You, Platåberget, cousin of Meru, also called Mountain, also called Gunung, also called 山, also called மலை, also called Fjell, also called Pahara, also called Parbat, also called Parbata, also called …

We offer you this book. A collage of fragments and whispers that we are tracing together, through a series of enclosures of possibility and waiting. All addressed to the heart of another dark sanctum. Your own.

We too have to work in the dark, at the start of what will of course be far too short a time of reflection, upon far too short a time on this planet, for my people, when seen through that opening to your depth and stone.

We know very well we are crazy beginners —just amateurs really, tramping through the debris of capital and things that perhaps shouldn’t even touch, but which have become intertwined, via the myriad ensnarements of power.

Our view in this book reads from inside a library different to that world-famous seedbank you host. It’s a view from within a salt water crocodile, killed in 1887, at the mouth of the Serangoon river, Singapore, after which it became the largest croc specimen the Museum had on show. Then recently our crocodile was found to be filled, quite unusually, with wheat straw, from which, after searching for hours, we were able to glean just one single grain.

We offer this grain to you now, with a wish to learn more of the worlds and the ways that might just be divined from the inside of wheat grains, and crocodiles, and mountains, with only that jumbled up toolkit of my people’s histories and sciences and politics and poetries and magics and hope.
You Crocodile, also called Buaya, also called 鳄鱼, also called தைல, also called Krokodille, also called Margamarchh, also called Khumbira, also called Kumeer, also called …
This is how we have learned to see you. From an image that was taken on the day that you were shot. A flat piece of paper. Frozen in time. A photograph in a book. A surface. So smooth.

How would that have felt? That one burning shot? That singular hole through a whole weave of receptors, in folds of scales; so tough, but so intricate, so attuned that the spaces between your toes can sense the slightest sliver of a fish, or a ripple in the current, or an insect breaking through the film between water and air.

This very large 4.7m long crocodylus porosus or salt water crocodile was shot in 1887 at the mouth of the Serangoon River by big game hunter G. P. Owen. It was donated to the Raffles Museum, which opened the very same year, 1887.

WHEAT FOUND INSIDE CROCODILE

It started with clearing your coastlines for settlements and for trade, with boats bringing in things like medicines, opium, flour, tea and weapons, and taking out things like sugar and spices and skins. Then your sacred mountains were carved out for tin, gold, copper and coal. And your forests were felled to plant nutmeg, gutta percha, teak, gambier, pepper, pineapple, tea, coffee, rubber, acacia, oil palm. We clogged up your estuaries with rafts and containers, clogged up our lungs with the smoke from our fires.

When Kate Pocklington, conservator of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity, opened up the crocodile for conservation purposes, she found it had been stuffed with wheat straw—a curious material for taxidermy. Then-Director Tan Swee Hee offered this straw to us at the Migrant Ecologies Project, thinking perhaps we might make something of it.

Then settlements became cities and city-states need space. Your mangrove trees made for the strongest kind of scaffolding for our still-building dreams. Your sand was dredged up, gouged out, and ‘reclaimed’ for the nation, for new towns, for new banks, new schools, new hospitals, new airports, new gardens, new hotels, new casinos, new bridges, new terminals, new galleries and new museums of natural history.

By the Migrant Ecologies Project. Singapore Art Museum, 2014.
Kate also found a small, torn up hand-written note inside the crocodile. It appears to be a record of a transaction concerning a leopard skin dated 10 August 1888, together with the name R. Liddelow, Esquire. Robert Liddelow was a businessman and resident of Singapore from the 1870s onwards. According to a Straits Times article from 23 April 1884, Liddelow was Manager of a joint stock outfit called Sayle & Co in the 1870s and 80s, with branches in Singapore and Penang. His business concerned 'Gentleman’s Outfitting, Tailoring, Saddlery and Harness, Furnishing, Stationery, Dressmaking, Millinery and General Drapery and Fancy Goods as well as General Stores and Wine.' Liddelow also sold arms and ammunition.

This 'tongue' is made from a cast of the roof of the mouth of the croc, covered in papier mâché. The paper used for the cover of the 'tongue' is a page from an unidentified guide which cites Woodward’s Manual of The Mollusca: being a treatise on recent and fossil shells (first print 1851-56). Woodward’s Manual ... is a publication by the British geologist, paleontologist and naturalist S. P. Woodward (1821-1865). The page appears to concern the genus of fossilized and mostly extinct molluscs and other sea creatures. The language of natural history pasted on the papier mâché (French for 'chewed paper') tongue of a hundred year old crocodile.
I first met you in person together with Kate in that makeshift museum worksite, alongside the scabby sun bear babies and the dusty tapirs, the drawers of dead birds and the skulls and the crabs and the pickled snakes. The consensus is that you are probably male. But by then what was left of your shell had become a hundred year old gestation chamber for the remains of colonial cash crops; a strange alien surrogate; a second hatching. We still don't know how and if anything will grow.

These are the waters in which you were shot. They no longer exist. Mangroves are murky. Mud sticks to our clothes, weighs us down and sucks us in. We needed to make stable that uncertain ground. We needed to drain the swamps to get rid of the mosquitoes, to get rid of the fever, to get rid of the stench, to smell a future without death and decay.

But for you such dualities of land and sea, water and air, life and death don’t always apply. You always got on fine in-between. Your nostrils above and your gaze dispersed, around the horizons and along the rim, while your weight sways below in those warm realms of silt and recomposition. You know very well that rich layers of rot are the safest place to bury your eggs.

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I first met you in person together with Kate in that makeshift museum worksite, alongside the scabby sun bear babies and the dusty tapirs, the drawers of dead birds and the skulls and the crabs and the pickled snakes. The consensus is that you are probably male. But by then what was left of your shell had become a hundred year old gestation chamber for the remains of colonial cash crops; a strange alien surrogate; a second hatching. We still don’t know how and if anything will grow.
I kept this fake perspex eye of yours for two years in my office at a university in Singapore. It would look out blankly at my groups of students during tutorials and we would laugh, slightly nervously. In 2017 I went with Kate and with Yuen Chee Wai to look at an exhibition that she had made in your honour. For an hour and a half we were in the presence of all those materials that had once been inside you and surrounded by an unravelling of stories that Kate had discovered online. We inspected a map that Kate had collated of your recent returns. For an hour and a half, I found that I could not see through my right eye. My vision had become wavy, like TV interference or like it was submerged.

Librarian, Curator and Secretary Davison struggled. He struggled with rising damp and mould in a museum that was built where there once had been mangrove. He struggled with the excesses of tropical possibility and how this might all be ordered in time. He struggled with fever on forest expeditions. He struggled with grief. His wife had died while he was away on a field trip to Pahang. He was diagnosed as suffering from hallucinations and was found dead in his room in the Victoria Hotel in 1892. A coroner report states that he ‘died from the effects of an overdose of opium taken whilst in a state of unsound mind.’

This resin eye from the crocodile is a later addition according to the Raffles Museum for Biodiversity Research, probably originating in the 1950s.

A report by W. M. Davison, Librarian, Curator and Secretary to the Raffles Library Committee, that was printed in The Straits Times on 11 March 1889, ends by thanking a local taxidermist, L. A. Fernandiz for his work. We have not been able to find more information about Fernandiz and it is a little unclear how or why wheat straw was uniquely used for just this specimen.
What followed in the years from then until now? How did we, beings with a mere two hundred thousand years of bipedal perspective and fingers and thumbs, imagine we could, if not devour and digest, at least capture and compute all hundred and twenty million years of yours?

And so there you are. Four point seven metres of dried-out keratin and nerve ends, all emptied and re-stuffed, on a series of pedestals, in a series of containers, in a series of arks of dead things with evermore dramatic lighting.

Please don’t get me wrong. My people’s desire to know you is not all bad, our intentions are not all about capture and control. We just still haven’t figured out the tools.

And so there you lie, for you next to the three prize dinosaurs flown in from Utah. We gaze at your surface and get lost in the patterns and believe that we have you down to size. Emptied of danger. Filled with our meaning. Ordered and sorted. Fixed up. Mapped out. Frozen in our time.

But you were was always so much greater than the sum of your parts. And you were never afraid of our dark. And your ways of knowing still quicken the waters. You call to your people, to your young underneath the sand and the shallow seas tremble in ways we cannot quite hear.

Today I learned that if temperatures rise by more than two degrees, all your eggs become female. I learned this and other miraculous suggestions and wonders of you and your people from papers on crocodilus porusus by researchers in Northern Australian crocodile farms. We wrap those skins around our loose change. Or around our two feet; a tooth and claw thrill. But as we pelt the pavement in our pirate Louis Vuittons, do we also sense rising waters in the gaps between our toes?
Might we learn belatedly to love you, You monsters, conjured by our dreams of reason?
And then what of those reasons? Those seeds?
We have not yet carried out genetic profiling of the wheat that was found inside the crocodile. It is most likely to have originated from India, with other possibilities being Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Russia or even America or Chile.
You Wheat Grain, also called Gandum Gandum, also called 小麦籽粒, also called காந்தாமதாநித்தான், also called Hvetefrø, also called Kanak, also called Gam, also called Gahama, also called …

You hexaploid:
six copies of
each gene,
and 21 chromosomes
and 16 million
DNA base pairs.
That’s five times as
much DNA
as my people,
sleeping inside a
saltwater crocodile.

‘Visible and invisible,
obvious and hidden,
everywhere and nowhere.’

Was all this all part of
your slumbering design?
Just like the way,
millennia ago, you
abandoned the unruly
multiplicity and precarity
of place,
to partner with us in that
special relationship
in which you have
nourished and sheltered
and made us feel safe
and at home
in the domus, in a
land that was scaped
by the time and the
space you required.

And so together
we continue
to count seasons,
measure markets,
sow religions,
ferment desires,
politic states and then
plough them up,
sift and sort, engender,
indenture and migrate
my people,
together with yours,
to where the latest action is.

While growing up together
we two,
we threshed up the fabric
of our own life-support,
eliminated millions of
other kinds of kin.
And still the sun never
sets on your gilded
patchwork,
and 24/7 aisles of
bread, noodles, flour,
lollipops, biscuits,
cat-food, perfume,
and industrial
glue.
You grain, 
both future and past 
in that one fragile 
casement,
What stories might you 
tell your wild cousins, 
together once more 
in that mountain 
in the dark, 
of your so often ex situ, 
so often suspended, 
worlding ways?

Of pragmatic 
plant-being, 
Of waiting for your 
moment and selecting 
the best 
from the varieties 
of kings you have 
cultivated.

Or might you, they, we 
consider together 
relearning the tools 
of myriad possibilities 
and messier 
place-makings. 
Without those god-given 
separations 
from which we have 
both gleaned 
our singular selves?
IMPORTS TO THE BRITISH STRAITS SETTLEMENTS COLONY

The exports from India to the Colony took in bales (788 in number), living animals, fruits and vegetables, paddy, rice, wheat, grain and pulses, rum, salt, spices (two million lbs.), sugar, tea, brass, copper, iron, tin (480 cwt.), hardware, machinery, chemicals, tobacco, cigars, aniline dyes, perch and gambier, myrobolans, turmeric, oil, coal (7,800 tons.), raw cotton, gums and resins, hides and skins, unmanufactured ivory, jewellery, raw jute, salt petre, shells, raw silk, wool, twist yarn (1,800,000 lbs.), piece goods, flax, hemp, jute, silk goods, wool, shawls, apparel, books and printed matter, cabinet ware, coir, coral, hides, lac, and stationery. Of opium the Straits Settlements took from India in 1888-9 about 20,500 cwt. The other items do not call for detailed notice.

1. "We wrap a category around a taxonomically complex set of plants and call it wheat. Just as other domesticated food plants emerge as 'countless' ('impossible to avoid' (Cook, 2004) and 'invisibly ubiquitous' (Whatmore, 2002)), wheat is - even more so - simultaneously visible and invisible, obvious and hidden, everywhere and nowhere'.


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The "Macrame" Thread for lace work, &c.

Franken-seed all alone.

It would be far too easy to make you our excuse.

To blame you and your powers of possession for what has in fact been a golden alliance, where a few tiny lineages of both of our peoples in a splinter of years became exclusive, entitled and fat.

Fires, floods and the fury call for action, and act we must.

But perhaps like you, we too might go back to the dark, to the mountain in which we have sometimes sought refuge.

Sensing ways to connect that are not just about hitching new rides, as capital circles from a tropical island frontier at the end of one human century to another far north, far away, at the beginning of another.
Another thread in this ongoing research involves vernacular understandings and knowledge about crocodiles in the Malay peninsula. Conservator Kate Pocklington also discovered a 1947 newspaper article, which claims that the body of the crocodile in the Raffles Museum contains the spirit of a legendary figure, Panglima Ah Chong. Kate and our research team later found that this story is quite common, with several heterogeneous and often contradictory strains, including the foundation story of a still-existing Su Lan Zhou Taoist temple in Perak.

You Spirit, also called Semangat, also called Hantu, also called Jin, also called Makhluk Halus, also called Mambang, also called Penunggu, also called 灵魂, also called உ, also called Ånd, also called Aatma, also called …
"Another Chinese traditional cannon belonged to ‘Panglima’ (Warrior) Ah Chong, a brave of the inter-Chinese wars which took place in the Larut Un fields in 1842, and lasted sporadically for ten years. This warrior turned into a crocodile on his death and this crocodile is now the biggest stuffed crocodile in Raffles Museum, Singapore, though the Director is unaware of the fact.

CROCODILES AS HETEROGENEOUS SPIRIT ITERATIONS AND AS THE GUARDIAN SPIRITS OF LOCALITIES AND PLACES, KNOWN AS PUNGGU OR PUAKA AND THE ISLAMIC-HYBRID KERAMAT

of the State of Kelantan. Some puaka may not be intangible spirits, but animals believed to possess the attributes of supernatural beings. Each village is

17 For further reference of guardian spirits of localities see Wilkinson’s Malay Beliefs, pp. 26-29; McHugh’s Mentu-Hantu, pp. 73-91.

18 See Wilkinson’s, Malay Beliefs, p. 28.

19 The commonest animals to be regarded as pungun or puaka are tigers and crocodiles. As we shall see in the next chapter, these supernatural animals tend to be identified as keramat. For a vivid account of beliefs surrounding an animal puaka, see Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad, “Ratu Paroi, War Tiger,” JAMNAS, III. 1 (1975), 76-78.

THE SU LAN ZHUO TEMPLE

The Su Lan Zhuo Temple worships So Ah Chiang, commonly known as Panglima Ah Chong in the Malay community. According to legend, So came from China and became a farmer in Matang. One day, he received a precious boar chain from an old boar. He thus embedded the chain into the cut flesh on his left leg and the wound healed itself. Since then, he had all sorts of supernatural powers. Later, he became a bandit who robbed the rich and helped the poor. For the people, he was an admired hero.

However, the British colonial government was not so happy with him and one day, he was arrested and sentenced to death. However, he survived regardless of the methods used to kill him, including shooting, stabbing and drowning. His wife could not bear the cruel punishments on him and thus, told the British colonial government about his possession of the treasure. The police officers forced him to cut open the flesh of his thigh to seize the boar chain. All of a sudden, the chain flew into the river and the angry police officers shot him.

So incarnated into a crocodile and fought against the British colonial government. To pacify the people, the British colonial government conferred So the title of “Datuk Keramat”, known as Na Tok Gong in the Chinese community. So hates Westerners after his death and does not like Western offerings. It was said that someone had offered him a glass of wine and the glass cracked.
You Datuk,

What ancient alchemies did you harness as you sailed from vessel to vessel across all of our modern divides, from wild boar, to metal, to human to crocodile to grain. And when you also so effortlessly shift shaped right through the coordinates of all of our maps, from forests, to rivers, to straits, to mangroves, to one-two-three-four museums, and now perhaps to a mine in a mountain at the end of the world.

Was it was in another mountain, in the tin mines of Ipoh, that So Ah Chong once honed the powers you endowed him with, before taking on the bullets of the Company that brought in the grain. The Company that shot the crocodile.

The Company that placed those strange canons around (half in half out of your waters, and always in the wrong direction!).

The Company that sponsored the writers of books, where in a translation of a translation of a whisper we learn that it was probably rather good that they did not capture your crocodile alive, or that long-haired langsuyar; the ghost-vampire beauty to which your buaya pays tribute might have flown howling in the night to its aid.

On 24 May 2019 the wheat straw from the inside of the crocodile was taken from its sleeping place in the store room of the National University of Singapore Museum under the guardianship of Devika d/o Murugaya and Siddharta Perez. It was transported to the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University where Zachary Chan, Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni and Kee Ya Ting performed a wheat-gleaning ceremony in the hope of finding a grain amongst the straw that we could send to the mountain in Svalbard. During the ceremony a small, very precious grain of wheat was found, still inside one of the few husks that had survived over the years in the dark.
Postscript: In 2019-20 a group of artists, natural historians, Taoist and Malay lore specialists will be travelling to Ipoh and Taiping in Peninsular Malaysia where shrines to Panglima Ah Chong still exist, in order to trace more threads of this story in parallel to our genetic explorations.

The objective is to not to privilege one strand over another, but to draw them together in order to assess their heterogeneity. It is a similar gesture with which we draw together these stories of our crocodile-as-seed-bank and offer them to the Platåberget mountain wherein lies the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.
ABOUT THE MIGRANT ECOLOGIES PROJECT

The Migrant Ecologies Project was founded in 2009 as an umbrella for transdisciplinary inquiries and practice-led investigations pertaining to art and ecology.

www.migrantecologies.org

COLLABORATORS FOR SEEDING STORIES: A GUIDE TO THE INTERIOR OF A SALT WATER CROCODILE

Agri/Cultures. Seed-Links Exhibition.
Svalbard. June 2019

Zachary Chan, Book designer and performer.
Lucy Davis, Project conceptualiser, artist, art writer & educator.
Kee Ya Ting, Photographer, cinematographer.
Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni, Researcher, writer, performer.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Seeding Stories: A Guide to the Interior of a Salt Water Crocodile is a collaboration between

The National University of Singapore Museum (Curator Siddharta Perez)
and
The MA Programme in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art, Department of Art, Aalto University Finland (Lucy Davis, Professor of Artistic Practices).

LETTER WRITERS TO THE WHEAT GRAIN

Letters to a grain of wheat/croc/spirit:

Technical Expertise: Benjamin Loh Juan Hui

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