

Chattel Land:
Legal and Labor Histories of Reclamation in Singapore

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a ledger

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Abstract

After fifty years of aggressive augmentation, reclaimed land now makes up a quarter of Singapore's total landmass. Cut out of sea, this artificial land aspires to cut the chain of causality: to self-found and so give law to itself (*auto-nomos*). How to analytically capture that gesture of self-authoring? From what vantage point does one study an object like reclamation whose structure is that of recursion? This is the challenge—at once methodological and theoretical—to which my dissertation responds.

I proceed first by asking: what exactly is being reclaimed in reclamation? Why should the creation of “new” land need to be enacted in the idiom of a “re,” that is, as a re-taking, a retrieval, or a return? Though reclamation purports to create land “from sea,” key to this land-making is not saltwater but sand and labor, both of which Singapore imports in vast quantities from its South, East, and Southeast Asian neighbors. Harnessing those flows, reclamation would appear to put the very ground itself in motion. Foreign coastlines are dismantled, ferried piecemeal, then reassembled into new land in Singapore by migrant workers on barges. In the process, land paradoxically becomes chattel. What then becomes of chattel—including certain forms of labor?

A tentative answer might be obtained, I argue, by looking to the legal and labor histories that inform this present-day fabrication of mobile land. Thus the dissertation rehabilitates a link between today's migrant labor and its earlier prefiguration, colonial convict labor, which was first tasked with creating new land in the island's *interior*. Just as today's reclaimed land needs labor's upkeep to fend off the tides, interior land needed constant servicing to prevent its return to the jungle. Where convict labor's lot was “imprisonment in transportation, beyond sea, for life,” reclamation workers, confined in vessels, trace an unending circuit between dredge sites at sea and fill sites near land. By situating reclamation within those longer-standing political economies of extraction, I show that mobile land—made here to be eternally remade against rising seas—is not “new” and cannot be claimed, but rather must always be re-claimed, even in the very first instance.

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O

POSTSCRIPT

After the writing, after the signature. What comes after... *post scriptum*?

Every parcel of land in Singapore that was once “reclaimed” from foreshore or seabed presumably has, tucked away in the concavities of the Land Authority’s offices, a corresponding proclamation. Each of those documents, by rehearsing a set textual formula¹, would have at some point bestowed upon a newly made plot of land its unimpeachable landness and affirmed its belonging to the State (C. Lim 2015). Each doubtless had been effective: the land is there for all to see. And yet all are incomplete. Not one of those proclamations, so far as I can tell, bears an authorizing signature—only the place of it. Thus effaced in the archival traces of land’s authoring is any mark or trace of the one who might be said to have authored. From those unsigned pages one gleans a most startling proposition: here perhaps is a land that writes itself.

So presents the problem of the post scriptum. For what lies in the wake of the auto-graph’s (lit. the tracing of the self) retreat from its place on the page? What form will subsequent writings—authorings—about land and its “reclamation” have to have taken?

Here is one possibility: an entire dissertation in the genre of a postscript. Or, better, in the form of an exergue—that meager inscription appended below the principle emblem of a coin or medal, of the sort that so fascinated Jacques Derrida, lying as it does *hors d’œuvre*: outside the body of work but also inside it, given that the inscription is what furnishes the order, the “lexicon,” which will have made the œuvre possible in the first place (1996, 7). Note the tense. It is a recursive one. The writing partakes of the structure of that which it describes. This is, after all, a reclamation.

Where then to begin?

¹ “Whereas ... And whereas ... Now, therefore, I do declare that the said piece of land shall ... be State land.”

In the Afterwards

Stuart McLean, writing after the Event of the Great Famine in Ireland, finds his appropriate point of departure not in “the classical punctuality of *in medias res*, but [in] the more vexed and asymmetrical space of hindsight” (2004, 2). It is a formulation I quite like, chronically tardy as I am. Yet the belatedness with which I presently attempt to write—here, about reclamation—is complicated by the fact that “the event” in question seems hardly an event at all. For one thing, it lacks positive content, comprising only the *withdrawal* of the gesture of self-tracing which would have otherwise bound body to word, being to logos. And because no one is ever called to bear witness to that withdrawal, we are unable to say when it is that the event actually took place—only that it has and that it is bound to repeat, with the next issuance of a proclamation and the next and the next, so long as land remains available for the State’s “retaking.”

Hence while we find ourselves perennial latecomers, perpetually chasing *after* the event, equally we are doomed to always arrive prematurely, *ahead* of the next occasion when the signature will again take its leave from the page. This ill-timing of ours puts us not “in the middle” of it all, however. (There is anyway no middle to repetition.) Instead the pattern of our arrival is at once too early and too late.² Thus mired in that temporal structure, we proceed then to “recollect *forward*” “what did not yet happen as what had already happened” (Copjec 2012, 37; my emphasis).

A Copy, in Full

Two Augusts ago, I pulled the entire collection of the Singapore Government Gazette off the shelves of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library in search of a signature traced by the hand of any one of the Republic’s Presidents, past or present. “Given under my Hand and Seal,” each proclamation would faithfully conclude. But no mark of that hand. No imprint of the seal. Only negative space. And to the bottom left, encircled, an “LS”—Locus Sigilli or *place* of the seal (**Figure 0.1**).

² “Too early/too late: these are the times of sexuality as well as the times of time itself,” observes Joan Copjec. “Anachronism—or temporal heterogeneity—is ... doubled,” she says, “for not only does the past come to be infected by the sense of a displaced present (thus introducing a premature sexuality, arrived too early to be felt) but the present also seems to be infected by a displaced sense of the past (creating a belated experience of sex as a kind of leftover of the former scene)” (2012, 37).

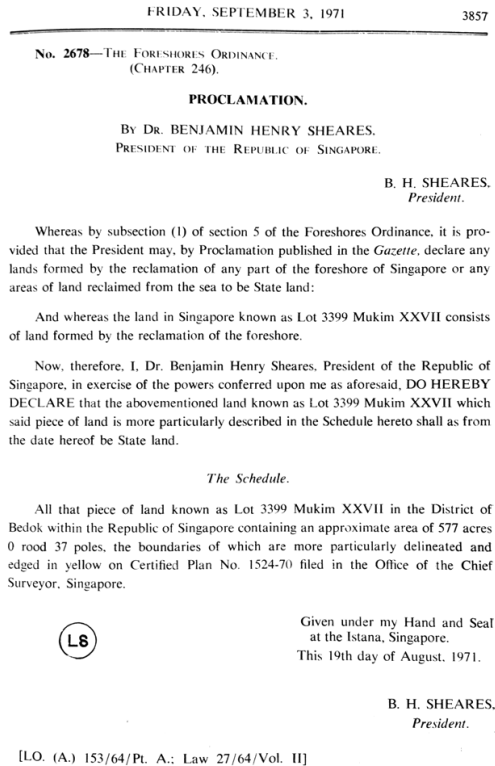
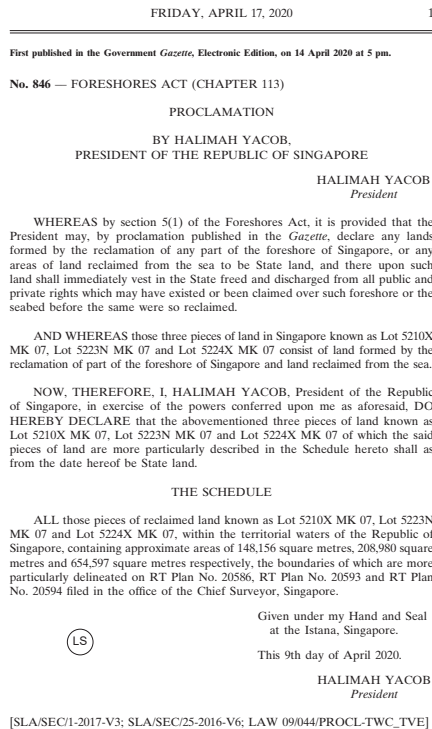


Figure 0.1. Proclamations published in the Gazette, one electronically in 2020, the other in print in 1971. National Library of Singapore.

If in days past “LS” indicated that the document being beheld was a copy and pointed therefore to the existence of an original elsewhere, convention has since made the actual affixing of the seal obsolete. Today, the abbreviation suffices; it is enough to designate only the place that the seal *will have* occupied. About the signature we might say the same.

What then to make of the affirmative presence of *both* the President’s seal and signature (a frightening surfeit of signs!) in an “exclusive *reproduction* of an official proclamation” published in artist Charles Lim’s most recent exhibition catalog (**Figure 0.2**)?³ A work of art, we might be tempted to say. But the artwork itself denies this.

³ Wording taken from the teaser on the National Gallery’s website. The emphasis is mine. <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/exhibitions/ng-teng-fong-roof-garden-commission/charles-lim-yi-yong>.

Consider the image. The proclamation it presents opens and closes conspicuously with the blue-inked scrawl of the current head of state. On the page her autograph is “doubly present: in the initial protocol, as subject of enunciation, and in the final protocol, as underwriter [*souscripteur*] of the act” (Fraenkel 1992, 71)⁴. Beside the second of her two signatures, midway down the recto, we find that other iconographic marking of hers, the Presidential seal.

Where normally only its empty place is marked, there suffusing the page is the overfullness of the scarlet corona. Pressed into the seal’s center is a wreath of orchids. The flora encircles a remarkably limber lion unhindered by its oversized, ungainly feet. Spine hyper-extended, the creature deftly raises a forelimb in what looks like a gesture of triumph (or maybe a friendly greeting), waving a sprig of laurel it seems to have plucked from the surrounding garland of blooms. Perched above the genial cat is a celestial grouping that graces most of the country’s national symbols, five stars and an upturned crescent moon. And winding around the seal’s circumference, a perimeter bund of letters spells out in bold, majuscule script, “President of the Republic of Singapore.”

“Thrice present in the protocols,” the President’s insignia “marks the document with insistence” (75). But that repetition we should not mistake for redundancy. Partaking of the aesthetics of decrees of old, the placement of each of her markings is formally determined; and it is at the juncture of these, the one hailing the other, that the author(iz)ing emanates.

⁴ All translations of Béatrice Fraenkel’s *La Signature* are mine. They are terribly untidy, but we will have to make do.



Figure 0.2. Reproduction of a Proclamation. Charles Lim. 2019. Print image. Companion piece to *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden*. Printed in *Ng Teng Fong Roof Garden commission: Charles Lim Yi Yong*, edited by Adele Tan.

Ungrounding

A special place is reserved for this “reproduced” proclamation in the latest chapter of Charles Lim’s artistic opus. Since the mid-2000s, Lim has been pursuing a multidisciplinary project, *SEA STATE*, which playfully intussuscepts sea and land, suspending the island-state of Singapore in the push-pull oscillation of the two’s tidal interface, thus introducing porosity into that which appears solid, and obstinacy into that which appears fluid. The series’ ten chapters are numbered zero through nine and take their structure from the index which mariners use to measure the fierceness of the sea.

At zero, the water’s surface is a glassy calm: an impossible apparition, more lake than sea. A little up the scale, ripples begin to form. Then come the agitations of small wavelets; and crests that did not previously break now shatter and foam. White horses soon follow, riding in herds that swell in size as the scale’s numbers do. As the winds pick up, the sea starts to gather itself in heaps. With each collapse it sprays about furiously as would a petulant child, cheeks puffed and full of saliva. Navigation becomes

treacherous under such conditions. How ominous then, for those of us marooned on Singapore's islands, that already we have climbed to *SEA STATE 9*. A severe gale whips about us and the high waves of the churning sea have begun to roll. Indeed, these are turbulent times. But *SEA STATE* is no warning cry. It spurns our pleas to transmit a distress call and instead encourages us, maniacally, to steer into the storm.

What might serve as anchor amidst our desperation?

Two sheets of text, perhaps? Lim's artwork volunteers.

Signed and sealed, the "reproduced" proclamation would seem to offer just the thing we crave: an instance of grounding, of naming land as "land." As the sea state escalates into a ferocious nine, incongruously *SEA STATE 9* only grows more adamant about wresting for itself that stabilizing moment, when pen conjoins flesh to paper and thus law to land. *I'd like to video record the moment when the President actually signs the proclamation*, Lim once mused.

His pursuit of that instant of touching pervades all other components of the artistic chapter. A sliver of film, for example, cropped tight and narrow tries to arrest that moment in another location: not on the desk of the President but under the open sky, as sand pours out from the discharge spout of a reclamation vessel—phallic, insistent—its falls into the soft, gray green sea below, then abruptly peaks, breaching the waterline, presenting to the eye of the drone camera hovering on high the rudiments of a new land (**Figure 0.3**).

Is this the aspiration of *SEA STATE 9*? Ever closer does it try to veer towards capturing that elusive moment of land's emergence. Hence the enlistment of the President to fill in with abundance the blank spaces in the "reproduced" proclamation. It hopes maybe to give positive content or ground to the moment of land's summoning into being.

In that endeavor, Béatrice Fraenkel would say, the signature, much more than the seal, is absolutely vital. For whereas the seal lends itself to mechanical reproduction, the signature carries the obligation to write by one's own hand. The particular tracing it obliges combines the gesture of writing with the invocation of the proper name, implicating both body and word in an autography that cannot be forged without consequences. In that sense,

The signature merely continues the old necessity that each juridical act be accompanied by diverse gestures [of the body]. The crossing of one's hands, the affixing of hand to sacred book, the proffering of speech, the breaking of an object—these were the actions that used to be sufficient to create an obligation. (Fraenkel, 10)

And should one fail to honor that obligation, the magical object now bound to the body through ritual will surely return to punish the perjurer in a manner proportionate to the magnitude of his crime.

Now, where the signature departs from these older, timeworn procedures is in the fact that “[its] action concentrates in the juridical act itself, *in the document*,” says Fraenkel (my emphasis). Accordingly,

The dimension of the ceremonial space changes, it flattens: graphic space replaces physical space. The gestural no longer engages the entire body and the viewership of an assembly; it is reduced and subsumed in the tracing of a sign. Hence does the tracing become trace, charged with expressing the presence of a body that is unique, singular, inscribed on the page. (ibid.)

No longer are external witnesses required at the creation of a binding obligation. The *auto-graph* alone will do. The gesture itself is witness enough to the juridical act.



Figure 0.3. Stills from Charles Lim’s *SEA STATE 9: proclamation: drag drop pour* (2018).

Read with this in mind, Charles Lim’s ambition to serve as extraneous witness to the moment of the President’s autography recalls the young Marx’s wish to identify the exact moment when equivalent form emerges—to locate it positively “in” the body of the thing that bears it.

But sure enough, both quickly find that no such ground ever avails itself. All ground here is of course but groundless recursion. In the end, the path that *SEA STATE 9* forges remains forever asymptotic: the signature reliably vacates the page and the gesture of autography never escapes its own indeterminacy. Indeed, against *SEA STATE 9*’s desire to assert the authenticity of the “officially reproduced” proclamation, a pesky countertext asserts itself, undermining those very claims.

Notice the tiny thread of text at the base of the image (**Figure 0.2**). The document, it would have us know, was supplied by the Land Authority and reproduced with the express permission of the Government of the Republic of Singapore. But are we to take that as citation, of the sort scrupulous scholars take care to include so as to accord others appropriate credit? Or is it perhaps a caption? Or an exergue, maybe? Does it confirm the legitimacy of the image—a true reproduction, a sanctioned one, from the source? Or does it accomplish precisely the opposite?

Ironically, *SEA STATE 9*'s efforts to furnish the absent signs and then mark the reproduction as "exclusive" and "official" turn the work on itself: they only betray it. For, inadvertently, the insertion of that tiny line of text introduces what Gregory Bateson would call a "play frame," opening the image up to its own deep-seated undecidability.

Pensive Images

In *A Theory of Play and Fantasy*, Bateson reformulates the relative-absolute, part-whole relation by way of a paradoxical element, the "play frame," which is at once part of the set and also that which defines the set. The example he gives is of a set which has as its first element the following line: (1) All statements in this set are untrue. Obviously, the statement is a "self-contradictory proposition about *itself*" (155, 184; my emphasis). At the same time, it also "carries with it *all the other* [subsequent] statements in the frame" (ibid.; my emphasis), thus rendering the question of truth or falsity impossible to answer. Because of that paradoxical first element, one becomes unable to discriminate between "some" and "all," and between "not all" and "none" (ibid.). Part and whole are confused: that paradoxical element is simultaneously inside and outside the set. The one is contaminated by the other.

The same logic is at play in Michel Foucault's "liar's paradox." There, the statement "I lie" or "I am lying" generates a similar slippage. To wit: I say I am lying, but *when* exactly am I? Am I always lying or is the lying confined to just this particular instance of my enunciation? The unanswerable question that the paradox poses is: is this *all* of me or just *part* of me? Here the subject and object of enunciation dislocate, and the statement precipitates a splitting of the "I" in time.

Into Lim's image, then, bleeds a certain "pensiveness," no matter its yearning to present itself as genuine—as a copy made "in full," so to speak, that is, with nothing omitted. That pensiveness, writes Jacques Rancière, involves a curious state of being: one is "'full of thoughts,' but this does not mean [one] is thinking them." A passivity encroaches upon the act of thinking (Rancière 2011, 107). Thus is the pensive image in art riven by an indeterminacy or ambivalence, "problematiz[ing] the gap ... between two ideas of the image: [one,] the common notion of the image as duplicate of a thing and [two,] the image conceived as artistic expression" (ibid.). "To speak of a pensive image,"

says Rancière, “is to signal the existence of a zone of indeterminacy between these two types of images” (ibid.).

Between the “original” proclamation and Lim’s reproduction what we encounter is a “dis-appropriate similarity.” The latter “does not refer us to any real being with which we could compare the image. ... But nor is it the presence of the unique being spoken of by Barthes”—pure art, say (116). The little thread of text captioning the reproduction, though *hors d’œuvre* it may be, manages still to trip the artwork’s central nervous system and so return it (and us), helpless, to a state of flux.

This, we might say, is the mode proper to reclamation itself. Such is the gamble this dissertation takes: it adopts a very peculiar structure, mimicking—or, better, partaking of—the essential structure that makes reclamation what it is. That structure, I shall endeavor to show over the course of many pages, implicates a distinctly recursive economy. It is the economy of the gift, in fact, whereby the first prestation is paradoxically always already a return prestation. The originary gift, to which all other gifts are only return gifts, may only at best be presupposed, but never directly experienced (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 40–41). Always, then, must reclamation be enacted in the idiom of a “re”: a return, a retrieval, a recuperation.

The task that awaits is therefore to meditate on the structure of reclamation by allowing oneself to be swept up by and into it. There is, I suppose, no other way. And there can be, as a result, no natural or give starting point to this study. As the exergue teaches us, there can be no point of genesis, only an aporia. Accordingly, I offer here no introduction, no preface. Just a modest postscript...

The aim here will not be to supply an answer to “what” land reclamation “is,” that is to say, give it positive content. My aim will instead be to try to ask or re-pose the question of reclamation differently: to find and articulate the questions that correspond to the answers we feel we *already have* about land reclamation. For this is not an open-ended journeying. If I may repurpose a few of Marilyn Strathern’s expressions with a little creative license, these are rather anticipated destinations, prefigured evocations (2004, 80). The answers are already given. We are merely trying to figure out how to ask the right questions.

1

SHORT MEASURE

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

—Genesis 1:9

Along the perimeter of mainland Singapore, wherever land reclamation is underway, there runs a length of fence. That fence, I was told, gets up every so often and moves. The spectacle is said to unfold on the country's minor islets as well. There too one might see the fence hike down the beach and resettle closer to the wash of the waves. Each relocation attests to a sovereign act of proclamation, marking the reach of artificial new land that the state has successfully "reclaimed" from the sea (C. Lim 2015).

To reclaim land, enormous quantities of imported sand are poured into coastal waters until fresh mounds break the surface. The wet sand must then sit and drain for years until it packs down sufficiently. In the interim, plenty of cajoling ensues. Giant vibrating rods tickle the sand into quicker consolidation. Alternately penetrating and withdrawing, the probes liquefy then repack the granular interior into ever-tighter interlocking columns. Floppy wick drains threaded vertically supply anatomical pathways for trapped pore water to expel itself from the depths where thirsty marine clay congregates. Their black flattish ends protrude in gentle arcs from their burial spots, making like an exposed seafloor of feeding clams, siphons waving in the air currents: an uncanny image of the seabed raised above water, lest we forget what all this once was.

Despite this drawn-out process, however, each parcel of compacted sand takes but an instant to metamorphose into “land.” Each turns into land only upon the state’s declaration that it is so—and not a moment sooner.¹ It is then that the fence moves.

The fence’s movements thus disclose the decision that cleaves “land” from its “not-yet” counterpart. To this landward side of the fence, true and proper land. To that seaward side, land of an aspirational sort—newly created between the tides and waiting its turn to be called into existence (*ibid.*). Our eyes perceive little of this apparently monumental difference. For it is all beach sand as far as anyone can tell. Yet the state insists on drawing a legal and material distinction, without which new land cannot be realized. Somewhere along the continuum between wet sand and dry ground a decisive cut is made. The state pronounces: This, and not that.

So when a rumor blew down from the north about a potentially deficient tract of land, the mild scandal underscored a basic contradiction normally unnoticed in the reclamation process. Someone had been caught trying to pass off as land something that perhaps wasn’t quite land. The cheats, to whom the state had contracted out the work, had tampered with the placement of the measuring instruments in the hopes of saving on costly soil improvement works. It was an easy enough trick. Collect a few initial readings, determine which portions of ground have attained the desired physical integrity, then take the remainder of the measurements proximate to that spot rather than at the standard intervals. Provided surveyors remain none the wiser, soft ground may freely masquerade as proper “land.”

But with that a contradiction emerges. If the state’s decision is both the first and the final word on land’s existence, how can there be a “land” liable to inadequacy or fraud?

¹ Charles Lim has argued that the sitting sand remains sea up till the moment it is proclaimed “land” by the President (2015). From what I gather, the process is a little more convoluted than that. Strictly speaking, the proclamation only establishes state *ownership* of, and rights to, reclaimed land, not the fact of it being or not being land (Foreshores Act of 1985, §5). If anyone can be said to “decide” when something is officially land, it is probably the Chief Surveyor in the Singapore Land Authority (a different arm of the state under the Ministry of Law). The process goes something like this: once soil improvement works are concluded, a cadastral survey of the new ground is done. That survey has then to be approved by the Chief Surveyor who “decides” if the ground passes muster. Only then does the President issue a proclamation cementing state *rights* to that land. I do think Lim is correct to say that the constitution of land rests on a sovereign decision; it just may not be the Presidential proclamation per se. That said, as a shorthand, I follow his use of “proclamation” to refer to the decision that makes “land.”

On the one hand, per the law, the proclamation is sufficient in and of itself. It is a self-contained gesture that poses its own presuppositions. When the state pronounces a section of new ground “land,” the act instantaneously inaugurates that land’s existence. Indeed the act alone is conclusive evidence of there being land.² It needs no supplement, no reference to material proof. It feels moreover no obligation to either demonstrate or refute the authenticity³ of the proclaimed object. As a ritual manifestation of power, the proclamation simply shows or discloses a self-evident truth (Foucault 2014, 5). The gesture is that of “mak[ing] truth itself appear against the background” (6). Land is land, arising fully formed as if from nowhere, all at once—“genesis without development” (I repurpose this expression from Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc (2016, 29), originally a précis of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s critique of evolutionist theories of State formation).

On the other hand, the proclamation is but the culmination of a *process* of land-making. It has, in other words, a pre-history. For only out of the reclamation process does the occasion for a proclamation emerge at all. The act is only the most contracted point of a material movement. And that movement anticipates the climactic act of proclamation that “will have been.” The gesture here is twofold: at once enlisting the material process as cause or pretext, and retrospectively disavowing it. “The problem is no longer one of chronological anteriority” but of “a scission of time” (Sibertin-Blanc, 36). In the

² The same logic applies to compulsory land acquisition by the state, where “the *declaration itself [is] conclusive evidence* that the land is needed for the purposes [the state has] specified” (Center for Liveable Cities 2014, 14; my emphasis). Whatever the reason for acquisition, it “can never be subject to judicial view” (Lim 1968, 3) because “Parliament has ... ma[de] the opinion of the Minister the operative test” (Koh 1967, x). Legal scholars Tan Sook Yee et al. note that in Singapore “property is what the state will recognize” (2009, 20). Land would appear to operate by the same principle, it being simply what the state will recognize.

³ The etymology of the word provides insight into the genealogy of the concept and its relation to the counterfeit. According to Jean Langford, “authentic” in the 14th century “was synonymous with ‘authoritative,’” whereas in the 15th century “it took on the sense of ‘reliable’ and ‘actual, not imaginary.’” Only in the 18th century did it come to mean “genuine, not counterfeit.” If at first “the truth inherent in the authentic *depended on its authorship*,” it later depended on “the separation of the authentic from the merely imaginary” and finally “on the difference between the authentic and the copy that poses as itself.” Our modern notion of authenticity thus “*conceals its links to social authority*.” It “is imagined to be perfectly self-present, a *final referent* that ... paradoxically is unthinkable except through a relation to the false or imitative” (2002, 64; my emphasis). Although here specifically I counterpose “authenticity” to the counterfeit, in my subsequent discussion of the authoring of land I recuperate the term’s disclaimed links to authority.

proclamation of reclaimed land, diachrony confronts synchrony. “The first makes the second impossible, and yet the second must come from the first” (29).

Authoring Land

Now, although the law might permit it, the Singaporean state is not in the habit of proclaiming just any sort of ground “land” at whim. The sovereign decision remains in some way tethered to what lies outside of it, bound by the material integrity of the object it declares to be “land.” This outside is, to be sure, not the same as exteriority. I mean that not as a spatial metaphor where interior space is delimited by another space exterior to it (Althusser 2009, 28). The outside is rather an *immanent* limit to the law: the law “carrie[s] its outside inside it” (28). And at that limit, Jacques Derrida has argued, paradoxically “the decision must not only follow a rule of law ... but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstating act of interpretation, as if ... the law did not exist previously—as if the judge himself invented it in each case” (2002, 251). Each invention, each decision, thus instantiates the constitutive aporia that is the law’s marrow. The sovereign prerogative to make land therefore remains vulnerable always to the accusation of dissimulation internal to it, even as it “must exceed every facticity” (Morris 2017, 22).

The aporetic character of land reclamation, I want to suggest, presents in modern dress the familiar problem of value-making. Reclamation stages “a scene of fetishistic processes” which make land, like gold, “appear as the site of inherent value” (those are Rosalind Morris’ words (308) for describing Fernando Coronil’s *The Magical State*). And yet any attempt to install value “in” an object is, as we shall see, menaced by while also dependent on the counterfeit as foil. So: dramatized in reclamation is, first of all, *doubt*—that conundrum which any would-be author of value must face when trying to fix value “in” its material bearer (*Träger, porteur*). That conundrum is lately aggravated by rising seas as these render low-lying lands all the more untenable a repository of value. What precisely is the function of doubt in the determination of value? This is one of two questions that preoccupy me in this chapter.

The second is this. Land reclamation lets us appreciate the paradoxical manner in which value comes to be constituted: as it rises out of the irresolvable agonism between

the sovereign (he who authors value) and the public of citizen-sovereigns (they whose habitual circulation of an object accords it value), or, again, the structuralist paradox of arriving at a state without history. The whole enterprise revives an old question about the authorship of such value: on what does that author-ity ground itself? This is the other question for me.

Here “ground” should not be taken metaphorically. As Hannah Arendt reminds us, authority recalls not just the author or originator but also, etymologically, augmentation (*augeo*): he who augments the literal foundation of the ancient city of Rome; he who is unlike the *artifices*, those “actual builders and makers” that craft but never conceive the city (1961, 121–22). This *augeo*, Emile Benveniste would insist, defies its common translation as mere “increase.” That would imply the expansion of something already in existence. In its oldest uses the verb rather denoted a *creative act*:

Every word pronounced with authority causes a change in the world; it creates something. This mysterious quality is what *augeo* expresses, the power which causes plants to grow and *brings a law into existence*. ...
Obscure and potent values reside in *auctoritas*, this gift which is reserved to a handful of men who can cause something to come into being and can literally “bring into existence”. (1973, 422–23; my emphasis)

This “gift” of conjury, with which one forges valuable land from barren⁴ foreshore and seabed, is, in abbreviated form, the subject matter of my dissertation. However, in order to say anything at all about this “technoshamanistic” creation of land along Singapore’s exterior (Shabbir 2015, 23), we must begin elsewhere—with the inward expansion that prefigured it, as art historian Kevin Chua has argued we do (2015,

⁴ The supposed barrenness of the foreshore is key here, for it was on that basis that the English Crown forcibly seized it (Moore 1888, xxx–xxx). The claim was that the foreshore was an unoccupied zone of “waste” and hence belonged to the Crown *prima facie*. In reality the foreshore was a highly productive space (for fishing, navigation, etc.) and had historically belonged to the manors abutting it. The Crown’s dubious prerogative to the foreshore was, despite protests, ultimately written into law and later conveyed to the colonies. Today the Singaporean state exercises this inherited right whenever it reclaims foreshore into land. I give this history a more thorough treatment in Ch. 3.

60). We begin, that is, with the colonial “discovery” of land in the island’s interior, once the residence of the intemperate tiger.

A Tiger’s Excess

In 1815, George Dromgold Coleman, not then twenty years of age, left Ireland for Calcutta taking with him his eagerness and his untested training as a civil architect. From there he wound his way through Java, depositing as he went several of his creations on the Dutch-controlled landscape—sugar mills, stately private dwellings, and blueprints of churches never built (Hancock 1986, 8–11). Eventually he arrived at the British settlement of Singapore where he would flourish in the employ of the colonial administration as a land and revenue surveyor.

Some twenty years after his initial voyage, Coleman, newly appointed Superintendent of Public Works and Convicts, was cutting a path into the island’s jungle interior when a tiger hurled



Figure 1.1. *Unterbrochene Straßenmessung auf Singapore (Interrupted Road Surveying in Singapore).* Heinrich Leutemann. c. 1865. Wood engraving. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

itself at the survey party, sending the crew helter-skelter. The panicked encounter is immortalized in a lithograph by Heinrich Leutemann (c. 1865, **Figure 1.1**) and recollected in equally vivid detail by John Cameron, then editor of *The Straits Times* newspaper. Cameron writes:

For many years after its settlement [in 1819] there were no tigers at all on the island—at least none were ever seen, and the Malays make no mention of their appearance antecedent to that.⁵ It was not until 1835 that their presence first became known. Mr. Coleman, the surveyor of the station, accompanied by a body of convicts, was in that year laying out a new road through a low swampy part of the jungle about four miles from town. He was in the act of taking an observation through his theodolite when a crashing sound was heard among the bushes close by, and a huge tiger leaped right into the thick of the party, but fortunately alighted on the theodolite, which was overturned and broken, and, doubtless alarmed by the commotion occasioned, the animal immediately sprang into the jungle again and disappeared. The convicts ... flew back to town, and the surveyor himself followed as quickly as he could, leaving the theodolite where it lay on the ground. It was a long time before the people of the town could be brought to believe that a tiger really had been seen, and it was only on an appeal to the broken fragments of the theodolite ... that unbelief was finally overcome. After this no work was done near the jungle but under arms, though it was some years before the next tiger showed himself. (1865, 94–95)

Leutemann's lithograph keeps from us the fate of the various protagonists—human, nonhuman, and inanimate alike. “The image puts us foot-first in the jungle: we are like Cameron, recoiling from the charged leap,” remarks Chua (2007, 127). The tiger

⁵ A terribly unlikely claim (see Barnard and Emmanuel 2014, 55), which in itself is interesting. Why the need to conjure the tiger as this heretofore-unseen creature, issuing abruptly from the interior at the advent of colonial expansion?

here “is notably depicted in three-quarters profile, leaping both leftward and forward—as though about to burst through the picture plane itself” (127). We see the convict laborers mid-tumble: a tangle of frightened nakedness. Feet up, toes curling in fear, they scamper out of the tiger’s reach. Centered in the scene, the theodolite levitates. To the left of the frame is Coleman, swaddled in fussy garments and wobbling on his knees. Our intrepid surveyor raises an arm in feeble self-defense while a turbaned assistant tugs him backward. In the tumult we too are displaced. The image locates us “at a slight distance, and [off to] the side” perspectively (127). We, like the rest, know not if these are to be our final moments.

What is curious, though, in the image is that the tiger lunges not at the humans but directly at the theodolite, toppling the instrument and, we later hear, tearing it asunder. “Attacker and attacker, facing each other, aim themselves at scattered targets,” Chua observes. A confrontation between competing sovereignties is kept here in “perpetual hang” (127). Why attack the survey instrument? The answer is perhaps already given by the fact that what emerges from the thick pleat of vegetation is not just any ferocious beast but a *tiger*.

The tiger, after all, embodies an alternative economy of value in the Malay Peninsula: always the tiger is multiple (Ho 2014 and 2017). The colonial record shows a special fascination with this. To the consternation of colonial officials, not only did the creature seem to proliferate the more the forest was cleared for agricultural expansion,⁶ but also folded into the body of the tiger was allegedly another body: a deceased chief or else a transfigured medicine man sometimes referred to as a “were-tiger” (Skeat 1906, 222–27 and 191–94). A regime of excess seems repeatedly to greet colonial efforts to rationalize the labyrinth folds of the interior.

Coleman’s jungle foray aimed to create land in these inner parts through the taking of measure. Peering through the theodolite he would “discover” it pristine beneath the thicket or else “retrieve” it ravaged in the wake of Chinese cash crop cultivators.⁷ It

⁶ Cameron was “fully convinced that 365 men per annum” had their lives unceremoniously cut short by man-eating tigers (91). Others proposed their own competing statistics (see Chua 2007, 125).

⁷ It is not that the interior was uninhabited prior to the British, but that “land” had not there been made. In fact, the presence of Chinese settlers was an important motivation for measuring and thus creating this object, land. For the Chinese were cultivating fields of pepper and gambier in the jungle without being

would be demarcated, assessed for revenue, sold, purchased, tenanted, and so forth. It would, in other words, be “found” an object of value precisely through its mapping, its quantification, through its being *set in relation* with all other objects of value. As Anoma Pieris explains, the colonial cadastral survey “materialized this desire” to generate value “as part of a tax regime tied to individual property ownership”—the survey being “perhaps the most effective device for making lands ... visible” (2009, 38).⁸

Coleman himself testifies to this. In an immodest letter to the Resident Councillor, where he trumpets his surveying work and its potential contribution to the colonial exchequer, he complains bitterly that the government is squandering the value of the land he has newly created. “I then begged leave to remark that the land itself contained a resource which Government could avail itself of with great general benefit,” he wrote in lilted cursive (Hancock, 36). The government needed “merely to drain and divide and land and afterwards sell the lots by Public Auction, instead of giving them away in an *irregular and unimproved* state,” he fumed (36; my emphasis). As he saw it, their imprudent charity was preventing the new land’s true value from being realized.

What Coleman’s letter does not say, however, is that the auction he was recommending was really a ruse. “It was an auction in name only” (Abdullah 1970, 167). We learn this from Munsyi Abdullah, native informant, translator, and Malay language teacher to Singapore’s so-called “founder,” Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles. Reflecting on the auction, Abdullah laments his own “stupidity and ignorance” in failing to see through the ploy.

taxed or regulated (Cameron, 82–83). Gambier, moreover, severely diminished any potential value of the land, it being a notoriously rapacious crop that quickly depleted the soil.

⁸ For contemporary, comparative perspective we might consider Tania Murray Li’s (2014) account of “land”-making in Sulawesi, Indonesia. According to Li, indigenous highlanders “have no word for land in their language. Their words refer to more specific qualities,” like the fact of it being tilled or fallow. But with the planting of cash crops and the land’s treatment as a “commodity and a site of investment, they had to invent a new word for it.” Their choice, *lokasi*, “an awkward translation of the English word ‘location,’ ... named a new resource assemblage—a plot of land that was *detached from neighbouring plots*, and *detached from the sweat of the person* who first cleared the [forest] and transformed its status.” Rather than “change something concrete into an abstraction,” it “*reformatted the social relations* with which the new resource was entangled, and extended the network of actors and devices connected to it” (590; my emphasis).

When all the swampy, low-lying ground and pools of muddy water had been banked up, the land was marked out and sold by auction. ... At the time when they were auctioning land Mr. Raffles said to me, "You should take up four or five pieces of land here, for in the future the place may become densely populated." (167)

The suggestion was, of course, that settlement and development would soon make the presently worthless land valuable. Abdullah continues:

I replied, "Sir, where can I get money enough to pay the price of the land, for I notice that a single piece of land sells for as much as \$1,200 or \$1,150 and how shall I find the money to build a stone house?" Mr. Raffles smiled when he heard my words and said, "Don't you worry about money. You can settle that later, as long as you take the land first." (167)

But Abdullah demurs. Despite its high auction price, the land looks of dubious value to him.

I did not believe for a moment that Singapore could become so densely populated, nor did I realize that the land was being *auctioned for nothing*, no money being taken. It was an auction in name only. I saw that in selling in this way Mr. Raffles was being very shrewd, for *if the land were merely given away free it would be grabbed by poor men* who might never be able to afford to build houses of stone. Therefore the lots were auctioned for a high price *so that only rich men would buy and they would build quickly*. (167–68; my emphasis)

That orchestrated sale and the rapid construction that was to follow it would in turn realize the self-fulfilling prophesy of the land's augmentation in value. "So it came about," Abdullah ruefully concludes, "that because of my lack of foresight and my

stupidity I did not follow Mr. Raffles's advice when he told me to take up land, and now I regret my mistake" (168).

What this makes clear about Coleman's survey mission is that measure functioned not as a supplementary, abstract quality grafted on to an already existing, empirical land. To put it in the language of Benveniste, the taking of measure was a *creative* act that summoned a land into existence, an object capable of bearing the promise of its own future value in the present.

Such creativity, Marilyn Strathern teaches us, is always revelatory rather than originary: a reordering of immanent social relations. For the object in question exists not just "in" the relation that is forged by measure, but by virtue of it—as but the effect of that relation. Relations, we might say, and not things, are the object of social action. It is they that characterize the work of creative production (Strathern 1988, 178). So, through the act of measuring, Coleman objectifies a particular relation, culling it from the bottomless morass of relationality always already there. In so doing he constrains and thus elicits a form, land.

General Economy

But, as the story goes, Coleman's deployment of measure did more than just constitute land. It also invited the intervention of the tiger, a being that emphatically defied any rational count. We might ask at this juncture what to make of the creature's inconvenient appearance. One possibility is to read it as a symptom of the terrible colonial anxiety provoked by value's want of fixity. Indeed, a palpable disquiet accompanies Coleman's otherwise dauntless founding of new land. We see it insinuating itself into the colonial record and returning as a projection onto the native other. Ironically the colonial discovery of valuable land finds itself everywhere aggressed by untamable excess the more it tries to naturalize and fix value "in" the bearer, land.

Rosalind Morris' discussion of fetishism is instructive here. In her remarkable tome *The Returns of Fetishism* with Daniel Leonard, she details European traders' sheer bewilderment at the seemingly unbridled proliferation of objects of value among the natives—a sure demonstration of their inability to assign the right value to the right

things. It was this angst over an impossible accounting to which the concept of fetishism responded.

With Pietz and Iacono, we may understand the emergent concept of fetishism as arising in a discursive space where regimes of value—economic and spiritual, social and personal—were being separated out. In this context, the concept of the “trifle”... functioned as the sign of their persisting confusion. (Morris 2017, 156–57)

On the one hand, native traders’ “apparent undervaluation” of valuable trade items presented their European counterparts with an irresistible opportunity for profit. On the other hand, their willful “misrepresentation of value”—an alloy in the guise of pure gold, for instance—left the Europeans vulnerable to fraud or the “theft of value” (157–58).

If the conduct of the natives betrayed a competing, albeit illegitimate, regime of valuation at work, then the Europeans faced the concomitant problem of how to immunize themselves against possible swindling in exchange relations. If they alleged theft of value, could they actually point to what had been purloined? After all, what is value that one can deem it right or wrong, too high or too low, stolen or foolishly parted with? From where can one access such a total picture, in which all accounts are already settled, if one is at the same time included in that picture, in the middle of so many ongoing exchanges?

The arbitrary magic of profit, the impossibility of equivalent form, the myth of natural value—this arbitrariness “could only be disavowed by being projected” onto the native other, whose own accounting of value would then appear “in the negative form,” as the “mistaken valorization of ‘trifling things’” (158 and 137).



Figure 1.2. “Pandak the Were-Tiger (on the Right): (Ulu Kelantan.)” Frank Fortescue Laidlaw. n.d. Photograph. In Walter William Skeat. 1906. *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula, Vol. 2*, p. 228.

Returning with this in mind to the jungle where we left Coleman and company, we now better appreciate the significance of the tiger’s outsize, irrepressible excess which looms large in the image. Grippled by anxiety about their own uncertain value-making, the colonial administrators start to see confusion overtake the natives. It is *they* who mistakenly see multiples where there are none.

One or Several Tigers.

Ten Thousand Tigers.

The evocatively titled artworks of Ho Tzu Nyen (2017 and 2014) explore precisely that uncountable quality of the tiger, oscillating between the one and the many—or, more precisely, between the virtual mode of one-is-many and its externalization as “one”-of-a-pair (Strathern 1988, 15 and Song 2012, 126). As if a visual confirmation of that excess, we learn in *One or Several Tigers* that the only known image

depicting an alleged were-tiger in fact presents *two* bodies, similarly posed, to the viewer (**Figure 1.2**).

The curious image is credited to biologist Frank Fortescue Laidlaw, a member of anthropologist Walter William Skeat's 1899–1900 expedition to the Malay Peninsula.⁹ Two men squat bare-chested, arms tucked inward, their elbows and knees making sharp angles against the makeshift cloth backdrop that skims the backs of their heels. Two. Whereas only one is a were-tiger, still two are needed to capture that fact. Beneath the image the caption reads: “Pandak the Were-Tiger (on the Right)” (in Skeat 1906, 228).

An internal doubling is here represented as an external doubling. The “paradoxical plurality” (Ho's term) confined within the edges of this startling image vibrates between the conjoined, twinned bodies and in the shadowy hoods of Pandak's eyes. “The two figures already generate a duality in the image, but the weretiger ... is in itself double,” notes Ho. Indeed, “we can never be sure how many beings we are looking at” (Ho 2018, para. 7).

Laidlaw's photograph, like Leutemann's lithograph, captures a heteromorphism that would seem to operate as sexual androgyny does in Strathern's Melanesia. A virtual, intensive multiplicity becomes actualized now in one way, now in another, depending on the social relations the person (or tiger) is drawn into. For Melanesians, Strathern explains, a person is “dually or multiply composed.” And so “for a person to encounter another of ‘opposite sex’ means that her or his own gender takes a singular form. In this condition, one person elicits a corresponding sexual form in another” (1988, 183). Androgyny is “activated” into one of a pair of sexual opposites only *in the encounter with another*, “in the presence of a partner” (15). That is to say, persons are not already biologically sexed as the Western orthodoxy would have it. Rather their sex—and this is the point—is drawn out only in the forging of a relation with another.¹⁰

So: a tiger a beast only in the encounter with civilized man. A man a were-tiger only in relation to one without like ability to shape-shift. A tiger's unchecked excess as

⁹ I learned of the existence of this image through the works of Ho Tzu Nyen.

¹⁰ Deleuze, drawing on G. H. Leibniz, would say something similar about heteromorphism: “every animal is double, ... just as the butterfly is folded into the caterpillar that will soon unfold. The double will even be simultaneous to the degree that the ovule is not a mere envelope that furnishes one part whose other is in the male element” (1993, 9).

against the fixing gaze of the survey instrument. “Attacker and attacker, facing each other ...” (K. Chua, 127). “[A] distinct condition is made known through having to appear as one of a pair of interrelated forms. ... One can only act in reference to the one or the other, and thus sociality is ‘immanent’ within them” (Strathern, 188; emphasis removed). Each finds in the other its necessary relational counterpart.

A Token of Proof

What concerns us equally about Coleman’s tale is why, in the aftermath of his abortive mission, the townspeople insisted on handling for themselves the shards of the ill-fated theodolite. In John Cameron’s telling, they desired them as proof. But proof of what exactly? Well, Cameron would say, of the tiger’s existence, of course! “It was a long time before the people of the town could be brought to believe that a tiger really had been seen, and it was only on an appeal to the broken fragments of the theodolite ... that unbelief was finally overcome” (95). Cameron’s explanation would seem to enjoy favor among latter-day commentators as well. According to Kevin Chua, for example, “the event poses a deeper epistemological problem: what exactly did Coleman see and not see? From what was he recoiling? And what of the tiger itself—was it a figment of fear and imagination, more spectral than real? The theodolite fragments work hard to anchor both animal and event in reality” (127).

But there intuited in Chua’s remark about epistemology is another plausible answer worth entertaining. The fragments, I would venture, are meant to confirm not so much the existence or nonexistence of the tiger but the truth or being of the land made in the interior. They mean to confirm the veracity of that novel object called into existence by the act of measuring, which is to say, by the fateful meeting of rival regimes of value. And proof is precisely needed because of the land’s mode of origination which “poses,” for us, “a deeper epistemological problem.”

Read this way, the torn instrument furnished proof of a land beyond one’s immediate horizon of phenomenological experience, but whose truth one could nevertheless confirm by touching what had touched it. Without such proof, interior land could gain no currency among those in the town. Absent as they were from the moment of land’s making, the townspeople needed to personally hold the broken theodolite—just

as Doubting Thomas insisted on touching the wounds of the resurrected Christ, touching the promise of salvation not immediately available to him and yet embodied in the physical person of the Christ before him (cf. Latour 2010, 28).

The townspeople's' enthrallment was, moreover, absolutely indispensable to this attempt to establish land's value. Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* observes that the introduction of novel objects needed always to enlist the figure of the ignorant—animals, children, women, primitives—to bear witness to the marvel (1993, Chs. 14 and 15). For it was on account of their illiteracy about how the technology worked that the ignorant could therefore be amazed and delight in it. “Who can forget,” he muses, “in what has become one of the classics of ethnographic film, Nanook of the North's look of wild disbelief on hearing sounds emerge from the white man's phonograph, and then trying to eat the record?”

Mimetic sensuosity incarnate! Except for one factor; shouldn't we assume that this look and this eating is a contrivance not of the “primitive” but of the primitivist film-maker Robert Flaherty?—a set-up job. Mimesis of mimesis; a link in the chain of what Horkheimer and Adorno called “the organization of mimesis.” (200)

A perverse *mise-en-scène* unfolds. The Nanook's scrutiny of the phonograph becomes itself the object of interest. Hence included in the same scene is “[a] European man, perhaps Flaherty, ... seated on the other side of the phonograph, carefully looking not at the machine but at the great hunter looking at it” (201). And let us also not overlook the fact that this staging includes us as well, asked as we are to play audience to “the white man's fascination with Other's fascination with white man's magic” (207). Our gaze is already anticipated in and by the scene.

Now, with Coleman we cannot be sure to which “people of the town” he displayed the broken theodolite. By “town” it is possible Cameron was referring to the European Town north of the Singapore River, which was segregated from the Native Town on the soggy south bank. It is also possible he paraded the instruments around both enclaves. Either

way, the story of Coleman's conquest of the interior is probably not as straightforward as Taussig's narrative about primitivism and technology's "intimate relationship" (201). Still, we might at the very least note that in Coleman's land-making exercise bewilderment and credulity are just as key. For only in their wonderment could the townspeople testify to the value of that novel object, interior land, whose mode of creation they could not fathom, whose value they could not directly know, and whose legitimacy could only in time be guaranteed through circulation.

Importantly, for Coleman's proof to be efficacious, its material chain of handling could not be broken, hence the need to retrieve the forsaken instrument and present it to the townspeople for examination. In much the same way as the proclamation of reclaimed land over a century later would need to produce some material proof of that newly-made land's integrity, Coleman's gesture of land-making would too have to supply a token of proof. For how else would he guarantee that "land" had really been discovered, hard won, in the jungle? How else could the town's inhabitants know if that land was truly good and proper land, capable of bearing and delivering on its promise of value?

Bruno Latour in his *The Making of Law* illustrates just how imperative it is that the chain of proof remain unbroken. He recounts a humorous incident of a missing signature on a decree issued by the Office of the General Secretariat in France. The decree bore the seal of the Prime Minister but not his accompanying signature. That small absence precipitated a veritable crisis. For the parties disadvantaged by the decree had sought, via their lawyer, to have the decree invalidated because, reasonably, they argued, a decree sans signature was no decree at all (2010, 24).

The office that issued the decree, for its part, assured the Council of the State arbitrating the case that the original decree did indeed bear the necessary signature. It offered to send a "certified copy"—"a certificate attesting the signature of the document"—to the Council, but declined to provide "a copy of the [signed] document itself" (24). There was "no question," moreover, "of remedying the absence of the signature by morally unacceptable ways." For after two electoral changes the Prime Minister whose autograph was at issue had long been replaced. The Office simply asked the Council "to take their word for it" (24).

Obviously, Latour notes, a civil servant's word even when uttered in good faith is "not the same thing as the signature on the decree itself. The [Office] seeks to *break* the chain of writing and its particular traceability [*la traçabilité qui lui est propre*], by means of an oral act and a request for trust" (24). Naturally, the Council is not satisfied. "It must be able physically to touch the very 'substance' of the autographed document." The trouble is that the issuing Office "broke the vital connection between the very body of the Minister and the page on which the decree is inscribed" (28). "The only way," Latour concludes, "of preventing the lawyer from interrupting the efficiency of this decree that is contested by his clients is to ensure that the bond that physically attaches the constituted authorities of the Republic to the text is not broken" (33).

In the end the Council arrives at some manner of compromise. They opt for a deferral of action, as one might expect, and pledge to seek further advice. But not before one especially intriguing solution is proposed. A member of the adjudicating Council suggests that rather than obtain the document itself, the Council might dispatch a court reporter to "go and look at the document *himself*" (25; original emphasis). Examining the decree with his hands and eyes, the reporter was to insert, as it were, his physical body into the broken chain, thus becoming the missing link and so mending the connection. Alas, notwithstanding the plan's ingenuity, it was really no solution at all. For after which the Council would "simply have to trust the reporter" (26). The proposed fix would merely repeat the earlier predicament of a person's word given without accompanying tangible proof.

Sympathetic Magic

A similar necessity impresses itself on the reclamation process in Singapore. Though by law the act of proclamation instantly makes "land," it alone is not enough to quash doubt about that land's authenticity. So, one might try to furnish proof by pointing to a process having taken place. In the creation of land on the island's exterior, soil samples and measurements fetched from the substratum have to be relayed along an unbroken chain of handling. They travel from ground to embedded instrument, extractive machinery to container, from the custody of field technicians to that of lab hands, from one set of testing apparatuses to another...

Undisturbed samples of the ground, for example, are collected in split barrels driven down with the tap-tap of a hydraulic push. Once retrieved from the boreholes, the specimens are right away labeled and sealed at both ends with wax to stave off ruinous oxidation whilst they await transportation to the laboratory. Within the tubular walls of those airtight chambers each sample of sand turns encyclopedic, abridging the entirety of geological history and manipulation it has undergone. As Jerry Zee puts it, “sand becomes a mineral spur to remembering. It ‘holds geological memories in its elemental structure,’” each grain a “catalogue of environmental changes and disappearances” (2017, 216).

At the receiving lab, it is then the technician’s job to coax the story from the sample. She must select the appropriate testing method for what is at hand. If its material composition permits, she might choose to extrude the entire cylindrically-shaped specimen from its holding tube by winding a crank on one of end of a lathe-like machine. If it does not, she might instead elect to trim a specimen of suitable shape and size from a block sample. Whatever the method by which the specimen is obtained, it is then subjected to a barrage of tests which gauge moisture content, plasticity, density, particle size and distribution, shear strength, compression strength, consolidation, etc. Specimens are ushered from ovens to dessicators, shaken through the tiny eyes of sieves, warmed in water baths, and scrutinized under magnifying lenses, all in an effort to divine the physical properties of the ground from which they were taken.

Along their paths of travel, the samples transmute into other, varied material forms: particles, numbers, data, interpretations, errata, and so on. Eventually they find their way to the desk of the President under whose hand and seal those bits of grit, having now assumed the shape of words on a page, are made to touch the force of law which authorizes land’s existence. With the culminating ritual gesture of proclamation, the literal fleshy body of the President attaches to the new ground, establishing an unbroken vital connection that alters the very nature of that ground: it makes it land.

If this sounds like magic—“technoshamanism” to recall Shabbir’s term—it is because in a qualified sense it is. For it is worth remembering that parts (samples) here are being made to stand for the whole (ground). And the question we must ponder momentarily is: *do* parts sum to a whole? When early anthropologists diagnosed the

magical thinking of primitive peoples, they identified two types: the mistaking of effect for cause, and the confusion of parts for the whole. James George Frazer would taxonomize “sympathetic magic” in an analogous fashion, distinguishing between imitative magic and contagious magic (1922, Ch. 3, §1)—or, what Taussig later called copy and contact (1993, 47).

Whereas imitative magic “is founded on the association of ideas by similarity,” contagious magic is founded on “contiguity,” Frazer writes (Ch. 3, §1). He is quick to determine, as we might expect, that these “two great principles” of the “magician’s logic” are really just illogic. They “turn out to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas.” The mistake imitative magic makes, he tells us, is “assuming that things which resemble each other are the same” (§1). In this case, the primitive is led to believe that “[l]ike produces like, or, in other words, that an effect resembles its cause” (§3).

Contagious magic, by contrast, imagines that “things which have been once conjoined must remain forever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other” (§3). A magical sympathy thus “exist[s] between a man and any severed portion of his person, as his hair or nails; so that whoever gets possession of human hair or nails may work his will, at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut” (§3). Teeth, navel strings, placentas, clothing, bloodied bandages, foot-tracks—great care is taken to hide these lest they grant an opening for malicious manipulation. Even flesh wounds are bound sympathetically to the weapons and enemy hands that inflicted them, such that the twanging of a bow-string might “cause the wounded man to suffer from tension of the nerves and spasms of tetanus” (§3).

Having said this, imitative and contagious magic are not, for Frazer, fundamentally different forms of associative thinking:

[B]oth assume that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether, not unlike that which is postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose,

namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty. (§1)

As Frazer and his critics, Mauss, Hubert, and Taussig, all emphasize, copy and contact are best understood as different but inseparable expressions—two “moments,” Taussig says—of the same underlying epistemology (Taussig, 21 and 55). The hoofprint of a horse whose rider one wishes to manipulate “is virtually *part of* the horse and at the same time it is an *image of (part of)* the horse and, to complicate matters further, the horse is a substitute for the rider” with whom it was in contact (53; my emphasis). To aggravate an adversary’s wound, one need not place into the fire the exact arrowhead that tore the flesh. “[I]f you put an instrument of iron or wood *resembling* the weapon into the wound, whereby it bleedeth, the anointing of that instrument will serve and work the effect” (Frazer, Ch. 3, §3; my emphasis).

The answer to the earlier question, then, of whether parts do in fact sum to a whole seems obvious: not *these* sorts of contagious parts, which maintain sympathetic—and therefore *never proportionate*—relations to other entities. For one can wreck a life with mere clippings of nails. One may heap untold misery on another using just the impression of a foot. Nothing of this obeys the proportionality or commensurability that governs mathematical parts and wholes.

So: to what extent does land reclamation partake of this magical thinking? I would say that certainly something of its logic of excess and contiguity does appear to bear out in the sampling of ground in Singapore. For the ability of samples to bind the body of the President to the ground signals a comparable form of association at work. Those samples, as I shall shortly show, are precisely non-additive in character, and they are activated, as are nail shavings and locks of hair, as instruments for manipulating relations from afar.

Redirecting the Flow

For a long time, precious little was known about the geology and composition of Singapore’s “naturally-occurring” land beyond the broad strokes. “We have not on Singapore Islands any precious metals and therefore the geological literature is not

voluminous,” wrote K. G. Sehested, a civil engineer in the Public Works Department in the 1960s (1993, 8). A cruel anecdote serves to illustrate his point. He tells of some shophouses built in the eastern part of the main island—two-story structures which had been “placed on sand” with considerable ease (16–17). This fact encouraged another builder to purchase the plots next door where he wished to construct a four-story building. “The sites had specifically [been] bought because of the cheap foundations to be obtained on sand.”

However, to the builder’s utter dismay, “when the foundation pits were dug, there was no sand” (17). Bakan piles intended to prop the structure up simply sank into the depths. “Ultimately, a Civil Engineer was called in and concrete piling held by ‘friction’ had to be resorted to—a most painfully expensive expedient.” Those remedial measures, Sehested explains, presented their own challenges:

During the driving of the 90 feet long piles, most piles proceeded quickly to full penetration but others could not be driven further than 15 feet down. There was sand after all at the site. The distance between a 15 feet (*sic*) pile and a 90 feet pile was sometimes only 3 feet. It was nearly unbelievable but one pile went down easily and the neighbor could not be moved. The house stands well on its mixed group of piles. The story is to illustrate *the incredible sudden appearance and disappearance of sand* in the beach formations. (17; my emphasis)

An account of a similar drama was conveyed to me by a middle-aged architect about a large infrastructural project that his mother—herself a practicing architect—once took on. The job was again in the eastern reaches, likely near to where that poor builder had tried to erect his four-story building. After all the design plans had been made and construction had begun, she received an abrupt summons from the crew on site. She watched, amazed, as tall foundation piles disappeared without trace into gray, viscous sludge.

No one had known, despite the sampling work, that beneath the veneer of perfectly sandy soil was hidden a gigantic syrupy pocket of marine clay. Clay is, of

course, the nemesis of anybody looking to raise a solid edifice. Its particles have the frustrating ability to assemble and reassemble themselves into all manner of configurations, each with totally different physical properties. The construction team retrieved the pile and welded to it a second, doubling the original height. Bloop, it went. The taller pile just as easily drowned in the muck. The team dutifully recovered it once more and welded to it a third. To their relief, with its newfound exaggerated length, one end of the foundation pile finally found its footing on the bedrock below and construction could proceed.

These minor tales, trivial as they are, force us to consider something elementary about the sample. What good is it if it cannot be trusted to faithfully render that of which it is allegedly a representative “part”?

In an early article, geographer Bruce Braun describes the geological “production of vertical territory” off Canada’s west coast on Queen Charlotte Islands, as they were then called (2000). In the late-nineteenth century, when the field of earth sciences was nascent, George Mercer Dawson, a plucky geologist, helped develop a novel epistemology: a “geological way of seeing nature.” He did this by collecting rock samples, sketching the strata of exposed formations, and mapping areas that had hitherto remained uncharted (8). The samples in turn made possible the work of comparison. Geologists were able to “correlate the exposed strata ... observed in the Queen Charlottes with observations ... made elsewhere along the coast and in the interior of British Columbia” (9). Rock formations could be placed within a larger stratigraphical order and taxonomy (9).

These labors gave miners and prospectors the ability to “see” or intuit the “inner architecture” of the landscape without having straight access to it themselves. Mining companies courting investors could for example point to a rock sample, activating it as a sign of what was likely hidden below. The notion was that samples could be taken as indicative of probable larger formations and structures (24). And although sure proof, if ever there was any, could not be directly obtained before money had already been sunk into the venture, investors were encouraged to bet on the probability of finding valuable buried minerals. As a result, the substratum became the new “frontier” for capital (25).

Braun's discussion is a guide for thinking about the legibility of reclaimed land in Singapore. For the soil samples and measurements that geologists and field technicians dutifully collect contain the same potential to be rendered into convincing signs of something beyond individual apprehension, and so alter the orientation toward that unseen ground. Extrapolating from Braun, we might say that the relation between samples and land is hardly summative. More samples do not necessarily afford a more complete picture of the whole—nor are they meant to. Instead the sample means to refigure our relations to that object, land, of which it was once a contiguous “part.”

In Dawson's case, rock samples established conduits so that the flow of capital might be newly directed toward that vertical territory (cf. Strathern 1996, 517–18). Likewise, in land reclamation, samples make pathways for the law to flow toward the ground and, upon touching it, turn that ground into valuable land. The “parts” here are surely magical in Frazer's sense: entirely disproportionate to the “whole” and functioning as material instruments for making and re-making social relations across spatial and temporal distance.

Lingering Doubt

Being coastal creations, reclaimed land must forever fend off tidal encroachment. Far from behaving as dry ground does, the sand fills that make up Singapore's reclaimed land actually form extensive unconfined aquifers: they imbibe water. According to geologists, sand layers of varying thickness anywhere between 12 and 18 meters down are fully saturated and thus would likely liquefy in the event of an earthquake (Win Naing 2011).

When the ground convulses, pore water pressure builds with each tremorous wave. Silty or sandy soils steadily lose their cohesion until the mass of ground finally yields and begins to flow as liquid—hence the term liquefaction (ibid.). Although Singapore lies outside a seismic zone, still it is surrounded by them; its landmass does sometimes feel the shivers of particularly large earthquakes nearby. And whereas hard rock is little affected by shear waves, soft rock—especially the unconsolidated sediments that constitute reclaimed land—are highly susceptible to them (ibid.).

About a quarter of Singapore's land today is soft soil, a result of the state's ambitious reclamation program over the last 50 or so years. “[T]he real worry for

Singapore is for buildings which stand on marine clay and some reclaimed land. These soil types tend to amplify low-frequency vibrations from earthquakes hundreds of kilometers away” and building codes have not adequately factored in the risk of tremors because earthquakes are by and large uncommon in Singapore (Megawati cited in Win Naing).

Of late, a new phenomenon is adding to these existing concerns: warming seas. In response, the state has mandated that reclaimed land be built significantly higher above mean sea level no matter the extra building cost. However, the effort to outpace its rise may well be futile in the long-run. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson gives us a few pertinent statistics:

Thirty percent of Singapore lies less than five meters above sea level, and ten of its seventeen reservoirs are adjacent to the coast, which puts them at risk for contamination by seawater. In November 2015, a report by Climate Central ... suggest[ed] that a temperature rise of four degrees Celsius by 2100 could “force 745,000 Singaporeans underwater.” (2017, 169)

The prospect of climate refugees in one of the wealthiest nation-states certainly paints a dire picture for residents of those with lesser means. But the reason I bring up these grave threats to the durability of reclaimed land is to draw attention to something considerably less dramatic, namely, doubt. Quiet, unobtrusive doubt—that eternal conundrum which, to repeat myself, animates and therefore also plagues the creation of any sort of novel object—that problem, which as Deleuze says, “lives in theorem, and gives it life, even when removing its power” (1989, 174).

Indeed, the worry that reclaimed land is simply no good is not a “problem” in the sense of something to be overcome. Rather what is at stake is really the *organization* of that productive problem of doubt so as to facilitate the making of an object of value. Value, to put it succinctly, needs the threat of fraud. And where reclamation is concerned, we see this necessity confirmed by the fact that consternation over reclaimed land’s

integrity is exactly as old as the practice itself. It is to this longer history of land reclamation that I presently (but briefly) turn.

The Devil's Work

In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Netherlands*, Faust too fighting the sea. There, however, it is a sea whose levels have always been troublesomely high. Distressed at the briny, inundated landscape before him, Faust enlists Mephistopheles' demonic aid to reclaim a tract of arable land by shutting out the tide. Upon that new ground he desires to cultivate a "secular promised land"—a polity of "free people living on free land, exposed to danger, but removed from the sea through collective effort" (Galli 2010, 190).

One must wonder why, with the power of the Devil at his disposal, Faust opts not for land but *to make* land for his Eden—and an embattled land at that, forever imperiled by "the usurpation of the wave" (Goethe 1886, 215). He builds, in his words, "A land like paradise within the mound,/Though the sea rave without to o'erleap its bound" (266). Faust's odd choice encourages us to speculate about the appeal this land holds. Cut out of the sea, this land aspires to cut the chain of causality: it self-founds. The promise of this Promised Land is, in a word, autonomy. If it is "free" it is because it is a land that purports to give law to itself (*auto-nomos*) and for that reason holds out the prospect of a paradisiacal polity.

Accounts of land reclamation in the Netherlands for the most part favor a narrative of progress. Ann Adams, for example, in her study of 17th century Dutch landscape painting, writes that precisely on account of its sodden character, feudal lords were wont to neglect this pestiferous terrain (1994, 42). Constructing fresh land for oneself out of the marshes therefore offered a way out of the existing hierarchy that was based on feudal holdings. "Having never been subservient to a lord," the inhabitants of the newly reclaimed lands were therefore "never ... subservient to [any lord's] land. From the beginning they owned and worked the [reclaimed] land as their own" (42). So it was that Dutch polder land became one of the few places in Europe at the time where peasants could, and did in great proportion, own land—and, consequently, where a favorable political structure "radically different from that of the rest of Europe" could take root (42).

Other commentators echo this politically emancipatory rendering of land reclamation's history. Architect Milica Topalović explains that in the Netherlands, the first democratic form of government, the “water board” (*het waterschap*), derived from the communal management of reclaimed lands. And, conversely, “the metrics of agricultural polder land were ... seen as an ideal measure for [the] organization of cities and buildings, for example in Simon Stevin's plan for an ideal Dutch city at the turn of the 17th century” (2015, 53).

On these reclaimed lands, the argument goes, one could reap the entirety of what one sowed. The very ground ensured a more just proportionality between labor and reward not to be found under vassalage, and thus gave measure to an ideal form of politics.

But for all the political promise one might wish to read into Faust's enterprise, taking it as a lesson for our present times (e.g., Galli, 190), we should not forget that this was a land existentially vulnerable to ruin. And not merely ruin brought on by the tides, but also by the possibility of ruinous politics. The orientation toward that vulnerability had to be less its eradication than its constant management. To wit, the effort itself was to be the paradise, and an earned immunity the reward.¹¹ As Stuart McLean puts it, the story of Europe is its “perennial failure to escape from the swamp” and its unending negotiation with those “recalcitrant materialities” (2011, 604 and 597).

Faust's land is not exempt from this recalcitrance. His too faces the undiminished task of having to prove itself good and genuine *before* the fact of habitual use—that is, ahead of the test of time—which would have lent the land currency and validated it in practice (Marin 1988, 126). Faust's fashioning of land thus confronts a temporal bind: an aporetic structure that here expresses itself in the question of value's authorship. And

¹¹ Stuart McLean presents an important counterhistory to this (2011, 600–01). Writing more generally about the reclamation of marshes all over Europe, he explains: “Once drained, the plains became richly productive agricultural areas, but the process of reclamation was often a long, slow one, punctuated by frequent setbacks.” These included flooding and malaria. Disease made necessary the “constant replenishment” of stricken laborers employed in reclamation projects, while “[t]hose who did not succumb to the disease often fell victim instead to the oppressive social order that often grew up around draining and reclamation projects.” Because of “the risks and the financial outlay involved,” reclamation work “often relied on and in some cases perpetuated the existence of feudal institutions and power relationships in the regions concerned.”

here as well we encounter doubt, immediately coterminous with, and generative of, the object that must prove the certainty of its future value in the here and now.

Indeed, right away, we see Faust's charitable creation meet a chorus of skepticism. "The land! Call you that 'land' o'er-flowed by ocean vast?" the Kaiser demands (Goethe, 246). "Wonders! Prodigies of Magic!" cries Baucis the old peasant woman. "Trust not land that late was water;" she warns, "On the high ground keep thy stand" (249–50). Their disquiet responds to that old problem that recurs whenever value is at issue: the risk of the counterfeit. For how can Faust's detractors be sure that what he has engineered is solid land—or even land at all? After all, was this land not fashioned with the help of the Devil, he who is master of dissimulation and who covets that power which belongs to God alone: the sovereign power of creation, or, the authorship of true value?¹²

With the land's authenticity in question, the test becomes paramount. Not only must the reclaimed land show itself able to repel the sea's every incursion (a task necessarily without end), it must also present tangible assurance of its inner goodness. It must offer something to assure doubters that the value it has promised at the open—autonomy, just rewards—will have been fulfilled at the close.

That Faust strikes a deal with Satan, chief purveyor of false value, to build his reclaimed land inextricably binds the land's fate to that of his soul. That binding is hardly arbitrary. Foucault's meditation on the problem of doubt in Christian penitence reveals a homologous structure at work. For where the soul's salvation is at stake, he tells us, the candidate for baptism must present to God a token of his remorse. The Lord in turn "tests [that] repentance as one tests a coin," examining it for marks of adulteration to see if it is "good money" (2014, 132–33).

Because one can never be totally sure about the sincerity of the soul's contrition, the test must repeatedly be implemented with the aim of ferreting out what is not genuine. Such testing is not a one-time evaluation. Rather, it is an unending obligation ironically

¹² Mephistopheles taunts Faust for his desire to create new land in the manner of God in Genesis. Whereas the Lord summoned dry land from beneath the cloak of floodwaters, Faust by dark conjury resurrects land by driving back the sea. His is a "land *like* paradise" (my italics) on which he tends "a happy Garden/Fair as Eden was of old" (248). Mephistopheles jeers: "Making, and making nothing of what's made./And then this evermore we see/Making pretence a something still to be" (267).

made all the more imperative the farther along the soul travels on its path to repentance, Foucault argues. For in Christian theology the believer's soul is ever open to infiltration by the Devil, and that risk only intensifies the closer one draws to God (125).

Does the embattled soul ultimately receive the gift of God's grace? That can only be determined at the end of time. The same goes for land's true value. In Goethe's Netherlands, just as in modern-day Singapore, no matter the tests that reclaimed land is subjected to (waves, measuring instruments), we cannot know if the land will at last prove itself authentic and true. This is the anxiety. For value appears always as a promise that awaits us, a future still to be consummated—and yet one must nevertheless transact in the present amidst that uncertainty.

The False Coin

The chapter's close is probably the right place to start asking about beginnings—to end, that is, by talking about origins. We are anyway overdue now for asking how this problem of value comes to be a problem in the first place.¹³

As Adam Smith reminds us, prior to the advent of coined money, parties to an exchange contended with the sheer impossibility of ascertaining in *each and every* instance of transaction a piece of metal's true weight and composition. Unless one studiously undertook the “tedious and difficult operation” of weighing and assaying the metal presented, one was “liable to the grossest frauds and impositions” (1976, 29). In place of the professed quantity of metal, one might receive “an adulterated composition of the coarsest and cheapest metals, which had, however, in their outward appearance, been made to resemble those metals” (29). The solution was thus to “affix a public stamp upon certain quantities of such particular metals.”

Now, such fraud was of course a problem neither confined to money nor inaugurated by its use. Smith was identifying rather a problem of value generally. Indeed, mints actually took their cue from the “aulnagers and stampmasters of woollen and linen cloth.” Those institutions were “equally meant to ascertain, by means of a public stamp, the quantity and uniform goodness of those different commodities when brought to market” (29). *All* objects of value, Smith's examples serve to demonstrate, are

¹³ An opening for inquiry I adopt from Ajay Skaria (2015, 450)—a way to question the question.

constitutively liable to the threat of counterfeiting and thus borrow an authority external to themselves to confirm their integrity.

To this, however, Marx adds a crucial caveat. The stamp, that supplementary guarantee of integrity, never did banish the counterfeit. Fictitious gold, he points out, “continues to perform the function of a legitimate coin” (1904, 142). And while an object in question—precious metal, for one; land, for another—might be a *bearer* of value, nothing of its physical body inherently has or contains that value “in” it. Value always exists elsewhere, so to speak, in relation. “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values,” Marx emphasizes (1990, 138). The “fictitious importance of gold due to its function ... comes in conflict with its real substance.” So “the coin is idealized in practice, being gradually transformed into a mere phantom of its golden or silver body” (1904, 142).

Finally, then, an explicit answer to the chapter’s second motivating question can be given. That question—on what does the authority to author value ground itself?—I have been trying to answer more than metaphorically, by tying it to the literal making of ground in Singapore. Such author-ity is grounded perforce on credit. And credit, as we know, is that which promises the future “will have been” by extending a token of collateral in the present. It is also that which must always be given or granted by others, even as it alleges to generate its own conditions of possibility.

“Custom,” Derrida says of the law, citing Pascal citing Montaigne, “creates the whole of *equity*, for the simple reason that it is accepted [*reçue*, i.e., received, gotten]. It is the mystical foundation of its authority. Whoever carries it back to first principles destroys it” (239; emphasis modified). Derrida’s immediate concern when he writes this is the law, and yet the double valence is clear. He means also value. For the “equity” that is created depends on three things, he says. First is “the authority of the legislator.” Second is “the *interest* of the sovereign [*la commodité du souverain*]” (my emphasis). And third, “present custom” which is guaranteed by the public whose habitual practice of, and abidance by, it affirms it (239). “Lawes are now maintained *in credit* not because they are just, but because they are lawes,” Montaigne argues (239–40; my emphasis). And we find we are obliged to say the same of value. Should one try to trace its origin, one would surely destroy its authority. For the problem of value is no more than the

material expression of a structural aporia: the agonism between sovereign who authors and citizen-sovereigns whose circulation authorizes, or, the structural paradox of genesis without development.

2

GROUND'S KEEPERS

They keep moving They're not hiding, but you can't follow them.

—Zai Kuning, interview for *Ocula*

In May of 2017 a pair of vessel-bound reclamation workers came ashore to offer before the tribunal for employment disputes a simple avowal: they were not seafarers. On account of that, the men reasoned, they were owed pay for work that they had done “overtime.” The statutes were clear on this. A seafarer’s workday could never by law pass into overtime, only from shift to shift—but theirs could, they said, and regularly did without due compensation. Their employer had been wrong to treat them as seafarers, the men told the court. They actually fell under another category of labor, the one that applied to most land-based workers and which legally provided for a standard workweek as well as for remuneration for anything done in excess of that.

The men were certain of this despite their permanent physical residence on water. Being tethered to land or to water was not the determinant, they said; the *ambit of their movement* was. For, legally speaking, the space of their circulation was anyway neither land nor sea. And if, as the men claimed, they belonged to that other category of labor, then that belonging would make it possible for them to bifurcate the continuum of their existence, kept out of sight on those vessels, into stretches of “regular” time and “overtime.” Both times would be equally legible to the law and both therefore compensable. It was that capacity to distinguish between the times of their own labor that the men were after. Was theirs the time of land or the time of sea? The law’s arbiters had to decide.

The Time of Labor

We may recall that there was once a time when the time of labor was not simply clock time. An eyewitness to the 1830 July Revolution in France, who was kindly disposed toward poetry, memorialized the two's antagonism in brief verse:

Qui le croirait! on dit, qu'irrités contre l'heure
De nouveau Josués au pied de chaque tour,
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.

[Who would have believed it! we are told that new Joshuas
at the foot of every tower, as though irritated with
time itself, fired at the dials in order to stop the day.] (Benjamin 1968, 262)

On the first night of fighting, Walter Benjamin relates, workers in Paris' various quarters fired "simultaneously and independently" on the oppressive clocks fixed atop the towers. They acted with the awareness, he says, that they were "about to make the continuum of history explode"; thus did the time of labor seek to restore itself, even if only fleetingly, to the arrhythmia of revolutionary upswelling and so halt the even-paced tick-tick-tick of that other time, clock time, to which it had become beholden (261–62).

In or around that same year but away from the convulsions of Europe, clock time in the new settlement of Singapore had, for its part, begun taking its cue *from* the time of labor, and not the other way around. Time on those islands had been appointed a keeper: a convict laborer—and he apparently was always late. "The noonday gun fired from Fort Canning (according to which the population set their watches) depended on a signal made by a convict at the government office," Anoma Pieris tells us. "'Time' on the settlement, which depended entirely on his punctuality, suffered frequent delays. Signals given to ships entering the harbor suffered a similar fate" (Pieris, 100).

Not just clock time but "space" too in the new settlement derived from that irregular, sometimes untimely time of labor. For any extension of the spatial grid and all land that was newly made therein needed constant labor to keep it well serviced. Fall short of that and the land and grid would return itself to the jungle, forfeiting the value made to inhere "in" them (Ch. 1). Indeed, the city's municipal limits were entirely

contingent on the availability of labor—specifically convict labor—to conduct the day’s conservancy work; and until the 1870s, those limits “did not exceed a two- to two-and-a-half-mile radius from the Singapore River” (100). “Land” and the reach of the colonial grid extended only as far as road gangs could physically march between sunup and sundown, during which time convicts had to complete the roundtrip from rest stations to worksites and back. It was labor’s daily, repetitive tracing of this loop that kept land “land” in the settlement and ensured that the grid remained firmly in place. Like clock time, then, uniform space equally hinged on the ambit of labor’s continual movement, its existence fettered to convict labor’s idiosyncratic rhythms, interruptions, and delays.

What precisely was this peculiar sort of labor—a labor perpetually on the move and whose idiosyncrasies gave ground to universal space-time in the settlement of Singapore? How to understand that relation of giving ground and also its eventual reversal, thanks to which today’s ground-making reclamation labor strives and fails to render legible its own time *within* that universal schema? This chapter ventures an answer by staging a juxtaposition across historical moments. It tries to see if a link might be rehabilitated between colonial convict labor, which first made land in the main island’s interior, and postcolonial reclamation labor whose sea-land circuit today “makes” land on the coastal margins of the country’s various islands. Again we proceed by going backwards (in keeping with the structure of reclamation). We begin with reclamation labor and work our way back to convict labor—and then back out to sea we once more go, to catch another view of reclaimed land, this time from the moving vessel.

Still Points

Now, the case of the two reclamation workers, with which the chapter opens, was not especially complicated—not, at least, according to the statutes. The law is clear that those whose vessels remain within the confines of Singapore’s legally defined “port waters” are not seafarers. This is because “port waters” actually insert themselves *between* “land” and “sea,” and only the latter is the proper domain of the seafarer (Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) Act 1997 and MPA (Port Limits) Notification 2010). The two men, being other than seafarers, were therefore entitled to the protections of the Employment Act which included most categories of land-based workers but excluded

seafarers (2009, §2(1)). It is that same Act which designates as “overtime” any work done beyond the standard 44-hour workweek and which thus gave legal basis to the men’s arguments.

The tribunal for employment claims, which heard the men’s cases in July and August, ruled in their favor on the first account: they were indeed not seafarers. The men’s vessels, the tribunal confirmed, were registered as harborcraft and had never ventured beyond port waters, except for the occasional trip to nearby Batam, Indonesia where they occasionally refueled (it was cheaper). Thus seafarers the men were not.

On the second point, however, the tribunal disagreed with the men. They were *not* owed any particular sum for overtime work. The problem was the lack of evidence. The men could not prove to the tribunal’s satisfaction that they had indeed worked all those hours that they said they had. The timesheets they had prepared for the tribunal’s consideration had been done from memory, months after those contested workdays had passed. (Although whether the tribunal would have decided differently had the men’s timesheets been made contemporaneously is open to question.) The men presented no witnesses, moreover. Coworkers who might have been able to testify to the accuracy of those hours were denied shore leave by their captains to appear at the men’s hearings.

By contrast, the company’s representative included in their submissions the captain’s monthly time logs as counterproof. It didn’t matter that those logs looked highly suspect: a tidy string of digits, allegedly documenting six-hour shifts, four a day, as was standard for seafarer work assignments. All were written in the same ink, likely in one go, and without variation—except when the forger’s hand began to visibly tire from the tedium, making the sixes grow rapidly in size from row to row, column to column. It didn’t matter either that the company representative only submitted the log for the month of February, and not for the other months in question. It was enough for the representative to suggest to the tribunal that the captain had those other logs in his possession. One month, it seemed, was example enough and thus perhaps proof enough as well.

As for what the two men did manage to present as additional evidence, theirs was in the form of brief video footage taken on their mobile phones as well as timestamped still images of their land-making activities. But unable, unfortunately, to show proof of

their labor in continuous passage—in the act of doing, of expending itself in time, and not as discrete still points—the tribunal ruled against their claims for compensation. The published grounds of judgment from their case reads as follows:

I am not satisfied, based on the documents alone, that the Claimant is able to show on a balance of probabilities that he is entitled to the overtime claim of over \$6,000 (*notes*: Company asserts that the Claimant works less than 8 hours a day, with a lot of rest days; Captain is prepared to confirm the same; on the other hand, the Claimant ... prepared from Dec. 2016 to May 2017 a list detailing on a daily basis the number of hours he worked [overtime] including [public holidays]—all these [are] from memory, etc. The Respondent has a point in stating that the claim rests on bare assertion on which eyewitness account[s] would have greatly assisted). ... [The Claimant] accepts that other than what he says, he has nothing to corroborate his assertion. ... Both accounts being equally probable, I am not able to find ... that the Claimant is entitled to the sum (\$6,000) as alleged in the claim he had filed. The claim is dismissed.

If the outcome of the men's cases was straightforward, the tribunal's process of fact-finding was less so. During one of the hearings, the presiding judge, having not yet thoroughly researched the relevant legislation, tried on for size a number of plausible explanations for why the men might or might not qualify as seafarers. Each in turn pointed to contradictory possibilities.

What type of employment documents did they hold? the judge enquired. The men held Work Passes, permits that seafarers were not normally granted. Yet, at the same time, they also possessed seafarer documents—certificates and discharge books—which the vessel's captain retained on the men's behalves. How to reconcile those two sets of documents which were typically mutually exclusive? As the company represented testily retorted at the hearing, why else would the firm specifically hire people with seafarer credentials if not to have them work as seafarers! It was worth noting, the representative continued, that the Ministry of Manpower's Land Reclamation Special Scheme, under

which the men had been hired, included both marine works and land-based works. Would it not be reasonable to presume that the Scheme included seafarers too?

Formal bureaucratic designations aside, there was also the question of the men's residence out on the water. Their registered place of domicile was after all their vessels, whose movements had to be cleared by the Maritime and Port Authority. Indeed, the men spent nearly all of their time away from land, working and resting exclusively onboard, save for the rare shore leave they were granted to attend official engagements, such as doctor's appointments or administrative business with the Manpower Ministry.

Then there was the type of vessel they operated. The men worked on hopper barges whose gross tonnage was small—too small to accrue toward their seafarer experience and thus advance their careers. Many of them had hoped to graduate from Ordinary Seamen to Able Seaman by working in reclamation and so command a better salary. But, dismayed that the job would not help them toward that desired promotion, the men expressly asked their captains *not* to endorse their seafarer documents, as they feared the vessel's meager gross tonnage would only disadvantage them in the future. What validity then did their seafarer documentation have if it was unendorsed?

No closer to an answer, the judge pressed on with finding something else to anchor the men's labor to. How about the nature of their work? Were the tasks they were made to perform exclusively the duties of seafarers? Did painting or cleaning, for example, tasks arguably not essential or exclusive to seafaring, automatically count as seafarer work if done onboard a vessel? What about mooring or the setting of ropes? Was anything that a captain assigned by default a seafaring activity? And what about the cargo they transported? Did the precise nature of the cargo—sand, aggregate, marine clay, and other reclamation fill material—determine whether a vessel was of the seafaring sort or of another kind altogether?

Importantly, the judge wished to know, had the men explicitly been promised "overtime" pay in those exact words? Was the verbal promise of such pay, if ever made, an indication that the men were of a class of workers other than seafarers, since generally it was land-based workers who were entitled to such pay? How precisely, the judge inquired, had the job been represented to the men when they were recruited in Myanmar? Had they in fact been told that this was a seafaring job?

Finally, supposing that the men were not seafarers and therefore entitled to overtime pay, should the time they spent allegedly twiddling their thumbs whilst the vessel was in transit be remunerated, or was it to be written off as “rest time,” as the employer contended? By what criteria could the tribunal differentiate between rest and work when the time and place of one could not be cleanly delineated from the time and place of the other?

The judge’s intellectual rummaging offers insight into one of the central problems— theoretical and methodological—that continually confronts this present study of land reclamation. How is one to give an image to relations in motion, in this specific case those that bind (or uncouple) land and labor? Such was the problem that the two men faced before the tribunal: where to place one’s analytical cut so as to momentarily stop the flow of relational substance and thus elicit a meaningful form? Out of what virtual ground could the actual figure of labor be made to emerge?

Labor’s objectification, Marxists scholars teach us, first became possible within the mercantile economy, which was itself made possible by the advent and spread of universal space-time viz. a “neutral” ground. But recall the historical case of convict labor’s enlistment into land-making in colonial Singapore. There, it was the space-time of labor which gave land in the settlement its space-time, not the other way around. It was labor’s restlessness, its peripatetic activity, which supplied for other figures (value or land, say) the needed “neutral” ground. So too, it would seem, with reclamation labor, whose endless shuttling between dredge sites at sea and fill sites near land furnishes the space-time ground for the coming ground-to-be. Against what, then, if that is the case, can that labor make itself legible, consubstantial as it is with the ground it is tasked with creating?

In a situation where clock time-keeping was either not possible for the men (they did not have the means to) or counted against them (the captain could fabricate records), the conundrum was quite simply: *how else to represent the (space-)time of one’s labor?* If not clock time, could the men point to the time embedded intensively in the shifting landscape itself? Could the landscape’s extensive passage and physical change, perhaps

bearing traces of manipulation by their hands, stand in as proof of their labor? What sort of “image,” in other words, or what figuration of labor was possible here?

A provisional answer might be had, but only in a roundabout way, if we are willing to revisit for a few pages an image previously encountered in the first chapter.

A Body

Earlier I meant to ask: did it startle you, as it did me, the scene that the interruptive tiger brings into view? See the puncture its body leaves in the wall of vegetation. It fashions for us a judas hole; and through it we espy a furtive creature. No, not the tiger itself. Have another look at the lithograph (**Figure 1.1**). Notice this time the supporting cast. Convict laborers they are. More than a half dozen of them. They overrun in sweeping diagonal the spread of visual space from foreground to background, pushing over the image’s hypotenuse. Look past wimpled Coleman to see now what the cat’s dragged out: *a body* of convicts. This choice of collective noun, we shall shortly see, is not accidental. Our brash feline, forsaking all habits of concealment, hasn’t just exposed itself; it’s also put on view the curtained-off stagehands behind this drama of land-making.

A disturbance of this kind is as precious as it is rare. For only when an object trips over itself does it divulge, as specter, the past labor extinguished within it. “A knife which fails, a piece of thread which keeps on snapping, forcibly remind us of Mr. S., the cutler, or Mr. B., the spinner,” observes Marx (1990, 289). What has imperfectly congealed in the form of being (*Sein*) we glimpse again as a shadow of unrest (*Unruhe*). What crystalizes in the form of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) softly intimates that it had once been in motion (*Bewegung*), namely, as living labor (296). Thus a land impeded in its coming-into-being becomes our occasion to “see” labor standing, as it were, beside itself.

Wait, there is more. Notice too the conjunction in the title Coleman wears. It fastens together two vital objects of administration, Public Works and Convicts. Coleman would be the first in 1833 to superintend this combinatory department for the settlement. But long before the post was even dreamed up bureaucratically, architects of the larger colonial project there and elsewhere would have already intuited the two’s compatibility.

You see, penal status was understood to be by nature at odds with property

ownership (Pieris, 28). Unable to accrue property for itself, penal labor was therefore highly amenable to creating property *for others*. As Foucault remarks in *Discipline and Punish*, “with feudalism, at a time when money and production were still at an early stage of development, we find a sudden increase in corporal punishment—the body being in most cases the only property accessible”; and later “with the development of the mercantile economy,” we see that growth rise in tandem with “forced labour and the prison factory” (1979, 25). What better property then, at the inception of a colonial settlement, to have convict labor create than the most primordial of all forms, land itself? The first transportees to Singapore were put to work accordingly.

It was convict labor that built Commercial Square in 1825. Two hundred yards long by fifty yards wide, the square was a proud piece of the colonial grid and the epicenter for trade traveling up the riverway from the port (Pieris, 99). Eight years later, it was equally convict labor that undertook the island’s first land reclamation project on the river’s south bank. Their methods were crude—and probably unsanitary. Town refuse and sweepings were chucked into the swamp and covered over with miscellany foraged from nearby hills. “Long lines of convicts ... could be heard singing as they daily made their way through town with bundles of brushwood and baskets of dirt balanced on their heads” (Dobbs 2003, 39).

The south bank, which Raffles insisted be raised, sat some nine feet lower than its opposite shore. At high tide this made for “a vast inland lake up to 12 feet deep that engulfed the entire Chinatown area to Pearl’s Hill” (8). At low tide, at its most benign, the fluvial spillage interposed itself as a marshy bog. All that soggiess stymied settlement around the river. Natives and Europeans squeezed with each other on the more favorable north bank, ruining Raffles’ designs for a segregated, dual city (Pieris, 39–40).

“I offered,” sulked Coleman to the Resident Councillor, “with the aid of Convict Labour to clear, drain and form into regular Streets one of the worst Marshes in the vicinity of the Town” (cited in Hancock, 36). Why, he grumbled, was government waffling when he was willing and able to implement those plans? “I require no establishment except a few Convicts to carry my instruments, for I have always found that nothing in the way of surveying or building can be property executed by Deputy in this Settlement,” he huffed (37).

Eventually Coleman would have his day, and he is remembered for having “obtained as much efficient work as possible from [the convicts], maintaining a strict, but by no means painful discipline” (66). His practices even won him praise from the Commissioner of Prison Discipline in Calcutta, who hailed his “great efficiency in the active management of labour [as] an outstanding achievement in the progress of public works” (69). Thanks to Coleman, so the story goes, those twenty-eight acres of new ground reclaimed from the south bank of the river handsomely rewarded the settlement’s nascent administration. They supplied ample room for European habitation as well as much needed tax revenue for further land-making and public works (Pieris, 99).

Elsewhere on the main island, it was again convicts who were deployed to make crosswise cuts through the town and along the seafront, peeling back for colonial administrators the introverted folds of the Chinese and Malay villages. Country roads—thick meatuses extending fanwise—were carved into the fleshy jungle, yielding fresh land for European plantations (ibid. and Hancock, 66). As land was opened up, aerating the island’s inner parts, so grew the need for convict labor to keep that land in good shape. Tasks bred more tasks: Tree felling. Snake killing. Tiger trapping. Road paving. Ditch digging. Hauling, hacking, tidying, elevating, flattening... By keeping the elements back, penal labor ensured that the grid stayed anchored where it had been lain.

By 1852 a tight mesh of roads articulated the central plain and the authority of the European grid. Roadways across the island enabled the subsequent alienation of property by the land office and survey departments, where convicts were employed as chainmen, survey assistants, and land measurers. It was through the survey of land that the larger plan of the city grid, as taxable properties, became apparent. (Pieris, 99)

So intertwined, in fact, were the functions of land-making and penal management that Coleman had his engineering office housed inside the convict jail, Pieris reports (66). And never was a survey mission ventured “unless for objects directly connected with the revenue of the land office” (Chief Engineer Collyer cited in Pieris, 99, Fn. 26).

Labor's Unwriting

Now, it is here at this juncture that an odd thing starts to occur in the colonial paper trail. We begin to see penal labor writing over itself—unwriting itself, in a way. For the more the grid advances and land proliferates, the more penal labor, and ultimately the very prison itself, recedes from view. Labor becomes paradoxically unrepresentable within the very grid (of legibility) it is at pains to construct and maintain. We witness, in fits and starts, convict labor being enlisted as artificer of its own effacement.

We can afford to be quite precise about how this manifested. Early maps and town plans of the colony, Pieris notes, specifically “omitted the physical imprint of the colonial prison.” This despite its enormous scale and its location in the very heart of the European Town (29). The sprawling complex, unmatched in size by any other structure in the settlement, sat across a full three blocks in the grid. Yet in drawings it appeared as a gigantic void—a gigantic *imperceptible* void. For how would one even come to know of its absence within this schema?

After all, everything else appears where it should: the courthouse; the battery; the breezy esplanade; the police station; the settlement's smattering of bridges (some planned but not yet built), and Government House, lofted high on Forbidden Hill. Surrounding the site where the prison should have been sketched are the many-spired houses of worship—the Armenian Church, St. Andrews Cathedral for the English Protestants, the French Church, the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, and the Portuguese Church of St. Joseph's. Their “competing heights,” writes Pieris, would have offered a visual counterweight to the prison's horizontally rambling appearance, not to mention a stark moral juxtaposition (51). Even the Sultan's premises make their benign appearance on the map, drawn displaced from their original site, after colonial administrators had convicts smash a line right through the compound and empty into the sea the bones of the Malay notabilities buried in the adjacent plot—all in keeping with a directive from Bengal to “make proper thoroughfares and ... straighten those which were winding” (Pieris, 45 and 99; Abdullah, 222–23).

At issue was not, it would seem, a more or less attentive exercise of any one individual's faculty of “vision”; the non-sighting was rather “the act of its structural

conditions” (Althusser 2009, 26). (It might be interesting to note that unlike European mapping, non-European toponymics emphatically marked the presence of the jail, albeit aurally. Thanks to Pieris’ research, we know that “Two Chinese names for Bras Basah Road, which is adjacent to the [old jail], [were] Lau Khaku Keng Kau (mouth of the old jail) and Ken Kau (ankle chains).” And although not marking the site per se, “Words from Hindi such as *hargari* (handcuffs) and *kanjaus* (punishment cells), which have been absorbed into the Malay language, suggest the Indian origins of the penal system” in Singapore. Likewise, “Oral accounts ascribe the Malay term Kling or Keling, said to refer to Indians from Kalinga, to the sound of ankle chains and identify the penal population as having been largely of Indian origin” (30).)

Given that it was convicts whose labor built most of the island’s land and early municipal structures, with the settlement’s expansion, evidence of that congealed labor was in theory everywhere multiplying. So great, in fact, was the demand for penal labor that after the first eighty convicts arrived in April of 1825, dispatched from Bengal via Bencoolen, Sumatra, another twenty thousand more would come, their presence greatly alleviating the acute labor shortage that was at the time hampering colonial infrastructure projects. But despite this, and ironically even while partaking of the fruits of that convict labor, “one [could] live for many months without knowing that there [were] any convicts” at all, as one European resident blithely remarked (cited in Pieris, 100). Later history books too remember it as that dear resident did, attributing the success of the settlement not to convict labor but to European design and immigrant enterprise (the latter in particular is lionized in postcolonial discourse).

All of this invites the question: what structural conditions account for this non-sighting and, even more enigmatically, for the absent prison, the vanished institutional center of that penal labor? Certainly it was not because convicts were deliberately kept out of sight. On the contrary, a notable characteristic of penal labor in the colonies was that it was rarely confined. Convicts were in fact just about everywhere on the island. Their criminal bodies were meant to be seen, for humiliation through labor was an essential part of the penal regime (67). Even those who had committed egregious crimes were not kept locked away. Instead they were made to publicly wear their transgressions in the form of heavy ankle fetters that loudly announced their comings and goings.

Across the penal settlements of Europe, then, a convict's fate was to be placed in constant circulation—both within individual colonies and from colony to colony,¹ a fate to which convicts quickly resigned themselves, claim McNair and Bayliss in their 1899 *Prisoners Their Own Warders*.

We may remark here that transportation in those early times had its terrors both to the European from our shores to Australia, and to the native of India to these settlements, and more especially to the latter.

Though, by a system of “assignment” or “compulsory” servitude to masters, or by a ticket of leave which made it open to the European criminal to work for whom and where he pleased, expatriation became in time to be less severely felt; still, for a long period it continued to act as a deterrent to others, though to the convict himself it was “greater in idea perhaps than in reality.” To the native of India it meant even a severer punishment than to the European, for to be sent across the “kala pani,” or “black water,” in a convict ship or “jeta junaza,” or “living tomb” as they called it, meant, especially to a man of high caste, whether of the right or left hand section, the total loss to him of all that was worth living for.

(1899: Ch. 1)

A convict's punishment, consisting of “imprisonment in transportation, beyond sea, for life” (Pieris, 69), stood in contradistinction to the penal regimes of the metropolises at the time, which had, according to Foucault, begun to favor keeping prisoners cloistered inside panoptic prisons, having forsaken older models of punishment which put the body on display through hard labor (more on that below). In the overseas territories still, the prison primarily functioned as an explicitly *distributary* node in the broader colonial labor circuitry: a depot from which labor was repeatedly dispersed and from which trailed

¹ Penal transportation bound the three cities of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, Malacca) “in a network of penal appointments, promotions, and retransportations that mirrored the circulation of colonial administrators and military officers” (Pieris, 64).

lines of “communications” that extended far and wide, writing the penal system into the landscape.

All the more striking then, given this deliberate visibility, that the penal prison complex should go into hiding. Or that it should hide even now, in the present day. For, following the prison’s metamorphosis into a prison factory—when it “physical[ly] implo[ded] ... into a labyrinth of industrial workshops” (113)—the complex was subsequently abandoned when penal transportation to Singapore ceased in 1873 and the colony’s remaining convicts were transferred to the Andaman Islands. In that state it remained, a cavity in the city’s otherwise dense civic district, converted at some point into an unobtrusive urban park, and then converted again, in 2002, when the site was leased to the new Singapore Management University (30). But though the actual prison structure is long gone, its imprint, contrary to all appearances, doubtless remains. Embedded now not *in* the landscape but *as* landscape, the penal structure we might say hides in plain sight, veiling itself in order that it may endure.

In the end, Pieris has this to say about the colonial prison’s omission from those early maps and town plans: it was “intend[ed] perhaps to prevent mischief makers from abusing [any] knowledge” of its location and design, she conjectures (29). Hers is a sensible speculation, for sure, but one that I think in its pragmatism declines to address the larger, unresolved question that the absent prison raises. Namely, why does labor here expend itself ironically in the mode of self-effacement, and what organizes our ability to “see” (if at all) that unwriting? The question has, I believe, broader resonance beyond the particular subject matter of Pieris’ study, and should equally be asked of present-day postcolonial migrant labor, which eventually came to replace colonial convicts as land’s makers and keepers in Singapore.

As Pieris rightly observes in the final pages of *Hidden Hands*, today’s migrant workers inherit precisely the tasks once assigned to transported convicts (229). Those tasks include roadworks, landscaping, building construction, repair and demolition, marine works, waterworks, sanitation works, and—most importantly for our purposes—dredging, land reclamation, earthworks, and soil sampling (Employment of Foreign Manpower Act 2009). The hypothesis, then, with which Pieris concludes her marvellous

book, is that the penal regime bequeathed as “institutional template” its particular “graduated labor system” to postcolonial migrant labor, “the resilience of which is apparent in the contemporary construction industry” (217).

It is a hypothesis I find very compelling—if for reasons other than convict and migrant labor’s similar job functions—and here I pick up where Pieris’ text leaves off, with the aim of exploring just how that “institutional template” expresses and reworks itself in the state’s ongoing enterprise of coastal land-making. At stake, I would say, is not the production of land per se (by an invisible body of labor, first convict then migrant) but rather the production of land *as a self-authoring sign of productivity itself*—a process which depends, as it must, on labor’s unwriting.

Read with that in mind, the absent prison is surely a *productive* omission, not an oversight or precautionary measure. Pieris’ text actually intuits this notwithstanding its explicit conclusions. Rather than error or safeguard, we might take the omission to be at once “diagnostic and symptomatic” (Povinelli 2016, 15) of labor’s paradoxical character, whereby it expends itself always in such a way as to no longer be recognizable as such. Thus do convict and migrant labor, through their roving, itinerant exertions, make land and give ground, materializing the grid of legibility in which ironically their own figuration becomes increasingly impossible. What gets foreclosed in that process is the ability to pinpoint a direct relationship between maker and made, subject and object, cause and effect, or labor-as-commodity and commodity-made-by-labor. What gets severed is the possibility of a simple 1:1 correlation. A third term intervenes: something must go offstage.

What further elaboration, then, might this study offer regarding the “institutional template” which Pieris has identified? Beyond the literal functions that postcolonial migrant labor explicitly inherited from its colonial penal counterpart, how should we understand their alleged structural continuity? Here I’d like to suggest that it all hangs, ultimately, on the question of bodies and what manner of “accounting” they permit or deny. Two works in particular, when read together, offer an subtle (if at times stomach turning) meditation on those bodily capacities and so it is to them that I now turn. First,

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979); and second, Strathern's *Property, Substance and Effect* (1999).

Too Little, Too Much

In *Discipline and Punish*, what takes shape behind the spectacles of pain which Foucault seems to revel in retelling is a specific sort of body. That body possess one trait in particular which is of special interest to our present discussion: it is capable of bearing too much or too little punishment. Accounting, in other words, is possible—if always open to challenge. That is what explains the growing public discomfort across Europe with spectacles of punishment, as documented by Foucault. In his words:

It was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them, ... to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration. ... The public execution is now seen as a hearth in which violence bursts again into flame. (9)

In Foucault's telling, the criminal body of premodern times possessed the capacity to manifest a *disproportion* between the magnitude of a crime and the severity of a punishment. A body that made such accounting possible was thus able, under the right circumstances, to reflect back the shame originally meant for it alone onto the executors of the law. In rare cases, it could shame the law, even. So, when, for example, before the public's eye, the punishment did not befit the crime—

The apportioning of blame [was] redistributed: in punishment-as-spectacle a confused horror spread from the scaffold; it *enveloped both executioner and condemned*; and, although it was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory, it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame. (9; my emphasis)

What sort of body was this? It would appear that the dispensation of punishment applied itself specifically to a body that was believed able to bear its punishment in full—if not all at once then cumulatively over time through a duration of suffering. It was the law’s job then to calibrate the form and length of that punishment so that the suffering (finite) would sum to the gravity of the crime (also finite). A delicate balance thus had to be struck. If the two were commensurate, then the shame would not reflect any of its excess or its inadequacy onto the law’s executors.

But the criminal body swiftly lost this special endowment when, as Foucault explains, premodern forms of punishment were abolished in favor of modern technologies of reform. According to him, between the modern criminal body and the law, a *soul* now interposed itself (23), behaving as a floating signifier would, able to soak up the excess—a third term, as it were, foreclosing the possibility of the 1:1. This soul prevented the potential imbalance between the crime committed and the suffering meted out. It prevented an imbalance, that is to say, in the accounting.

Eventually, there was no longer even a perspective from which to say that “too much” or “too little” was being inflicted on the body. Spectacles were done away with and the law increasingly dealt with criminals in spaces out of public sight. In fact, the body, according to Foucault, ceased altogether to be the proper bearer of punishment. Its relevance would be henceforth only as a repository for the soul in need of reform. Or, put more precisely, it was not that the criminal body came for the first time to contain an inner soul but that a soul now came to veil the modern criminal body. The law veiled the body in order to place the soul and its crime on display.²

“One no longer touched the body,” writes Foucault, “or at least as little as possible, and then only to reach something other than the body itself” (11).

² In France, after 1832, the year that the practice of severing parricides’ hands as punishment was abolished, only the practice of veiling the criminal as he was led to the scaffold was retained. “Thus it was in the case of Fieschi, the would-be assassin of Louis-Phillipe, in November 1836: ‘He will be taken to the place of execution wearing a shirt, barefoot, his head covered with a black veil; he will be exhibited upon a scaffold while an usher reads the sentence to the people, and he will be immediately executed.’ We should remember Damiens—and note that the last addition to penal death was a mourning veil. The condemned man was no longer to be seen. Only the reading of the sentence on the scaffold announced the crime—and that crime must be faceless. ... The last vestige of the great public execution was its annulment: a drapery to hide a body” (Foucault, 13–14).

The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property. ... Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. ...

As a result of this new restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists... (ibid.)

If, in certain cases, the law was absolutely pressed to do what it now detested, i.e., take life, then it reached for the guillotine, which was designed to “[take] life almost without touching the body” (13). Physical punishment would apply the law “not so much to a real body capable of feeling pain as to a juridical subject”—to a possessor of rights (ibid.).

Bodies Without Souls

But, as mentioned earlier, this was a peculiar body that Foucault was describing, peculiar perhaps to Europe. The *colonized* penal body posed a markedly different problem. This Othered body neither had interiority nor could be individual. As Morris emphasizes in *The Returns of Fetishism*, European colonizers were certain that the natives could not dream: this was evidence of the absence of an inner soul. Thus, recognition of the “internal division of the white subject,” she writes, “rendered blacks as matter undivided (this was also the essence of Herodotus’s perplexed observation that there are people in Africa who do not dream)” (163).

So lacking in interiority, the colonized body came to be administered as an undivided mass. (Recall: a *body* of convicts.) Punishment, especially in the form of hard labor, was explicitly directed at the *collective*, penal social body, Pieris reports, “[s]ince individual reform was considered unlikely due to the prisoners’ incapacity for interiorized self-discipline” (67). That collective, undivided, interior-less body ultimately made for a different sort of accounting problem. What the colonists had to confront was a

single body of bodies: no organs, no parts, no metaphysical soul—just bodies all the way down, bodies veiling more bodies, or, a body composed of introverted folds.

This was the trouble with the natives: their penchant for folding, matter upon matter. The propensity manifested even in the way they organized their dwelling spaces: in the Straits Settlements, “[t]he shophouses in the native towns were tube-like introverted spaces, between party walls. ... The need to accommodate outdoor habits within this indoor arrangement provoked the use of multiple courtyards organized in degrees from most public to private” (55). “Semipublic spaces, usually related to community space, had to be carved out inside the rectangular building mass as private, even secretive urban courtyards” (42–43). Thus, one spatial fold could be unfolded to reveal yet more folds. How on earth to govern?

Separately, Deleuze would valorize this, the fold, in his exegesis on Leibniz and the Baroque, where he writes:

Dividing endlessly, the parts of matter form little vortices in a maelstrom, and in these are found even more vortices, even smaller, and even more are spinning in the concave intervals of the whirls that touch one another.

Matter thus offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture *without emptiness*, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns. (1993, 5; my emphasis)

Now, while colonial architects of penal regimes likely did not share Deleuze’s affection for the fold, they like him were no doubt invigorated by the metaphysical puzzle that it posed. For facing them was the challenge, simply put, of ensuring that the colonized body—that body of bodies—bore its commensurate punishment through labor. A body without summable parts but instead infinite pleats of matter implicated a vastly different political economy, they found. For out of this virtually intensive, punished body came labor endlessly renewed and regenerated. The task at hand was how to devise the best way to capture it.

Fat Babies

This is the question that Foucault's history of punishment cannot help us answer, focused as his study is on the European criminal body. What precisely is that vastly different political economy, the one of the folded body? The most succinct and illuminating answer is, I think, to be found in Strathern's *Property, Substance and Effect*, where two contrasting Melanesian images of circulation are deployed, as heuristics, to great effect.

On the one hand we have the tragedy of the fat infant among the Etoro of Papua New Guinea. Before the baby draws its first breath its mother hastens to suffocate it. She does so for no other reason than the child presents in its over-stuffed body evidence of unethical accumulation. The fat child is a "witch-child": fat not because it is healthy, but because it has failed to dissipate the vitality of others, hoarding it for itself. "This," says Strathern, "is what witches did. And the witch-child reduplicate[s] the identity of its witch-parent(s), at once the outcome of excess and an embodiment of excess" (1999, 48). Children of this sort are unhealthy for others; they must be disposed of (45).

What we have here is an image that directly links circulation with the body. The image, shocking as it may be, is not far perhaps from the link I am interested to make between the need to keep labor circulating and the body that is bearer of that circulating labor.

The luckless Etoro mother faces a choice. She "[cannot] discount the evidence of witchcraft before her eyes. She could, however, refuse to be the creature's mother, that is, refuse to activate the relationship" (48). Perverse as it might seem, unethical accumulation is at least merciful enough to furnish an option for ethical action in response to it.

What had over-accumulated in the child's body was life-force (*hame*), and life-force, crucially, is regarded by the Etoro as "in finite supply" (48). For them body size is an image to be passed between persons. The diminishment of one body visibly corresponds to the enlargement of another. Among Etoro men, "the senior generation in effect besto[w] their bodies on the junior generation. Younger men absor[b] the life-force of older men in this way" (48). For them, it is possible therefore to keep meticulous accounts. By observing the size of bodies, men are able to track the passage of life-force in their relations with others (49).

Problems arise then when life-force lodges too much in any one body. As Strathern explains, to be healthy, life-force ha[s] to flow among willing recipients, as semen, as growth-inducing meat, or as valuable shells. “Witches, however, men and women alike, snatc[h] rather than receiv[e] and as a consequence [can] never get rid of what [has] accumulated inside” (49). That the Etoro are able to produce the image of a witch-child when circulation is poor is contingent entirely upon their ability to “see” transactions of life-force in terms of 1:1 cause and effect relations, directly evidenced by the relative size of givers’ and receivers’ bodies.

Now, by contrast, the Hagen, also of Papua New Guinea, produce no such image of unethical accumulation. For them circulation temporarily goes off-stage, and one’s capacity to transfer life-force *without diminution* is paramount. “For what [is] given away [are] images of that capacity in the form of detachable substance: the wealth one produce[s], not the power to produce it. That power remain[s] intact” (53). Fat, healthy bodies are thus evidence not just of a transaction successfully accomplished, but also material evidence of a giver’s “specific capacity for transfer itself” (52–53; emphasis removed). To quote Strathern:

In the foregrounding or separation of an outcome (wealth) from its origin (the donor), what drop[s] off, the discarded image of the donor in his glory, might also be thought of as being momentarily hidden from view. That is, the entities out of which others [are] brought forth become *backgrounded*. The cavity of the men’s house from which shell valuables [come] [is] closed up after the ceremony. It [is] because the detached element [comes] to *stand for the whole process*, and thus refer[s] to, encapsulate[s] or *exemplifie[s] its own origin*, that what had once been its origins [are] now parts located “elsewhere,” and thus concealed. (53–54; my emphasis)

The alternating ritual concealment and display of wealth is as such “an enactment of [the men’s] own continuing capacity for growth,” and it is the repetition of these transactions

that keep substance flowing (54). Something has to continually go offstage in order for life-force to circulate. Key here is the fact that Hagen transfers make direct accounting between giver and receiver impossible. A third element is here needed or introduced: the relation. Thus the transacting men reach for (and manifest) a meta-relation, the *capacity* to transfer, which lives incarnated in the body but which is not necessarily equivalent to the sum of the body's parts.

Engorged Land

Our borrowed Melanesian images lead us back to labor, the “life-force” most intimate to us under capitalism. In the circulation of labor, we might conclude, beginning at least from colonial times in the case of Singapore, we see that no image of unethical accumulation is possible so long as labor travels along its ceaseless circuit. The ambit of its movement prevents sighting of it. This is perhaps why the nameless European denizen of the settlement could proclaim with confidence that life proceeds without anywhere encountering the presence of convict labor: labor veils itself. It retreats into its folds.

That paradoxical aspect of labor-in-motion thus sets for us our analytical challenge. The challenge is how to elicit an image of its passage. How to create an appropriate stoppage in the flow of substance—a resting place, shall we say, or a point of arrestation that makes a congealment of dead labor trip over itself and release the specter of living labor. If labor tends always toward expunging itself from the “field of the visible” and if “the whole function of the field is to forbid any sighting” of labor per se, what might prompt a “metamorphosis in the gaze” such that we for a moment “identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text” (Althusser, 27–28)? Is it at all possible that labor might stand beside itself, living beside dead?

I can only conclude this chapter with an image of a failed attempt at this. The reclamation workers, whose story I now sketch, cannot in the end point to the land they fabricate as bodily evidence of their labor. The aesthetic conventions, in the final analysis, do not permit it.

Timing it Right

Four chairs had been arranged around the table. The caseworker pulled two aside by their backs: one for himself, the other to make room for legs. He addressed me first, contracting my name from three syllables to two.

There's a new case, Beverly. Maybe you'd be interested? A couple of reclamation workers came in while you were away. Something about poor working conditions.

He looked past me to see if the drink seller had his coffee order ready.

They're from Myanmar, he added, setting a few coins down.

Several months into working under him, I knew to wait. The caseworker angled himself away from either me or the other volunteer as he spoke. Beside me the Malaysian sat far back in his chair. He'd joined the labor helpdesk after I did and we quickly became friendly. But that day we were still new to each other, so, carefully he eyed my left profile for a reaction. He knew as well as I did that this was a taunt.

The caseworker continued:

The men are kept on board their vessels. They rarely dock and the company restricts their movements. I'm considering a trafficking angle.

The three of us had positioned ourselves at the edge of the coffeeshop, within reach still of the oscillating fan. There were four fans, I remember counting, mounted on pillars. If you bothered to take a second look, you'd see that each fan had over time acquired a coat of grime: a light crust on its blades and metal cage, and thickest on the impeller. The food offerings there were limited, but inexpensive.

The fans sweated as we did. Angled down, they sprayed aggressive air currents at the tops of our heads. Every day, after the lunch crowd dispersed, the fans took turns pushing around the wads of tissue paper, blotted with food debris, that were left tucked under bowls and plates. Dining there was impossible and yet we did so frequently. Over the whirl of motors every conversation, idle or solemn, required exertion. I took a shallow sip from my drink can and tried to bury my skepticism. Trafficking was a stretch, I thought.

Are you keen on the case?

Again I dithered and the caseworker muttered something about my research.

Pardon?

Not sure if this is part of your research, he raised his voice slightly.

Behind us a passenger car backed into a free lot and the old man driving it shouted his order to the drink seller from the road. Coffee! with evaporated milk!—and sugar! His speech traveled right through our persons. He took his coffee to go. The next table over, empty drinking cups wet with condensation were being wheedled by the wind into performing a skating routine.

One fan, two fans, ...

Sure, I offered finally.

The woman from the farthest stall walked our three plates of rice over to us. In November, six months hence, she would raise the price of her food by fifty cents.

The helpdesk's other fulltime caseworker positively yelled upon hearing it.

A twenty percent inflation!

Labor costs, the woman's husband later explained apologetically: I cook; she cleans and counts the money. They needed to hire a kitchenhand, the husband pleaded. To fill the gaps that age had begun leaving.

Sure, I offered again.

The caseworker hiked up his eyebrows, taking his cheeks with them. For only the first time since we sat down, he looked directly at me.

I'd be happy to talk to the workers, yes.

There.

Right there. I had taken the bait. And now I had to rescue myself:

But, of course, if you feel someone else would be more appropriate that's also fine by me.

(Too late?)

A chair stood between us, the one he had pulled aside to make room for legs. The caseworker tapped its plastic backrest absentmindedly.

Oh.

His “h” lingered. (Too late.)

Well, I might put you on it. (He paused to chew.) I’ll see. (We all chewed.) I’ll see—

The coffeeshop had become our near-daily lunch spot by default. Everything else was a too-far, armpit-wetting distance away. Like most others in the neighborhood, this one was built next to an intersection. One flank faced the main thoroughfare. The other faced a quieter lane, and that was where patrons preferred to sit.

To get to the coffeeshop from the helpdesk office, you had to negotiate the thoroughfare. And if you planned to cross it at its midline, rather than at its ends where the traffic lights were, your timing had to be impeccable. There were about six seconds of reprieve between the traffic travelling straight and the traffic merging right from a feeder street.

Once, as we did a walk-run across it, the caseworker wondered aloud if it was the climate that kept my face red or if it was just my natural complexion. The weather or the skin? He couldn’t decide. So he thought it best to inquire.

The space of the coffeeshop was a rectangle. It was open-aired and recessed. Its cement floor lay lower than the pavement that boxed the place in. Heavy awning extended diagonally from the building’s façade shading part of the walkway. One had to duck to enter. At full extension, like when it rained, the awning’s fringe nearly touched the ground. It left just enough height to sit but not to stand underneath. I found it kept the sun out but the heat from the stoves in. Thus a non-choice presented itself each afternoon: accept shelter and be cooked pink by the fires or sit outside where there was sun and maybe a passing breeze.

We rose to leave at half past one or a little after. The Malaysian tucked his chair back under the table. The plates we pushed into a heap at the center and left for the food seller to clear.

Coming to Shore

It was June by the time I next heard about the reclamation workers. Late one morning the caseworker rapped his knuckles on the glass window that separated us. I had been outside, on the phone and thawing my limbs. The air conditioning kept the office far too chilly. On the other hand, out there it was absolute soup: too humid to loiter. In time I had found a comfortable rhythm shuttling between the extremes. It took just a quick, few-minute defrost roughly every hour.

I peered in through the blue tint and finger smears. A hand beckoned me.

Hey, I have a job for you, the caseworker informed me.

A Burmese worker had an afternoon appointment at the Manpower Ministry building. I was to accompany him.

The worker introduced himself as Tin U. He was from Shan State, in the east of Myanmar, and he worked for the same marine company as did Kyaw and Lwin, the two men who had sought the helpdesk's assistance back in May. Tin U wore his torment and his rubber workman's boots to every engagement. He never swapped them for something less bulky, even on land. Privately he professed sympathy for the Shan State Army. His brother felt similarly. Both were imprisoned—Tin U first and then his brother—for participating in the Army's insurgent campaigns against the Burmese government.

My mother understands, he said simply. She was Shan, his father Bamar.

Besides lodging a complaint about salary arrears, Tin U had resolved to file a claim for an injury he had sustained at work. He'd already given a statement to the Ministry, the caseworker explained. A witness had done the same. Tin U needed now to collect an injury assessment form ahead of his medical examination scheduled for the middle of the month. The caseworker instructed me to tag along.

It was Kyaw and Lwin's firing that set this all off, I later learned. They'd been charged with drunkenness on board. In seeking redress, the two were not only contesting their dismissal; they were also demanding backpay for the long hours that went uncompensated: work done on public holidays, labor put in beyond the standard 44-hour workweek. Their case gave momentum to Tin U's. Another four hundred men, stationed on the company's vessels, were watching silently from the deck to see if they might make similar salary claims for themselves.

Tin U crewed a hopper barge, one of a fleet of about fifty vessels. He was an OS, an Ordinary Seaman, the lowest rank on deck, one below Able Seaman and two below Officer. He'd been hit in the right eye by a jet of saltwater. A high-pressured cleaning hose. The deckhands had been washing off the clay caked to the barge's inner walls when the hose slipped. That was last December. The force blew his spectacles off, he said. His helmet too. Gradually he started seeing waves, running vertically, wherever he looked.

In the evenings, I followed a number of the company's barges on my computer screen. I watched for where they dropped anchor for the night and for the paths of travel they traced. Vessel tracking apps could tell you a lot, and I would sometimes cycle out to spectate as the barges pulled close to the shore, laden in their holds with sand and aggregate.

The company declined to report Tin U's accident. He was instructed to take two days off to recover. But Tin U sought out a general practitioner anyway and secured a referral to the National Eye Center.

The receptionist in the lobby pointed us down the hallway.

Clinic F? Those elevators, third floor.

Third floor, Clinic F: Tin U and I and his burly Tamil supervisor would spend half a dozen slow mornings there getting his scans, tests, and injections administered. Tin U needed a jab to the eye every four to six weeks. Doctor's orders. Before every appointment, the caseworker had me nag the company to ensure that Tin U would indeed make it to shore.

In Clinic F they played American daytime television in the waiting area: Dr. Oz, Ellen, Judge Judy. Sometimes, if our appointments really dragged on, we caught a gameshow or two. One afternoon, Tin U asked how many babies I had. One, I said, and showed him a picture of my dog. He looked affronted at first, then showed me his three, zipping around in a waterlogged field. A lover was waiting for him at home. She had waited through his prison term and would wait still more while he earned a living abroad. He wanted to return, he said. But soon after his dispute with the company was settled for some undisclosed hush money, he took a job with a European transshipment firm.

Will you be getting married this year? I wrote him.

Not sure, he wrote back.

He would send a brief “hello” over text message every now and then from his new mobile home in the sea. The job took him to Malta, to Sorel City and Oshawa in Canada (“very cold,” he wrote), to England, France and, for a few days, Duluth, Minnesota. He rarely disembarked, though. Only the European crew on board could secure visas to do so. The others with less favorable nationalities took their repose on deck.

Tin U’s first appearance at the National Eye Center had been fruitless. The staff would not attend to him. Not without a letter from the company pledging to foot the bill. The caseworker had me write to the Ministry to bid them intervene. Remind them of their own laws! he coached. Twice the captain, on company orders, kept Tin U’s vessel from docking. So again we penned missives to the Ministry asking that he be given leave to come to shore.

The doctor had determined that Tin U’s fading vision had nothing to do with the accident. She had found no abrasion or scarring on the cornea.

A leaky blood vessel, she diagnosed. Probably congenital.

The lesion in his eye had already encroached on the middle vision. It was giving him headaches, dizziness, and night sweats. The injections would not totally ameliorate his condition, we learned, but they would at least stem the deterioration. The doctor seemed displeased that Tin U was, as she saw it, taking advantage of his employment in Singapore to obtain medical care.

The accident was a coincidence, she said.

Reluctantly she ordered bloodwork to rule out infection or inflammation. Tin U’s supervisor promptly refused. Not for a non-work injury, he said. So yet another appeal was sent to the Ministry asking that the company be reminded of their legal obligations. Employers had to provide for workers’ “upkeep” even in the absence of a work injury. In the meanwhile, as the request lay pending at the Ministry, the doctor had her own proposition to make. Why not Tin U return to Myanmar where he could get the same

treatment for less money? She knew of someone at Yangon General Hospital. He could get the injections there.

Quarter to two. We arrived on time at the Manpower Ministry building. Tin U was to meet with a representative of the Tripartite Alliance of Dispute Management.

An entity bearing such a grand name I think requires some explaining. See, the Alliance owed its existence to the most recent round of administrative reorganization: a creative exercise on the part of paper pushers. It had debuted earlier in the year, on April Fool's. Really it was just a rebrand of its predecessor, the Labour Court. That said, for all my cynicism, there was at least one thing about it to commend. The new name was (perhaps inadvertently) a little truer to life. "Court" had been a gross overstatement.

The new Alliance was an alliance among the Ministry, the national trades union, and the national federation for employers. It was an old alliance in fact: a product of early-independence era policies to keep the country "friendly" to foreign corporate investment. State-Union-Employer. Partners they were to be in pushing for quiet mediation over the nuisance of strikes and litigation. The alliance would tamp down on labor by making it "partner" to these shared, national interests. Notably, though, the trades union withheld much of its protections from migrant workers.

On our commute I jotted down Tin U's complaints. "Worker Issues," I titled the memo.

1. Not paid for overtime work for five and a half months; 18- to 20-hour workdays.
2. Wishes to withdraw his resignation letter, signed a month ago, and pursue a claim against his employer for his eye injury.
3. Fears for his safety: is verbally and physically threatened and prevented from attending his appointments on land.
4. Needs the Ministry's assistance to ensure that his vessel docks on the 12th for his eye exam. (He works and sleeps on the vessel.)
5. Today: needs to sign and submit his work injury claim forms.

After being shuffled from one end of the building to the other and back, a kindly woman greeted us in Room 2A. She glanced over the list of complaints.

Dear? she turned to me, a question in her voice. It seemed her custom to address everyone in that way. She pressed her palms together meaningfully.

Dear, you'll have to wait outside.

It took only a minute and a half before she sent Tin U running to fetch me.

Dear, how did you learn of these? She gestured to my list as I re-entered the room.

A translator, I replied. And Google Translate, I confessed. She too had struggled to communicate with Tin U in English.

She deliberated and I said nothing further. After a time she made her recommendation. Tin U should first attempt to withdraw his notice of resignation before filing a claim of salary arrears. The Tripartite Alliance would see him again on the 25th of the month.

The bureaucratic hoopla took us to half past five. When we finally hopped in a taxicab, I was dismayed when Tin U insisted that we detour to Peninsula Plaza, and not head right back to the office.

To meet Thiri! he said brightly.

Who?

You'll see.

Peninsula Plaza was a short jog from the National Archives where I spent the days that I didn't spend at the helpdesk giving myself motion sickness while scrolling through microfilm. Peninsula Plaza was the preferred gathering spot for Burmese migrants. Shop signs and the composition of wares testified to this.

Tin U and I ascended a stalled escalator in the central well of the building. It trembled and made a double CLACK! each time Tin U, ahead of me, pushed his weight onto the higher step. Upstairs, he led me to a corner joint where he greeted three men with big, familiar embraces. The one in red gestured to the others to stand.

To the office, he announced.

But Tin U slowed Red Shirt by the shoulder, telling him—I surmised—that we had yet to eat. Both of us smelled in our mouths of long-passed hunger.

The labor helpdesk retained a small outfit on one of the higher floors of Peninsula Plaza. It catered to the growing numbers of Burmese migrants seeking work in Singapore. There was another one in Lucky Plaza for the Filipinas. A lone woman manned this outpost. She had emigrated to Singapore years ago now, and her children, once small, were nearly done with their schooling in local institutions. She lent her resources and her English to any of her countrypersons seeking help in their labor disputes.

Why? I once ask her.

Did you know? she tut-tutted in reply, Another Burmese girl just killed herself. Domestic worker.

She scrolled through the dead woman's Facebook profile pictures, turning the screen now and then for me to see.

For the first four years of her marriage Thiri had difficulty conceiving a child. So she prayed to all the Chinese gods in as many temples in Singapore as she could manage. Soon enough she learned she was pregnant.

I think my children are actually Chinese, she chuckled. Reincarnated Chinese people. They do look Chinese, you know.

I had asked her if her children preferred Singapore to Myanmar, since she often spoke of settling back in her country of birth someday.

She sniffed at the question. What prevented her from returning was her husband, who resided there.

It's better this way, she said. Here I can have my life.

Tin U pushed a plate of rice toward me. Okra, beansprouts, tofu, and fish. He insisted he pay for it: a dollar forty. Earlier in the cab he would have none it when I tried to cover the fare.

Coconut water?

Yes, alright.

It came in a can and had pulp in it. We made polite conversation.

Siblings? None.

How old? 35.

He pantomimed needing to go somewhere. Off to the loo, I figured.

As I listened to a message from a call I'd earlier missed, I watched Red Shirt snap a few photos of Blue Shirt and a woman companion. The two posed in t-shirts screen printed with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's face on them. Three short tables were lined up to make one long one. Blue Shirt arranged on it stacks of folded garments and other cloth merchandise. He began saying something to me, then stopped himself mid-word.

Oh! You're not Burmese! he realized. Well, she'll be here soon, he offered.

He indicated with his nose toward the far end of the corridor, beyond my line of sight. A portly middle-aged woman ambled over. She had fine hair which she pulled back in a bun. Her name, as Tin U said, was Thiri, and she was the incurably cheeky, winking sort.

You know, she leaned in conspiratorially shortly after introducing herself, When I spoke on the phone with Tin U, I thought he was so young, maybe a teenager.

She checked to see that he had was not within earshot, then continued:

He addressed me using the terms that only children use with their elders. But look at him! All grown! Old enough to have children of his own!

This was their first time meeting too.

Labor, Frame by Frame

Kyaw and Lwin's case, as I said, presented a fairly straightforward case before the law. The tribunal quickly ascertained that they were not seafarers. But although now entitled to overtime pay in principle, proof of their actual workhours had, alas, been found wanting.

Livestream your workdays on Facebook! the caseworker had advised. Take photos of yourself *doing* the work. You know, get some of the other guys to hold the camera while you pose—and make sure the pictures have time stamps!

There were going to be obstacles to this, of course. Data plans, for one, were finite and probably insufficient for uploading large video files to social media. For another, being out on the water would almost certainly make for spotty internet connection. Still, the men agreed to try.

It was interesting, then, to see how those directives were later interpreted by the workers. After all, Kyaw and Lwin, both fired, had no way to return to their vessels for videos and photographs. So they leaned on the others—but mostly on Tin U, since he too had opened a case against their employer for unpaid overtime. Images of Tin U would stand in, they decided, for those of themselves which were now impossible to obtain.

Now, I must say, as I reviewed a few of the brief clips Tin U recorded, I was thoroughly baffled by his choice of what to shoot. I tried to guess at how he might have seen the contents in the frame as evidence of his working. Sometimes the compositions included glimpses of the landscape—but so brief were they, and generic, that I puzzled over how he might effectively use them in court to “locate” his labor. Other times, Tin U took pains to show the markings of his vessel: its call sign, its condition. He also made sure to repeat, verbally, the day it was, the time it was, and the fact that it was a public holiday (and therefore rightfully a day off)—but that he had been made to work nonetheless (although no footage was made of the working per se).

Most of those clips were just a few second long, although to that there is one notable exception, a clip which I think deserves comment for the absolutely bizarre scene that it captures unfolding.

In the grainy distance is the shore. Oversized black tires lay prominently just beyond the reach of the waves. The vessel from which Tin U records seems not too far away; and the camera doesn’t appear to bob with the waves, but that could be the effect of the camera’s image stabilizing technology. From the voices, it’s fair to assume that a small crowd has gathered on the side of the vessel and together those present watch the land.

Appearing from the right side of the frame, a man—“MISTER JO-NA-THAN!” they yell—jogs parallel to the waterline. He pumps his fists in the air as the men hoot at him. Is he exercising? MISTER JONATHAN! His bodily reactions suggest he is well-acquainted with the screaming crew. The camera tracks his path. Tin U, closest to the microphone, is most audible. He mutters in Burmese, alternating between that and bellowing the running fellow’s name. Later I learn from an acquaintance who speaks the

language that those mutterings are the vilest of curses. She seemed embarrassed to tell me that.

In any case, the scene continues. The man on the shore runs and runs, left to right and right to left in the frame—aimlessly, as far as I can tell, but the men onboard seem thrilled. What on earth am I watching? A bit of fun at Mister Jonathan’s expense? A glimpse maybe into what work onboard a hopper barge entails? I haven’t any answers, and no more commentary to add—except to report that the caseworker ultimately elected not to include any of Tin U’s videos as proof of work done overtime. Still, questions for me linger. What sort of witnessing was I unwittingly witnessing? What was the object being put on display in each of those short video clips?

The Right Value

In his critiques of political economists of his time, the later Marx (as he is called) designates as fallacy the view that one can in fact calculate the right remuneration for labor. Indeed, his analysis finds no perspective, no available vantage point from which to say, “too little” or “too much.” The accounting strategies of the Etoro, we might say, have no traction here. No easy ethical position avails itself. No straightforward image of the witch-child appears.

We might also say, as a shorthand, that the Etoro’s manner of accounting is consistent with the earlier, humanist Marx who saw labor as “greater than” what it produced. Life-force > body. In that view, that which labor makes is always “lesser than” the maker; and the ideology of the “right remuneration” comes from that idea that labor is “actually” so much more than what it makes. To put it in the Etoro idiom, the relation is based on cause and effect. It is a paired relation we speak of. Always there is a giver and a receiver. 1:1.

This pairing is, by contrast, precisely what Hagen forms of accounting and exchange would reject. Derrida in his writings on the gift reports that Polynesian societies have but one word or name for the giver and the receiver. The two are expressed as one, as it were, and those societies do not distinguish between giver (as cause) and receiver (as effect). The two are not a paired relation: they require a third. Thus we have the formula made famous by Mauss, for understanding the spirit of the gift: if A gives to B and B

gives to C, but A and C do not know each other, then the hau of the gift emerges when C gives something to A. That is when A experiences the hau of what was given to B, returning to him. That, we might conclude, is what goes “offstage” for the Hagen, namely, all that is irreducible to the pair. And on account of that which goes into hiding, it becomes altogether impossible to accuse any receiver of receiving “too much,” say, or “too little.”

In the end, humanistic political economy wishes to say that we can, if we are meticulous, arrive at last at the right rate at which to compensate labor. But the Hagen push us to see the limitations of that thinking. Instead, what which goes offstage permits us to see that value arises at the arbitrary points of touching between two differential series (here, labor and land). Two series, that is, without positive terms: no individuals as it were, just bodies made up of folds and folds and folds.

3

CUT AND DRIED

prefigured land

At First Face

Beginning in July of 1909, the colony’s English language newspapers covered in unusual detail the proceedings of a case brought by the Attorney General against one Haji Mohamed Tahar and seven or eight mostly unnamed others. Their collective crime, the papers tell us, was “wrongfully entering upon” a stretch of foreshore allegedly belonging to the Crown, southward of Telok Ayer basin, in the environs of the “immense eyesore” that was the Palmer godowns (ST July 27 and August 11). Among the accused were—

1. A “Chinaman”;
2. Miscellaneous Malays (“living in an amphibious way upon this foreshore,” whose forebearers were “probably, no doubt, ... pirates, but later ... peaceful fishermen”); and
3. An individual the papers referred to as “Adam” (a name which so tickled reporters that one felt compelled to enquire if they had perhaps chanced upon the very “first man to occupy this foreshore Eden” now under dispute) (ST July 27, 28, and 30).

In need of revenue, the colonial government had earlier moved to clear the defendants off the foreshore where their dwellings “of the usual temporary Malay character” stood (ST July 27 and SFP July 29). Built with local timber, topped with a vernacular thatch roof, and raised on stilts over water, the houses were to the court a picture of impermanence: prefabricated, readily dismantled, and (as was the claim) routinely relocated up- or down-country as their occupants so pleased (see e.g., *MLJ* 1953, 82–83).



Figure 3.1. “Beach at the Foot of Mount Palmer, Showing Chinese Digging Cockles.” G. R. Lambert & Co. c. 1880. National Archives of Singapore.

The principal defendant, Haji Mohamed Tahar, when put into the box testified that “the people who lived in that campong¹ (sic) ... were dock labourers and fishermen, and they paid rent to him, and to his father before him.” The grounds also served as a place for the fishermen to dry their nets, he said, though he “collected no rents for the privilege” (ST July 28). So long had Kampong Sambau stood on that stretch of foreshore that residents had seen the sea encroach substantially upon the land’s drier reaches, “at a rate of about 18 feet a year” (ST July 29). A retaining wall had once been put down (it took Haji Mohamed Tahar’s father a hundred or so *tongkang* loads of stone to get it

¹ Village or more accurately, as Imran bin Tajudeen has forcefully argued, urban ward (2007, 7–8). Also spelled kampong or kampung. The conflation of kampong with village, he writes, is deeply racialized, kampong houses being stereotyped as “rural” and “Malay” versus “urban” “Chinese” shophouses (2012).

done); and houses once located far out where the water presently flowed had had to retreat up the coast, the court heard (ST July 28 and 29; SFP July 29).

The reason for the defendants' ire, as the papers tell it, was not so much the prospect of their eviction, but the purpose to which the foreshore was to be put. "The government between the devil of the opium business and the deep sea of harbour improvements, had to consider everything as grist which came to their mill" (ST August 11). Thus the move to "reclaim" the foreshore from the defendants was so that it might lease the site to a Mr. Worrick—the one responsible for the Palmer eyesores, and who had subsequently, in a bid to further offend the eye, proposed to build a few more, to the benefit of the colonial coffers (ST July 27). With patronizing sympathy, the news articles plead the defendants' case:

Right under the shadow of the godowns was the kramat where the Mohammedan saint was buried, a quaint building which might have come out of the Arabian Nights. There was the little cemetery near by and the residents were very much attached to the place. If sent away they would have nowhere else to go. They were a fishing people and the court knew how much those who had lived by the sea became attached to that life. They would be most unhappy in the backlanes of Singapore.

It was not probable that Mr. Worrick would pay the government a very heavy rental. The defendants would not resist if the government needed the land for any great public improvement, but they did resist because they thought it so unjust that they should be expelled in order that the government might rent their land to Mr. Worrick, who already owned plenty of land around there. (ST August 11)

The defendants objected, moreover, to the Attorney General's characterization of their criminality. For they were no "common trespassers," they protested to the court. They and their predecessors had resided peaceably on that shore, having held those land "in continuous and undisturbed possession" for no less than 60 years—long enough, that is, by the standards of English law to claim adverse possession against the Crown. And

longer still, since their occupation of that shore, they avowed, pre-dated even the arrival of the Crown in 1819 on the brig of the Company vessel, the *Indiana* (ST July 30). A cross comparison of the Land Office's "time-worn and tattered plans" would confirm it, the defense insisted (ST July 28). It simply could not be that the Crown was the rightful possessor of this length of foreshore, which it now wished to "take back" from the residents of Kampong Sambau.

Alas the dispute ultimately rested not on the question of any ordinal count of who came before whom. The case rather set out to establish what we might call an *originary* count wherever the ownership of the foreshore was concerned—a count outside the progression of first, second, third... and marked, just like the proclamation of land, by a paradoxical "scission of time" (Ch. 1). To lay claim to that sur-face between the tides, the sovereign invokes an *Ur*-face: a synchronous, virtual First in aporetic relation with the otherwise diachronic unfolding of time. All that the tides alternately covered then uncovered in the course of a day would belong henceforth (which is to say anachronistically) to the Crown *prima facie*—"at first face" or "on first appearance."

From high to low water mark, all who occupied those amphibious lands would be presumed usurpers or trespassers unless evidence could be produced of an express grant once given—a requirement well-nigh impossible since ancient grants left little tangible record of themselves except, precisely, in the form of persons' ongoing occupation of the lands in question. Absence of proof was thus, perversely, proof of encroachment; present presence an indication of prior infringement rather than a vestige of some rightful past conveyance. "It had not been proved," the Attorney General maintained in his closing arguments, "that there had been any link of title between Inche Malacca [the original title holder] who died in 1849 and the other successors. If the law was that the succession of title had to be proved, then the case of the defendant undoubtedly failed" (SFP August 12).

"Probably," the *Singapore Free Press* conceded, "the Malays were there when the English first came to Singapore." The East India Company however "did not interfere with them as the land was not worth anything" (July 29). But "probable" or not, that history mattered little without evidence of title. As the Attorney General argued, there

needed to be proof of “possession by title *from the Crown*” and not merely “possession by a succession of individuals one after the other with a title common to them all” (ST July 27; my emphasis). Thus whereas the court would uphold the anachronistic logic of Crown ownership “at first face”—which, being literally “self-evident,” was sufficient to establish original possession as fact—it did find great fault with the retroactive logic cited by the defense, asserting, ironically, that chronology would not support those claims.

The July 29 publication stages for its readers the testy courtroom exchange. The defense, after much show and tell with old plans and maps, exhorts the presiding Justice to take a tour of the land in question, to see the houses extant and how far the sea had come inland. What would that prove! the prosecution retorts. Surely no amount of looking would reveal that there were indeed houses there sixty years ago. “Counsel [for the defense] suggested that if the houses were there in 1842, as shown by the Government map, they were there in 1819 [when the British arrived].” “—Or in 1519!” the prosecution interjects. By that logic, there would be no foreseeable limit to how far back the defendants could claim to have been present on the foreshore.

The burden of proof having been foisted on the defendants, the Crown would by its *prima facie* prerogative be always and unquestionably the foreshore’s “first” and rightful possessor, whether it arrived in 1819, 819, a thousand years Before Common Era, or Before even the Crown as it were. And as a consequence of that originary, aporetic “first,” each and every exercise of sovereign prerogative to the foreshore would come to be enacted in the idiom of a “re,” that is, as a re-taking, a return, or indeed a reclamation.

Eliciting Form

In a way the outcome of the case against Haji Mohamed Tahar et al. was a foregone conclusion. For the matter of *prima facie* had already been debated strenuously in the English courts several centuries prior with the Crown’s position prevailing since the time of the Stuarts. Still, because the reception of English law in the colonies was obliged to yield to “native custom” in select instances, its tenets were open to contestation and its application was not always an inevitability.

But, in any case, if we put aside how things panned out for Haji Mohamed Tahar and the others, to a lay reader such as myself, what draws the attention is what’s taken for

granted in the broader legal history of *prima facie* here implicated. And that is: why should Crown prerogative to the foreshore need to be construed as a retrieval or a recuperation? Would it not have been enough to simply *take* the foreshore the way the Crown—and today the postcolonial State—readily takes other forms of property (see for example the 1966 Land *Acquisition Act*)?

The question is a variation on the one earlier asked of Faust and his inconvenient desire to *reclaim* land where it not yet existed, from beneath the tidewaters (Ch. 1). It seems not incidental to me, this repeated pairing of the foreshore with a structure of recursivity; and it is difficult to be satisfied with the view that “reclamation” was merely inelegant rhetorical window dressing—a bid to legitimize illegitimate Crown claims. If the argument of false consciousness does not satisfy us elsewhere, why should it here? Mostly, I think, and with due respect to those in the legal field, we have been overly cynical in our explanations, even if there are good political reasons for that cynicism. Now, without this devolving into an apologia for Crown prerogative, I’d like to revisit the question of that notable pairing and ask: what is it about the foreshore specifically—that dynamic form at the confluence of land and sea—that invites the repeated invocation of the “re”?

My wager shall be that the foreshore in fact *necessitates* that it be “reclaimed”; do otherwise and it will not, as form, eventuate. What I mean to argue, in other words, is that reclamation is *the* aesthetic key to objectifying *viz.* activating the foreshore. The pairing is therefore not accidental (or cynical for that matter). Rather, reclamation is the particular technique required to produce the foreshore as such—to give it, as Strathern says, the “persuasiveness of form, the elicitation of a sense of appropriateness.” Here I say “aesthetics” because at stake is that which makes things appear as such (2004, 10 and *passim*).

So, what reclamation will point us to, I will try to show, are the relations out of which the foreshore is “cut”: the virtual ground out of which an actual figure is coaxed. Those relations, if I may get ahead of myself for just a moment, partake specifically of the economy of *the gift* whose “aesthetic trap,” again citing Strathern, is that of the “anticipated outcome.” “[H]ence the inevitability of enchainment: one can only make appear what already exists” (1988, 223). Reclaimed land, we shall find, is cut and dried—

and yet that peculiar economy does anything but foreclose “improvisation and invention” (ibid.). This will all, I hope, start to sound less opaque as we progress through the chapter.

Reclamation’s “re”

Though the court was little moved in 1909 when the defense proclaimed Crown “reclamation” an empty conceit, that argument has in our present times found an unmistakable echo (and significant discursive force) in a variety of contemporary critiques of state-led reclamation today. Common to those many, trenchant critiques—artistic, academic, literary, and filmic alike—is a crisp formula of reproof: there is in fact no “re” in reclamation. No matter the accepted terminology, “earth cannot,” as Joshua Comaroff argues, “be ‘reclaimed’ from the ocean² by the *magic* of sovereign right; it needs to be brought from *somewhere*” (2014; my emphasis). Thus a “de facto transfer of [foreign] territory” masquerades as domestic alchemy, abstracted from the filigree webwork of sellers and buyers who push land-as-sand incrementally, “by the boatload or by the handful” (ibid.), across the sovereign lines that partition the Sunda Shelf’s watery face.

For architects Lino Moser and Gabriela Schär, the point can be made diagrammatically. In their *Construction of Territory*, they rig a map of the country’s roughly five dozen islands, its coastal prostheses colored in with the flags of other Southeast Asian states whence infill for each new land parcel came (Figure 3.2). “A Global City Built on Foreign Sand,” the caption reads (2013, 44). The flag of Malaysia shrouds the mainland’s eastern flank. A sliver of the Philippines peeks out to the northeast. Indonesia is smeared across Tuas to the west, the villiform site of a new mega seaport. Its fingerlike projections maximize surface area the way the body’s membranous structures do: the more room for berthing vessels, the quicker the circulation of trade goods—including sand for reclaiming new land.

² At the risk of sounding pedantic, ocean is never reclaimed into land in Singapore; only “foreshore and sea-bed” are (Foreshores Act 1985). This distinction is crucial to the argument I am making as to the necessity, rather than falsity, of reclamation’s “re.” Only the right things, by the right conventions, may be reclaimed into land.

On the opposite end of the territory, bowing out into the Johor Strait which dissevers Singapore from Malaysia to the north, Myanmar rounds out Pulau Tekong, the military's dedicated playground. Cambodia meanwhile plumps up the Southern Islands, another playground, this time for the wealthy. West of that is the big yellow star of Vietnam, lain across Jurong Island, a blockish agglomeration of eleven or so smaller landforms and a special triumph of land reclamation for the state (Jurong Town Corporation 2000, 16 and 46). Today the island is a sizeable liver through which much of the world's petrochemicals pass for refinement (PK Koh 2019), a fact that sits at odds with the state's self-image as global leader in "green" development (Jesuthasan 2019; Mokhtar 2020; Tay et al. 2018). As a courtesy perhaps to the ones made vanished, a few of the districts of the completed Jurong Island retain the names of the old cays (Savage and Yeoh 2013, 195), offering a partial catalog, if you will, of those islandly phantom limbs.

Harsher assessments still have been made of these acts of re-clamation. A political "euphemism" Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has called it (2017, 168). A "fiction on two registers," decries Charmaine Chua (2018, 22–23). For to say "reclamation" is to supply a rhetorical alibi for "concomitant acts of extraction, erasure, and dispossession," she argues. To say "reclamation" is to misrecognize "appropriation" as a benign "act of restoration or return"—an alleged retrieval by "natural right" of "something that was once one's own" (ibid.). Per the "logic of reclamation," writes Chua, "a state deserves to procure or cultivate a site for habitation or commerce; few questions are asked about the sites from which material has been extracted, and therefore made increasingly uninhabitable" (23). Her analysis offers, then, a partial but useful emendation of Comaroff's:

In the rearrangement of borders and states, ostensibly "new" territory has *always* come from somewhere else. This is as true of terraformed land *as it is of its older precedents* of colonialism and military conquest. ... Often left unexamined ... is the question of what is removed or lost in these acts of sovereign making. It is easy to forget in the spectacular emergence of

“new” landmasses, that these very acts of movement and creation also require their shadowy, barely traceable other. (22; emphasis modified)

Thus it is on that effacement, she urges us to see, that our inquiries into reclamation must train its focus.

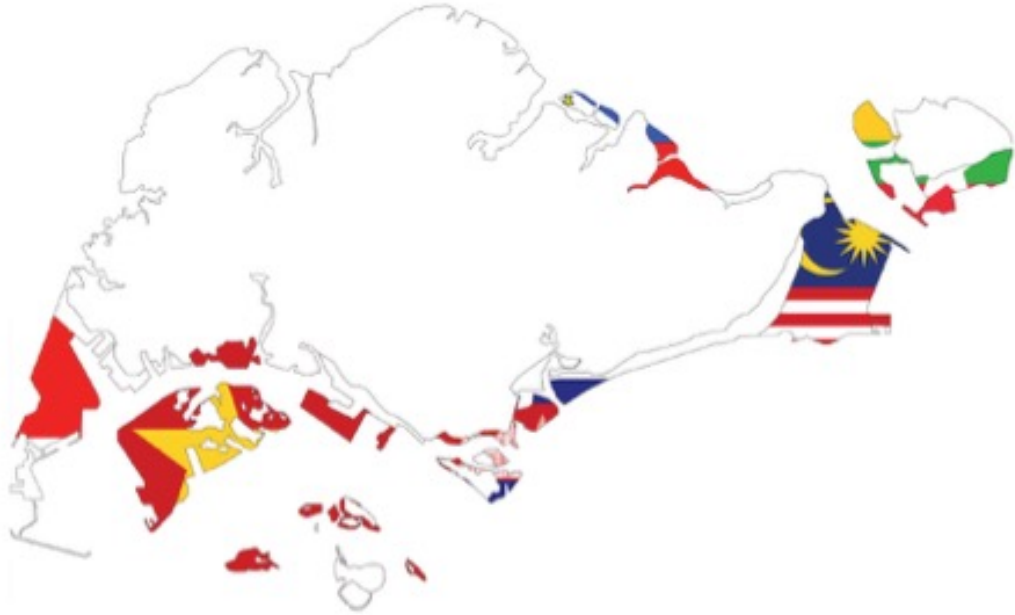


Figure 3.2. “A Global City Built on Foreign Soil.” Lino Moser and Gabriela Schär. 2013. *Construction of Territory*.

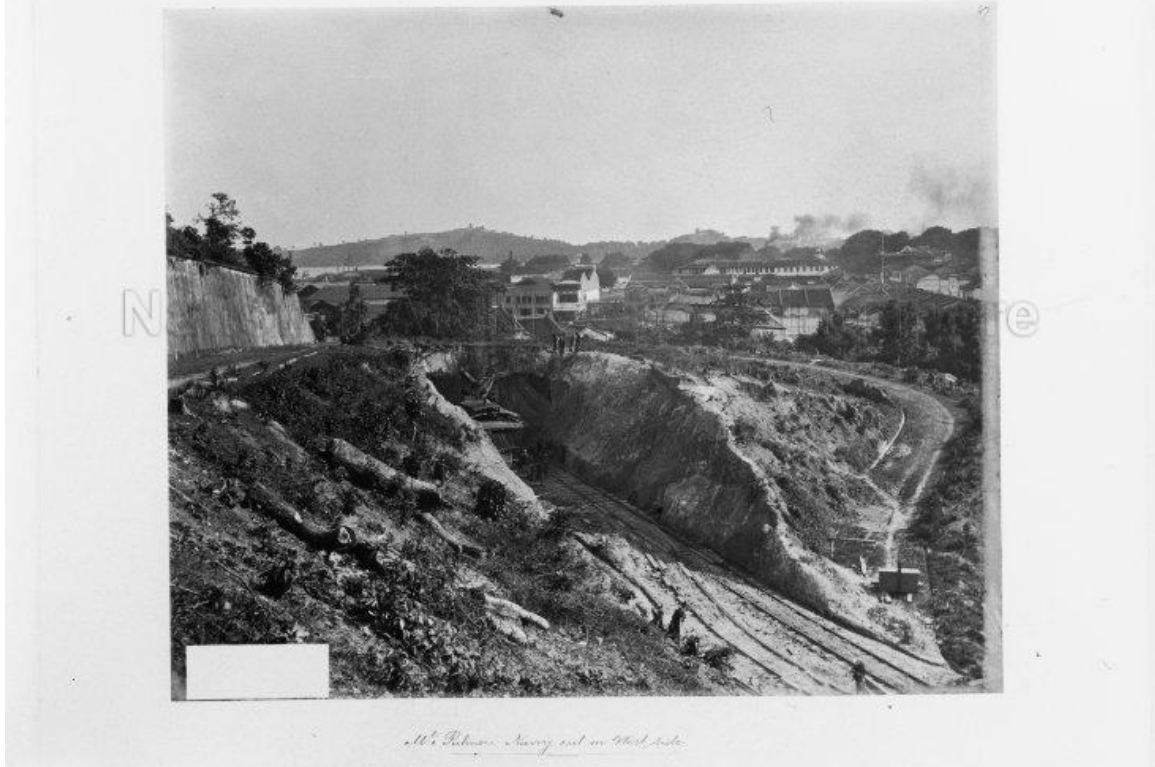


Figure 3.3. “Mount Palmer. Navy Cut on West Side. (Received with Resident Engineer’s Service Letter Dated 27 June 1912).” Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). n.d. National Archives of Singapore. The hill in whose vicinity the Palmer godowns and Kampong Sambau were located, shown here being cut down for use as reclamation fill material.

Indeed, Chua is not alone in calling attention to reclamation’s oft-invisible environmental and human toll. In a much-fêted film by Yeo Siew Hua (2018)³, the outsize phenomenon of reclamation finds intimate format in a sardonic exchange between two migrants who try to orient themselves on a land that is itself always migrating. The scene, equal parts cruel and tender, unfolds thusly:

“Doesn’t that mean, then,” the woman in the film ventures, pulling at the ends of her words, “that we’re no longer in Singapore?” She ponders the list of countries her companion says supplied the shore on which they now loll. Beside her, his chest still

³ See also *Lost World* (2019), directed by Kalyanee Mam. It follows Phalla Vy, a young Cambodian islander, whose community has been devastated by sand mining. She travels to Singapore to see its newly reclaimed territory, which was built from the substance of her village’s lands. “It is already enough to be removed from one’s land,” the director Mam says in an interview. “It is another thing entirely to have one’s land removed as well” (Buder 2019).

heaves from their clandestine swim in the night sea. From when she, seized with a sudden fury, kicked her heels against the tidal slurry and charged headlong towards the far horizon wreathed in light, hoping to board one—any, really—of the anonymous parked vessels and so flee her lot. She might have made it (and he might have not) had she not cast a final look upon the land she was forsaking, and been towed back to it by the sight of his drowning form.

“It’s from Malaysia,” he tells her. Indonesia and Vietnam, too: their sand makes up other stretches of the island state’s new coast. The construction company he worked for had lately, he’d heard, been using fill material acquired off-the-books from dredge sites in Cambodia. “From the black market, some say.”

That sand, poured in faster than the waves can remove it, curdles as it meets the astringent labor that is spilled into the mix. Beneath the littoral wash a new terra gathers, loose at first, and churning, until at last enormous mounds breach for air, yielding what the film calls “*A Land Imagined*”—or, as its Mandarin title “*幻土*” (*huan tu*) better suggests, a hallucinatory ground: not yet land but no longer sea, in Singapore but not of Singapore. The tactile surface of a phantasm.

“I heard,” the woman glances over at her beached companion, “this whole area used to be part of the sea.” She traces an oversized panel in the ground and presses a gully into its soft slope. “Looking at its map, Singapore’s southern coast is completely straight.” She drags the line, unbending, as far as her arm will go. “As if,” she says, “it had been drawn into being.”⁴

Like the sand, Wang too been brought from afar for the manufacture of this artificial new shore, one is an edgeless throng of imported labor that slept stacked in rattly dormitory bedframes on the fringes of the main island. And she (Mindy, she said she was), she was to him a coquettish mirage jeering at his delirium, keeper of the internet café where he fed his insomnia, a wormhole to the elsewhere-than-here—she as foreign to the land he daily built as he.

Aware now of the provenance of the sand on which she lays, Mindy chuckles at the absurd bit of holidaying she finds herself having unintentionally done. “So, in fact,

⁴ Translation modified.

we are lying in Malaysia!” She stops to enjoy her own observation. “In other words, I don’t need to get on a boat or a plane [to escape this place].” She jingles the keys to the company lorry they filched for the evening. “All I need are these!”

“Next time,” Wang volunteers with a laugh, “I’ll take you to see the other reclaimed areas—to see the world!”



Figure 3.4. Still from an untitled video by Mother Nature Cambodia (Facebook). Oct 8, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1124744394274976>.

Phantasmic Economy

The critiques I adumbrate above make the case that land reclamation drives an unethical and potentially unlawful *closed* economy of territorial “transfer.” That is, land exists first “somewhere” and likely belonging to someone—a rightful owner or user—before it is taken apart and “taken back” by another, elsewhere. There is, to embellish Comaroff’s words, no *creationary* magic of sovereign right.

In recent years, this line of argument has reaped considerable political dividends in the push for accountability. For example, against withering local and international criticism about its complicity in illegal dredging in Cambodia (**Figure 3.4**), the Singaporean state, typically reticent about its reclamation activities, found itself on the defensive and obliged to issue clarifications (however persuasive or evasive), due

probably in no small part to the public discourse these critiques have fostered (see YC Lim 2010 in response to Milton 2010, and the official reply to the Global Witness report, “Shifting Sand” (2010)).

Yet to perceive such a closed economy at work one must do an odd thing, namely, perform the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere”⁵: one must seemingly stand outside it. To hold both origin (of land) and destination in the same frame, the observer partakes perforce of a disavowed transcendent perspective, a point of view that purports access to a totalizing vista at once spatial (so one can see land’s transit from points A through Z) and temporal, across time. For all their alleged intractability, the dismantled parts of land-in-transit in effect come cut from “other whole cloths, larger pieces, [else]where” (Strathern 2004, 110)—from other nation-states, let’s say. Thus reclamation can consist of no creativity, since the newness of new land is never truly “made,” only “made up.” What is more, from this exalted perspective the observer can profess to be a thorough bookkeeper, able to say definitively which came from, or before, what—able to keep, that is, an ordinal count.

But there are problems to be sure with taking the object, land, as starting point and working our way backwards to retrace its displacements. Even as we deny any “magic of sovereign right” we give over to a magic of another kind. For the appearance that collapses origin and fulfilment is precisely, Morris reminds us, that of fetishism. And should we be persuaded by her “‘itinerary’ after Marx,” then

after *Capital*, the future history of the analysis of fetishism will be split between those who are themselves caught in the fiction without fantasy—and who thereby attempt to demystify fetishism by reducing it to empirically verifiable practices and/or deluded beliefs—and those who understand fetishism to be, precisely, *a relation to the phantasmic* (if not fantastic) space where knowledge loses its power to combat illusion. (2017, 203–04; my emphasis)

⁵ That is Donna Haraway’s expression, which she means as a spirited defense of eminently partial, not whole, perspectives (1988, 581).

I confess I myself hesitate at the starkness of this prophesy. For who, in this intellectual judgment day separation of goats from sheep, wishes not to be on the right side of this future history? Is it really a matter of volition—as if one might simply decide to refrain from demystification? We fools are ensnared in fetishism’s “fiction without fantasy” not out of ineptitude but because that itself is an effect (a “necessary effect,” Althusser would say) of fetishism. As such it is not thanks to some special acuity that some manage to feel their way out of that trap. It is rather that at particular historico-political junctures a judas hole arranges itself and so one glimpses—in the dislocation between one time and another, or between one text and another—that relation to the phantasmic which otherwise hides in plain sight.

Precisely this was Althusser’s point when he contrasted the two forms of reading present in Marx’s *Capital*, the first a “retrospective theoretical reading” and the second a “symptomal” one. The first reduces reading to a question of “vision” and because of that succeeds only in providing “a summary of concordances and discordances,” or “the balance of what [another text] discovered and what [it] missed.” But “[a]s for the omissions themselves, this reading does not provide reasons for them, since the observation of them destroys them” (2009, 19).

A symptomal reading, by contrast, has nothing to do with vision—at least not of the sort an individual might consciously exercise with greater or lesser care. In this practice of reading, “the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems.” The “field itself . . . *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines” (26; original emphasis).

Thus, Marx reads Adam Smith not from the vantage point of a “larger” or “fuller” field which might accommodate the both of them. The condition of possibility for seeing lies elsewhere: in between. Specifically, it lies in “the historical distance and theoretical dislocation (*décalage*) in which Marx thinks the theoretical difference that nevertheless separates him from Smith for ever” (19–20). It is that disjuncture which supplies the perspectival ground from which Marx then “sees” the lacunae in the seeming fullness of Smith’s text.

Forgive the long diversion. The reason I quoted Morris' "itinerary" in the first place was actually for its reminder that fetishism entails *a relation* to the phantasmic: not that it *is* the phantasmic (thing) but that it is itself a relation. In my attempt to respond to the repudiation of reclamation's "re," it is that double ontological status—at once thing and relation—that I am trying to keep in view. Indeed, where the critiques of reclamation earlier sketched falter is in their tendency to *begin* with the thing called "land," as though a given object. From there they proceed to break down the object's constituent parts and so demonstrate that reclamation's fantasy of creationary magic is merely added on: an ornamentation.

Henri Bergson would have called this "mechanism." By that he means that the thing studied (for him, biological life) appears manufactured incrementally, part by part, and therefore avails itself to reverse engineering through our analysis. Yet mechanistic theories fail to explain how incremental additions of quantitative parts result in a qualitative capability—a leap—that exceeds the sum of those parts, for example vision in the organ of the eye. Or, in our case, the phantasmic effects of reclamation. Bergson writes: "The eye is composed of distinct parts In each of these parts the detail is infinite. ... Yet vision is one simple fact. As soon as the eye opens, the visual act is effected. ... This contrast between the complexity of the organ and the unity of the function is what gives us pause" (1911, 88).

Bergson would have critiqued too the conceit of standing, as observer, outside the closed economy of the thing observed. Using the example of biological life, he argues that the "intellect" with which the scientist studies her object, evolutionary life, is already immanent to that very object. And that the observing scientist is herself a product of the very same "intellect" which drives the process of evolution under study. Her gaze is therefore already anticipated by and included within the object observed.

Within anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss gives us an early formulation of that immanent relation. He writes, "in a science in which the observer is of the same nature as his object of study, the observer himself is a part of his observation" (1987, 29; emphasis removed). For him, the social itself is a phantasmic thing imbued with a perspective. It is of the same nature as the anthropologist who studies it: at once "thing" and "representation" (*ibid.*).

If that is indeed the case, as Lévi-Strauss reasons, how then should we understand the “total” of the social, which, according to Marcel Mauss, is anthropology’s object par excellence? Or, putting the question in the language of the present study, how should we understand the “total fact” of land reclamation here at issue, what with all its ostensibly summable parts? I believe an answer to that might be obtained by revisiting, following Lévi-Strauss, the very basics of the economy of the gift, as first outlined by Mauss.

An Anthropology “To Dissolve Man”⁶

The object of Mauss’ study in *The Gift* is “exchange,” something he defines as the engine of society, and which enacts itself through the practice of gifting (Lévi-Strauss, 45). Specifically, what Mauss seeks to apprehend is the “property which forces the gifts to circulate, to be given and returned” (Mauss cited in Lévi-Strauss, 46). He identifies three indivisible components for observation. These are: “giving,” “receiving,” and “returning” (ibid.).

Immediately, however, Mauss’ taxonomy finds itself in grave danger. For, as Lévi-Strauss notes, there are acts of prestation in *The Gift* which do not neatly conform to any one of those three discrete categories. For instance, when an act of prestation has no “counterpart” or when, as Mauss’ informants report, the “first prestation” is also called a “compensation.” In other words, when an *inaugurating* gift is represented as a “return” gift (40–41). Collapsed there are two of the categories which Mauss wishes to keep separate, giving and returning. Another troublesome example which Lévi-Strauss cites from Mauss’s own text is those societies which “have only one word to designate buying and selling, lending and borrowing”; where “antithetical operations are expressed by the same word” (49).

In Lévi-Strauss’ estimation, Mauss was bound to overlook those niggling examples because his three elemental categories were in fact “functions,” meaning, they were acts carried out by discrete individuals and hence could be empirically observable as phenomenal “facts” (42). The one able to conduct that empirical observation, moreover, would always be an objective third party to the exchange, standing outside of the economy of the gift under observation.

⁶ Lévi-Strauss’ expression, from *The Savage Mind* (1966, 247).

That being the case, Lévi-Strauss concludes, the “total” of the social becomes (as it must) for Mauss but the quantifiable sum of operational terms, the adding up of individual acts of prestation. Whereas Mauss set out to investigate the nature of social *relations*, what he ends up with are only discrete, quantifiable *terms*, the former being no more than the sum of the latter (my words). And, not unlike some of the critiques of reclamation’s “re” sketched above, Mauss then proceeds to draw from his study moral lessons about what would then make for an ideal economy (Mauss 1990, Ch. 4).

Among ontology-oriented anthropologists, who take much of their inspiration from Lévi-Strauss, Mauss’ axiom—that relations consist of summable terms—is a regrettable hallmark of humanistic or human-centric thinking. For them, the term is not merely an ingredient for the relation, but rather is immediately, in itself, a term-relation. Or, to use Lévi-Strauss’ earlier expression, the term is at once a thing-representation or a thing-perspective. Hence a relation between two persons is not a one-dimensional unit but in fact made up of two “relatings,” from two different points of view. Thus is the Father “not a noun that refers to an essence or action; it is a noun that indicates the father’s manner of being in relation to the son and the son’s in relation to the father” (Mondzain 2005, 79). Alternatively, if we are not fond of Christological metaphors, we might instead say, as the Melanesians do, that “a mother is held to ‘grow’ a child because the child, so to speak, also ‘grows’ her” (Strathern 1988, 179).

Not incidentally, it is this type of *unmediated* exchange *viz.* growth between mother and child that Strathern says Mauss’ description of the gift economy fails to recognize, since exchange of this sort “produces the semantic paradox of there being gift exchange without a gift” (*ibid.*). His description, she explains, accounts only for mediated exchange, where persons detach “parts” of themselves—parts we recognize as gifts—then transfer those to each other. Yet, both modes of exchange, mediated and unmediated, “are created within the frame of a single conceptual system” and so must be understood accordingly. That Mauss omits half of this equation is the critical flaw in his classical rendering of the gift economy.

How does all this alter our response to Mauss’ opening query, about the fundamental operator of the social? We see that Lévi-Strauss proposed understanding of relationality, which takes it to be immanent to the very ontology of terms, allows us a

very different answer than the one Mauss ventured. The counterexample upon which Lévi-Strauss builds his critique of Mauss is crucial here, and that is the paradoxical case of the first prestation being called “compensation,” or, a prestation without its counterpart. For Lévi-Strauss, this “first” which comes before all other named firsts is something that can only be inferred, never experienced or observed empirically. The bottom to the social thus falls out. What we have is only a groundless re-lating or a re-claiming without originary terms. Now, the name which Lévi-Strauss gives to that groundless ground is, of course, “structure”—that which, in de Saussure’s words, consists only of “differences without positive terms.”

So, if we accept that Lévi-Strauss is right, that the total is not a sum, and that the first is not an experienceable first, how should we understand the ungrounded ground that makes possible land reclamation in Singapore? Of what does *its* “re” consist? Let us take a very, very selective look now at the history of the foreshore, reading it closely for the precise technique with which the Crown claimed its aporetic “first” or “groundless ground,” thus supplying the basis for its exercise of sovereign prerogative.

What will immediately become clear is the centrality of magic, if not so much the role of the phantasmic. For, to effectively objectify the foreshore, that is, to give it form and (re)turn it into land, two sets of stars needed historically to be brought into alignment. The first: the celestial bodies whose exertions determine the spread of the tides; and the second: the stars that adorned the high ceiling of the chamber in which the sovereign pronounced his “taking back” of the foreshore.

A Return to Form: Stellar Technique

Where Earth passes beneath the moon’s near face its tidewaters bulge, tugged toward the lunar orb by gravitational attraction. At its opposite extreme, meanwhile, on Earth’s far side, inertia gathers a second bulge. There, away from the draw of the moon, the waters bow out instead with centrifugal force, their ponderous bodies trailing behind as the planet whips around on its axis. The tidal bulges keep their alignment with the circling moon, and it is Earth that spins under those swollen pockets. Thus the contents of oceanic

basins rhythmically distend then sag as they veer toward then away from the lunar pull or antipodal to it, so generating the high and low tides we observe.

Other celestial bodies too exert themselves (if a little less energetically) on Earth's waters. Interplaying with lunar forces are solar and atmospheric ones, as well as those of anonymous masses which once knocked Earth off balance to its present axial tilt. Plate tectonics also have a hand in determining the magnitude of Earth's tides. Their agitations reshape and resize oceanic basins, which in turn alter patterns of coastal erosion and accretion, so dictating just how far up or down the coast the waters run. Materially, then, the intertidal zone is best understood in relational terms and not as a thing. Really it is but the effect of the confluence of those so many geophysical forces.

The fact of that dynamism necessarily complicates the ability to say where precisely land ends and sea begins, because on any given day—within any given day, even—those boundary posts are on the move. Twice in a twenty-four-hour cycle, the sea's edges heave themselves up the coastal slopes before beating a retreat to their troughs, whereupon they tuck their heads against the seafloor readying for the somersault that sets them off once more on their landward climb. The oscillating waterline dragged by that ebb and flow alternately conceals then uncovers a contested surface to which English common law, and Roman law before that, gave the name foreshore.

Less a spatial interval *in which* fishing or navigation may be enjoyed, or wrecking rights exercised, or new land made, the foreshore is rather a capacity: *that which* the right persons by the right conventions might activate so as to retrieve—we might say reclaim—a harvest of fish, a path of travel, a castoff bounty from a luckless ship, or perhaps most dramatically a mass of land.

The literal wording of Singapore's 1966 Foreshores Act makes the point clear. Tellingly, the statute contains no positive definition of the foreshore; instead we find only a recursive rendering. In the Act's Interpretation section, where terms are defined for the purposes of the statute, there exists no description, much less a definition, of what the "foreshore" might entail.

This is in contrast to, say, New Zealand's explicit delineation of the "foreshore and seabed" as "the marine area that is bounded, (i) on the landward side by the line of mean high water springs; and (ii) on the seaward side, by the outer limits of the territorial

sea” (Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004 §5). Or Australia’s 1973 Seas and Submerged Lands Act, which similarly makes reference to geophysical markers, defining a “low-tide elevation” as “a naturally formed area of land which is surrounded by and above water at low tide but submerged at high tide” (Article 13). Or Hong Kong’s definition of the “foreshore and sea-bed” as “the shore and bed of the sea and of any tidal water within Hong Kong, below the line of the high water mark” (Foreshore and Sea-bed (Reclamations) Ordinance 1985).

The lack of comparable geomorphological references in Singapore’s Foreshores Act thus obliges us to seek a definition internal to the statute. In the absence of a positive, extralegal ground that might serve as anchor, the foreshore becomes only *that which* the Government, subject to approval by Parliament, may reclaim into new land (§4(2)). And, once reclaimed, the transmuted foreshore becomes subsequently only *that which* may be proclaimed by the President to be State land and thus State territory (§5(1)). What we encounter, in short, is an unyielding recursivity: an ungrounded ground.

A Second Set of Stars

On the first of December 1641, a year into the sitting of England’s infamous Long Parliament, when the House of Commons issued its Grand Remonstrance against King Charles I upbraiding him for “the taking away of men’s rights under the colour of the King’s title to land between high and low water marks” (Moore 1888, xl)—already it was too late.

Already twenty five years earlier, in 1616, two sets of stellar constellations had become permanently enfolded: one, the heavenly order that underwrote the Crown’s divinely ordained rights of prerogative; and two, the astral bodies that dictated the extent of the foreshore, from its lowest ebb to its highest flow. Already by the time of Charles I, the first of those two orders would have been made the basis on which to lay exclusive claim to the effects of the second, thus cementing the Crown’s unimpeachable and exclusive right to the foreshore.

For that, Charles I had his predecessor to thank. For in the year 1616, twenty days into the month of June, James I had stood in the Court of Star Chamber at Westminster Hall, beneath its gilded canopy, and revived the doctrine of the divine right of kings from

which would flow the Crown's absolute prerogative to take *back* all the kingdom's foreshores and salt marshes as its own.

To his courtly address, he appended as epigraph one of the hymns of Solomon. "Give thy Judgments to the King, O God, and thy Righteousness to the King's son." As long as the sun and moon endureth, so would the righteousness of the King, he recited. A later verse in the Psalm, verse eight, however, James I chose to reserve: "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." But poetically foretold, as it were, in that Song of Solomon was the meeting of the two consequential sets of stars—a meeting whose reverberations we still feel today.

To the assembled judges in the Star Chamber, James I spoke plainly:

Encroach not upon the Prerogative or mystery of the State. ... That which concerns the mystery of the King's power, is not lawful to be disputed; for that is to ... take away the mystical reverence, that belongs unto them that sit in the Throne of God.

The absolute prerogative of the Crown, he admonished, "is no subject for the tongue of a Lawyer, nor is [it] lawful to be disputed."

... As it is atheism and blasphemy to dispute what God can do: good Christians content themselves with his will revealed in his word. So, it is presumption and high contempt in a Subject, to dispute what a King can do, or say that a King cannot do this, or that; but rest in that which is the King's revealed will in his Law. (1616, 332–33)

Now, even Christ, the Son of God, would not countenance to do as James I claimed to, and sit *in* the throne of God; the Christ was content to sit only on the Father's left (Monateri 2018, 94). But here it is significant perhaps that James I chose *this* occasion—the one in which he placed his bottom firmly *on* that divine seat—to "speak in this place," the Star Chamber, "where [his] Predecessors ha[d] often sitten" (James I, 328). He made sure to note the occasion explicitly in his address. Fourteen years, he reminded

his audience, had he abstained from ceremony beneath the Chamber's starry sky since his Coronation. This abstinence he practiced despite his "loving subjects' ... great expectation, and as it were ... longing, like them that are with child" for him to issue his will from within these halls (ibid.).

Reading this history long after its having taken place, one wonders: what *is* the significance of that choice? Why the need to pronounce the extent of Crown prerogative from this particular place, in the witness of the heavenly constellations? For James I, who was in the business of reviving the *prima facie* doctrine that was to later justify his seizure of the foreshore, why was one set of stars (the ones whose push and pull demarcated the reach of Crown property) not sufficient without the other, the ones inscribed in paint and wood within the Chamber?

The Uselessness of Stars

Foucault's 1979–80 lectures, compiled under the title, *On the Government of the Living*, open with an account of another, older chamber of stars, the gilded hall of the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus who ruled in the second century CE. In his palace was built

a large ceremonial hall where he granted audience, delivered his judgments, and dispensed justice. On the ceiling of this hall, Septimius Severus had a representation of the star-studded sky painted, which did not represent just any sky, or any stars in no matter what position. What was exactly represented was the sky of his birth; the conjunction of the stars that presided over his birth and so over his destiny. (2014, 1–2)

The purpose, according to Foucault was so Severus might "inscrib[e] his particular and conjunctural judgments within the system of the world and ... sho[w] how the *logos* that presided over this order of the world, and over his birth, was the same *logos* that organized, founded, and justified his judgments" (2).

Issuing his will from beneath those stars, he would therefore demonstrate the continuity between the two orders, one heavenly and one earthly, the one the foundation of and hence alibi for the other. In Foucault's telling, Severus "wanted men to read in

truth what he did in terms of power in politics” (4). He “[sought] to found in the heavens of a magical-religious necessity a sovereignty that the law, which was just as magical and religious, moreover, could not recognize in him.” For Severus was not born of noble birth. He needed to show that “it was not an error that he, the roughneck . . . , had seized power by force and violence, that it was not by chance . . . , but that he had been called to the position he occupied by the very necessity of the world” (2).

For Foucault, the significance of the story of Severus is this: it shows us that any exercise of power must always be accompanied by a “manifestation of truth,” specifically, a *ritual* manifestation which Foucault terms “alethurgy” (4, 6 and 7)—that will be the recurring theme of his 1979–1980 lectures. That manifestation, he says, is never simply utilitarian. Rather it implicates a “somewhat luxurious, supplementary, excessive, useless truth” (5). “After all,” he says, “what immediate, rational need could Septimius Severus have for those stars that he had represented over his head and the heads of those to whom he dispensed justice?” (ibid.).

Foucault’s framing here is provocative, and good for us to think with. Indeed, the question of how to understand the avowedly uneconomic economy of the chamber of stars is one that is pertinent to the history of the foreshore. But while Foucault *wishes* to argue for luxurious excess and inutility, a competing tension manages to cut right through his analysis: in the end he defaults to a disappointingly stale, precisely utilitarian argument, namely, that the stars were in order to give legitimacy to an otherwise illegitimate rule. Abruptly then we are returned to the realm of demystification. And where reclamation is concerned, we find we are again having to affirm that there is no “re” in reclamation.

But is not another reading possible? Is there not a way to read the appeal to the stars on the chamber’s ceiling as a *necessary* (not merely instrumental) aesthetic technique—a technique that makes things appear as such, and that does the work of eliciting form? By necessary I do not mean to imply a proportionate relation between means and ends. I mean rather that the institution of one’s rule *requires* that technique of manifestation, as in ritual. Below I try my hand at this other reading.

A Given Archive of the Law

It is surprising that Foucault does not differentiate between the star-studded sky housed in Severus' hall and the natural, open sky to which the former ostensibly refers. He overlooks the crucial detail of the chamber: the sky at issue is one cloistered and reproduced in an interior. This inside/outside difference seems important to understanding how exactly Severus devises to transfigure his power—from the arbitrary sort that a brute “redneck” might exercise—to the lawful judgments of one whose reign is sanctioned by a logocentric authority.

This is a delicate task: that of *giving* oneself an authority which is lawful—lawful not simply because an emperor wields it—but because it is *given* by the order of the world itself. This “given” has at least two senses. One, the sense of being in agreement with and bestowed by the order of the world. And two, the sense of being ready-made and so able to be dispensed in whole. Severus' delicate maneuver requires him to mobilize both those aspects—a requirement that owes, in the first place, to the inherent ambiguity in the idea of “legitimation by a logos.” For is that a symbolic or a substantive legitimation? Is it by the fact of the sign—which refers to something other than itself—or by consubstantiality? Is it, in other words, by formal resemblance or by a material one?

Foucault does not address this ambiguity. For him, as far as “logos” is concerned, the legitimation sought cannot but be a symbolic process. But one suspects that Severus' self-serving, circular act of shoring up his legitimacy—precisely because it is self-serving and circular—is a more challenging operation than Foucault allows. It needs to be *staged*. On the ground, one might say. It needs to be correctly and “substantively” presented in order to give it, as Strathern says, the “persuasiveness of form, the elicitation of a sense of appropriateness” (2004, 10).

An abstract form simply will not do for Severus. For abstractness is how the law wants itself to be seen; yet that is not how its effect is engineered. Here I am thinking of the law as *nomos* in the Greco-Roman tradition, which in turn derives from the Greek *nomō*, meaning “to divide, to attribute parts” (Agamben 2005, 47). The law appears abstract because it presents itself as but the instituting of divisions and separations—without contents, as it were.

But the law also wants to be, or engineers itself to become, the *first* content before all others contents, so to speak, thereby turning “found” content into only that which infringes upon its own (recall the case of the trespassers, Haji Mohamed Tahar et al.). This feat of engineering is nothing short of miraculous. For how *does* one in fact give form to the logos of the world whilst contending at the same time with the vagaries that very same world? Such is the challenge that confronts every instantiation of the law; and should it fail, the law risks its own debasement to mere rule by means of exception.

Staging becomes all important here. The question for the law remains: how does one domesticate the sky without into a sky within, without diminishment, thus ensuring the latter’s substantive existence? What sort of technique would one need?

One answer to that might be: a technique of archiving, of the kind that Derrida describes. For what archiving strives to achieve is a housing within of the “order of the world” without. The archive aspires to give form or a substantive place to this “logos”—it builds a chamber for it. Derrida’s preoccupation, then, is how the archive transfigures the authority of logos into the authority which is behind the “force of law.” There he identifies a technique of sorts, one useful for our consideration. “The meaning of ‘archive,’” writes Derrida, “comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile ... the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded” (1996, 2). Legal authority congeals at this “privileged *topology*,” he says, where there intersect “law and singularity ... the topological and the nomological ... of the substrate and the authority ... visible and invisible” (3). This privileged place of “topo-nomology” is where, to return to the ambiguity which Foucault overlooks above, the symbolic or formal legitimization of power and that by consubstantiality become indistinguishable.

Derrida asks the question which Foucault forgets to, namely, what happens there exactly, in this privileged place of “topo-nomology”? What sort of engineering must have successfully come to pass? His answer is: in every “domiciliation,” the house “*conceals*.” And in concealing, something becomes deliberately unavailable—as opposed to ever-accessible, under, say, an open sky. A non-existent signified gets retroactively installed within the chamber as an effect of that concealing. Needless to say, this non-existent

signified, because it is non-existent in the first place, can never be claimed; it can only be *reclaimed*, even in the very first instance.

Our lesson from Derrida's meditation on the archive is this: no order of the world is inherently lawful. For it to become so, it has to be substantively placed—cloistered—in a chamber of topo-nomology. Only then can it become law's authority and force.

The same can be put in a Strathernian idiom. To wit: an order of the world as big as the open sky lacks the appropriateness of form. No power may be gained from a purely symbolic or formal elicitation of that world's order. To have power's "form" appear, a cut must be introduced, interrupting the continuity between the open sky and the sky one secrets away into the chamber. As for what appears on the surface of that cut, it will always be of a dual nature: a thing-relation, at once symbolic and substantive.

From Foreshore to Land

It is time, I think, to step out of the foreshore (prolonged wetness causes rot) and to conclude the chapter by stepping onto dry land. In the pages that remain, I would like to consider the specific character of the land into which the foreshore is reclaimed. Again this requires a dip into history, but mercifully this will be the very final roll backwards which we will have to take.

The common law on land and realty in Singapore proceeds from the Latin principle *superficies solo cedit* or surface yields to ground. By that principle, whatever attaches to land becomes "part and parcel of" that land or *quicquid plantatur solo, solo cedit*. Buildings therefore merge with the land on which they stand. As do fixtures—footpaths, chimney caps, machinery, trees—be they joined to the land directly or fastened in a supplementary fashion to buildings which have themselves ceded to land.

This basic tenet of land law narrowly expresses a broader concept of relationality to which the Romans gave the name *accessio*: where two objects are in relation with one another, a determination must be made as to which is the minor and which the major. Always the minor accedes to the major, relinquishing its identity as a separate thing; and he who owns the major will by extension own the minor as well (Tan et al. 2009, 27). The concept applies equally to situations where the minor is "produced by" the major, as

when a bovine mother births a calf, and to those where the minor is “added on” to the major, as when a riverbank is augmented by fluvial sediment or when a body acquires a prosthetic limb.

How to determine which is the minor (figure) and which the major (ground)? One begins with the relation and works backwards to the objects. Mostly the “freight of ‘quantity’” does that work for us: amidst the scalar asymmetry which quantity introduces, “[g]round acquires the value of an unmarked category. So when the greater (unmarked) value can be expressed in terms of an *appropriateness of quantity*—neither too much nor too little—then *that* is what locates the entity in question as ground. An excess, in either direction, becomes a (suitably grotesque) figure against the ground (the natural world) of appropriate and reasonable description” (Strathern 2002, 93).

Notably, in *accessio*’s application to land and realty, no question arises as to the nature of the “ground” to which “surface” objects yield or do not yield. This is because land, according to Tan et al., presents a “somewhat simplified” case of *accessio*, “since the chattel will always be the minor thing compared to the land” (2009, 27). Land reclamation, however, puts a challenge to the law’s long-held certainty that land reliably functions as the major ground vis-à-vis minor surface attachments. After all, in reclamation land is literally being disassembled into its minor component parts, towed to distant fill sites, and reassembled into new configurations. Land becomes moveable, partible, parted and parceled—a logical impossibility for land-as-ground which, by the law’s reasoning, is static and constitutively indivisible into chattel. Something thoroughly implausible therefore seems to take place in the course of the reclamation process: land converts from major to minor and then back again, creating temporary disturbances to the internal coherence of the law.

This “unprecedented liquidity” which land acquires through reclamation has a material basis, Joshua Comaroff explains.

The malleability of sand makes it a uniquely volatile substance. Its softness and scalability distinguish it from other modes of infrastructure. ... [S]and is a medium by which massive environmental [and territorial] change can be effected via incremental processes. It is

granular—neither liquid nor solid—which means that it can be transported by the boatload or by the handful. In large quantities, it can be engineered into the most fundamental of all infrastructures: land itself.⁷ (2014, para. 3)

Now, where the priority in land law has overwhelmingly been to delineate the minor thing, mine here is to do the same for the unproblematized major thing, namely, the *solum* or bottom, base, foundation, bed, or sole (of the foot), as the term variously connotes. My interest is in that ground which grounds itself, or that which is its own ground and so purports to yield to nothing else. What work goes into to fixing land as the ultimate anchor, the implied universal base against which all other major-minor relations can be given expression? I offer here the rudiments of a case study, culled from legal history, which might serve as a heuristic for drawing out the law’s implicit assumptions regarding land-as-ground. The case study concerns movable ground, in the form of Malay stilt houses, a vexing “native custom” which English law found itself having to accommodate.

The Invention of Convention

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the common law courts of British Malaya were wrestling with the widespread violation of a legal precept held otherwise sacrosanct in English property law, namely, that buildings were “part and parcel” of the land on which they stood and, being themselves “land,” those buildings were therefore immovable property. The Malays however had a penchant for packing up their stilt houses and relocating them up or down country as need dictated. The practice compelled a legal response, as the disputes it precipitated found their way into the courtrooms with some frequency. Itinerant land, moreover, imperiled the colonial project of value-making, as we saw in Ch. 1, and that simply would not do.

⁷ Political scientist Charmaine Chua makes this same argument using her preferred set of imagery: “Sand may seem a fairly innocuous particulate in its granular form but this granularity is precisely what makes sand a valuable medium. Both liquid and solid, sand possesses a softness and scalability that allows its easy transportation across great distances, whether moved by truckload, bargeload, or spadeful. . . . [W]hen sand is terraformed in enough quantity, [it turns] into the most foundational infrastructural form: land” (2018, 21).

The mobility of Malay “land” was a matter of “local custom,” the courts decided. It would therefore be duly accommodated, one case at a time. The provisions of the 1807 and 1826 Charters of Justice, by which English law was transmitted to the colony, explicitly tempered the application of its principles where local legislation or practices to the contrary existed (Tan et al., 4). Thus it was not the job of the keepers of English law to override those customs, only to arbitrate when troubles arose. But what was the custom to be accommodated, exactly? The apparent inconsistencies in the local *adat*⁸—its tenets as well as its application—irritated the learned English judges who were tasked with deciphering the *adat*’s “truth.” It was a truth, they came to suspect, that was opaque even to *adat*’s closest adherents.

As a number of contributors to the annals of Malayan law journals complained, the *lembagas* or tribal chiefs, the presumed authorities on *adat*, when summoned to testify before the courts regularly gave conflicting testimony, cultivating “an atmosphere of ignorance and perjury” (Taylor 1929, 4). In the case of *Miah v. Safar*, for example, three witnesses called by the same party offered three opposing views on the fate of a disputed property, much to the confoundment of the court (reported as Land Case 21/12 in Taylor, 3). It should go to the husband, said one. It goes to the children, said another. No, it is divided, said the third (ibid.).

E. N. Taylor of the Malayan Civil Service, a notably sympathetic observer of *adat* among the Rembau Malays in Negeri Sembilan, had this to say:

In such circumstances it is not surprising that many officers despaired of ever obtaining a clear statement of a point of *adat*, and indeed some of them have said in their haste that all *lembagas* are liars—yet they themselves were largely to blame. It can indeed be proved from Records that when it happened to suit the interest of their own tribes *lembagas* have given directly contradictory evidence before the same judge within a short period but it is palpably absurd to expect a *lembaga* to come into court and make a clear and crisp statement of the strictly relevant law. (1929, 2)

⁸ Customary law. Also: tradition, philosophy, practices of propriety, social norms.

It was more appropriate, Taylor reasoned, to see *adat* as a “living thing” prone to change, development, and adaptation in step with the “progressing needs of the people” lest it “fall into decay” (5). That, he felt, would explain *adat*’s internal contradictions. In fact, its “combination of certainty and elasticity,” built on a morass of prior decisions made by the Ruling Chief (*Undang*) and the *lembagas*, made *adat* not unlike English common law with its “vitality and adaptability” and its roots in case law, he noted (5). But those same qualities which made *adat* adaptable and hence endure over time were also the reasons for its inscrutability. Being an open-ended living organism, *adat* would never, in his view, arrive at its own coherence: the truth of *adat* would forever elude *adat* itself.

“The truth,” Taylor opined, “is that like the six blind men of Hindustan in the fable of our childhood, ‘each was partly in the right and all were in the wrong’” (2). Then, quoting Lord Chancellor Halsbury in *Quinn v. Leathem* (1901) approvingly, he concludes that “a case is an authority for that which it actually decides,” never an expression of the “whole law” (6).

Such was the trouble: how to grant an exception to a foundational tenet of English law, that buildings *are* immovable land, when no generalizable principle of *adat* could be gleaned? Would the custom apply to all houses that rested on stilts, regardless of building materials used, or would it be restricted to thatch-roofed, timber-walled structures? Would raised dwellings topped with zinc roofs, more typical of Chinese-style stilt houses, qualify? And what about those plank-walled structures that were finished with concrete floors—or some combination of other building materials?

Before any definitive answer could be reached in British Malaya, the “traditional” stilt house had fallen out of favor and so the courts largely tabled the matter. Today these matters are “probably a matter of curiosity and [belong] to legal history,” write Tan et al. Yet, as they point out, while the specific case of Malay stilt houses has since been put to rest, the underlying principle which their mobility disturbed is far from permanently settled. “[T]he prefabricated house which can be reduced to its component chattel parts easily, presents the question in modern dress” (26). If the quirk of moveable Malay “land” raised an external challenge to English law—and could thus be dealt with via the exception—the contemporary practice of land reclamation now raises a challenge internal

to this law. For in reclamation, land appears to transform into chattel and back with considerable ease, making it capable of being packed up, as Malay stilt houses allegedly were, and moved up or down country on a whim, its movements dictated by those with deep enough pockets to induce land's changes of form. What, then, is the law to do about this widespread chattelization of land? How now to make it stay put?

4

MISANTHROPOLOGY

a method

In the dream of the man that dreamed, the
dreamed one awoke.

With relief, with humiliation, with terror,
[the dreamer] understood that he also was an
illusion, that someone else was dreaming
him.

—Jorge Luis Borges.

The Circular Ruins

Exhumation

A forest clearing. *Bus Stop*. Shelter, seat, vertical supports. Upon approaching, the palisade of broad trunks parts from the waist down. On the edges are palm species, a few distinct varieties. They bend toward the open pocket. Sand? Quite wondrously, yes. All of it *is* sand.

In the path of the bus that never arrives: a bulging tide of grass, lance leaves glinting, spills over the berm, about to topple the structure from its humid foundations (**Figures 4.1 and 4.2**).

How does it hold itself together? ... But we don't ask that of the ground on which it stands.



Figure 4.1. *Bus Stop*. Mike H. J. Chang, 2016. Art installation. *State of Motion* exhibition. Photograph by Mike H. J. Chang.



Figure 4.2. *Bus Stop*. Mike H. J. Chang. 2016. Art installation. *State of Motion* exhibition. Photograph by Mike H. J. Chang.

In 2016, the artist Kent Chan, leaning on the expertise of film researcher and fellow artist, Toh Hun Ping, curated an exhibition that enquired into the ways a particular oeuvre of local films had “taken place”—locus and tempus—in the landscape and thus come to at once diagnose and symptomize¹ Singapore’s *State of Motion* (Asian Film Archive 2016).

Two years earlier, a cache of films, 91 titles in all from the Cathay-Keris Studio, had been inducted into the UNESCO Memory of the World program, giving special impetus to Chan’s collaborative project on “history, locality, and storytelling” (2–3). Five artists were assembled for the task, among them Mike H. J. Chang. His installation, *Bus Stop*, staged a dissonant call and response: between the delirious images of the seminal 1964 film *Mat Tiga Suku* (lit. Mat “Three Quarters” or Crazy Mat); its filmic locale on the East Coast Pilot Land Reclamation site; the secondary forest that had, in the five decades since, overtaken the once pristine desert; and the uncanny stillness of the sand-structured bus stop—a terminus? a way station? to where? *from* where?

What had Chang disinterred from that filmic archive, its images retrieved not from some box or reel, but rudely resurrected—an act of profanation—from beneath the forest floor?

Indecorum

The film to which Chang’s installation responds is directed by and stars Mat Sentol (born Abdul Rasip bin Yahya) who plays the hapless protagonist overtaken by his circumstances. Being a quarter not there, everything for him is more than a little off-kilter. His house regularly speaks to him; and a bit like a compulsion, he navigates daily life as a series of pranks and impersonations—as an office clerk, a man of exaggerated wealth, a barber, a doctor—his hijinks always just about catching up with him. Meanwhile his idle daydreams regularly lead to mind-bending sequences that don’t so much “take place” in Mat Sentol’s mad mind or bland extant surrounds. They rather

¹ Elizabeth’s Povinelli’s formulation, from *Geontologies* (2016, 15).

assemble an “objective illusion” (Deleuze’s term), *retrieving* the madness and disorientation that is already endemic to and constitutive of the world.

Thus does *Mat Tiga Suku* partake of the genre of musical comedy, where a character’s limping walk on an uneven pavement becomes dance, extracting *from* the world the movement that was already there, in the lively ground itself: a gathering up in the body rather than an imposition by the body (Deleuze 1989, 61). This is a paradoxical kind of comportment: move the body not in order to move the body, as it were, but to show the world made up of motion. Hence the walker-dancer’s “personal motility” expresses the “movement of the world that the dance will [in turn] outline”—it is, as it must be, recursive (*ibid.*). Likewise in Mat Sentol’s staging, it is not he who interrupts the sane world with his antics. The mad, crawling underskin of society’s superficial politesse is already there; he simply tears a hole and lets it breathe.

In one of the early scenes in the film, Mat Sentol attempts to hail a passing bus in the middle of a street but the driver declines to pull over, continuing on to the designated stop a few meters down where a couple of passengers, very sensibly, wait to board. Patiently, then, and now at the right spot, Mat Sentol tries to get on the next bus which arrives shortly after, only to be inexplicably shoved off the steps by another traveler. To a third bus he is similarly denied entry, blocked this time from making it through the door by a gigantic taxidermy deer head the passenger before him is transporting. His frustrations mount. So, as a small crowd gathers in anticipation of a fourth bus, Mat Sentol seized by mischief yanks the bus stop sign from its roots and instigates the oncoming bus and would-be passengers to give frantic chase. Onto a blinding white desert landscape he steers them (the then pilot East Coast reclamation site), whooping, cheering, and pole vaulting with the signpost, the film’s jouncing soundtrack amplifying the comedy as he induces the bus and people on foot to swerve and circle on the sandy expanse.

What is it that’s been deracinated then taken for a ride here? And what holds stationary against that figure in motion? If the ground off which Mat Sentol ricochets is the test case (“pilot”) for what can be made solid and still—so that paradoxically it may as commodity wildly circulate—then Mat Sentol’s cheeky act of ungrounding, his setting

of the (bus) stop in motion, his tangling of proper and improper, offers something of a parody of that overzealous topographical rearrangement. Who is the mad one now?

Likewise, when Chang's *Bus Stop* congeals into an actual bus stop, except composed of caked sand and serving no bus nor passenger, one wonders too which here is the moving ground and which the dancing figuration: the overgrown land; its past bareness; the viewers who venture (by bus, perhaps) onto the vanished sea to see *Bus Stop* in situ; the lonely, static installation; the forgetting it indexes; or the swirling images of *Mat Tiga Suku* caught between reanimation and dissolution *as* landscape. "Which is the mirage, the bus stop or the forest?" the exhibition booklet asks (53). Which?

A sane, "whole" society no longer the tether for Three-Quarter Mat's erratic flights of fancy, now rather the kite pulls the entire ground by its tail. No unmarked ground, no appropriateness of quantity. Here there are only figures of excess in all directions, each "suitably grotesque" (Strathern 2002, 93). Could we not say, as a shorthand, that this is what reclamation *is*? Namely, the fetching of disorientation from a world already in mad motion so as to expressively body it forth.



Figure 4.3. Stills from Mat Sentol's *Mat Tiga Suku* (1964). Compiled by Toh Hun Ping for *SG Film Hunter* (blog). <https://sgfilmlhunter.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/mat-sentuls-dreamland-singapore/>.



Figure 4.4. “Sketch of *Bus Stop*.” Mike H. J. Chang. 2016. In *State of Motion* program booklet, edited by the Asian Film Archive.

Fictio: Made Thing

In the story of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges’ narrator hunts for a fantastical world that one evening fell out of an encyclopedia and onto his lap whilst he dined with a friend and frequent literary collaborator, Bioy Casares, the two scheming as they ate, devising ways to craft a novel that purposefully inhibited its own narrative progression. They thought at first they might attempt a fiction told in the first person “using a narrator who omitted or corrupted what happened and who ran into various contradictions” so egregious that the “banal reality behind the novel” became utterly indecipherable (1962, 17).

But was indecipherability actually their goal? And would that not in the end keep Reality intact even if sequestered behind a veil of confused storytelling? How to puncture reality with narration, to mutilate it even—or better yet to tell it such a way that reality became altogether untenable as an imaginative category? The thing about the two’s narrative ploy was that it conserved quietly for “a handful of readers, a very small handful” the ability to discern the objective from the not (ibid.). And quite besides the

question of what is or isn't objective, just who would get to be among those exceptional few, those keepers of the coherent (albeit banal) reality?

“[I]f it is easy to check the subjective character of the image,” chides Deleuze, “this is because we compare it with the modified, restored image, which is supposed to be objective.” Whereas “the character whose eyes are damaged sees his pipe in soft focus,” we on the other hand “had seen the pipe and the injured man before we saw the pipe seen by the injured man.” Alas, “It is here that the difficulty begins” (1986, 71). How to instead have it such that the character “who sees in soft focus is herself seen in soft focus” (72)? How to write the dreamscape of land reclamation such that the dreamer is dreamed by the land he dreams?

Appropriately, it is thanks to Bioy's “misleading encyclopedia” (otherwise a record of Real Things) that Borges' narrator becomes inducted, unbeknownst to himself, into a much more daring exercise in literary imagination. He is set off on his way by an entry Bioy recalls about a land called Uqbar, allegedly “in either Iraq or Asia Minor” but otherwise never referenced, not in “atlases, catalogues, yearbooks of geographical societies, memoirs of travelers and historians”—not even in other copies of the very same encyclopedia (Borges, 23). For all the them, at 917 pages, stop short of Bioy's 921, those final four pages being where the entry on Uqbar has been mysteriously snuck in.

It is the literature of Uqbar (apocryphal or not) that has Bioy's dinnertime companion enthralled. Their stories are set always in imaginary regions, like the planet of Tlön where the language forbids the primacy of objects and therefore the objective as such. Being “congenitally idealist,” the world of Tlön consists not of “a concurrence of objects in space, but a heterogeneous series of independent acts” (ibid.). And there, having released the narrator from the duty of holding down the reality, *narration* grows only all the more vivid.

Language in the southern hemisphere of Tlön, Borges' narrator learns, is without nouns and thus a priori objects. It comprises only impersonal verbs. In the north, by contrast, theirs is a concatenation of monosyllabic adjectives. They too do not have nouns. So in the south, for example, “there is no word corresponding to the noun *moon*,” although “there is a verb *to moon* or *to moonle*. *The moon rose over the sea* would be written *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*, or, to put it in order: *upward beyond the constant flow*

there was moonlding. (Xul Solar translates it succinctly: *upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned*.)” In the north, where adjectives prevail, they might say in lieu of “moon,” “*airy-clear over dark-round or orange-faint-of-sky* or some other accumulation.” That the mass of adjectives corresponds to a real object is “completely fortuitous” (ibid.). Indeed, “ideal objects abound, invoked and dissolved momentarily, according to poetic necessity.”

Sometimes, the faintest simultaneousness brings them about. There are objects made up of two sense elements, one visual the other auditory—the color of a sunrise and the distant call of a bird. Other objects are made up of many elements—the sun, the water against the swimmer’s chest, the vague quivering pink which one sees when the eyes are closed, the feeling of being swept away by a river or by sleep. These second degree objects can be combined with others; ... the process is practically an infinite one.

(24)

Could this be a tentative blueprint for a misanthropology—whether as a general method or one specific to the study of land reclamation? It seems to me that what the recent array of artistic works on reclamation endeavors to craft is precisely a grammar, one without nouns perhaps, that forecloses the solidity of “land” and the coherence of the one (the anthropologist?) who narrates it, and so returns “reclaiming,” the naked verb, to an interminable relation, to an inexplicable sensation—of permanent land legs, maybe, or a rush of anarchival² impulses.

To some of those creative works I shall now turn.

(But first, an important aside: Borges’ tale ends not with a narrator enamored of a world “elsewhere” and dreamt up. No, the fantastical world of Tlön, like a slow drip at first, begins to intrude on its real counterpart. A magnetic compass shows up, “trembling

² On the “anarchivic,” Derrida writes: “If repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come, one must also import there, *in the same stroke*, the death drive, the violence of forgetting, *superrepression* (suppression and repression), the anarchic, in short, the possibility of putting to death the very thing, whatever its name, which *carries the law in its tradition*: the archon of the archive, the table, *what* carries the table and *who* carries the table, the subjectile, the substrate, and the subject of the law.” (1996, 79)

faintly, just perceptibly, like a sleeping bird,” the letter on its dial bearing the alphabet of Tlön (32). Then a few coins, spilled by a drunkard, along with a “shining metal cone, of the diameter of a die” but “intolerably heavy.” Those too are objects unmistakably from Tlön (33). And then finally, in a library in Memphis, Tennessee, the entire forty volumes of the encyclopedia of Tlön! The drip turns into a pour and before one knows it the world of Tlön has begun to “take place” in reality, each time in the same peculiar mode: retrieved as if found.)

Murder Mystery 1

Will Jamieson’s *Thirst for Sand* (2019).

A man is dead. We have spent half the novella not knowing this, wondering to whom the second person “you” is referring. We didn’t get his name even. Not until right before we hear he expired on his bathroom floor—after, that is, the novella abruptly shifted from the second to the first person, to the “I” of his wife, whereupon the accusatory tone of the earlier “you” starts to make a lot of sense.

“I thought he might still get up and begin asking how much I made at the blackjack table tonight, for he could be a surprising man. *Honey I’m dead!*” (23). His name, as we later learn, was Alan.

Alan, we know, was an engineer, contracted by the Singaporean state on several land reclamation projects. He was a man who wished to do it by the book and as a result always found himself in too deep trying to make finite sand supplies meet bottomless demands. This his wife, Soo, understood better than he: the business of sand was all a gamble and so needed to be played by those with the correct temperament.

You and Soo have both settled into a routine by now. Day and night lose tread. Most days you are at the helm of the dredger, watching sand stream into the site, or ten times as much soft-clay slop in, filthy, difficult. ... soil composition, littoral flows, and tectonic scans, cross sections of a ghost and the gristle and sinew of the still breathing and sweating animal, ... the faces of the subcontractors as they stand watching this seam of ash serenely drift in vapours toward them, as one wipes some indescribably

small particles from his forehead beneath the yellow helmet when it is already on the hand he is wiping it with.

Your wife spends her time riding the bus, steering it with the bones of her face along the expressways. ... She withdraws hundreds of dollars at a time from the joint account ... sometimes it reappears several days or week later in larger quantities, sometimes it disappears for good. Every time you think of asking her what she is doing with it, you remember that after adding the withdrawals and the deposits together she isn't just breaking even, but making a profit (14–15)

Back in their bathroom, we look on as Alan's wife studies his corpse. "People look so stupid when they are dead, like they think you can't see them," she decides. Later she "unload[s] [her] daughters off their international flights, teary and tipsy from the business class champagne, wearing the bathrobes and slippers they had been provided with." Pride swells in her: "I raised children who knew how to grieve in style" (25). We tag along as Soo and the children disperse Alan's ashes in the strait, the funeral party collectively let down by the paltry volume of those remains. "He was a small and thin man, so I suppose it was to be expected, but I felt for Jeremy. There is nothing more disappointing for a son than discovering the miserable quantity of his father's ashes" (25).

You, the reader, are wont to feel self-conscious, a voyeur to this unsentimental domesticity. And in that discomfort you realize that the second person "you" of the novella's first half was in fact referring equally to *you* and the now-dead Alan, co-accused in the eyes of his surviving wife. "Face down. He died the same day the Straits Times reported the death of Lee Kuan Yew. He always wanted to slip beneath the radar, and I could not fault his timing" (22–23).

So, dry eyed and without skipping a beat, Soo reaches for Alan's motionless head and plucks from it the talking earpiece (the one that will not shut up with calls about sand), beats out with a hammer the corresponding mobile phone from Alan's locked

bureau (that “overvarnished matchbox”; that “lacquered bunker”), and picks up his sand business where he left off.

Following that initial pronominal break in Jamieson’s novella, where we shed the “you” and pick up an “I,” we are not later treated to any more such shifts in the narrative. Compliantly we continue with Soo’s “I,” following her down a river in Cambodia to a dredge site where activity has stalled, where she must negotiate a new sand deal, a briefcase of large bills and a gambler’s appetite in tow. The novella will see that deal to its conclusion.

Still, the earlier shift which abruptly bisects the novella accomplishes something curious, and one is almost not keen to keep on reading past that point, the temptation being to stay with the seismic narrative hiccup and be tossed, over and over, by the story’s spasming diaphragm. The shift accomplishes something akin to what Deleuze calls the “‘being-with’ of the camera” in cinema (1986, 72), where the newly mobile camera, liberated from its post thanks to technological advancements, moves amongst the characters *as one of them*: it now inhabits “the anonymous viewpoint of *someone*” (ibid.; my emphasis).

This cinematic “being-with” Deleuze likens, following Pasolini, to free indirect discourse in linguistics, that is, “an enunciation taken within an utterance, which itself depends on another enunciation” (73). Hence we have

not a simple combination of two fully-constituted subjects of enunciation, one of which would be reporter, the other reported. It is rather a case of an assemblage of enunciation, carrying out two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously, one of which constitutes the character in the first person, but the other of which is present at his birth and brings him onto the scene. (ibid)³

³ The example used to illustrate this comes from Bakhtin: “She summons up her strength: *she will rather endure torture than lose her virginity*” (ibid.).

Interestingly, Jamieson's *Thirst for Sand* accomplishes this without resorting, as one might expect, to the third person "it." By switching from "you" to "I" what happens in that changeover is that the earlier "you" retroactively bifurcates—or, more accurately, splinters into *so many* "yous." Not just the you of the sheepish reader and the you of the soon-to-be-dead Alan. But also the you of the hateful bureau, keeper of Alan's secrets, mundane as well as alarming, all of which were concealed from Soo and yet trailed the couple across the world, a silent watcher in each of their unhappy homes (26). Then there is the you of the riverine woman who holds Soo in her gaze and simply will not let go, her steely watchfulness a counteraccusation:

As we passed closer, I stayed near the curtain, even though the window was tinted. A woman standing in the doorway of one of the houses stopped picking through the hundreds of feet of fishnets and looked towards the yacht. She was looking towards the window I was looking at her out of. I crouched beneath the desk. A knock at the door. There was no way she could have been looking right at me. A knocking at the door; it could have been a dream so easily. I could have woken up and muddled over how strange it was and wondered whose eyes I was looking out of, staring back at a time-bleached photograph of my aunt's seaside village, imagine the creak of the rotten wet planks and the smell of the mud in the heat. In a dream the woman's hands would have been moving deftly through hundreds of feet of my intestines, but she kept picking through the nets for bits of wood and clumps and dirt and drift. If it was a dream I would have said *I have come to eat your land because mine has eaten itself from the inside out* but I said nothing and sat on the floor, with my back against the desk and the window that she was looking at. After a moment I peeked over the desk: she got smaller, framed by the dark of the doorway, staring at me. *But how?* Another knock at the door and I turned. (39–40)

Amidst all those partial yous, impossible to corral, impossible to untangle (a hundred feet of intestines!)—amidst their indeterminate, but only retrospectively possible, relation lies that elusive “being-with.” A fractured eye. Foggy, distributed, roving: a liberated camera. Broken apart now by the bitter “I” that narratively succeed them, those yous forcibly multiply and so accomplish what elsewhere the third person “it” might have been deployed to do. No one of them amounts to a totalizing point of view. Instead those yous partake, in their disjuncture, “simultaneously of exclusivity and inclusivity,” referring not only to “the hidden people implied in any two-way exchange” but also “the world as such in the impersonality of its taking place” (McLean 2017, 19; drawing on Benveniste and Serres).

This is the novella’s achievement: it teaches us how the story of reclamation must be told, “caught” as we are “in a correlation between a perception-image and a camera-consciousness which transforms it” (Deleuze 1986, 74). A method, then. And were we to narrate like so, we might find no further need to ask what in reclamation is or is not real—“not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask” (1989, 7).

Murder Mystery 2

Yeo Siew Hua’s *A Land Imagined* (2018).

Is a man dead? Or is he simply missing, and suspended therefore between two tenses, was and is (McLean n.d., 6)? As the credits roll on the evening of the film’s debut in Singapore, the director, along with several other crew members, rises to field questions from the audience. In the central well of the theater, they arrange themselves in a line, backs to the dimmed screen, fronts to their eager questioners. It looks a bit like a defensive formation, which is unfortunate.

A prior screening of the film’s rough cut, the director explains, convinced him that the film needed to undergo a number of excisions. It needed more narrative holes not fewer. So many in fact that the resulting disorientation (it was hoped) would persuade the audience to renounce once and for all the desire to ascertain the precise storyline and instead let themselves go limp in the tide, doing as the body of Ajit, the ill-fortuned reclamation worker, does.

Think how that might alter the questions we'd wish to ask. As we regard the scene, lungs filling with seawater, the question *did he die?* might find itself replaced by a different, more urgent query, namely, *is it meant to be his or ours, that grisly death on the darkened shore?* Are the images we behold the hallucinations of Ajit's fellow worker, Wang? Or are they our involuntary fantasy, reflected back to us on the screen?

This is not their delirium, the film insists. The perversion is ours. We too are being dreamed.

Judging by the questions raised that evening in response to the film's final cut, one might say that Yeo's subtractions had been too modest. For instinctively we still watch for a pulse. A breath. Twitches in the limbs. *But don't*, the film urges the audience. *Don't look for signs of life.* Don't do the work that the cops, tasked with solving the case, themselves do not manage to do. For they too know that there is nothing else to do but succumb to the waves of fevered dreaming.



Figure 4.5. Still from Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined* (2018). The body of Ajit.

The story of *A Land Imagined* is on the face of it a straightforward police drama. A migrant worker, Wang Bicheng, has gone missing. Lok and his partner have been called in to investigate. Ever since the accident which put his forearm in a cast, Wang has been

driving the rickety company lorry at half pay, ferrying the Bangladeshi workers also in the firm's employ to and from the reclamation sites. One of them he befriends, Ajit. They share warm beers in the dormitory canteen once the night has set in, telling each other (in order to tell themselves) of their miseries and afflictions which flourish between wakefulness and sleep.

Haltingly, Wang enquires:

—Ajit, do you dream?

Ajit massages Wang's dangling neck; a gesture tender as well as menacing in the closely cropped shot of armless fingers on headless neck.

—*Yes... I dream. Here, all time dreaming.*

Cutting from their quiet exchange, the camera returns the two men to the sea of pulsing bodies from a few evenings before, thrashing rhythmically to the music which the South Asian workers have gathered to play, but that we cannot hear. Ajit's voice glides over the images.

—*You dancing. Me singing. But I not me. You not you.*

All (the) time dreaming.

Ajit, it turns out, owes a monstrous sum to the company, several months of pay worth. Back home, his mother has had her legs amputated, to stave off further illness. And though he wishes to return to care for her, his passage is blocked by debt and by a confiscated passport ("for safekeeping; lest they misplace them," the boss' nephew says).

Wang, for his part, wonders if he should have lent his support to another worker, his compatriot from China, the crane operator who scaled the impossibly tall machine and demanded from on high that he be paid his overdue wages. The crane operator awaits deportation for his troublemaking. And in the stale, tight space between the dormitory beds and their biting bugs, the firm's Chinese workers have been conferring with each other about what to do. No one, they whisper, has seen their salaries for months now.

Ajit is to assist with the deportation—an opportunistic use of one set of workers against another, counting on the fact that lines of solidarity often do not cut across

racialized ones. It is the last Wang sees of Ajit, pulling out of the compound in that rickety lorry. So ensues a hunt within a hunt. Wang searches in vain for the missing Ajit and himself goes missing, prompting an official police search, which brings Lok and his partner onto the scene (this is where the film begins). But Lok too is being pursued. By the insomnia he shares with Wang and by the dreams in which, unbidden, he has been made privy to Wang's, and thus his own, fate. Lok and Wang, the one dreaming the other, (re)live each other's meanderings through sleepless life and uncertain death—one existence the distorted echo of the other.



Figure 4.6. Stills from Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined* (2018). An exchange between the Lok and his partner.

“I dreamed of Wang Bicheng last night,” Lok discloses to his partner. He pauses over a purple flower that has crested on the long arm of a weedy plant.

—*How would you know it was him? You've never met or spoken to him.*

Lok holds his stooped posture, watching the petals catch the breeze. Behind the two of them, in the far background, conveyor belts of fill material release plumes of fine grey dust into the hot air.

—I used to dream a lot when I was young. I dreamed of all these bizarre things and mysterious places, and I thought I was very imaginative. After I grew up and

started traveling, I realized that I had been to all those places before, in my dreams. ... You want to know how I knew *I was* Wang Bicheng in the dream?

Without waiting for his answer, the camera pushes us off the hill where we have been conferring with Lok and partner. We descend sharply into the reclamation site below. A worker keels over in pain. He grasps at something at his midsection. An alarm blares. Someone has pulled the emergency cord to halt the heavy machinery. Coworkers make haste toward the writhing man. Even closer the camera takes us, and we are now a *someone* (we know not our own identity) caught up in the commotion. It is Wang, we realize. We are recalling his image, paradoxically, for the first time—as in a dream. Rocking, mouth dangling. Clawing at his bad arm with his good one. “Are your fingers still intact!” Wang’s boss shouts. “The rest of you, back to work!”

Oddly enough this sequence in the film, intended perhaps to fill in some of the back story, feels not revelatory but almost like a goading. For can the time before Wang’s disappearance actually be recalled? From the get-go he is missing; *A Land Imagined* commences in the wake of that withdrawal. Its narrative momentum comes from what has been vacated, primordially so. The film, we might say, is propelled by a subtraction, but not of the sort cut from a prior whole. In that regard the director, Yeo, would seem to have had the right intuition. Accordingly, everything unfolds or oscillates around a vanishing point—except where that vanishing point lies we cannot hope to say, passing as we do out of one character’s clairvoyant dreams and into another’s past terrors. Recollections and premonitions are all nested within one another.

To retrace Wang’s steps, then, Lok must dream his dreams. He takes a lie down in Wang’s dormitory bed and wakes into Wang’s nightmares. He is invited to dance the dance that Wang earlier did, in that circle of South Asian workers, their music intoxicating, a trance. He ingests Wang’s diazepam and slips into a sleep that is not his own.

At the same time, Wang too has already dreamed Lok ahead of his arrival. In the internet café where he communes with TROLL862 into the wee hours of the morning,

Wang confesses his wakeful visions to the unseen but intently seeing digital persona who lurks in the multiplayer game, Counter-Strike.

Two cops will come searching for me, he says, one an insomniac like myself. Wang’s voice arrives as if from some distance, beyond the frame. We sink into the quicksand of ochre colored pixels, traveling between the architectural levels of the game. “I think had a dream...” (A no man’s land.) “I dreamed of my own death.” (Eternal wandering.) “The feeling I had wasn’t painful—or terrifying. It was like being swallowed by something. Slowly sinking downwards.”

The smear of repeated pixels makes an impromptu stairway up the mountainside which, typically a backdrop, suddenly comes tantalizingly close, within reach (**Figure 4.7**). “It’s hard to explain. It was as if I was being forgotten by a kind of ignorance.” But the stairway of course cannot be climbed. “In the end,” he says, “I realized I had disappeared in my own dream.” An exit that enters him into the dreams of another.



Figure 4.7. Stills from Yeo Siew Hua’s *A Land Imagined* (2018). Wang’s conversation with TROLL862 “taking place” in between the levels of Counter-Strike.

The Watchful Void

In the neo-realist cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni, writes Deleuze, “objective images ... impersonally follow a becoming” and “[w]e are returned once more to ... disconnected space.” Indeed the distinction of Antonioni’s films owes to that which is *not* in them:

The connection of the parts of space are not given, because it can come about only from the subjective point of view of a character who is, nevertheless, absent, or has even disappeared, not simply out of the frame, but passed into the void. (1989: 8)

Thus the gaze of the character vanished weighs on those who remain within the frame, “giv[ing] them the continual feeling of being spied on, and ... explain[ing] the lack of coordination of their objective movements, when they flee whilst pretending to look for [the one disappeared]” (ibid.). This burdensome gaze is not a view *from* the void. No, it *is* the void: it watches them.

Gawans would readily recognize this gaze as the one belonging to the witch. For implied in all transactions is always the anonymous third party *someone* who is “the hidden ‘fixed center of the turning world,’” paradoxically excluded from the exchange—the witch is the one “who *does not* receive, or who receives [too little] a share”—whilst also supplying the indispensable “latent perspective” through which all acts of transmission are formulated or inverted (Munn 1992, 224 and 222; my emphasis). As “virtual observer,” this someone need not have been physically present at the exchange, since their gaze is only the intensification of Gawans’ *own* selfishness, greed, or craving to eat and acquire, all of which are perforce present in every transaction. Thus is witchcraft an inescapable, ever-present possibility: “a hidden construction of the Gawan self latent in the overt world of Gawan everyday life” (215). The witch, we might say, is but the exaggerated, hideous expression of the inner secret covetousness of which all partake. Or, as Nancy Munn puts it, the “reciprocal image of the victim’s imputed retentiveness” (224).

That retentiveness of which Munn speaks is more than metaphorical. “We have found our heaviness,” Gawans say when they are afflicted by witchcraft (215). Literally,

it weighs on them: “[s]ince what the witch does is to make the victim’s body heavy with illness, it is as if the latter’s own retentiveness were acting back upon him or her from outside through the agency of the witch, its intensive, active form” (224).

But the witch is, of course, not “outside” as it were—hence Munn’s use of “as if.” Gawans readily concede that it is “we ourselves” who are witches (216). Even when witches arrive on canoes from other islands or fly in from elsewhere, it is in the end Gawans, they say, who bear the responsibility for having let those canoes or flying witches in (219).

Ultimately, “the community at large remains the diffuse locus of witchery” (218). And so the witch never can nor does crystallize in the form of a particular person whom the community might positively identify. Gawan society, Munn tells us, has “no viable mechanisms” at its disposal “for publicly exposing a witch’s identity and demanding punishment or confession” (218). As a result, “witches continually remain under the surface of the overt world of public identities to which they are never with any certainty fixed—a feature that significantly contradicts the Gawan emphasis on bringing the hidden out into the open” (ibid.).

No witch appears (cf. Siegel 2006, Ch. 6). Instead only a gaze: one without ascription; distributed and immanent, withdrawn from direct knowing and yet wholly present in all that does come onto the visible scene.

A Method?

So, those flashbacks, then, in *A Land Imagined*. What are they really, if the structure of dreaming does not allow us to “go back” as such and recover from there the truth of what happened? Whenever the missing Wang does surface, we find it is not as himself, so to speak, self-presenting to the viewer. Each time he appears only as an image of himself—dreamed, screen-captured, played back.

Near the film’s end, when Lok finally tracks down Wang’s preferred terminal, booth 57, at the internet café, what he finds being played back is a video recording of Wang which TROLL862 presumably made through the terminal’s webcam. Wang’s expression suggests he is oblivious to the fact of being recorded, eyes trained on something of interest on the screen before him. But then gradually he turns. Something

has caught his attention offscreen, beyond the frame. Lok, watching, turns too to follow the implied path of that gaze. A clue perhaps? Or a perverse game? Or simply a reminder that the promise of coherence which lies ostensibly in the character vanished beyond the frame is entirely false—and that we are fools for having turned to look.

Something like that we might call, tentatively, a misanthropology. Not a method that avoids human society because of intersubjective antipathy, but one that commences in the wake of the withdrawal of the figure of the anthropologist—suspended somewhere between nested dreams or lurching from one to another. Not an anthropology held together tacitly by the promise (even if not realized) of a coherent perspective potentially available to “a very small handful.” Instead a misanthropology where the dream structure or the world’s mad disorientation *itself* sees or itself *is* the perspective. That perspective would be a distributed one, residing in the indeterminate relations among massifying verbs and adjectives, without tending especially toward nouns. No moons necessarily. Just moonling and orange-faint-of-skies. The films and works of art produced about reclamation exemplify how this can and must be done, narrating as they do our submergence in a land that is itself unlocatable.

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