Their investment in schooling was less qua academic and more instrumental. Students at Old Cloisters, as at all the schools, put their future in extra school lessons. Students felt that they needed a particular portfolio and a broader menu of courses than their school was offering. It was not unusual for some students to be pursuing, totally on their own, piano or music certification with the Royal Academy of Music, mixing this with courses in law at the Barbados Community College or the University of the West Indies or a course in Economics at Ardent Arbors, a rival school that offered economics in their curriculum. This meant, in reality, a hybrid curriculum distilled through habits of personal choice and careeir program building (‘Well I do management of business, economics and literatures of English. When I got into sixth form, I chose… I want to work at a Magazine and eventually own my own. So, then I chose business to go with that and… literatures in English’ [Ginger, round 1 student interview, Old Cloisters]). Old Cloisters students approached their curriculum, as Bernstein maintains, as a ‘collection code’ (Bernstein, 1977, p. 14) in their aggressive anticipation of tertiary education and professional life in North America.

Working through past time, present times and future times, our research schools reveal themselves to be astute re-inventers of their identities grounding their reinvention in change that preserves the past. The practical effect is that these schools continue to dominate the educational environments in which they exist (‘Cause it’s a top school in Singapore and then like later when I go to university or want to find a job in the future when they ask which school are you from? Then when you say like I’m from Straits then they like know that immediately that excellence is from Straits School. It’s a way for us to work around the world’ [Amber, Straits School, round 1 student interview]). Rippon, Straits and Old Cloisters have embraced the sense of eliteness tied to opportunity, rejecting the notion of privilege through birth and social position. They have worked up a meritocratic tenor into school narratives. And they now seek out the academic elite from a broader class base than ever before.

Section Three
Concluding Remarks

a) Back to the Future

History itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes” (Marx quoted in Bauer, 2003, p. 175 New York: W.W. Norton)

“I entered Old Cloisters for the first time in September, 1944 on the bar of my father's bicycle. Head Teacher of Canterbury Boys’ Elementary School at the time, my father was a great lover of history, a gene that I apparently inherited from him. As we passed through the Magnolia Street gates, he said to me, ‘I say to you what Sir Francis Drake said to his troops as he prepared to attack the Spanish town of Porto Bello: I have brought you to the treasure house of the world, the rest is up to you.’ ” (Old Cloisters Alumnus).

With the quote from the Old Cloisters alumnus above, we enter the world of postcolonial elite schools as they back into the future. I return to the past to establish a benchmark from which to sum up where we have been heading in this essay. In the quote above, taken from an article written by one of the alumni (Bledsoe Edith) of Old Cloisters, Barbados, one gets the sense of the shock and awe of these elite institutions in the island generated at a time when members of the gentrified working class were beginning to enter them in the 40s and 50s, when these institutions were still the preserve of the planter/mercantile elite in the island. These schools have therefore used their tremendous cultural resources in a project of class making and class reproduction. The father in this story, an elementary school teacher, delivers his son to the door of Cloisters (the so-called Eton of Barbados, then predominantly a zone of exception for the white planter mercantile class) and peddles away, not daring to enter. What were the objects and possessions of this school that generated such awe? What were elaborations in the visual domain and social aesthetics of the school (as MacDougall describes them with respect to the Doon School in India [MacDougall, 1999]) that in fact echo into the present of similar schools founded in the high colonial period of the British Empire around the globe? How are these postcolonial elite schools now responding to globalization and the tremendous pressure of the new transnational education markets as new education actors enter the scene such as the five thousand plus IB schools established in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin and the Caribbean in the past two decades?

Well, as we have seen earlier, these postcolonial elite schools are responding to the new challenges by bolstering and burnishing their cultural heritage and the narratives that define these institutions as primus inter pares. As Karl Marx underscored: “History itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes” (Marx quoted in Bauer, 2003, p. 175...
New York: W.W. Norton). It is this pursuit of interests that we find particularly articulated in an emerging global imaginary generated at these schools—a strong desire on the part of school agents and school administrations to play in the larger theatre of the world context beyond the school as Principal Lin at Straits and Old Cloister’s deputy principal, Stuart Calmley told us. What I have sought to foreground in my discussion of our research schools is precisely this radical untaming of the imagination in these school settings.

The deployment of imagination at Straits, Cloisters and Rippon results in a coupling, not so much with geography, but with history. I have followed the nostrum declared by Arjun Appadurai in *The Future as Cultural Fact* that ‘histories make geographies’ (2013, p. 61). I have sought to show how much these schools work on burnishing their school heritages, traditions and narrative (school histories) sharpening them into a useable ornamentalism in order to navigate the challenging present. They work on their school histories precisely as the context of schooling is not now exhausted at the point of local geography but is, indeed, ever expanding into the global arena. What then is the meaning of history residing in these practices of revivification and renewal that the elite schools constantly conduct? I have defined the historical in this essay not as a matter of chronology but as something more active in which old forms and contents take on new meaning and are put to cultural and ideological work. I have, in fact, sought to prise the historical away from methods of linear accounting and periodization. Instead, I have sought to show how marked histories (past times, present times, future times) are really storehouses of accumulated and invented cultural references, memories, socially produced meanings attached to objects, practices, and programs of action. This is the province of ornamentalism. History then is the illuminated evidence of human beings working on their material environments and universes of meaning. I have defined the historical—along the lines formulated by Cannadine (2002)—as the everyday strategic mobilization and deployment of material and symbolic resources (ritual, tradition, emblems, architecture, heritage, heraldry) of given institutions in projects of competitive human interests, identity formation, control over institutional narrative and the tussle over marketability and economic viability. For the elite schools in this account, history takes on special significance since these institutions have been shaped by the weight of past nexus with British imperial relations. They are, after all, the products, outcrop, and markers of colonial transactions. Their eliteness was founded in particular relations of class formation and the loyalty of indigenous elites to Britishness. Yet, the story of these schools does not stop there.

These schools have been critical beacons of modernization and accomplishment in their own settings and have started to chart paths as global players. They have continued their storied success well after British direct colonial domination ceased and their respective countries have become independent. Yet the story of the work of history in the elite school is not one of transcendence of that colonial past after independence. It is instead the studied selection of tradition, the strategic ornamentation of the socially produced memories and traditions as well as the new pathways that have been grafted, of necessity, onto the image making of Old Cloisters, Straits and Rippon. It is also the full play of contradictions, which such specific history constantly gestates. A particular challenge that these schools face is to bring their school narratives into line with present student ambition for global futures and their generational shift into the digital age.

All considered then, elite schools in the globalizing context are attempting to martial their histories at the crossroads of profound change. Schools such as Rippon, Straits and Old Cloisters are therefore dealing with matters that involve scaling or rescaling of the past to consolidate these schools’ relationships to local and national projects as well as global imperatives in the present. Just as importantly, and perhaps more insistently, these schools must now respond, and are responding, to neoliberal economic circumstances that are powerfully articulated not simply ‘out there’ in the global arena but in the very personalized and customized desires of their students seeking careerist futures with furious energy and investment: ‘Today we say we are Indian citizens. Tomorrow we will say we are world citizens’ (A student at the student council interview, Rippon College).

For these youngsters the world is their oyster, and they seek to carve out futures in a broad range of arenas that can make the past seem irrelevant or relevant in new ways. But as we have noted, the past persists. It breaks into the present and the imagination of the future. Like the Angelus Novus (Paul Klee’s figure of the new angel, the angel of history, read by Walter Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as a portent of the future buffeted by the past), contemporary elite schools must carry the burdens and the glories of the past, selectively, and strategically using and deploying tradition even as they orient to the future.

The story of Old Cloisters, Rippon College and Straits School, therefore, is one of schools constantly struggling to stay in control of their institutional narratives. As we have seen, the roiling global conditions in contemporary education markets and the global ambitions of postcolonial school youngsters place these elite schools in the Global South at the epicenter of the translation of cultural and economic pressures transforming the global context onto institutional life. It is the resources of storied histories and the archival accretion of symbolic capital derived...
from their colonial inheritance that schools like Rippon, Straits and Old Cloisters leverage into the present, striving for a new sense of equilibrium in times of tumultuous change.

References Références Referencias