

INTRODUCTION

The Legacy of Colonial Images of British Malaya, from Past to Present

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.¹

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009)

(L)ike every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and *a tool of power*.²

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977)

Abstract

The introductory chapter raises the question of violence, particularly the violence of seeing and objectifying the Other. Central to the theme of this book is the question of agency and intentionality, and how we can and ought to see and interpret the visuals of Empire today.

Keywords: Objectifying the Other, violence, epistemic and visual violence

I. Seeing *Innocently*, Seeing *Innocence*: The Violence of the Colonial Gaze

If one looks at a thing with the intention of trying to discover what it means, one ends up no longer seeing the thing itself, but of thinking of the question that is raised.

—René Magritte

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TEDGlobal 2009, July 2009. Re: http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en

² Sontag, 1977: 5.

The image of hatred and of the Other is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. [...] Strangely, the foreigner lives within us, he is the hidden face of our identity.³

—Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991)

I was born in the year 1967 BSM (Before Social Media), and I grew up in a country where the most popular images of Malaysia and Malaysians came in the form of postcards. On the way to the correctional facility that was my school, I would stop by the shopping center nearby to buy the odd pencil or pen, for in those days, children were still expected to be able to write with their hands and not tap on their phones incessantly. In the stationary shop was a revolving rack that displayed a wide array of postcards of Malaysia, with images of rural villages, mountains and rivers, smiling locals, and of course, the ubiquitous orangutan. Even as a young child whose visage had yet to be devastated by acne, I was enthralled by the arresting power of those postcards that told me and others who we were, and how we were meant to look and dress. The postcards spoke of a traditional Malaysia whose inhabitants seemed to be decked in traditional dress all the time, though I have to confess that I never came across anyone buying bread or cigarettes dressed in such a manner.

This somewhat sedimented understanding of tradition lingers until today. Those who have lived in, and are familiar with, Malaysia and the rest of Southeast Asia would presumably be familiar with the kind of formal invitation cards that get sent out for weddings, receptions and official events. More often than not, such cards would include at the very bottom a short note that says something like ‘Dress code: Traditional dress’. It is interesting to observe that in most cases, ‘traditional dress’ is understood as *19th century dress*, and we would never see a guest arriving decked out in the gear of an 8th to 10th century noble of Mataram, or a 15th century lord of Sukhothai, or a 16th century prince from Majapahit.

Just how and why the 19th century continues to have such a stranglehold upon the popular imaginary of Southeast Asians happens to be one of the themes of this book, which looks at the visuals of Empire from the late 19th century, when the combined might of racialized colonial-capitalism and all the emerging technologies of the age were brought to bear upon the communities of Southeast Asia that came under colonial rule. This book will look at one aspect of modern colonialism in particular, that is the introduction of photography and photo-postcards, and how the subsequent production of the latter determined the way that colonial rule was seen, framed and reproduced for public consumption (and consent) both in the

³ Kristeva, 1991: 1.

colonies as well as the colonial metropole. Our contention is that *looking is never simply looking, and seeing is never simply seeing*. In the context of late 19th century colonial-capitalism, the manner in which the realities of racialized colonial-capitalism were depicted, disseminated and at times masked or hidden can also be found in the visuals of Empire themselves.

There are some who may regard colonial-era postcards as relatively ‘harmless’ objects that were at the tail end of the long train of imperial conquest and colonial rule. Indeed, this tendency to view such colonial-era imagery as harmless or even quaint and charming can be seen all over Southeast Asia today, where there exists many examples of how such images have been regurgitated and recycled to serve the ends of the present-day tourism industry (in the form of reproduced postcards, images on t-shirts and mugs, calendars, fridge magnets, and the paraphernalia of today’s nostalgia industry). Yet to do so would entail forgetting the fact that when the original postcards and photos were taken, the subjects we see captured in them were literally *captive subjects* who were subjects of colonial rule, and that the circumstances of their production were defined and shaped by differentials of power and wealth that were very real indeed.

The aim of this book is to revisit the era of late colonial-capitalism and to interrogate further the ideology and logic of colonial governmentality that not only helped to create the plural (and dependent) colonial economy that was British Malaya’s, but also its society that came to be divided according to the compartmentalizing logic of racialized capitalism that saw human beings as units of capital, differentiated along biological-racial lines that were in turn organized according to a violent hierarchy that placed some races above others. These were circumstances that were far from innocent or natural, for they were entirely the result of the rational agency of colony-builders who saw other lands and other peoples as units of capital that had both political as well as economic value. This may be a book about pictures, but it will be argued that the pictures themselves cannot be understood without placing them in the political-economic-ideological context of their time. That context also happened to be one where power was at work, and the postcards that were produced during the era of late colonial-capitalism were themselves objects that were powerful in some respects.

For us to begin a serious discussion about the workings of power in the visuals of Empire, we would need to dispel some misconceptions that have been around for a little too long. One of the first misconceptions that needs to be addressed is the notion that visual representation is somehow an essentially innocent and harmless thing, where violence almost never takes place. To counter this viewpoint, we can begin with the work of Tzvetan Todorov, whose *Conquest of America* (1984) was pioneering in so many ways.

Todorov's account of the European conquest and colonization of America was novel at the time as he was among the first to note that long before there occurred the acts of physical violence that marred the encounter between the Europeans and the natives of America there had already occurred a deeper, and longer-lasting, act of nominal violence. The very act of naming the New World 'America' was, for Todorov, one of the foundational acts of violence itself, for what it did was to deny the living reality as well as the history of the peoples and cultures of the New World while at the same time imposing upon both the land and its peoples names and labels that were European in origin. Todorov shows in his work how the desire to know and learn about the land and people of the Americas led the Europeans down the path of what he would label the 'epistemology that kills', and how even the simple act of naming the other (as 'Other', as 'Indian', etc.) was one that necessarily led to the negation of the identity of the Other who in turn was left voiceless. Todorov does not deny or question the Europeans' *desire* to know and learn about the Other; but he argues that this desire to know and learn was also driven by the accompanying desire to control, dominate, regulate and ultimately colonize. The lamentable tragedy of the encounter between the Europeans and the native Americans lay in the fact that this encounter never led to a genuine dialogue between equals but quickly degenerated into a monologue where the Westerners defined America and the Americans according to terms that were known, understood and recognized by the former.

Todorov's concerns about the latent violence that is contained in the desire to know and learn about the Other has been echoed in the work of Bernard S. Cohn, too. In his *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (1996), Cohn shows how the expansion and development of British colonial rule in India was accompanied by an equally rigorous effort to collect as much information and knowledge about the subcontinent and its peoples as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. Like Todorov, Cohn also notes that the development of British knowledge about India and Indians was hardly ever an *innocent* process, for in the course of learning about the land and its people the British were also organizing the data they collected according to an order of classification and typology of their own. Crucial to the colonial enterprise in British India was the intended goal of learning as much as possible about Indian history, with the intention of relegating all that knowledge to the archives of Empire. For Cohn, this sustained effort to document, record and classify India's history was part and parcel of what he termed the modality of 'museumization', where all that was local and native would be rendered historical – and by doing so removed from the present-day realities of colonial intervention and colonial governance – and moved instead into the museum of Empire.

Cohn's critique of the modalities of colonial data-collecting and knowledge production would be echoed by others such as Richards (1993) and McClure (1994),

though what all these works have in common – from Todorov to Cohn to Richards and McClure – is the tendency to locate epistemic violence in the domain of the written word, and books in particular. Much of my own work to date has also been focused on the books, novels and reports that were produced during the 19th century, and I have focused on the epistemic violence that occurred during the time when the region now known as Southeast Asia was discursively constructed (Noor, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2021).

Though it is undeniable that much of the epistemic violence that took place during the colonial era happened in the process of learning and writing about the non-Western Other, it is equally important for us to remember that the jaundiced gaze of the colonial eye was also turned to the *image* of the colonized subject and the lands that he/she inhabited. In this respect credit must be given to Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978) was one of the first to call out the fact that the boundary-line between Orientalist writings and Orientalist images was simply too fine to be regarded as a dividing line at all. Said's argument that we can (and should) *read* the visuals of Empire in the same way that we *read* the texts and narratives of Empire happens to be one of the main arguments of this work. In her work *On Photography* (1977) Susan Sontag applies a similar logic to her criticism of photography in particular, and has argued that photographs (and this would include photo-postcards too, to be sure) possess a similar power to shape and arrest the subject that it captures, and by doing so becomes a part of the ruling system of any capitalist society. As she notes:

(A) capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers).⁴

Such concerns have spilled over into the domain of Southeast Asian area studies too, and developments in the field have witnessed a range of important interventions. In recent years there has emerged a growing interest in the visuals and visualization of the region and its peoples, both in the past and in the present. Among the works that have significantly expanded the scope of research concerns

⁴ Sontag, 1977: 140.

and interests in and about the region is Sandeep Ray's *Celluloid Colony: Locating History and Ethnography in Early Dutch Colonial Films of Indonesia* (2021).

Ray's *Celluloid Colony* represents a major breakthrough in the domain of Southeast Asian studies as he extends the domain of research into Southeast Asian history to the world of colonial films and moving images. His argument is that we can read the films that were produced in the Dutch East Indies as works that reveal much – not only about the subject matter at hand, but also about those who made these films too. The genius of Ray's work lies in how he turns the critical gaze of the colonial film-maker back onto the film-maker himself; and the 'inadvertent ethnography' that is contained in these films tells us a lot about how the people of the Dutch East Indies lived at the time, and also reveal something about the motivations, worldviews, biases and interests of those who made the films in the first place.⁵ By foregrounding the role of films and film-making as legitimate modes of colonial data-collecting and knowledge-production, Ray has opened up a new vista for future research by historians of the region, who need not focus all of their attention on the books, reports, articles and popular literature produced during the colonial era. For Ray, films *are* material worthy of critical analysis, and they deserve as much attention as the books and reports that were produced in the colonial setting. This book moves in tandem with Ray's, though the primary object of study will be the photo-postcards of British Malaya, most of which were produced just a few decades before the arrival of moving images and the cinematic camera.

Another earlier, yet hugely important work that inspired the writing of this book is Jan Neverdeen Pieterse's *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (1992). Pieterse's account of the evolution of the images of black Africans in popular Western culture goes back to the very first encounters between the Western world and the non-Western Other, when Europe's initial attempts to position itself in world history and geography exhibited what the author calls a 'civilizational narcissism' that invariably centered the West in both space and time.⁶ What Pieterse sought to do in his work was to address the question of how relations of racial dominance are 'constructed and reproduced in popular culture, (and) how are they normalized and routinised in word and image'.⁷ By examining what he calls 'the social rhetoric of images'⁸, he showed how and why 'the relations depicted are not those of dialogue, but of domination'.⁹ Central to the argument put forth by Pieterse is his insistence that there has always been a

⁵ Ray, 2021: 62.

⁶ Pieterse, 1992: 23.

⁷ Pieterse, 1992: 12.

⁸ Pieterse, 1992: 12.

⁹ Pieterse, 1992: 10.

close and intimate link between the making of epistemic claims and the exercise of power, for 'knowing the colonized is one of the fundamental forms of control and possession', and 'one application of this knowledge is that the *subject peoples are turned into visual objects*'.¹⁰

For both Ray and Pieterse, the material world of objects – be they native Asians and Africans or coconut trees or the dogs that sleep under their shade – are real enough and exist as things-in-themselves. In and of themselves, these things are simply things that do whatever things do. But for a human being to be seen, framed, and designated as a 'native Other' requires not a keener eye, but rather an eye that frames the world according to a particular register of knowledge that also classifies. This invariably brings into question the role of active human rational agency, and it is that agency (set in its historical-political-institutional context) which determines whether that act of seeing-framing is innocent or not.

This book builds on the premises that were laid down by Ray and Pieterse, and will look at the visuals of Empire that were produced in the colony of British Malaya in particular. As in the case of the visualization of Africa and Africans that has been studied by Pieterse, we aim to examine the manner through which Malaya and its peoples were conceived of, framed and represented in colonial photo-postcards in particular.

We have set off on this path at a time when in Malaysia there appears to have developed a 'nostalgia industry' of sorts, where the legacy of the colonial past has been reduced, in some instances, to the level of aesthetics. In recent times, popular public interest in colonial postcards has grown in Malaysia, as with the rest of Southeast Asia. A number of books have been published on the subject, and foremost among them has to be Jin Seng Cheah's *Penang: 500 Early Postcards* (2013), which by now has assumed near-legendary status as the go-to book for avid postcard collectors in the country. Then there is also the earlier *Reminiscences of the Straits Settlements Through Postcards* (2005) that was jointly published by the National Archives of Malaysia and Singapore. Both these works, and many others like them, are comprehensive in terms of the huge number of postcards that they offer to the reader, reprinted in exquisite detail. But while they are ambitious in scope and variety, the socio-political and socio-economic contexts within which these postcards were produced have received comparatively less attention. As reference works on the subject of postcards in general they are incomparable, but the reader who may wish to *read beyond and beneath* the images themselves may be left thirsting for more.

Before proceeding any further, I should like to state clearly that this book is *not* about the aesthetics of Empire, and is thus not of the 'coffee table' variety. (If

¹⁰ Pieterse, 1992: 94.

anything, it may put you off your coffee for a while.) My own analysis of colonial postcards is informed by the fact that these postcards and photos were produced at a time — from the late 19th century to the first decades of the 20th — when racialized colonial capitalism in Malaya was at its height, and when there emerged the need for some kind of validation of the colonial enterprise itself (on the basis that it was indeed productive, profitable, modern, rational, etc.). Pieterse made the same observation in his work on Africans, as he noted that ‘the leitmotiv of colonial propaganda was economic gain. The favorite image of the colony, in the home country, was of a place being made productive through European discipline and ingenuity, where under European management natural resources could be exploited, where order reigned so that labor could be productive. Useful products and (cheap) labor therefore played an important part in colonial iconography. The cheerful image of productive colonies was disseminated by means of postcards, advertising and the packaging of colonial products’.¹¹

In the course of the development and popularization of colonial photo-postcards, there would emerge the latest iteration of the stereotype of the native Other, who would in due course be visually objectified and reproduced for mass consumption. Though these stereotypes may not have had any basis in the actual socio-economic-political reality of the people of Malaya themselves, they were nonetheless ‘real in their social consequences, notably with regard to the allocation of roles’.¹² Echoing the work of Alatas (1977), Pieterse notes that ‘the stereotype of the lazy native dovetailed with the expansion of capitalism, served as an alibi for forced labor and exploitation, and thus formed a lucrative component of the civilizing mission’.¹³

As colonial postcards grew more common and popular in British Malaya there would later develop a self-validating and self-affirming ‘epistemic loop’ of sorts, where ‘social representation echoes social realities which are in turn modelled upon social representation. A kind of societal typecasting is set up, from which it is difficult to escape’.¹⁴ Pieterse was right when he concluded that ‘the single most important feature of representations of Otherness is the role they play in establishing and maintaining social inequality’¹⁵, and the aim of this book is to examine and explain just how and why the visualization of Malaya and Malaysians from the late 19th to early 20th century in postcards was so important to the grand narrative of Empire upon which the entire colonial enterprise in Malaya rested.

¹¹ Pieterse, 1992: 91.

¹² Pieterse, 1992: 11.

¹³ Pieterse, 1992: 91.

¹⁴ Pieterse, 1992: 11.

¹⁵ Pieterse, 1992: 234.

Having stated the objectives of this book, it is also important to highlight from the outset the parameters of its concerns and its limitations. Here, at the very beginning of the book, we would like to point out that our goal is to understand the meaning and messages that were conveyed by the photo-postcards we will be discussing in due course. But as the postcards and photos of British Malaya were taken and produced by professionals who were themselves the purveyors of visual goods and items, there arises the question of individual agency and responsibility as well.

II. On Agency and Intentionality: Reading Meaning in and into the Visuals of Empire

Everything that is visible hides something that is invisible.

—René Magritte

Images of Otherness as the furthest boundary of normality exert a disciplinary influence, as reverse reflections, and warning signals. The savage is indispensable in establishing the place of civilization.¹⁶

—Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black* (1992)

Notwithstanding the labors of natural scientists the world over, we have yet to discover a postcard tree growing anywhere on the planet. As such, it is safe for us to assume that the postcards that exist in the world today (and which we will be looking at in this book) did not rain down from the sky, were dug up from the earth, or were plucked off the branches of a tree, and are *all* the result of human manufacture. The *manufactured* nature of photographs and postcards point us to the fact that they exist as a result of human agency, and if human agency is involved in their production then this naturally brings us to the attendant questions of accountability and intentionality. We raise this question here for there has always been the assumption that unlike paintings, photographs and photo-postcards were, and remain, somehow more ‘objective’ and ‘innocent’. Sontag (1977) was among the first to remark upon this assumption when she writes that ‘a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph — any photograph — seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate,

¹⁶ Pieterse, 1992: 233.

relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects'.¹⁷ But how long can this claim to innocence be maintained?

When we look at the postcards that were produced during the era of late racialized colonial-capitalism, we are confronted with the questions of accountability and intentionality. *Who* were the ones who produced these postcards, *who* were their primary intended audiences, *what* were the motivations that led to their production, *how* were the subjects of the postcards seen and framed, and *how* were they seen/read/interpreted during their time (and *how* are *we* to see/read/interpret them today)?

All the questions raised above are about human agency as well as human choices, and all of them need to be set in the historical-cultural-political context of their time. Before proceeding any further, allow us to state in the clearest terms possible that this book does *not* purport or aim to be a work of psychology, and that we are not attempting a psychological reading of those who were responsible for the production of the photo-postcards that we will be discussing later. Nor will we be attempting a micro-biographical study of the photographers and postcard producers themselves, in an effort to gleam some truth about the 'inner workings' of their minds. This is not a denial of the value of psychology *per se*, but rather a declaration of the aims and intentions of this work, that are set within the demarcated parameters of colonial history and the study of the visuals of Empire themselves. The chapters that follow will look at the photo-postcards that were produced from the late 19th century to the first decades of the 20th and will try to show just how and why these images can be read as emblematic and representative of the prevailing logic of racialized colonial-capitalism at the time of their production.

Though this book aims to be a study of the visuals of Empire, at no point are we suggesting that these photo-postcards produced, or were responsible for, the ideology and modalities of colonial-capitalist rule in (what was then known as) British Malaya, but rather the opposite: that in many ways they reflected the prevailing attitudes and concerns among the colonial authorities and colonial-capitalist elites who chose to see and frame the colonized subjects in a manner that was particular. Elsewhere, I (Noor, 2019.b.) have raised similar concerns and observations about how the literary works that were produced by successive generations of colonial-capitalist administrators and elites in colonial Southeast Asia can be read today as 'confessional' texts that betray the underlying prejudices, cultural perspectivism and political leanings of the authors at the time. I have argued that another way of reading the works that were produced by Western Orientalist-colonial scholars and writers of the 19th century is to see them as works that actually reveal the subject-positions of the authors themselves; and though all of these works claimed

¹⁷ Sontag, 1977: 3.

to be writings about Southeast Asia and Southeast Asians, they *were also* works that tell us a lot about the mindset of Western European colonizers and imperialists too.¹⁸

Any attempt to understand the meaning and intention/s that may have been contained in the photo-postcards that were produced in British Malaya must therefore begin with the understanding that these were images produced in the context of a *colony*, where the native subject was also a colonial subject, subjected to foreign rule and foreign laws.¹⁹ This happened to be the prevailing political reality across much of colonial Southeast Asia by the closing decades of the 19th century, and what held true for British Malaysians then was equally true for those who lived under Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese rule in other parts of Southeast Asia at the time. The reality of colonial subjection and subjecthood was surmised most eloquently by the Dutch colonial official-turned-novelist Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820–1887), (better known by his pen-name Multatuli) who in his ground-breaking novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) wrote that: ‘There is no question of tribute, or levy, or alliance. The *Javanese* is a *Dutch subject*. The King of the Netherlands is *his* king. The descendants of his former princes and lords are *Dutch* officials. They are appointed, transferred, promoted, dismissed by the Governor-General, who rules in the name of the *King*. The criminal is convicted and sentenced under a law made in THE HAGUE. The taxes the *Javanese* pays flow into the Exchequer of THE NETHERLANDS’. (*Emphasis in the original*)²⁰

Most of the British Malayan colonial subjects that we see in the postcards produced in British Malaya were likewise subjects of the British Empire, and even the landscapes that were photographed by the postcard-makers were then thought of as colonial territory that was within the wider expanse of the imperial territory, too. This foregrounds the fact that photography and postcard production that took place in British Malaya (as in British Burma, British India, and other British colonial possessions) were activities carried out under the auspices of colonial rule and

¹⁸ See: Noor, Farish A. *Mea Culpa: Re-reading 19th Century Colonial-era works on Southeast Asia as Confessional Texts*, in: Journal of Southeast Asia Research, SEAR, School of Oriental and African Studies SOAS. Volume 27, No. 1: The Past, Present and Future of Area Studies. 2019: 74–96.

¹⁹ It has to be remembered that what was then referred to as ‘British Malaya’ was a somewhat eclectic and hybrid political arrangement. British Malaya was not seen or governed as a singular political unit, but rather as a collection of colonies and protectorates where British colonial power was not uniform. The Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca were under direct British rule, but there were also the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan, and later the Unfederated Malay States of Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu and Perlis where British power was concentrated in the domains of economics, development and security (while the Malay rulers were left largely unchallenged in the domains of religion and native customary law).

²⁰ Multatuli, 1960: 66.

management. And although postcard-making was certainly not the tip of the imperial spear at the time, the manner in which these postcards were produced, sold and circulated all point to the larger workings of the colonial-capitalist enterprise from which it could never be divorced. In the same way that it would be impossible (and some might even say unethical) for us to attempt to read Stamford Raffles' *History of Java* (1817) as 'merely a book' in isolation, taken out of the context of Britain's colonial occupation of Java from 1811 to 1816, it would, we argue, be equally hard to see the postcards of British Malaya and its peoples as 'merely postcards' outside their historical-political context. The context we are talking about here happens to be the workings of racialized colonial-capitalism in the colonies of Southeast Asia, which in turn informed and shaped the manner in which the region and its people were seen and known by the different colonial governments then.

If context matters – and we hold that it does – then how did the context of racialized colonial-capitalism inform and determine the manner in which British Malaya and its people were seen and captured in photographs and postcards? What is it that made these postcards *colonial postcards*, and *how* did this happen? In order to answer this question, we need to take a slight detour and revisit the theory of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as elaborated in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1958).

In my study on how the idea of Southeast Asia was discursively constructed during the era of late colonial-capitalism, I have argued that in order for us to understand the workings of colonial-capitalism we would first need to see it as a *discourse* – that happens to be a *rule-governed language-game* in Wittgensteinian terms²¹ (Noor, 2016).

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein introduced the idea of language-games – which is not meant to imply that there is anything frivolous or playful in the way that we write and speak. Wittgenstein noted that in the process of learning a language one does not simply learn the words, grammar and syntax of any language, but also how all languages are, in fact, never singular but rather multiple. (In the sense that within any language there are also many languages that are at work all the time.) As one learns the English language, for instance, one also comes to learn that there are things that we can do with the language: We learn not only to speak English in an ordinary manner, but we also learn how to praise, how to criticize, how to be sarcastic, how to joke, how to lie, etc. Those of us who were told that we are 'born liars' or 'born jokers' at school by our teachers would therefore have every right to interrupt the retirement of our former educators and alert them to the fact that one is never a 'born liar' or a 'born joker', but that we were in fact *taught* how to lie and how to joke by other language-users. To learn

²¹ Farish A. Noor, *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in the Discourse of 19th Century Colonial-Capitalism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

how to joke, to lie, to be sarcastic or poetic or literal-minded is precisely that: a *learning* process where we learn the *rules* of joking, lying, sarcasm, etc. This is why Wittgenstein insisted that all language-games are like games that have rules specific to them. (Lying is a rule-governed form of language use, and the first rule of lying happens to be never telling the truth.)

If we can agree with Wittgenstein's argument that all languages are made up of different language games that have rules specific to them, we can also see how and why he noted that new language games can emerge while some old language games can fall by the wayside and die. In proposition 23 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein noted that: 'new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and forgotten'.²² By applying this theory of language games to the discourse of colonial-capitalism, I (Noor, 2016) have argued that the discourse of racialized colonial-capitalism is, and should be seen as, a language-game as well, that comes with its own set of normative rules of use.

The upshot of this argument is that one is never *born* an Orientalist or colonial-capitalist, any more than one is born a 'natural' liar or joker. In the same way that we have to learn the rules of joking and lying before we sally forth to spread mirth and deceit among our fellow human beings, one also has to *learn* the rules of the language game of Empire before one sets out to see, know and frame the world in imperialist-colonialist-Orientalist terms. Uncomfortable though this idea may seem to some, we maintain that colonial-capitalist imperialists like Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd were never born that way, but rather *became* what they eventually became as a result of their own conscious entanglement with the colonial companies and colonial governments they chose to serve.

It is within that complex web of entanglements – of economic prerogatives, political-military-strategic goals, hierarchical understandings of racial differences, etc. – that the postcards and photos that we will be looking at were made and produced for mass public consumption. To ask whether the photographers and postcard-makers themselves were committed imperialists, or whether they wholly (or partly) subscribed to the goals of colony-building and empire-making, would be a question that can never, we feel, be truthfully answered. Nor would any answer to that question address the related query of how these postcards came to have any meaning or significance in the context of their time. What we intend to do in the following chapters is to study precisely how and why these particular postcards were made in the way that they were, and how they came to have their meaning – as visual depictions that captured the 'reality' of life in a colony – in the context of the age in which they were produced.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (1945), London: Basil Blackwell. 1958. Proposition 23.

The age that these postcards were produced happened to be the age of racialized colonial-capitalism, where historically specific understandings of both racial difference and colonial-capitalist governmentality were at work in a particular British colonial setting that was then called British Malaya. By placing these postcards in their historical-social context, we will try to show how an already-hegemonic colonial mindset and ideology – that regarded non-Western lands as commercially valuable territory and colonized subjects as useful (though racially inferior) human capital – was reproduced in postcards that both reflected and reproduced this ideology in visual form. As we have noted earlier, both the colonial postcard and the colonial photographer/postcard-maker were certainly not at the front rank of Empire's legion, but the visuals of Empire that they produced were nonetheless important instruments in the much larger arsenal of colonial-capitalism at the time.

III. Did the Sun Ever Set? Revisiting the Legacy of the Visuals of Empire Today

There is a kind of sadness that comes from knowing too much, from seeing the world as it truly is.

—Virginia Woolf

This introduction began with an observation about how – among quite a few postcolonial Malaysians today – there remains an understanding of 'tradition' that seems to be defined in terms that are decidedly and visibly 19th century. Just how and why that particular period of time continues to loom large in the popular imaginary of postcolonial Malaysians today tells us something about how extensive, deep and penetrating the modalities of colonial data-gathering and knowledge-production were, and how during that period the country and its people came to be known, documented and visually arrested in a manner that was lasting. What holds true for Malaysia today is equally true for the rest of the region as well, where the popular understanding of tradition, traditional customs, traditional dress, etc. all seem to hark back to a time when Southeast Asia and Southeast Asians were documented – literally and visually – as never before.

This work, however, does not and cannot offer some miraculous panacea to solve the problem of colonial nostalgia. If such nostalgia exists – and admittedly, traces of it continue to emerge and re-emerge all over the region from time to time – the task of the historian is not to 'solve the problem' but rather to account for how and why it is the case in the first place.

As stated earlier, the aim of this book is to study the production and dissemination of colonial era photo-postcards in their historical context, and to show just

how these postcard images corresponded to, and helped bolster and reinforce, the prevailing ideology of racialized colonial-capitalism when they were produced. To echo the sentiments expressed by Sandeep Ray in his study of colonial-era films in the Dutch East Indies, we would like to argue that the colonial postcards that were produced in British Malaya from the closing decades of the 19th century all the way to the 1930s were, and should be regarded as, visual documents that merit the serious study of historians of Empire and colonialism today. Far from being 'harmless' and 'innocent' morsels of visual entertainment that took the train of Empire just for the ride, these visual renderings of Malaya and Malaysians were part and parcel of the colonial-capitalist enterprise in many ways. And the manner in which they helped to create a colonial setting of hierarchies and distinctions – between communities and races, between urban spaces and the countryside, etc. – can still be read off the images today.

Even more profound has been the manner in which these sedimented visual renderings of Malaya and Malaysians continue to inform the way Malaysians see themselves today. From present-day articulations of Malaysian multiculturalism to the manner in which the country sees and sells itself through the tourism industry to foreigners and locals alike, Malaysia and Malaysians can be known and understood not only in terms of how they speak, sing, write and carry themselves, but also in how they are seen and how they wish to be seen by the world. In the final chapter of this book, we will attempt to address the questions of moral agency and intentionality both in the colonial past and in the postcolonial present and show just how and why the legacy of colonial visualization continues to haunt us today. The point being made here is a simple one: namely, that while the flag of the former colonial power has been lowered, the logic of capital-driven development remains alive and well in the present. And accompanying that logic of capital-driven development – that was the catalyst and driver of colonial-capitalism for more than a century – are the visuals of development that divide the world into neat categories of urban and rural, developed and under-developed, and so on.

Pictures are therefore never simply pictures, and the photo-postcards that were made and sold during the colonial era can never be thought of as being airy souvenirs of sweet nothingness. Photos and postcards are, as Sontag (1977) has noted, artifacts. And as she went on to add, 'their appeal is that they also seem to have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information'.²³ In a colonial setting such as British Malaya's, the fantasy of the time was the fantasy of Empire, and the information that these photo-postcards contained were the building blocks of the colonial economy that

²³ Sontag, 1977: 54.

was being built. Though it could be claimed that ‘no natives were injured during the production of these images’, the arresting power of the colonial photo-postcard remains a thing to be reckoned with, and the burden of epistemic arrest continues to bear upon the shoulders of the living today.