“Almost the Same, but Not Quite”:
Postcolonial Malaysian Identity Formation
in Lat’s Kampung Boy and Town Boy

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The Malaysian comic-book autobiographies *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* chronicle the early life of their author Lat (born Mohammad Nor Khalid) from his birth in a Perak *kampung*¹ through his family’s new life in the larger town of Ipoh. The Malay boy whose life is followed within the books is known as “Mat,” the diminutive form of Mohammad. Mat acts as a kind of avatar for or slightly fictionalized version of the author himself, for Mat’s experiences are based loosely on Lat’s memories of childhood and adolescence. Because Mat’s story is anchored in Lat’s real life, the narrative of memories inscribed within the books is temporally located with great specificity: their storyline spans the years leading up to and directly following Malaysian independence from British colonial rule. However, just as Mat, the character, is a re-figuration of Lat, the author, the narrative of his memories comprises a re-figuration of the exact, authoritative historical narrative. This conflict between reality and mimesis leads to the problematic formulations of identity played out within Lat’s works as he and his characters—Mat and his family and friends—struggle to reconcile their individual, self-designated identities with externally ascribed identity markers, particularly those imposed by the legacy of British colonialism.

In a further complication of Malaysian identity, many of Mat’s acquaintances, including his friends Frankie and Lingham Singh from *Town Boy*, are non-Malay Malaysians whose family or ancestors were brought to the country through direct and indirect colonial structures. As the books’ storyline progresses beyond the date of Malaysian independence, Lat’s characters are forced to define themselves as something other than colonial subjects such that their individual ethnic identities (including Mat’s Malaysian Malay identity) must be acknowledged and reconciled with their colonially

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¹ A traditional Malay village
influenced Malaysian identities. In the absence of the colonizers, these various Malaysian ethnic groups increasingly mingle with one another to create a coherent Malaysian national identity, one that resolves the characters’ identity crises with both self-ascription—for it is their own, collective nationality—and external authority—for they now have full control over the writing of history. This new, Malaysian historical narrative includes aspects of the colonial narrative, but also departs from it in crucial ways. Lat’s two small books capture (and re-imagine) this particular moment in time when Malaysian national identity is in its infancy, including all the promises and pitfalls associated with identity formation, and, as memoirs, are both poignantly nostalgic and humorous.

On August 31st, 1957, the Federation of Malaya gained independence from the British crown. After years under colonial rule—in the end by the British, but also at varying times and places by the Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese—the turnover of power precipitated the need for the peninsula’s highly multicultural and multiethnic populace to forge a unified national identity. This new nationalism is the primary glue (albeit a socially constructed one) that binds Mat and his multi-cultural, multi-ethnic friends to one another, but the most imposing cohesive force that binds this diverse populace is lingering colonialism, for independence did not truly free Malaysia from the bonds of its colonial past. Like other newly independent nations, such as those of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Asian sub-continent, Malaysia to this day maintains many of the

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2 In 1963 Malaya joined Singapore, North Borneo, and Sarawak to form the present nation of Malaysia. Singapore left Malaysia and became independent in 1966.

3 History must be a part of an informed reading of Lat’s books, for they are very specifically geographically, culturally, and temporally situated. Given the specific years and ages of Mat that are presented at various moments within the text, Kampung Boy opens in 1951 with Mat’s birth and closes in 1961 when he is ten; Town Boy opens where Kampung Boy left off and closes in 1968.
political, economic, and social structures set in place during the years of British rule, exemplified by Mat's very British schooling experience that includes uniforms, a class monitor, and grade-levels designated as "forms." Despite these facts, however, Malaysia is of course not England. It is a difficult nation to culturally pinpoint in no small part because of the large percentages of relatively recent immigrants from China and India. These ethnic groups do not form autonomous, compartmentalized Malaysian subgroups, however, because—again seen in Mat's school—these groups often interact on a daily basis. In fact, most Malaysians speak two or more languages (including Malay, English, Tamil, and a wide variety of Chinese dialects) and participate in the food and celebratory cultures of multiple ethnic groups.

Mat and his classmates have unique access to multiple Malaysian subgroups because they attend an English-medium, multiethnic school and are forced to actively reconcile their differences in order to successfully interact. These multiple ethnicities are clearly coded within Lat's visual idiom, for he exaggerates physical characteristics stereotypically attributed to these groups within Malaysian culture. Unlike in a politically correct Western context, where culturally specific physical markers are often studiously ignored so as to maintain an image of undifferentiated democracy, difference in Malaysia is widely discussed. The various Malaysian ethnic, cultural, and religious groups are so wide-ranging and disparate that it would be socially counterproductive to ignore differences rather than openly working with them. This is not to say that racist

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4 1975: "Most of the English schools attended by the different ethnic groups are in the towns. Of the total number of students who attend them 28 per cent are Malays, 39 per cent Chinese and 26 per cent Indians. Comparing this attendance with the population size of each of the races, the Indians have been more than proportionately represented, the Chinese proportionately represented while the Malays have been under-represented in the English-medium schools. In spite of these differences, there is no absolute compartmentalization of the various ethnic groups. The English schools provided opportunities for inter-ethnic contact among the young" (Ali, 24).
stereotyping does not exist in Malaysia, but Lat’s exaggerated depictions (small eyes and overbites for the Chinese, glossy hair and thick lips for South Indians, full beards and turbans for Punjabis, and so on) are non-offensive to his audience. Such culturally specific demarcations are natural, familiar, and the most productive and accessible means for understanding the intricate social interactions within each scene. Malaysian national identity is necessarily concerned with recognizing and reconciling difference—in order to create a unified whole, those who are working to form this collective identity must first acknowledge the realities of difference. Malaysia sees its multiculturalism as a major source of pride, for its large populations of peoples of Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous, and Eurasian heritage have lived together in relative peace for several generations, and multiculturalism can only exist with the recognition of difference.\footnote{1980: "Of the 10.2 million dwellers in the Peninsula, roughly half are Malay, a third are Chinese, and a tenth are Indian. This tripartite division nevertheless oversimplifies strong ethnic alignments that are based on origins from different islands in the archipelago, different provinces in China, and different regions in the subcontinent—alignments that often are as rigid as those among the main groups" (Young, Bussink, and Hasan, 10).}

Fully harmonious multiculturalism is never, however, a reality.\footnote{Over the course of history, much tension has erupted between the various groups, both in easily observable ways like violence and in more quiet ways like government-created ethnic hierarchies of privilege. Town Boy, which puts much stake in Mat’s friendship with a Chinese boy, closes in 1968—the year before race rioting between Chinese and Malay sparked new affirmative action policies that gave much greater special privileges to Malays and widened division between the two groups (Young, Bussink, and Hasan, 20).} In truth, Malaysian multiculturalism—which is in many way synonymous with Malaysian nationhood—is only a reality because of British colonialism. The various Malaysian “local” cultures must interact because they all operate beneath the umbrella of British colonial culture, just as Mat only interacts with his multiethnic classmates because they all attend a British-style school. These disparate peoples are all subjected to colonialism’s systems of dominance and subservience that maintain a psychological...
impact upon each person even after colonialism. The visual idiom of Lat’s books, one that highlights ethnic and cultural characteristics, thus calls forth a paradox of identity in which each character (including the Malaysian national character) has multiple, definable versions of the self aligned with various cultural groups as well a wholly unified self that incorporates and complicates these compartmentalized selfhoods beneath the oppressive force of British colonial hierarchies. The systems in which Lat’s characters operate, such as the educational system, are re-figurations of colonial structures, and yet are also necessary for maintaining a cohesive national character in the wake of independence. Colonialism is what brought Malaysia’s multiple ethnic and cultural groups together, and its tools are what must be used to maintain unity until national identity is fully realized.

Kampung Boy and Town Boy operate within this reformulated colonial system not only in the situations they represent but in their form as well. The books follow a Western comic book formatting, but they cater primarily to a Malaysian audience and treat Mat’s particular memories as commonplace rather than exotic and necessitating cultural analysis. Lat’s words are simply chosen and largely narrative, taking the events of his life as matter-of-fact. His black and white drawings show richly detailed background scenery both natural and human, but his exaggerated characters make obvious the fact that he is a cartoonist, portraying his own version of Malaysia, rather than a realist illustrator who seeks to accurately portray historical Malaysia. Alone, either the images or the words within these books would be interesting and compelling but not deeply meaningful. It is in the intersection of Lat’s images and text, then, that richness and insight unfold. What Lat’s words do not say but his pictures show, and vice versa, makes these books speak strongly to the problems of postcolonial identity as he
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subtly enacts the colonial comics form to tell his particularly Malaysian tales. His exaggerated cartooning is not a drawback but one of the strongest forces within the works: he chooses what to exaggerate about each character, often transcending traditional stereotypes, creating a heightened register of “speech” through these images. Though Kampung Boy and Town Boy have remained widely read since their original 1979 and 1980 publications, Lat’s cartooning is not merely a popular amusement. Instead, it brings to bear all the horrible and wonderful intricacies of Malaysian existence between colonial and local selfhoods, and it is this depth of insight that gives Lat’s works their lasting, and highly comic, impact.

Lat’s reconciliation of the comic form to his postcolonial Malaysian identity must also confront Malaysian multilingualism, for before he can add text to his images (and thus create fully realized comic books) he must decide on a language of representation. Lloyd Fernando, one of the earliest scholars of Malaysian literature, wrote in 1968—the same year that Town Boy’s story closes—of the difficulty this multilingualism has caused when trying to conceive of the very notion “Malaysian literature”:

Readers sometimes point to West Indian or African writers and ask why writers in the Malaysian region have not been equally prolific. The analogy is not altogether a fair one. Our writers have a choice of at least four languages for literary purposes – Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil – where the West Indians and the Africans (viewed continentally) have either English or French but not both. (ix)

Although Fernando suggests that all of these languages are equally viable, and although Lat is a Malay man writing in a country where the national language is also Malay, Kampung Boy and Town Boy were originally written and published in English.7 Even though many Malaysians kept their native tongues throughout the colonial period,

7 They were eventually translated into Malay following the success of their English editions.
English became the widespread common tongue under the British, who used it as a homogenizing system of power. Lat’s use of English could be viewed as a similarly oppressive force, preventing lower-class Malaysians (most problematically some of the kampung Malays from whom Lat himself comes) from accessing his books. Once again, however, Lat uses colonial structures to his advantage, re-imagining the tools of oppression in order to build national cohesion. By writing in English, Lat ensures a wider audience for his works and does not privilege one ethnic or cultural group above another, just as all groups are equally subject to the stereotyping of his drawings. Fernando makes the argument that writing in English should not be seen as incompatible with postcolonial Malaysian identity. He writes: “Writers in English have existed too long on the fringes of our society…[Their] exile has lasted long enough” (xiii). Rather than being a move that is complicated by the fact of the author becoming both oppressed by colonial norms and oppressing others with them, writing in English can instead help the author define himself as something new and different by “adapting the language to the fresh outlook that is in the making in South-east Asia” (Fernando, xiii). It is impossible to fully wipe the trace of colonialism from Lat’s use of English, but he is able to subsume this colonial specter and make it a part of himself rather than an external force that compels him to behave in certain ways.

Lat chooses to write in English even as the story is one that could never have been written by a British author, for within the English words are a uniquely Malaysian point-of-view. While Lat’s narrative follows formal English conventions, his characters often speak with a particularly Malaysian idiom. In Town Boy, Mat and his best friend, the Chinese boy Frankie, typically use English because it is their language in common, but
they sometimes slip into simple *Bahasa Melayu* and Malaysian-English vernacular. When Mat and Frankie share Mat’s bike for his first visit to Frankie’s house, Mat asks whether he should turn left or right at an intersection, but uses his home language and says, “Kiri atau kanan?” (Lat, 34). Frankie, instructed in Malay, is able to answer “Kiri,” but Mat’s next question, more complex and meaningful, necessitates the return to English: “Are you sure your father won’t mind?” (35). The two boys are seen in the background cycling past an ethnically specific scene of a barber cleaning out the ear of his elderly customer, a traditionally Chinese activity. Frankie, who is small, slant-eyed, and buck-toothed, is equally specified as Chinese, but he is interacting with a Malay boy as if they are equals, and his response also transcends ethnic difference: “I say... don’t worry lah!” Frankie’s “lah” is the most recognizable feature of Malaysian-English, going beyond the equalizing language of colonial English to reformulate the colonial tongue within the new Malaysian national identity.

It is this redefining of the comic form and the English language, perhaps more even than the content of Lat’s books, that makes them definably *post*colonial. As similar as Mat and Frankie are to British schoolboys, they depart from colonial identity and are definably Malaysian. In the same vein, as similar as *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* are to British comic books, Lat’s books operate in a way that a British author would not be able to produce. The language of the text and the visual language of the images are more accessible for Malaysian speakers of English than to British or other Western readers. The ideal readers of Lat’s works have access to both written and visual languages, and, at this highest level of dual-language, *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* form coherent wholes that are at once under colonial influence and yet make use of colonial influence in order

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8 The Malaysian national language, colloquially known as “Malay”
to create something recognizably Malaysian. As a collection of amusing vignettes within the larger narrative of a young boy’s life, the books create a pattern that speaks to the comic subversion of the colonial narrative (“comic” both in form and in humorous content) and the production of postcolonial identity.

Of the two books, *Town Boy* most explicitly wrestles with questions of identity because Mat, Frankie, and their friends are adolescents. They are at the age where young people universally work to define themselves as individuals, but they must work even harder because of their Malaysian context in which identity is already complex and complicated. In order to define themselves by their interests, Mat and his classmates join various British-style “extramural activities” including the rugby team, the Literary and Debating Society, and the Butterfly-Catching Society (Lat, 120-121). Frankie joins the Swimming Club while Mat himself joins his school’s cadet band with their Indian friend Lingham Singh. The band members are depicted as unsteady, with exaggeratedly bent knees and hunched backs as they march each day in front of their school—a building fronted by a row of coconut palms. After a wobbly turn in front of some stony-faced groundskeepers, the band’s Chinese drum major, who is squinty-eyed, buck-toothed, and dissatisfied with his rag-tag group, stops them for a lecture. “Your marching is still not steady!” he shouts. “I want all of you to watch how Lingham does it. He is the only good driller among you lot! All right, Lingham! By the left quick—” (130). Lingham, eager to please, sets off with a back as stiff as that of his instructor, who stands in the left of the panel and calls out through his pinched face: “March! Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Right…” (131). The rest of the band, looking on in the background, appears uninterested by Lingham’s poker-straight arms and legs. They do not seem to value
marching with regimented perfection in the way that Lingham does, but they are compelled to at least watch. In the next panel, a wide two-page spread (132-133, fig. 1), the band members’ heads have rotated to follow Lingham’s steady progress towards the right of the page, but their faces still show no emotion. In the far left of the image, a squat, turbaned man has appeared to question the drum major on the band’s progress. The major has turned his head to the man, saying “Oh...we’re doing fine sir,” and so does not witness the disaster looming in the right of the spread. Crossing the same street that Lingham is briskly marching down is a herd of sacred cows being shepherded by a Hindu holy man and his young helper. The rear-most cow of the herd has its head turned towards the reader, eyes closed in a knowing sneer. In the next two-page spread (134-135, fig. 2), the cows have crossed, the drum major has fully turned towards the squat man, and Lingham, unable to stop his progress without orders from above, has found his stiff legs bridging over a mine-field of cow patties. The boys in the band have finally expressed interest in the scene, for now they register small smiles and one has extended his arm to point. The cow, its head still turned back, scornfully eyes Lingham with its tongue out.

This scene is played mostly for laughs, but its inescapable temporal specificity calls forth a deep social and political undercurrent. The marching takes place in 1968 when Mat is seventeen (Lat, 82-83), about a decade after Malaysian independence from British rule, and yet the practice of marching in a band is very much a remnant of colonial culture. As such, this scene represents a Malaysia that is neither purely colonial nor purely new and independent. Lingham Singh, a Malaysian adolescent, is participating in a British pastime but is doing so in front of the palm trees and livestock.
of his tropical homeland. The broad humor of the scene comes from the disjunction between Malaysian and colonial culture, both equally valid parts of Lingham's personal experience and identity. Lingham Singh is clearly marked as Indian because of his bushy eyebrows and long sideburns, but physical characteristics are not enough to create identity. Religious identification is also unhelpful for defining Lingham, for his religious subgroup is quite elusive. His last name, "Singh," would suggest that he is Sikh, but he is not visually marked as such because, unlike his classmate Tara Singh, Lingham does not wear a turban. In fact, in many scenes Lingham is seen wearing the forehead marking of a Hindu. Regardless, Lingham is largely disinterested in religious markings, for in the marching scene none are present and he is, instead, wrapped in the clothes of a British cadet. His Indian ethnicity is similarly unhelpful in specifying identity, for the man herding the cows that are to be Lingham's downfall is also Indian, but he is marked primarily by religion and is wrapped in the particular robes of Hinduism that set him apart as a holy man. There is a third Indian man in the scene, the short man distracting the drum major, who is clearly marked as Sikh because of his turban but is wearing Western clothes. This third man is different from the first two both in his profession and in the way he displays his religion—he portrays both Indian religion and Western affiliation in the way that he covers his body. For his part, Lingham is not only the butt of the joke about two identifiable cultures colliding; he is also at the mercy of a host of competing affiliations pulling at him in multiple directions. These various cultures force Lingham to make choices between them, taking on characteristics of some (colonial dress) while rejecting still more (traditional religion). As such, Malaysia's various peoples are not always easy to identify culturally even as their stereotypical ethnic
characteristics are represented quite clearly in Lat’s drawings. Lingham Singh is clearly demarcated as Indian, but his self-formulated identity is not nearly as obvious, and it is this confusion of identity that leads to the scene’s visual punch line of Lingham’s feet in the cow patties.

The military urgency of Lingham and the marching band lies in sharp contrast with the laid-back groundskeepers who are not privileged enough to participate in the higher-status colonial activity. They do not have the opportunity for social advancement that Lingham has through his exemplary marching (even advancement merely in the eyes of disinterested peers), but, because they are not trying to traverse disparate cultures, they are not the ones who wind up in a pile of stinking cow dung. This sad end for Lingham is, nonetheless, a necessary one. Unlike the groundskeepers, who likely do not have the ability to gain any more status in postcolonial Malaysia than they were in colonial Malaysia, Lingham must actively work towards an identity that reconciles his disparate parts in order to function in a similarly complex Malaysian nation, even though he must suffer the pitfalls along the way.

Beyond the way characters, including Lingham, physically portray themselves in the marching scene, the actions performed by the band further highlight the multiple cultural forces acting upon each character. In an early panel of this same scene (Lat, 124-125), the drum major, with sweat running down his face, instructs the boys: “We’ll play the school song, followed by ‘Sedia Berkhidmat’ and ‘Ob La Di, Ob La Da.’” The first song is emblematic of school culture throughout much of the world, though in this case it suggests the colonial experience by being performed as a British-style marching-band composition. “Sedia Berkhidmat,” on the other hand, has a clear and immediate cultural
association—it's title is the Bahasa Melayu motto of the Malaysian police force: “Ready to serve” (my translation). As a police song, it is played to strike a chord of nationalism and pride, and yet it too is subtly linked to the colonial era because it was the British who first created a national police force. The final song, by The Beatles, most explicitly represents British influence, for it was The Beatles who began the so-called “British invasion” of pop-culture during the 1960s. In fact, Mat’s friendship with Frankie is founded in a shared enjoyment of Western rock-and-roll music—a common interest that bridges their ethnic divide. Besides being a song with an appropriate tempo for a marching band, “Ob La Di, Ob La Da” focuses on the absurdity of life, fitting for the ragtag, multiethnic group of students to play as they march towards national identity: “Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on, bra/La la how the life goes on” (McCartney et al). These three songs, representing disparate aspects of schoolboy identity in 1968 Malaysia though all touched by colonialism, are the signifiers of a group that cannot be made complete without multiple cultural sources to draw from. Leaving out any of these songs from the band’s set list would mean neglecting a large part of the cultural and musical experiences of its members, which would in turn be a rejection of a major facet of each boy’s identity. At the same time, these songs, though different from one another, are all applicable to each boy’s life, even as the boys are similarly different from one another. These boys are from multiple cultural and ethnic groups, and none of the songs cater to a single group by religious, language, or any other affiliation. The English is accessible to all because all have been subjected by colonialism, the popular song is accessible to all because all have been exposed to Westernization, and the Malay song is accessible to all because it is a marker of national identity in the national language.
It is such multiple and confusing influences, both internal and external, that prevent Lingham from making a split-second decision to stop his marching and thereby avoid the manure minefield he spies on the ground before him. Lingham implicitly recognizes the hierarchy of cultures constructed by British colonialism. Rather than submit himself to a culture that is lower in the hierarchy even though it might be his "true" Indian culture, he adopts the attitude of the colonized, British cadet. Ironically, by aligning himself with the upper-most culture of the hierarchy he is ultimately more oppressed because, as the cadet, he has no choice but to await orders of his drum major—his uniformed overseer who, even though also an ethnic minority, has now been given the actual position of the oppressor in this recreation of colonial hierarchies.

As Homi K. Bhabha writes in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," one of the strongest forces of colonial authority is seen in the extent to which the colonized mimic the colonizers. At the same time, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 126). Lingham Singh is clearly "almost the same" as a British schoolboy or even a British soldier, but his visual markers of Indian-ness, his bushy eyebrows and big nose, reveal that he is also "not quite" like them at all. Lingham's mimicry is more farce than subjugation, for the real British colonizers have been gone for more than a decade, and yet he continues to march under the influence of their authority:

If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce. For the epic intention of the civilizing mission, "human and not wholly human" in the famous words of Lord Rosebery, "writ by the finger of the Divine" often produces a text rich in the traditions of trompe l'oeil, irony, mimicry, and repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects, mimicry
emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. (Bhabha, 126)

Colonialism initially claims its power for grand, historical purposes that are later subverted by mutated or incomplete versions of the colonizers within the colonized, a subversion of authority that parallels the play between history and fiction within Lat’s work.9 The comic farce of Lingham’s marching band exploits ends in a fictionalized version of a historically accurate moment in time when the band performs in front of the Minister of Education, a non-fictional, historical character, in a massive parade for their school’s Speech Day (Lat, 148-155). Lat writes: “We were dressed in white Baju Melayu and blue samping10. Lingham’s family was among those in the huge crowd…” (148). Lingham eyes his family with nervous sweat beads flying away from his head, while his mother, father, and younger brother watch the show excitedly. Despite all of Lingham’s colonial mimicry, his family is even more clearly demarcated as South Indian: his parents have large noses, thick lips, and long waggling tongues. For the onlookers at the parade, Lingham’s family is clearly distinguishable as Tamil Indian; for the reader, Lat heightens his typical exaggeration to portray them as such with equal clarity. Lingham’s father shouts to his son in a speech bubble that extends above the band, but for the reader who cannot decipher Tamil, “Lingam” (spelled without the “h”) is the only word recognizable—just as it would have been the only word familiar to most of the listeners at the parade. This entrance of a foreign language, one of several used throughout the book, disrupts the uniformity of the scene. The easily differentiable family, singling out one member of the band, ruptures the qualities of marching that value homogeneity. It is

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9 Perhaps “historicity” is the best word for this interplay, for, as much as Lat’s works purport to be truthfully historical, they are also constructed and fictional. They therefore take on qualities that function in ways similar to history and are almost the same as history, but not quite.

10 A traditional Malay outfit of a long-sleeved shirt and trousers with a skirt (samping) worn over top
only the parade itself, a colonial activity, that brings the crowd together, just as colonialism forced these disparate people to form a singular national identity in the first place. Of course, following Bhabha’s formulations, this Malaysian parade is not quite like a British parade at all. The high colonial ideal has been subverted by the “unrefined” because the otherness of Lingham’s family (the low mimetic reality) is immediately apparent: while they are, in fact, participating in a colonial activity, their physical differences make obvious that they are not colonial individuals and that the crowd as a whole is full of such differences, making it a similarly non-colonial collective of people—the same differentiated collective that forms the Malaysian national identity.

The confused Lingham does not yet understand this Malaysian identity, however, and the particular ethnic characteristics of his family fluster him. He still seeks to embody the colonial figure of a marching cadet, but the appearance of his family forces him into a particular Malaysian subgroup instead. The clothes Lingham wears are markers of Malaysian national identity rather than Indian ethnic identity, and so, because this national identity has been rejected by his identification with his family, Lingham meets yet another marching disaster as his clothes reject him in return. When the band passes by the Minister’s viewing stand (Lat, 154-155), the boy’s belt comes undone and his samping falls down around his knees, causing him to trail awkwardly behind the band in embarrassment. The squat Sikh has once again come to distract the onlooker, this time the Minister of Education, but Lingham has been put in his place once and for all—for by rejecting both his ethnic and national identities by trying to march better than all the rest, Lingham is punished and pushed down to the back of the group, forced to acknowledge that in this moment he cannot be anything more than what he is—a young man who is
Indian, Malaysian and postcolonial all at once and cannot deny any parts of this complex selfhood.

Given the fact that Lingham Singh and the other characters of Kampung Boy and Town Boy are so wrapped up in colonial influence, it is hard not to immediately notice how these characters do not include any White people among them. Even the town of Ipoh, whose streets Lat crams with multitudes, is devoid of any that might be identified as part of the former ruling, colonial population. This absence of explicitly colonial forms is not incompatible with the pervasive force of colonialism within the books, however, and the invisible specter of British colonialism lingers throughout the unseen margins between what is drawn and what is written. When it is made manifest visually, colonialism is cast within local and familiar presences, both human (like Lingham Singh) and non-living (as will later be demonstrated), taking on corporeal form as living figures that are neither purely Malaysian nor purely colonial. Even with independence, colonial forms can never be removed from the landscapes of the colonized. They become one with the colonized, are subsumed by both their minds and their bodies, and continue to inhabit the newly independent colonial spaces in a way that is “almost the same, but not quite.” Even as these books portray a somewhat nostalgic snapshot of traditional Malay village life and multicultural city living, the absent colonizers remain ever-present as they are reproduced within the forms of those who have taken their place. In this way, Lat’s characters are completely realized entities even as the wholeness of their selfhood must

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11 This unstated presence of colonialism in effect creates a storytelling space in which only those who are aware of colonialism can recognize its abstract representations. For Lat’s primary audience—people who have lived with colonialism and its after-effects in the real, historical Malaysia—the colonial specter within the books is unremarkable and commonplace. A reader untouched by colonialism, however, might not notice its presence at all or might treat it as a marker of culturally specific “otherness,” paralleling the way that cross-cultural communication in the world outside of the books is often subverted by the unspoken.
be defined by absence. If colonial figures were themselves in the books’ scenes, the Malaysians would once again be forced into a hierarchy that removes the power of this wholeness. Only the subordinate aspects of the self would shine through, but by filling in the positions vacated by the absent colonizers (in however problematic a way), the figures of Lat’s books are each complicated, complete beings working towards a complicated, collective national being.

*Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* tell the story of this transition from colonialism to independence through the pictured memories of Mat’s young eyes and the adult words that Lat has inscribed upon them. Like Lingham, Mat is suspended between cultures and trying to find his footing in the new, sometimes uncertain landscape of postcolonial Malaysia. While *Town Boy*, the book that contains the marching band scenes, portrays the remnants of British colonialism quite explicitly, it is the earlier book, *Kampung Boy*, that actually begins during the colonial period. Though the impact of colonialism goes un-stated, it is fully evident as Mat is surrounded by markers of colonialism that encroach upon his *kampung*. For the time being, Mat is protected from these influences by his family and by his unawareness of other, external cultures, and yet, even as Mat feels that his family lives an isolated, traditional Malay life, he is at the mercy of multiple cultural forces from the very moment of his birth. Just as postcolonial Malaysian identity is a combination of multiple colonial and “local” identities, Mat’s own singular identity is a combination of multiple viewpoints and narratives.

*Kampung Boy* opens in a way that recalls *David Copperfield* and countless other Western tales that begin with the narrator’s recollection of his birth. Lat prefaces the details of his own birth, however, with the following: “I cannot truly recall, of course,
what happened in the first few years of my life. It was not until I had learned to speak and been able to conduct conversation with my mother that I found out about my early days" (4). His mother serves as the authoritative version of his own origin story as if, having grown up in a country where conflicting views of the self are the norm, he must turn to someone else—a sort of historiographer of his own life simply by virtue of her motherly interest—in order to validate his own selfhood. “According to my mother, I was born at about ten o’clock on a Monday morning in our house...I was Mum’s first child” (4). These lines are not unfamiliar to a Western reader, and up through this point in the narrative the mother’s memories are rather universal in scope. It is the entry of the second voice, Mat’s father’s, that demarcates this story as non-Western and specified in place and time.12 “My father’s memory of this day was also quite clear,” Lat writes. “According to him, he was under the house waiting anxiously when my grandmother called: ‘Come and cradle your son!’” (4). A non-Malaysian reader might pause at the words “under the house” even before the reader shifts his eyes over to the following page and its image of the inside of this traditional Malay house. The father’s version and situation of Mat’s birth carries the most weight, for it is the father who appears on this first page cradling his boy; all that can be seen of Mat’s mother are her sarong and striped socks as she rests on the facing page: “Minutes later dad was standing in the anjung (lounge) with me in his arms. Then he whispered the muezzin’s call softly in my ears just as any good Muslim father would do to his newly born child” (4).

The love of Mat’s father is universally recognizable, but the scene’s cultural specificity immediately highlights the external forces acting to create that specificity—

12 Mat’s father, by virtue of his explicit awareness of colonial culture, is more specifically able to denote his own culture as “other” in a way that Mat’s mother, depicted as traditionally Malay throughout both books, cannot.
most notably, Islam. Up to the present day, all Malay Malaysians are legally required to be Muslim. This definition of ethnicity by religion created an early hierarchy of power that paved the way for colonial power structures. Unlike with other colonies, where Christianity was widely imported, the British promoted Malay Islam by practicing “indirect rule” through the Sultanates in many parts of Malaya, banning missionary schools in the countryside near the turn of the 20th century, and using of Islamic education to reinforce Malay identity. In this way, the British were able to keep the Malay community separate from other cultural groups and to keep most Malays and, to a greater extent, non-Malays from reaching positions of power through pre-existing religious and cultural hierarchies. At the center of this culture-defined-by-religion is the basic family unit, and Kampung Boy opens with Mat’s father, dressed in a checkered sarong, pursing his lips in order to pass along this religious identity to his eldest son.

Mat’s father not only represents the way traditional Malay life was inflected and deeply influenced by the introduction of Islam, he also provides a strong example of Malay life trying to reconcile and live within colonial terms. Like many other Malays, he is involved in the rubber industry, but his primary profession is as a government clerk (Lat, 24). These two occupations fall into line with the traditional stereotypes of Malay roles in Malaysian society: that Malays are either peasants (typically rice farmers or rubber small-holders) or low-level government workers. This latter association gives

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13 "Islam had been established as the state religion since the 15th century, and religious ideology was crucial to the feudal domination, with the mosque’s imam as an important functionary in the political structure of the kampong” (Hua, 13).
14 “Villagers often carry out their religious rituals on the basis of existing social units or institutions. One such unit is the family. The daily prayers…are done mainly at home. Often the reciting of these prayers are led by the father and followed by the wife and children” (Ali, 60).
Mat’s family a privileged position within their *kampung*\(^{15}\), and Mat’s father has ascended so far within his community that he himself does not need to perform the daily physical chores on his land but rather acts as a landlord and hires a man from the kampung to tap his two-acre plantation (124-125).

There are downsides to the privilege created by Mat’s father’s job, of course. Perhaps the most obvious is the loss of comfort in the form of the clothes he must wear in order to assume his high-status occupation. Lat writes: “My father was different. My father was a funny fellow. My sister and I would look forward to seeing him coming back from work in the afternoon” (24). In the accompanying image, Mat’s father is atop his bicycle making a funny face as he approaches his two children, his legs raised above the handlebars. In the next panel Lat writes: “He was a big man. This was what he’d do first...” The image shows Mat’s father, now with his Westernized shirt in hand, with motion lines all around his body and his arms outstretched as if he is revving an invisible motorcycle. All is revealed on the following page, when the outside of their house appears behind his wiggling body and the text explains to us that the first thing that father would do is “…scratch his back” (25). Like the scenes involving Lingham Singh, this one is highly comical but, unlike Lingham Singh, whose comic nature comes from his inability to fully reconcile his disparate selfhoods, Mat’s father is comic in a way that deals with the multiple forces acting upon his identity with self-awareness.

Even though Mat’s father participates in the cultural hierarchies set in place by colonialism and in so doing is able to raise his family’s status in their community, he is

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\(^{15}\) “Within the confines of the village communities, those with non-agricultural occupations are few; there are some teachers, clerks and other minor officials from various departments who have dealings with the rural population... The minor officials, including clerks, also have the force of government authority behind them, and this lends greater weight to what they say and do, and thus their status is enhanced” (Ali, 76).
uncomfortable with completely becoming like the people for whom he works. Unlike town dwellers that are unable to isolate themselves from other cultural groups, Mat’s father is able to extract himself from becoming a not quite member of the colonial culture simply by removing his clothing. In the next scene in which we see him, he is playing hide and seek with his kids, once again in his checkered sarong. The floorboards of the house stretch vertically back in a seemingly infinite, bare playground for the two naked children, their hero father near the vanishing point of the boards covering his eyes and counting as they hide themselves. For Mat’s father, history is linear, traceable, and he is able to incorporate both the deeply rooted and modernity-enforced parts of himself along a continuous line because he has experienced and lived through both of these, straddling them with the experience of an adult. His children, on the other hand, playing horizontally across the floorboards, do not have the lines that root them with the past beyond what they can be taught by their parents. They are creatures of only the colonial period, and so it is up to their father to show them, as much as possible, what “traditional” Malay culture is.

Mat’s father’s urgency in teaching his children about tradition is in direct opposition to the encroachment of Western industry upon their kampung. In the birth scene on the opening page of Kampung Boy, before any other cultural or religious associations, Mat is defined by the tin industry: “I was born in a kampung in the heart of the world’s largest tin-mining district—the Kinta valley in Perak” (Lat, 4). The highly realistic, historical discourse that operates within Lat’s comic discourse highlights the threat that this particular identification has on Mat’s traditional way of life. In the late 1840’s, large deposits of ore were discovered in Perak (Drabble, 13). “Chinese had
mined tin there at least as early as the sixteenth century, but on a small scale. With the
new discoveries the expansion of Chinese mining settlements was rapid” (Young,
Bussink, and Hasan, 12). By the time Mat was born, however, the British had gained
control of the tin-mining industry. Hua Wu Yin, a scholar of the class and communal
impacts of colonial capitalism, writes:

Tin was the essential raw material for the West’s canning industry, but it was
largely with the introduction of the dredge, which facilitated large-scale mining,
that foreign capital began to dominate the tin mining industry; only the Western
firms could afford this heavily mechanized method of production. (42)

Hua shows how the introduction of dredges heightened the menace of the tin industry
during the period of Mat’s childhood, but the boy himself shows no fear when he
announces the location of his birth. Instead, his words “the world’s largest tin-mining
district” indicate a sense of importance, perhaps even pride. At the very least, the weight
this particular identification bears on Mat’s earliest identity forms the basis of his earliest
interactions with colonialism.

Like most kampungs throughout Malaysia, the business of the Mat’s is primarily
rubber, yet even the primacy of this other industry is eclipsed by the presence of a dredge
just like the ones mentioned by Hua: “From the window in the front part of the house I
could see a rubber estate. It was from the direction of this estate that a distant roaring
sound came and never seemed to stop. It was the sound of a tin dredge, about which I
shall tell you more later in this book” (Lat, 12). Not only does the noise of the dredge
dominate Mat’s childhood, Lat self-consciously acknowledges that the impact of the
dredge will dominate his work. If Mat the isolated kampung boy is to become Lat the
author who is fully aware of colonial systems and uses them to his advantage, then this
heavy-handed foreshadowing suggests that the dredge is what symbolizes the colonial
force within *Kampung Boy*. Though in *Town Boy* there are other humans who take on the physical characteristics of the absent colonizers, at this earlier moment in Mat’s life, when all the people he interacts with are familiar and safe, the threat to his traditional way of life, the dredge, is what aligns itself with and takes on the corporeal form of the colonial threat.

One day, when Mat is playing outside, he decides to sneak off the housing compound to confront this unseen colonial force that has nonetheless been ever-present in his life through its noise: “I had always been curious about the tin dredge, which kept on roaring from the other side of the plantation” (Lat, 19). In order to peek at the dredge, the naked boy zig-zags between rubber trees, representations of his traditional Malay culture that still stand between himself and the outside threat, for the accessibility of rubber trees preclude them from being fully consolidated under colonial power. The dredge, an industrial representation inaccessible for *kampung* Malays, is loosely depicted in the far background. Lat writes: “I just had to see how the tin dredge looked...” (20), but when Mat finally sees the dredge for the first time, the reader does not. Instead, all we see is Mat’s nervous face beneath a mop of unruly hair peering out from behind the safety of a rubber tree. Accompanying this image are the words: “What I saw was a huge thing floating in the big pool of mud. It had to be huge, for even at a distance it looked very big. No wonder it sounded so loud. It would roar and once in a while groan frighteningly...like a monster!” (21). Even though Mat has set out to see the dredge and, ostensibly, this is what he is looking at, the lack of pictorial representation and the words suggest that he is, in fact, looking at something *not quite* like a dredge at all. Rather, Mat sees a huge “thing” to which the nearest comparison he can make is that it is “like a
"The dredge remains unknown and unseen, and, just as colonialism operates even when unseen (or perhaps most effectively when unseen), is thus somehow more threatening than before. The monstrosity of the imagined dredge could be interpreted as the mere fantasies of childhood, yet the terror of the dredge is frighteningly real—it is the most threatening form through which the colonial specter exhibits itself in either work. Lat, whose human characters are highly caricaturized, draws backgrounds that are quite realistic in form and detail; the one rupture of this realism is the dredge, for when it is finally drawn up close it proves to, in fact, be a monster (fig. 2). The dredge’s monstrosity can no longer be mistaken as being in the boy’s mind, for Mat is laughing with his friends and is facing away from it this time, such that he is not the one projecting monstrous features upon it. The words, too, remove the monstrosity from Mat’s imagination, for the accompanying text reads: “I told the boys that when I was younger I was scared of the dredge because I thought it was a monster” (Lat, 65), suggesting that Mat no longer believes that it is a monster. Thus the dredge-as-monster is not a rupture of realism through the depicted imaginings of a child; it is a heightened depiction of reality because its characteristics can only be attributed to the artist—and this particular artist draws his backgrounds with close attention to realism. Even so, Mat and his friends, wrapping up a traditional Malay day in the form of religious education and fishing, are unaware of the urgency of the dredge’s terror. Lat’s drawing shows the dredge with bulging eyes that glare menacingly at the boys’ receding backs and teeth that drip with the water and earth of their home. Unlike Lingham Singh, whose mimicry of colonial forms creates a scene of highly comic amusement, the dredge as colonialism’s corporeal form is not funny: it is all menace. It
is not enough for Mat and his friends and family to be struggling with notions of national identity—a concept that is mostly abstract and constructed. Their most solid form of identity, their land, is also torn up (quite literally) by the forces of colonialism. This destruction of grounded identity in the form of land—an act performed directly by the tin dredge but ultimately by the power of the colonizers who use the dredge to plunder the Malaysian landscape—is the ultimate force that pushes Mat to face the later abstract, ungrounded, notions of multiculturalism and nationhood that follow him and his friends throughout their town life. The land, as a deeper extension of Mat’s father (for it belongs to the father), is what keeps the family rooted in the kampung, and it is the destruction of the land that ultimately propels the family out of the kampung forever.

Mat’s father recognizes that the destructive forces of colonialism cannot be ignored and that his children must be taught about their natural surroundings while they are still available. “Just before sundown it was bath time. This was another time we looked forward to: when Dad would take us to the river not far behind the house” (Lat, 27). On the way, Mat’s father tells his children about weaverbirds who live in the bamboo trees. “‘These birds are very clever,’ he said. ‘When the time comes for mama weaver to lay eggs, papa weaver will do anything to make her comfortable. He will catch a firefly at night and take it back to light up their home.’ Dad knew a lot about such things” (27). The Promethean act of the papa weaver parallels Mat’s father’s own desire to care for and light up the way for his own wife and children. To his children he is a playmate and a bit of a clown, but he knows that he is, more importantly, their protector and their guide. He recognizes that his children should be taught the folklore and traditions of their home, and that he is the important link to their land that is soon to be
destroyed by the dredge. He understands that, with the urgency of this destruction, they will have an even more difficult time removing themselves from British colonial culture than he has had, and so Mat’s father sees that his children must be bestowed with the information necessary for success in this new version of Malaysia: they must be given the tools for using colonial structures to their own advantage (such as in the way Lat later uses these tools to write his books). Like Prometheus, Mat’s father’s presentation of this knowledge thus subverts traditional hierarchies of power, placing the knowledge of the most powerful, the colonizer, in the hands of the oppressed, the colonized.

The primary way in which Mat’s father gives his children power is by emphasizing education, not merely education about traditional ways of life and religious customs, but also education within the British schooling system. These two lessons that have defined Mat’s father’s interactions with his children—the importance of land and the importance of education—join together near the close of Kampung Boy when Mat’s father takes his son to their two-acre rubber plantation and tells him that this land will one day be his (Lat, 124-128). The boy is confused that his inheritance has been announced so early, but he is also thrilled. On the final page of the scene, Lat’s art pans out to show the entire plantation (fig. 4). The young Mat is shown in the lower left-hand corner of the page, tiny and clearing underbrush to reveal the border stones while his father sits nearby and smokes a cigarette. The text, in a freer hand than that of most of the book, shows his elation: “My land! MY OWN LAND!” (128). The land, however, is not to be Mat’s; it will instead be sold off to the tin company. Mat doesn’t know of the sale yet, but in each of the upper corners of the page a miniaturized monstrous dredge faces the boy and his father from beyond the thick swath of trees, their chomping mouths poised to rip through
the forest at any moment, ready to usher the family out of the *kampung* and remove them from their traditional Malay lifestyle forever. Mat’s father is prepared for this, however, and, somewhat ironically, is the catalyst that actualizes the threat of the dredges. In giving his son the skills to survive in a post-dredge Malaysia, Mat’s father promises his son the land only on the condition that he pass the exams needed to get into a school in Ipoh (127). As such, it is in the moment that Mat is shown his land, rather than in the moment the dredges actually bite down, that he ceases to be a *kampung* boy. He no longer plays and fishes with his friends and instead chooses to feverishly study for the exams that will gain him admittance. He passes the exam, his family sells their land, and Mat’s transition to town boy is begun.

*Kampung Boy* closes with Mat’s exit from the *kampung*, and in the final page of the book he looks wistfully out the back window of the bus taking him away, waving at the friends and family he is leaving behind and wondering when he will ever return. His father, on the other hand, sits preoccupied with the money in his wallet without a second glance back at the *kampung*. Mat’s father cares deeply about his traditional way of life, but he is a practical man, and recognizes the money is the most important tool he can use to help his children thrive in a postcolonial world. This money forces Mat’s father to complete the destruction of the family land, for, though not explicit in either text, in the intervening time between *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*, Mat’s family sells their rubber land to a tin company that suspects that there is tin in the area. Near the close of *Kampung Boy*, Mat’s mother says:

“It seems the tin company people are coming to inspect whether there’s tin in the area. Many say there’s a lot of tin here and if they buy the land it’ll be quite a big sum. If they do buy your father’s land, we can use the money to get a home in the cheap housing development in Ipoh. Many local folks are thinking the same. The
tin company people are going to tell us whether there’s tin around here, too.” (Lat, 134)

This transaction is realized in the opening of *Town Boy*, which shows how, within a year of moving to Ipoh for school, Mat’s family has joined him and they have all resettled into a low-cost housing unit. The sale of the land has financed this relocation and ultimately allows Mat the educational opportunities needed to one day have an economically successful, cosmopolitan lifestyle, but, because the land is no longer theirs, as much as Mat and his family try to recreate their old, traditional *kampung* life, their new town life is not quite the same as the one they left behind.

The new, town lifestyle of *Town Boy* removes Mat’s father’s ability to be the guiding light, the papa weaver, for his children, for they are now bombarded with new and unfamiliar cultures at every turn. In this book, Mat begins to explicitly confront his own particular identity. His move to Ipoh makes him realize that being Malay is not the default Malaysian identity, for he begins to interact meaningfully with people from multiple other backgrounds who are equally Malaysian. The most significant of these interactions is his friendship with Frankie, the Chinese boy with whom Mat bonds over rock and roll. The two boys discuss their differences in an open and honest way, but, even so, these conversations set Mat apart into a particular Malaysian subgroup. During his first visit to Frankie’s home, an apartment above his family’s traditional Chinese teashop, Frankie asks, “How come you cannot eat pork...if I may ask...” and Mat replies, “Because my religion says I cannot” (51). They discuss the other items Mat cannot eat as well as the foods that Malaysian Hindus cannot eat, and then Mat asks Frankie, “Is there anything that you can’t eat?” After a pause, Frankie raises a finger and exclaims
“Mutton!” Mat, unfamiliar with Chinese culture, asks, “Why?...Because of religion?” and Frankie delivers the punch line: “No...because I cannot stand the smell...” (52).

Even though Mat and Frankie have similar interests and are best friends, they are quite different from each other in clearly definable ways. Around the same time that this friendship begins (and because of it), Mat starts to recognize his identity as specifically Malay, and the formatting of the book’s pages becomes increasingly bounded as well. Kampung Boy has no drawn-in margins and very few speech bubbles for, to the younger Mat, the world is without borders and his opportunities for exploration and growth are limitless. When he gets older and more self-aware, however, these borders begin to creep in. Town Boy starts off with the same openness of format, but, beginning with a single image of Mat and his multiethnic boarding school friends and becoming commonplace during his friendship with Frankie, most speech is encircled, many pages are subdivided into frames, and even Lat’s distinctive full-page spreads are closed off by a margin. As Mat becomes more in touch with Malaysia’s many cultures through his interactions at school and around town, he becomes increasingly aware of his specific place as a young Malay man from the kampung and realizes that his life is bounded by factors beyond his control. The scene in which Mat visits Frankie’s house for the first time and the boys evoke the cultural boundaries that set them apart makes particularly strong usage of the physical boundaries and margins on the page. When Mat first walks into the teashop (Lat, 40-41), there are no margins and the image spreads fully across both pages as Mat is completely immersed in the unfamiliarity of Malaysian Chinese culture. The people in the shop, the food being prepared, and the language written on

[16] The longest enclosed set of text comes when Mat’s father shows his son the land that will eventually become his, a way of thinking about the earth which itself involves human-inscribed boundaries
signs and being spoken by Frankie, are all fully Chinese. On the next page, however, Mat stands in the lower right hand corner of the page, aware of his otherness as a few members of Frankie's family eye him curiously and he still cannot understand the Chinese words being spoken, and a margin has appeared around the image further demarcating Mat's marginalization. A few pages later, when Frankie has finally addressed Mat in their common tongue, English, and asked that he follow him, the margin widens to take up most of the page, leaving only a small square in the middle of the empty whiteness that shows Mat's back walking slowly up a flight up stairs (fig. 5).

There are moments in the remainder of Town Boy that do not include these margins, particularly ones where Mat and his multiracial friends traverse the cultural divide by participating in universally accessible activities like hanging out at a coffee shop or participating in activities associated with collective, national identity such as performing in the parade before the Minister of Education, but these scenes do not comprise the majority of the book. The conversation Mat has with Frankie about their differences in the foods they can eat is broken down into multiple frames, similar to the formatting of a Western comic book. The conversation between Mat and Frankie can only take place because they have been brought together by social systems set up by British colonialism, and so British colonialism still haunts their later interactions, however innocent. Neither boy is mimicking the absent colonizer in this moment, so it is the book itself that must become “almost the same, but not quite” by taking on more qualities of the colonial comic form. In this scene, and increasingly throughout Town Boy, Mat and his friends and families are finding their own individual identity as well as their collective, national identity, and so no longer need to become like the colonizers in
order to be complete. Even so, the colonial specter cannot be denied. When Frankie, following the path of many middle-class Malaysian Chinese students, is accepted to school in London, Mat chases after him to say goodbye. These pages all contain a small, square image, surrounded by an obvious and oppressive border of white (Lat, 181-191). The final page, when the two friends have said goodbye, opens up a little bit as the weight of separation lifts off Mat’s shoulders (192). Still, a smaller border remains and Mat is shown only behind the chain that separates him from the world beyond Malaysia. This white boundary is all that remains of the Whiteness of colonialism, but it is this boundary that forces Mat to turn away on his bicycle, accepting his specifically Malay role within the collective construct of Malaysian identity (fig. 6). In the foreground of this final image is a Chinese man, sleeping contentedly in his rickshaw—the kind of future Frankie has escaped by making full use of the opportunities given to him by his participation in the British colonial education system. Mat, whose back we see at the end of Kampung Boy as he leaves his friends in the kampung for good, is now the one being left behind. In Malaysia, the term designated for Malays and indigenous peoples is bumiputera, “son of the soil”: even though Mat’s family has given up their kampung property for the sake of upward mobility, Mat’s Malay identity forever binds him to the land of his home.

In an interview with John Lent published in The Comics Journal, Lat stated that many of his strongest early influences were Western humor magazines such as Beano, Dandy, and Mad (1999), but the influence of Western comic conventions only begins to appear in his works around the age that the character Mat would have become familiar with such publications. While Kampung Boy’s pictures and words appear without a
universal structure (sometimes multiple images of the same event appear on a single page, while at other times a single image spreads across multiple pages), Town Boy is increasingly structured into sequential panels marked by a black, rectangular border. Lat’s prose narration gives way to the immediacy of speech-bubble dialogue—his nostalgic reflection subsumed by the colonially influenced formatting. The form of Lat’s books, just like his characters, deals with the oppositional pulls of self-ascribed and externally-imposed identity. Bhabha calls this a “comic” turn—a term that names the very genre of Kampung Boy and Town Boy. Bhabha’s evocation of trompe l’oiel as a particular characteristic of colonial texts is particularly illuminative, for Lat’s works are superficially two-dimensional, popular publications that, counter-intuitively, paint works with great dimensionality and depth of insight. While many authors and critics are trying to distance themselves from the “comic” element of comics (in part through the usage of the term “graphic novel”), Lat fully embraces it and allows his works to confront the difficult and serious issues of identity formation and cultural intersection even as they are wildly funny. The popularity of these publications does not make them lowbrow. In particular, the exaggerated features of Lat’s characters create a new way of imagining stereotype: because these works confront difference so openly, readers are forced to recognize difference as something real but non-threatening and non-hierarchical. Every single character has multiple identities, some very similar to one another and some highly specified, but they are all working to collectively define Malaysian identity. Kampung Boy and Town Boy have remained popular because they portray a true-to-life yet idealized Malaysian nationhood that is both multicultural and unified, an ideal to which his readers continue to aspire.
Appendix

(Fig. 1)
Then we passed through a dredging area. It was the first time I saw a tin dredge up close. I told the boys that when I was younger I was scared of the dredge because I thought it was a monster.
The fellows laughed.

We laughed a lot that day.
My land!
MY OWN LAND!
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