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The (Post)colonial Archive: Re-imag(in)ing Southeast Asia

Convenors: Dr Alexander Supartono (Edinburgh Napier University, a.supartono@napier.ac.uk) and Dr Alexandra Moschovi (University of Sunderland, alexandra.moschovi@sunderland.ac.uk)

Colonial archives have historically been centralised and exclusive in spatial as well as ideological terms. Digitalisation paved the way for the decentralisation and democratisation of institutional archives as digital proxies have become accessible to wider and geographically disperse audiences through different online platforms. This online presence as well as the possibilities for user interactivity and repurposing of content that Web 2.0 offered has opened new channels and networks for the critical examination of the colonial archive, its ontology, politics and power.

This panel seeks to investigate novel readings of the colonial photographic archive in the digital era. We invite papers that reflect on how the concept, content and taxonomy of colonial and postcolonial archives in Southeast Asia have been used, challenged, appropriated and repurposed by contemporary artists, curators and academics, within western and nonwestern explorations of ethnicity, identity, history and memory. We are particularly interested in the ways that these new interpretations, located on or disseminated through the Web constitute an expanded postcolonial archive that may afford us a reimagining of Southeast Asia.

Panel

Chair: Dr Alexandra Moschovi (University of Sunderland, alexandra.moschovi@sunderland.ac.uk)

1. Contesting colonial (hi)stories: (Post)colonial imaginings of South East Asia

Dr Alexander Supartono (Napier Edinburgh University) and Dr Alexandra Moschovi (University of Sunderland)

2. Dis-(re)membering and enchantment: Singapore artists and the colonial archive

Dr Adele Tan (National Gallery of Singapore)

3. Visual archives and visual methodology in Indonesian Studies

Professor Adrian Vickers (The University of Sydney)

4. Colonial archives and the quest for evidence of atrocity: Photography and the Indonesian War of Independence

Dr Susie Protschky (Monash University)

5. The elephant in the dark room: Colonial photography and environmental history in British Burma

Dr Jonathan Saha (University of Leeds)

6. Transnational identity construction by way of crowdsourcing images: The Southeast Asian experience

Kristian Jeff Cortez Agustin (Hong Kong Baptist University)

Abstracts

1. Contesting colonial (hi)stories: (Post)colonial imaginings of South East Asia

Dr Alexander Supartono (Napier Edinburgh University) and Alexandra Moschovi (University of Sunderland)

In lieu of introduction to the panel, this paper seeks to explore the impact of digital technologies upon the material, conceptual and ideological premises of the colonial archive in the digital era. This analysis is pursued through a discussion of the findings of an international, multidisciplinary artist workshop in Yogyakarta, Indonesia that used the digital colonial archive to critically investigate the ways national, transnational and personal history and memory in the former colonies has been informed and shaped by the colonial past. We specifically focus on how their use of digital media contests and reconfigures the use, truth value and power of the colonial archive as an entity and institution. Case studies include: Thai photographer Dow Wasiksiri, who questions the archive's mnemonic function by replacing early 20th century, handcrafted montage with digital manipulation; Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann, who adopts a speculative photomontage to represent onto the same picture plane different historical moments and colonial narratives; and Indonesian photographer Agan Harahap, who recomposes archival photographs into unlikely juxtapositions that he then disseminates through social media.

Recontextualised and repurposed online on different platforms, this work becomes part of the expanded post-colonial archive and proposes a reframing not only of the politics of colonial representation, but also of the validity and veracity of the photographic image as evidence and historical record. We further argue that the transition from the material colonial archive of the 20th century to the immaterial post-colonial archive of the 21st century also makes possible a shift in power relations allowing formerly colonised subjects to have unprecedented access to and control over the representation of their history.

2. Dis-(re)membering and enchantment: Singapore artists and the colonial archive

Adele Tan (National Gallery of Singapore), adele.tan@nationalgallery.sg

This paper looks at specific works by contemporary artists from Singapore—Erika Tan (*Come cannibalise us, why don't you?*), Liana Yang (*May It Be, with Purpose and Desire*) and Ho Rui-an (*Solar: A Meltdown*)—in order to examine why they have become invested in the colonial, and how their convergence upon and appropriation of colonial archival imagery, retrieved from ever-expanding digital repositories, are cut up and reassembled via installation, photography and performance-lecture respectively, so as to put pressure upon the assumed latent objectivity and natural taxonomy of colonial records themselves. These efforts can also be read against the Singapore Memory Project

(<http://www.singaporememory.sg/> or <http://www.iremember.sg/>), a governmental nation-wide initiative to collect memories of the country from individuals to organisations, a paradoxical gesture in itself when loss and change are constants in the country and where official discourse blurs the distinction between memory and history.

As access to archival records from the colonial past greatly improves with better digitisation / web technologies and search engines, these artists have harnessed both the radical indeterminacy of internet circulation and the authoritative register of the colonial archive, so as to simultaneously weave narratives and wrench away meanings from where and how one reads national identity in the context of Southeast Asian geopolitical histories.

3. Visual archives and visual methodology in Indonesian Studies

Professor Adrian Vickers (*The University of Sydney*), adrian.vickers@sydney.edu.au

Visual sources are often treated as illustrations of text, but the opening up of recent archives of Indonesian historical photography and Balinese painting have demonstrated new possibilities for approaches to research. The Dutch collector Leo Haks was responsible for assembling a number of different archives during his career. One of those, of colonial photographs, is now in the Australian National Gallery. Access to much of that material is now available via ANG, and preliminary research on that collection has been published. Likewise, the Haks collection of Balinese paintings has been used as one of the bases of a Virtual Museum of Balinese Painting that I have constructed. Both of these archives show how the ordering of images and demonstration of relationships between them reconfigures and remaps our understandings of agency and connections in Indonesian colonial contexts. This paper also seeks to demonstrate the utility of digital tools in research.

4. Colonial archives and the quest for evidence of atrocity: Photography and the Indonesian War of Independence

Dr Susie Protschky (*Monash University*), Susanne.Protschky@monash.edu

We appear to be inhabiting the moment when the long-standing allegation that Dutch military forces committed atrocities during the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–49) has become broadly accepted, not just among historians but also a wider international public. Such claims have circulated in the public sphere since 1969, but have been hotly contested ever since, and it is only in recent years that the Dutch nomenclature around the conflict has shifted from ‘police actions’ (*politioenele acties*) to ‘colonial war’ (Luttikhuis and Moses 2014). A new historical study using autobiographical sources—veterans’ accounts—presents further, compelling proof of Dutch atrocities having been widespread, if not systematic (Oostindie 2015).

Photographic evidence is now circulating in the public sphere to illustrate this latest iteration of a ‘history war’. Last year, Dutch national newspapers published photographs of a summary execution of Indonesian rebels alongside stories reporting new evidence of systematic atrocities (*Volkskrant*, *NRC* 2014). That photograph and others like it have since been disseminated in other news and social media and at a major museum exhibition (*Verzetmuseum*, Amsterdam 2016). Such photographs come from colonial archives, mostly situated in the Netherlands, that have long been known to professional historians, and that are in fact partly digitised.

In this paper I ask *why* it is that historians and/or the larger public have been blind until now to the photographic evidence of atrocity in colonial archives from the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia during the War of Independence. Drawing on recent historical scholarship on photography and violence (Bijl 2015, Lydon 2012), as well as new evidence from my own archival research, I demonstrate that it is not a

dearth of photographic evidence that has made atrocity in this war invisible, but rather, the dominance of competing discourses that have made atrocity unrecognisable in the public sphere.

5. The elephant in the dark room: Colonial photography and environmental history in British Burma

Dr Jonathan Saha (University of Leeds), J.Saha@leeds.ac.uk

The British in colonial Burma found elephants to be highly photogenic mega-herbivores. Globe trotting tourists, colonial officials and employees of imperial firms all took snaps of them in the early-twentieth century. They were photographed working in timber yards manipulating enormous teak logs. They were also photographed lifeless and prostrate at the feet of the sportsmen who killed them.

This paper locates photographs of elephants within the history colonial relations with the pachyderms. It excavates the meanings of these images for the photographers and their audiences. It then goes on to consider how these photographs—many of which are increasingly available online—might be used in the postcolonial present to foster debates about environmental justice.

6. Transnational identity construction by way of crowdsourcing images: The Southeast Asian experience

Kristian Jeff Cortez Agustin (Hong Kong Baptist University), kjcagustin@yahoo.com

Southeast Asian countries reclaimed Southeast Asia from its colonial past by establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) nearly fifty years ago. Now with ten member states and an estimated population of 600 million, the ASEAN is still redrawing the map of Southeast Asia through its attempts to consolidate a regional economic base and forge a regional cultural identity. Yet, while its economic integration has always been driven by the elite, its cultural integration is increasingly becoming a public affair by way of social media, an effective means of crowdsourcing and visualisation. By way of visual culture—photographs, illustrations, pastiche images, and even selfies and videos—Southeast Asia is contemporaneously and historically (re)imagined; its collective memory (re)constructed.

This paper looks into the overlapping roles of the region's elite and the general public in contemporaneously imagining 'ASEAN-ness' as an overarching cultural identity. By accounting for the different ways legacy and new media can be instrumental in the ASEAN cultural integration, this paper proposes three ways of identity construction: the 'official', the 'unofficial', and the 'participatory'.