

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2015.019.085](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2015.019.085)

CAMERON MCCARTHY

University of Illinois, United States

**BURNISHED ORNAMENTALISM: MAKING SENSE OF HISTORY,
ICONOGRAPHY AND THE VISUAL CULTURAL PRACTICES OF
POSTCOLONIAL ELITE SCHOOLS IN GLOBALIZING
CIRCUMSTANCES**

Abstract:

This presentation probes deeply into the tangled of historicities that animate British-bequeathed elite schools now operating in new competitive transnational educational markets in selected post-developmental states. The scenarios of this competition are increasingly moving online in photo and video-sharing websites such as YouTube, Facebook and Flickr and in the websites that individual schools are creating to consecrate their school heritages. I examine closely the work that postcolonial elite schools in a nine-country 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 postcolonial elite 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 securely linear school chronologies. Instead, drawing on Walter Benjamin, I look at the way in which postcolonial school histories are “active in the present” and the way in which schools in India, Barbados and Singapore are adroitly and selectively managing their school identities in the light of globalization. The results of these interventions are not guaranteed. They often run up against the revolution of rising expectations of school youngsters and their parents, the taste for global cultures and global futures indicative of the global ambitions of the young, and the pressures of alumni and other stakeholder interests which must be navigated.

Keywords:

Ornamentalism, Postcolonialism, Elite Schools, Digitalization, Globalizing Circumstances

JEL Classification: F54

“We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it.”
Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*.

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way ‘it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory in a moment of danger.”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the philosophy of History.”

In this presentation, I want to probe deeply into the “tangled historicities” (Clifford, 2012, p. 425) registered in the visual and iconographic domains of a number of schools in the 9-country international study on “elite schools in globalizing circumstances” that I have been doing along with colleagues from India, Singapore and Australia and my graduate students who hail from India, Kenya, Turkey, China and Chile and the United States. It is by giving attention to what might be by understood as the dead, inert life and objects of school that, paradoxically, we might in fact see more deeply into the contradictions of the living present [mention websites here]. In this regard, I look closely at what postcolonial 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 postcolonial elite 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. Instead, drawing on Walter Benjamin, I look at the way in which postcolonial school histories are “active in the present” and the way in which schools in India, Barbados and Singapore are adroitly and selectively managing their school identities in the light of globalization. The results of these interventions are not guaranteed. They often run up against the revolution of rising expectations of school youngsters and their parents, the taste for global cultures and global futures indicative of the global ambitions of the young, and the pressures of alumni and other stakeholder interests which must be navigated.

This presentation is organized in the following way. I begin with a vignette (distilled from a photograph) that illustrates the tremendous challenge faced by these elite schools in navigating the new environment of roiling globalizing ambitions of contemporary school youngsters. It is this collision of the past and the present that I take up theoretically and methodologically in the first part of the presentation. Drawing on the work of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin I discuss what I am calling the “work of history”; that is, its activeness in the present as Benjamin maintains and its contradictory and fracturing nature as Homi Bhabha outlines in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). I

argue that the poignant setting of the interface of globalization with the school sets up new material and discursive logics both inside and outside these institutions such that contradictory and hybrid energies are in brilliant display. Above all, in this section, I seek to answer the urgent question: What is the history that is postcolonial school history? How do we understand the work of history in these schools and in these postcolonial colonial contexts? How does the colonial past linked to Britain work in the present?

The second part of my presentation moves from theoretical overview to the concrete. I address the matter of the practices of what, after David Cannadine, I am calling the burnished ornamentalism and the management of school histories in three of our elite school sites—Old Cloisters of Barbados, Rippon College of India, and Clarence High School of Singapore—as they are articulated at a flash point of profound change. This section turns on this fundamental fact: that these schools, which are the products of societies marked historically by prolonged colonial and imperial encounters, are now driven forward by new energies associated with marketization, neoliberalism and globalization as these countries lurch forward unevenly toward the post-developmental era. This turn towards neoliberal globalization has precipitated radically new needs, interests, desires, capacities and competitive logics among the aspirant middle class and upwardly-mobile young and their parents, in each of these societies, that then press powerfully onto these elite schools. In this section I compare and contrast the work of history in these three different school settings.

In the third and final section of this presentation, I 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? I believe based on the data that we have culled from these postcolonial elite schools settings that these institutions are sites of class making. The deep colonial pasts that defined the gestation of these schools and their related contexts have been ruptured in the first place by waves of change linked to national quests for self-determination and autonomous will formation and the material evolution toward post-developmental status of these formerly colonial societies in which these schools are located (Ong, 2006). All of the schools in our "Elite Schools in Globalizing Circumstances" study are therefore dealing with matters that involve scaling or rescaling of the past to consolidate their relationships to local and national projects as well as global imperatives. Just as importantly, and perhaps more insistently, these schools must now respond to neoliberal economic circumstances that are powerfully articulated in the global arena that can make the past seem irrelevant or relevant in new ways. But the past persists. It breaks into the present, which like the Angelus Novus (Paul Klee's figure of the new angel, read by Walter Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as a portent of the future buffeted by the past), is overwhelmed by tradition even as it orients to the future. The present then of these schools is one that is "ruptured" and "fragmented," as one geography teacher at Old Cloisters in Barbados told her sixth form students. It is deeply hybrid. In exploring the nexus between usable histories and globalization, I oppose the idea of globalization as a kind of technological sublime efficiently suffusing and extending schools into the world. I argue instead, by exploring the strategically interested action of these schools as they work on their histories to navigate the present, that globalization is not simply a set of external processes imposing themselves on local institutions. Reading the discursive order of these postcolonial elite schools through the prism of the "work of history," I maintain that the globalization of elite schools is a productive scenario and an

arena of volatile actions and meanings—a veritable struggle over the iconography of the past and the present.

A Vignette

Our Barbados team of researchers at Old Cloisters were invited by some of the sixth form students to view an extraordinary transaction of the current students with the past not only of their school but the island. We were led into the hallowed space of the assembly hall of Old Cloisters; a space as the school's historian, Ralph Jemmott (2006) notes, where the school's ornamental and cultivated past—its emblems, its plaques listing the names of the prestigious Barbados Scholarship holders and the portraits of its old white British school masters going back to 1733—beams down from on high onto the school body comprised largely of Afro Barbadian youngsters. Picture this layered scene of images latent with allusions to the colonial past, trophies of the present, and the iconography and high water marks of the British public school in the postcolonial setting. But look again! This hall normally reserved for formal gatherings—morning assembly, the hosting of “speech day” in which the island's dignitaries, school officials, alumni and the parents congregate to celebrate the students' achievements and the continued success of the school—was now hosting something else. As a sign of the times, it is here that contemporary students chose to stage a modeling event engaging with their past and the ethnic history of the school in a form of self-orientalization (Potuog 1u-Cook, 2006) as they signal their interests in exotic futures—modeling over the traditional career paths of lawyering or doctoring! It was a striking scene of hybridity as the models dressed in traditional costumes of many different ethnic groups— Chinese, Yoruba, Scottish, Native American— strutted across the dais as if they were on a catwalk. The student audience made up of their peers responded with a mixture of delight and orientalist curiosity, seeing their school friends as models of something alluring. Interestingly, when we asked the “models” about their highly ethnicized costumes they told us they were representing different ethnic groups that were part of the Barbados ethnic make up and cultural heritage.

Theorizing the Work of History

Vignettes like this one help to set up our theoretical understanding of the work of history. In talking about the work of history, I seek to invoke two strands of scholarship that speak at times at cross purposes regarding the work of tradition and the past and its relevance. In the first strand, that of the cultural Marxism of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, there is a commitment to understanding the importance of the mobilization of structured-time/present-making history in maintaining a cultural dominant in light of change. The world does not stand still and the ruling institutional order, such as that represented in the factory of the nineteenth century, operates in part by regulating control over life's narrative and the organization of the rhythm of time and duration of everyday existence. The factory (like the school), then, in Thompson's account, structures time and life's narrative of human agents transforming from the peasantry into the industrial proletariat. It is the clock and the church bell (interestingly, these are critical markers in the organization of social aesthetics of postcolonial elite schools—the bequeaths of a transforming colonial order—see MacDougall [1999]) that mark the present in relation to the past as a progressive rather than a circular order. Time, history, for Thompson is malleable. It signifies and can therefore be recruited to purposes of affiliation, order making and, indeed, struggle against such order. Yet this world defined by Thompson in the tradition of cultural studies is

methodologically drawn in the periphery of the metropolitan center precisely at the same time that British colonial expansion is achieving a very deep, thoroughgoing register in the third world as Edward Said (1994) argues.

For Williams, history, understood as usable and “selective tradition,” plays a critical role in the larger project of building hegemony and sustaining the persistence of dominant institutions (Williams, 1980 p. 39). Hegemony is not to be understood as a one-sided dominance but as an active process of coordinating, selecting and integrating the different integuments of cultural form and registers of the past, the traditions of residual groups as well as emergent and oppositional ones into workable order—what Antonio Gramsci calls a “historic bloc” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 137). For postcolonial schools, this means that effort must be made to build legitimacy and carve out paths of access and trajectories of opportunity into the order of schooling. History then is recruited to the work of the persistence of group dominance and incorporation of countervailing elements in society that might seek change (Williams, 1980, p. 41). For Williams, the maintenance of dominance or hegemony is not guaranteed. The task is to articulate the commonsense of dominant groups, extending and dispersing influence throughout the whole social field. History’s role in this sense involves binding and incorporating residual and emergent traditions and cultural form into the present system of explaining what exists and what is possible. In many ways, the postcolonial elite schools in our study seek and maintain hegemonic presence in the educational market. Their persistence is linked to a code of capacities and characteristics articulated through consolidation of objects, furniture, remarkable academic success, built on some version of the trivium and the quadrivium—liberal arts curriculum in high school.

But our second strand on history, derived from postcolonial theorists, speaks to a more complex and fractured story around the articulation of history and dominant groups in the third world. It explicitly writes against the methodological nationalism that one finds as an Achilles heel in British cultural Marxism—Williams and Thompson deeply and besottedly dripping in it. These postcolonial authors speak adroitly to the expanded theatre of imperial and colonial historical conjunctures. Postcolonial history then, from gestation, is a trans-border affair. Postcolonial institutions, such as the elite schools are marked by this sense of the past. Much of the history that these schools claim to be their own is inherited, borrowed or imposed, invoking a reservoir of iconography and symbolism that exceeds any singular ownership or origins claim. Postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1994), Gauri Viswanathan (1989), Homi Bhabha (1994), and Stuart Hall (1996), even metropolitan historians such as David Cannadine sensitive to the postcolonial context, point to the ironies of the historical transaction over colonialism. These ironies persist into the present and the way postcolonial elites both draw on as well as renounce the imperial symbolic.

Hall (1990) for example, brilliantly illustrates this sense of heritage as postcolonial paradox in his discussion of 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 of endurance of first people was its elite-school educated former prime minister, Edward

Seaga (Harvard-trained lawyer). Seaga fervently rejected the native figure as representing too deep a reminder of the “crushed Arawaks” vanquished and defeated by the European colonizer. He maintained the symbol was inappropriate for portraying “the soaring [national] spirit of Jamaicans” (p. 235). This disjuncture of the native past and the postcolonial present is severe. Seaga’s elitist comments remind us of a colonialist attack. It is these discontinuities as Hall notes that effectively pluralize history, magnifying the links across groups and accenting the fissures within any given singular narrative of 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 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 coat of 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 gardening 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 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 writing of cultural Marxists and postcolonial theorists on history as well. Cultural Marxists foreground class affiliation, the cultivation and elaboration of a cultural dominant and the making of historical formations within a national order. Postcolonial theorists underscore 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 these different strands on the work of history present us with important perspectives in our efforts to understand the ideological work of history in the practices of postcolonial elite schools especially as they are articulated to current developments around globalization. I now turn to a discussion of the concrete experiences and uses of history associated with three of the postcolonial elite schools.

Section Two: The Concrete Working of History

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

For it's Cloisters, Cloisters, all for Cloisters...

(Old Cloisters' School Song)

Each of these schools reworks its particular historical heritage in new contexts in which they and their societies are situated. We must therefore methodologically move between the past and the present of these schools. Each has evolved out of colonial contexts to be significant symbols of modernization in their respective national regions and the world. Nevertheless, scale and capacity and different histories of incorporation into colonialism and capitalism are worth remarking in the discussion of these schools and their respective historical contexts. The vastness of India, its rising economic power and influence is also to be analyzed 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 country that passed into first world status since the end of last century according to its legendary former 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.

Past Times

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 postcolonial elite school, the matter of time itself is a deeply signified and signifying property. In the context of the postcolonial elite school, time is to be understood as useable tradition, useable chronology. 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. 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 meanings 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 postcolonial elite school above all comers.

The principal emblems of each of the schools—Cloisters, Rippon, Straits—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 heraldry 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 the postcolonial elite schools are coiled, pulsing with semiotically arranged tension and historical reference and significance. Like the coiled and braided ropes of the “3 Cs of Empire” (the mutually reinforcing projects and powers of capitalism, colonialism and civilization), these symbols are multidimensional and reinforcing—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” (2010, pp. 56-7) bespeak of a 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 and Old Cloisters and Hinduism in the case of Rippon are rich aspects of the allusive and imaginary heritage and universe of these schools that lend warrant to success. Religion is never far away from school-based triumphalism. But what, above all, these symbols dynamically introduce is the active nature of tradition and the past in 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.

Such is it with the symbolism associated with the iconographic figure of the lion. Remarkably, each of these schools, as it is with Eton, foregrounds the lion symbol on their coat of arms. These lion images tend not to be flat but raised, erect, poised and in the manner, as we are told in books on heraldry, of signifying and asserting power and domination (1990). In the case of Rippon College’s coat of arms, the lion image is exalted above the two princes (Maratha and Rajaput) standing on either side of a shield. We are like lions, “we are lions” (*nous sommes des lions*, adapting Barthes *Mythologies*). Two lions with paws raised occupy the center of Old Cloisters court of arms. And on the website of Cloisters’ 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 reins supreme. The griffin combines the king of birds, the eagle, with the king of beasts, the lion. Again the griffin’s claw is raised. Through these images the schools 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 postcolonial 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 reinforce the school as triumphant. Emblems, plaques, school motto, school songs flags, bunting, the architecture of these schools channel the sense of continuity, near permanence, of Old Cloisters, Strait Schools and Rippon College. The aura of school past is constructed not given. Photographs, busts, memorial walls, gardens with dedication walls, 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 north east quarter of 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 which 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 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-gothic style of late colonial architecture surviving in India. In a key source written on Rippon, the main building is described as a "perfect blend" of "Indian and British heritage."

If past times, articulated in all consuming images such as the griffin, in celebratory display, pride and specialness in history books, school magazines, special memorial releases, You Tube video and flicker and Facebook photos and uploaded files, are a modulated resource for the burnishing of image and the marketing of these schools—they are also the source of disavowal, markers of contradiction, at the interface of the past and the present.

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")

[1984]). 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 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 school are not so much a marker 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 roiling processes of globalization put these schools under the pressure of new circumstances. Present times then are times of change, precipitating repurposing and reorientation.

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, Old Cloisters built its reputation around the classics—the study of Greek and Roman 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 Old Cloisters!

But the great point of fruition of the classics was around 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 Cloisters that a celebrated group of brilliant students called the rolls royces were known for the speed at which they could translate Livy and Vergil into English (Jemmott, 2006). 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 of the rolls royces was Prime Minister and his former classmate would become his deputy. Both 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 roll 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 emphasis opting instead now for the sciences and business. Out of some six curricular tracks for the sixth formers at Old Cloisters five are designated for science and technology. Only one track is in arts and languages. Moreover, students have voted with their feet for business, accounts and law pursuing these subjects outside of Old Cloisters as the school does not offer them as courses of study. 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 and entrepreneurship, etc.) parked alongside the old liberal arts emphasis in the humanities that constitutes the

historical bequeath to these schools. Indeed, in the last two decades, Cloisters has abandoned the old Oxford and Cambridge GCE examinations for a examinations administered by the Caribbean Examination Councilⁱ. 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)

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 and to elements of the lower order. Like Cloisters and Straits, 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 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 notion 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 school 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 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 is having to compete with schools that are being founded by the business and commercial classes such as the Mercedes Benz International School (<http://mbis.org/>), in Rajeev Gandhi Infotech Park in Hinjewadi, Pune, India. As one of us has reported elsewhere (Rizvi, 2014), 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, like Straights and Old Cloisters have accepted this challenge and have enhanced their infrastructure, curricula and website and online representation and reworked their image. Official and unofficial videos, sometimes with very high quality production values can be found on 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 postcolonial 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 world and the ecology and survival of the planet. Within this narrative, Rippon 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 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 Rippon College 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 England or the US.

Straits School 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 and the notion of receptivity to change and creativity are the defining themes of this carefully produced video. “To be at Straits School is really magical,” says one of the eager student representative. 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. Straits’ great history 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 the oldest school 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 in an online interview also published on the web as she invokes Straits’ status of *primus inter pares*—as the model for other institutions. In this sense Straits school is both the oldest and 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 an interview available on the YouTube video sharing website, the principal (Pseudonym necessary) 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 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 brain storming 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 Principal Xxx (Need pseudonym) underscores in an online interview that took place at a conference on technology in the capital of one of the Asian tigers cities.

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 sample lays claim to this audacity of school narrative, this audacity of projection of school identity into the world. No other school projects this sense of confidence not simply as a world player but as a world shaper of educational practice as a universalist ambition:

- The eagle eye and gryphon strength
- They led us to the fore
- To reign supreme in ev'ry sphere
- The sons of Singapore.

The present times of these postcolonial elite 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. 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 that centered England as the chief benefactor and beneficiary and point of transacting and finishing the talent from the former colonies now has been significantly decentered or displaced. 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 postcolonial elite schools are responding to the new global imaginary universe. At Old Cloisters, 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 recruiting academic talent from Cloisters and other leading elite school in the island. At Straits School, whose 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 insistent of the future time is the work of the imagination of the students. Here the care of the self often replaces the care of the school.

Future Times

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable. (T.S. Eliot, 1943, p. 13)

“Today we say we are Indian citizens. Tomorrow we will say we are world citizens.”
(Student council interview, Rippon College).

Joanna Latimer and Beverley Skeggs (2011) make the point that the imagination is a way of thinking about the world that is always embedded in material purposes, practices and actions. It is a way of “ordering” time and space (p. 397). Postcolonial elite schools such as Straits or 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 sit at the crossroads of 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, representation 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. As administrators plan for the future, they must exercise custodianship over the past. Nowhere is this double tug of the past and the future more experienced than in the postcolonial school, where the past seems so all pervasively present in the visual domain and in the rhythm, duration and organization of everyday life and where the future is so insistently the path forward and the only guarantor of continuity and persistence: “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 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 a 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 this contemporary Straits heritage project. At the same time, there has

been a donation drive called “Museum and Artifact Donative Drive” organized, inviting alumni, seniors and relatives to donate artifacts to the museum. The principal describes the multipurpose heritage project this way:

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 artifacts and Old Boys momentos, 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 leant 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 garden 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. (Xxxx, 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 the past and for their present-day pedagogy to be preserved for 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.

But future times are best or most strongly articulated in student aspirations, in school strategy and projections, their continued but changing investment in noblese oblige and strategic social service, in the fraught engagement with technology, in the larger conversation about globalization and knowledge economy that suffuses the educational context of all these settings, and the relentless embracement of entrepreneurism. The speed and intensity of aspiration that the students carry forward often bring them in collision even 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 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, 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 they 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 felt 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). For them globalization was

best expressed with access to online communities, access to friends around the world beyond India:

C.M. 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 world?

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

Many in this group dreamt of professional futures that would be in commerce. None of them identified 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 and futures that had been inherited, was also strongly present in the discourse of students at 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 means-ends rational, less qua academic and more instrumental. Students at Cloisters as at all the schools put their future in extra school lessons. Students felt that they needed a particular profile 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 University 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 careerist block 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 pastime, present times and future times, Old Cloisters, Straits and Rippon institutions reveal themselves to be astute re-inventors 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).

Section Three: Concluding Remarks

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

Joanna Latimer and Beverly Skegg (2011) caution twenty-first century social analysts against a too easy coupling of imagination and geography, a too easy delimiting of imagination via territorialization. "We want to question," these authors go on to assert, "the ways in which imagination is always already tamed and ordered by our being enrolled in one tradition rather than another" (2011, p. 395). Drawing upon this argument, what I have sought to foreground in our discussion of postcolonial elite schools in this presentation is precisely the radical untaming of the imagination in these school settings. The deployment of imagination at Rippon, Cloisters and Straits 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) 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 the work of history that the postcolonial elite schools conduct? What is the sense of the historical here?

I have defined the historical in this presentation as not simply a matter of chronology. Infact, I have sought to prise the historical away from 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. 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 of Williams, Benjamin and Thompson) 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 postcolonial elite schools in this account, history takes on special significance since these institutions have been shaped by the weight of the past nexus into 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 loyalty of indigenous elites to Britishness. Yet, the story of these schools does not stop there.

These schools have been critical beacons of accomplishment in their own settings and have started to chart paths as global players. They 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 postcolonial elite school is not one of transcendence of that colonial past after independence. It is instead the studied selection of tradition, the strategic burnishing of the socially produced memories and traditions as well as the new pathways that have been grafted of necessity onto the image making of

Cloisters, Straits and Rippon. It is also the full play of contradictions that 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, postcolonial elite schools in the globalizing context are attempting to marshal their histories at the crossroads of profound change. Schools such as Straits, Rippon and 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. 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," Student council interview, Rippon College).

ⁱKent Greene, principal of Ardent Arbors, rival school to Old Cloisters in Barbados, maintained in our interview with him that Old Cloisters was "dragged kicking screaming" into changing their examinations from Cambridge to the Caribbean Examinations Council. Indeed, according to him, for the first few years the percentage of passes for Old Cloisters' students in these regional/national exams slipped when compared to their extraordinary success in the GCE Cambridge exams of previous years.