CHAPTER FIVE

ECO-ART HISTORIES AS PRACTICE:
WOODCUT AND CUTTINGS OF WOOD
IN ISLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Author’s Note

This chapter concerns an art historical, material and practice-led process, encircling stories of wood in island Southeast Asia under the auspices of The Migrant Ecologies Project1 and evolving through an ongoing series of exhibitions, art publications and hand-animated films. In the following, I trace a coming-together of perspectives of the natural world as inscribed in a migratory art historical form, narrated through perspectives of plant genetics as well as practices of, for example, Southeast Sulawesi tree-lore and regional timber patriarchies. Comparisons and frictions between such perspectives and practices reveal a fecundity of ways that human and non-human agents have colonized and continue to make their presence felt across the archipelago.

A prevailing concern has been to physically work-through the aesthetics, spirit, material and labor of the mid 20th century

Malayan Modern Woodcut movement; a form through which migrant artists of the Chinese left inscribed dreams of permanent residence in the South Seas or Nanyang. A second concern has been a critical-poetic investigation with Singapore’s economic success-story, predicated upon the island-city’s entrepôt processing of regional “cheap nature,” from rubber to palm oil. The resulting works aim to bring, macro and micro practices together and to re-work the micro-gestures of the Malayan Woodcut in a macro-ecological context of “cuttings of wood,” in this case the modern deforestation of the archipelago from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

From 2005-2016 I was Assistant Professor at the School of Art Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, (NTU) Singapore, where, among other things I taught an introductory course to Southeast Asia Modern and Contemporary Art. In the process of teaching this course, I became fascinated by the processes, material, and energies of the mid-twentieth-century Malayan Modern Woodblock Movement.

There is currently considerable interest in the turbulent, post-World War II histories of Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, and in the re-excavating, rehabilitating, and recasting of perspectives that were suppressed during the Cold War and by the US-allied political entities that came to power during this period. The 1950s and 1960s were a time of idealistic jostling amongst a wide spectrum of nationalist positions in Malaya.² And artworks, including woodblocks, were a vital medium in the struggle over which vision of modernity would prevail.

I first encountered the woodblock artworks in an exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore in 1999.³ This was the first exhibition to critically reconsider the politics of some of the artists and included a series of parallel talks at the museum. At one such talk, historian Lim Cheng Tju

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² The modern woodblock movement was initiated during a time that has been called the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), when the Malayan Communist Party—which had held out the most sustained resistance to the Japanese during WWII—was left out of post-war power sharing arrangements and took up violent anti-colonial struggle in the plantations of Malaya.

³ The exhibition *History Through Prints: Woodblock Prints in Singapore* (August 1998–March 1999), was co-organised by the Singapore History Museum and the Printmaking Society (Singapore) and curated by Joyce Fan in collaboration with then Singapore History Museum researcher Koh Nguang How.
presented a paper on political cartoons. A number of the woodblock artists were also political cartoonists, and their woodprints were reproduced alongside their cartoons in the Chinese press and in books published by the Chinese literati. The discussion following the presentation was led by artist and archivist Koh Nguang How (then a National Museum curator) and included suggestions as to various “messages” behind the more overtly political of the prints. Indeed, surviving woodblock artists I have interviewed have similarly seemed to favor didactic interpretations of their works. However, as much as I shared the excitement of being audience to a rare public discussion of political contexts and possible content of the woodblocks, I found myself equally drawn to the poetics of the medium.

Fig. 5-1. Lim Yew Kuan, After the Fire (Bukit Ho Swee), circa 1966. 45.5 cm X 61 cm. Woodblock print on paper. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.

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Over a decade later I find myself still absorbed by the positive and negative spaces of the modern woodblock works and by the raw, emotional quality of the prints in ways that are mystical as much as they are political. Such emotional possibilities are masterfully evoked by founder of the movement, Lim Yew Kuan, in what is possibly his most celebrated work, *After the Fire* 1966, a print produced at the very end of the period in which this movement was active. (Fig. 5-1) Lim informed me that this print was compiled from a collage of photographs he had collected of *kampung* (village) fires during the 1960s.6 Memories of such fires have become part of a conflicted narrative about an end to *kampung* life, informal subsistence farming, and associated community spirit, which came about when the population was encouraged to move to modern, orderly but far more individualized, Housing Development Board (HDB) high-rise apartments in which 80 percent of the Singapore population (including Lim himself) now reside.7

Lim’s print can be read as a monumental lament for urban life forms that by the late 1960s were burning out, the anthropomorphic remains of his blackened trees reaching into the sky. The medium enhances the emotive pathos of the scene. There is a depth in the counterpoint contrasts and layers of wood-grain, which is perhaps one reason why the woodblock medium has been a potent presence in times of antagonism and uncertainty. In Western art histories, the woodblock is poignantly remembered in medieval invocations of the Black Death and religious upheavals accompanying the Reformation. The medium was then reinvented by German expressionists during the impoverishments and idealisms of the Weimar period8 and equally famously in Shanghai where the May Fourth Movement literary ideologue Lu Xun advocated that Shanghai woodcut artists (much-emulated in Singapore)9 should embrace a living spirit of the woodblock in parallel with the political spirit of the time and let the woodblock speak via an “aesthetic of vigour”—*li zhi mei*. Lu Xun asked artists to let the material talk and let mistakes, slips of the

6 Yew Kuan Lim interview. See note 4.
9 Lim Yew Kuan spoke of the Singapore woodblock artists circulating textbooks on modern woodblock mailed to them from Shanghai, and teaching themselves the techniques from these books. Lim, interview. See note 4.
hand, be part of a dance with the wood.\textsuperscript{10}

In \textit{After The Fire}, this combination of ink and grain enables Lim Yew Kuan to draw us into the micro dramas of the tiny humans who are beginning to reassemble and tidy up, collecting the remains of their belongings, like ants on a burned forest floor. But the medium also leads Lim up and out via the “arms” of those burned-out arboreal familiars into a choppy sky, which moves like a tide, beyond the detritus and out of the top right corner of this patched-together collage of memories.

When I interviewed Lim in his spacious HDB flat about his time with the Modern Woodblock Movement in 2007, he also emphasized a combination of a political and emotional-spiritual engagement with the practice. I was directed to participate in a demonstration as to how breathe correctly, so as to channel the energy of a breathing piece of wood. This was an exercise which involved the septuagenarian Mr Lim having me follow him running around his living room, all apparently in order to ascertain that I had the correct level of respiratory-fitness to work with the material.\textsuperscript{11}

When I started this process, I had a vague idea of wanting to work through the possibilities of the woodblock in a way that was not merely a postmodern appropriation of a historic art form. The raw materials and political-ecologies of modern Singapore are intertwined with the currents of seas and movements of the winds around the island as well as with visits by migratory flora and fauna. I wanted to explore what recasting the form and content of this migratory movement might mean in a contemporary context of the “cutting of wood,” meaning macro-scale deforestation in Southeast Asia. I also knew that I wanted to do so in such a way that was not merely another illustration of things we already know (or ought to know) about ecological crisis. What I did not realize at the


\textsuperscript{11} During this interview, the charismatic Lim Yew Kuan, possibly most celebrated of the woodblock artists appeared to be reveling in and possibly exaggerating the heroic politics of his younger days. Encouraged perhaps by the energies and curiosities of a younger generation, Lim recalled how the group had ordered and shared banned literature from China, exclaiming, “We were Marxists, we were all Marxists!” as well as the writings of Lu Xun on the woodblock. I read his attempts later the same day to teach me breathing and to emphasize a more mystical relationship to the energy of the wood as Lim similarly enjoying a master-pupil, gendered, cultured dynamic (while an audience of Lim’s wife and teenage daughter tried unsuccessfully to repress their laughter!). Lim, interview. See note 4.
time was quite how disparate an assemblage of conflicting stories would eventually evolve from various sites where fingerprints meet wood-grain across the archipelago.

Fig. 5-2. Lee Kee Boon, *Nanyang University*, 1955 (1999 print), woodblock print on paper, 20 cm x 31 cm. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.

*Nanyang University* by Lee Kee Boon depicts the construction in 1955 of the university popularly known as *Nantah*. (Fig. 5-2) This was an independent institution funded by diverse migrant Chinese philanthropists and communities. It has been described as having a “good claim to being the first Southeast Asian university”¹² because, although the medium of instruction was Chinese, *Nantah* was independent of colonial rule and resolutely located in Malaya.¹³ But both colonial and post-independence authorities regarded with suspicion the heroic, May Fourth Movement-

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inspired visions of modern life in the archipelago espoused by *Nantah* founders and the critical perspectives developed by *Nantah* faculty and students. 14 Amidst accusations that the institution had fostered communist and cultural chauvinist sentiments, Nanyang University was closed in 1979. In 1982, an engineering institution appeared on the former site, later metamorphosing into Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where I used to teach.

Lee’s *Nanyang University* presents a splintered dance between a raw, porous grain and the construction of a modern that was not to be. Concrete dreams of a modernizing China, transplanted onto a plot of equatorial-orange soil and carved out of jungles and plantations in northwest Singapore, are inscribed with much intensity—indeed, much labor—into a woodblock. The print shows the future *Nantah* administration building as it was in 1955, a “work-in-process.” Still under construction, the building is held together in the print by a delicately-traced, exoskeleton of wooden scaffolding. This fragile depiction of wood-in-wood possibly depicts what were *bakau* mangrove poles shipped to Singapore from archipelago coastlines. Today, the *Nantah* building still stands, rebranded as NTU’s “Chinese Heritage Centre,” an attempt to co-opt disorderly historic material into official “Heritage.”15

But there were also other dreams and desires inscribed in the modern woodblocks. And, often one finds a tree not far from the frame. In another iconic print entitled *Persuading*, 1958, by Tan Tee Chie, a frangipani surrounds two men on a wooden bench. (Fig. 5-3) The older man taps the thigh of the youth with his fingertips, a gesture the latter does not appear to appreciate. Tan Tee Chie was fond of voyeuristic, film noir-like scenes, with ambivalent titles and what is actually being “persuaded” in this print is unclear. Is this, as Tan himself explained to me a “guidance

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14 Official histories portray leftist members of migrant Chinese communities and schools as communists. Others argue that the socially engaged culture of the Chinese in Singapore in the mid-twentieth century had less to do with communism, more to do with the May Fourth Movement efforts to modernize China following Chinese territory loss after World War I. Souchou Yao, “All Quiet on Jurong Road: Nanyang University and Radical Vision in Singapore”, in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore*, ed. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 170-87.

15 Singapore discourse on heritage often concerns a struggle over which entities are considered (grand) Heritage-worthy and which must make way for economic growth. Calling something “Heritage” is also a means by which government agencies celebrate but gild-over contested historical matter.
session” where the older man is counseling a reluctant youth? Or is something more shady perhaps being proposed?

Fig. 5-3. Tan Tee Chie, *Persuading*, 1958, *huang yang* woodblock print on paper, 20.5 cm x 31 cm. Collection of National University of Singapore Museum.

The frangipani, like the *bakau* scaffolding in *Nanyang University* and the burned-tree witnesses of *After The Fire*, is yet another invocation of wood-in-wood. It appears first as anthropomorphic mirror of the older man, winding around the pair, heavy with flowers. A leafy rosette, a third spherical center, opens to the left of the men’s heads. To the right, splayed leaves mirror the older man’s gesticulating fingers.

But what I find more persuasive is the way this frangipani, carved from a *huang yang* (boxwood) block, imported from China, slowly outgrows the ostensible human subject matter. Its branches stretch beyond and forward towards the viewer, disrupting both the composition and easy interpretation. Frangipanis, and especially the white-flowered *Plumeria*

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16 In a 2008 presentation, oral historian and artist Koh Nguang How connected this print with the Chinese left’s “anti-yellow-culture movement” against westernization, materialism, and vice. Tan himself was more vague about what exactly was being “persuaded.” Tan Tee Chie, interview with the author. See note 5.
obtusa Singapore (originating not from Singapore but Latin America), have been traditionally associated with death by both Malay and Chinese communities. To the former, the scent of frangipani (kemboja) at night is said to mean that a pontianak (female vampire) is in the vicinity. In colonial Singapore such trees were only found alongside European buildings or Chinese cemeteries. The path beneath the frangipani slopes vertiginously out of the bottom corner of the image, suggesting subterranean movements that contrast with a light-cut shadow-world of modern construction in the space behind.

It is very common to read accounts of Singapore’s economic success story as the engineering of unwieldy tropical nature into a manicured modern city. The trope of Singapore as “Garden City” is a much-tended feature of official political discourse, Singapore Tourism Board promotions, popular imaginations and critical inquiry, producing a series of somewhat repetitive and top-down associations along the axis of culture/nature. A whole anthology dedicated to environmental histories of Singapore was launched in 2014 entitled Nature Contained, featuring one of the futuristic new supertrees at the new Gardens by the Bay on the front cover. Certainly much of modern Singapore’s development has involved legal and illegal entrepôt processing of and profiting from natural materials, from opium to rubber to contemporary palm oil. More recently, regional marine and mangrove ecologies and an estimated twenty-four Indonesian islands have disappeared, together with sand shipped to Singapore for concrete and land reclamation. This utilitarian

20 For an at once poetic, intimate and biting perspective of palm oil worldings, see Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, Becoming Palm, Ute Meta Bauer and Anca Rujoiu, eds. (Singapore: Sternberg/NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017).
22 After Indonesia banned the sale of sand to Singapore, Singapore turned to Cambodian coastlines. See: Global Witness Press Release 10 May 2010: “Shifting
view of “cheap nature”\textsuperscript{23} was of course not the sole purview of the capitalist block of Southeast Asian nations. Most versions of modernity competing for predominance in the region have regarded raw material exploitation as the primary way forward, be this via nationalized state endeavors, or by opening forest and mining concessions to government cronies and multinationals alike. As a consequence, Southeast Asia suffers the world’s most rapid rate of deforestation and continues to be a major world center of the illegal wildlife trade.\textsuperscript{24}

However, while regional biodiversity is fast reaching a low not seen since the last great extinction,\textsuperscript{25} nature does also have a way of resisting such “containments.” Modern Southeast Asian cities are prone to flooding from tropical storms, even more so as tree roots that formally absorbed runoff are dug up and paved over. Ever more resilient stains of mosquitoes happily breed in clear water containers inside immaculate condominiums. If you leave a new tower block alone for six months, you may find a banyan or strangling fig sprouting from an upper story. And, in a particularly pervasive alliance between two realms of non-humans, banyan trees of a certain size—even in technocratic Singapore—require temple medium assistance to ensure their removal does not upset an uneasy relationship with the lives of spirits.

There are undoubtedly a lot of things that modern humans have done to control and contain Southeast Asian nature. But in the case of Tan Tee Chie’s frangipani as well as the various non-humans drawing me through this research, I am equally interested in things that nature (and by extension natural materials) persuade us to do and the stories they entice us to tell.

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\textsuperscript{26} While there are different perspectives as to whether we have actually reached sixth extinction level or no, science is in agreement that things are not great. Peter Brannen, “Earth Is Not in the Midst of a Sixth Mass Extinction,” \textit{The Atlantic} 13 (Jun 2017). www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/06/the-ends-of-the-world/529545/. Accessed 9 August 2017.
Migrant Ecologies

How might one work through stories of wood in such a way which does not ignore the environmental impacts of modern humans yet does not in the process, reproduce a narrative of singular human supremacy? When I began to work with woodprints, I discovered that the majority of timber available for printmaking in Singapore was jelutong, a rainforest timber, which led me to a search for alternative wood sources and inquiries into stories of objects discarded on Singapore streets. From 2006 to 2009, I lived in a quarter officially known as Little India, famous for its congregations of South Asian migrant workers. The quarter also plays host to a plethora of discarded “migrant objects,” such as electrical items, cardboard, and tin cans. Each night, a “nocturnal economy” or “ecology” occurs where these objects are collected and trolleyed to a central recycling point, often by elderly Singaporeans and migrants. I noticed that discarded timber items had not yet been integrated into this ecology and began to venture out at night collecting wooden planks and bits of discarded or damaged furniture.

I became interested in how and from where these pieces of wood had migrated to Little India, and these inquiries led to my first collaboration with a Singapore startup called DoubleHelix Tracking Technologies. DoubleHelix initially assisted me by overseeing cell tests in order to identify timber and tree species and thereby possible forests and plantations of origin of the objects I had collected.

I considered creating a forest of objects out of this collection, together with shadow landscapes of their prints. Mostly planks and random pieces of wood, they would all be inscribed with the routes of their migrations. However, a reminder of more disparate perspectives of my collection occurred early on when I observed my three adopted street cats

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26 Jelutong is not on the CITES A-list of endangered species. However, the harvesting of jelutong for art supplies and pencils contributes to rainforest destruction. See for example: Rainforest Relief, 2004 “Jelutong (Dyera costulata).” www.rainforestrelief.org/What_to_Avoid_and_Alternatives/Rainforest_Wood/What_to_Avoid_What_to_ChOOSE/By_Tree_Species/Tropical_Woods/J/Jelutong.html. Accessed 11 November 2012.

noses forwards, mouths open, interact with a four-legged stool I found on the corner of Kampong Kapor Road. Was some kind of wood-cat interpretive zone\textsuperscript{28} being constituted here, where the stool had absorbed stories that the feline nose and mouth were investigating?\textsuperscript{29} In my work as writer and artist, I have tried to emphasize non-human perspectives of local politics and histories.\textsuperscript{30} Domestic objects made of forest materials carry traces of story in their cells that have been acquired during journeys through industrial and intimate, human and non-human environments. Perhaps these feline investigators could sniff out that stray black dog that was sitting with his human by this stool when I discovered it on the corner of Kampong Kapor Road?

Another related turn concerned a relationship between art practice and advocacy. I have been engaged and allied with various artist-civil society issues in Singapore and elsewhere, but in my practice I have tried to let activist concerns inform rather than determine the process. Had I chosen to focus upon the many planks of wood collected from a nearby construction site, I might have discovered that the timber used was an illegal species and the project might have become, certainly more immediate, but possibly also more “black and white” and predictable, comprising evidence of supply chains and life cycles of materials. However, for me, choosing to work with domestic objects added other layers of familiarity and engagement, dreamwork and complicity.

Another challenge involved how to develop a contemporary method that paid homage to the Malayan Modern Woodblock Movement. As mentioned above, I originally intended to make my collection of discarded timber into woodblocks in the spirit of the 1950s and 1960s, inscribing stories of actual and speculative migration into their grain. However, once these objects had spent time in my studio, I found I had begun a relationship with them. And with that relationship came an ethics.

\textsuperscript{28} The idea that there are meaning-making processes outside of the human in which we may be part- or temporarily included, has become a key theme in Migrant Ecologies projects. It links to Donna Haraway’s pioneering analyses of impermanent, inter-species “contact zones”; different species “becoming with” each other or “making each other up in the flesh…full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined sometimes-separate heritages” Donna J. Haraway, \textit{When Species Meet} (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 16-17 and 25.

\textsuperscript{29} Cats scent out stories both with their noses and by “tasting” the air with an olfactory organ on the roof of their mouths.

\textsuperscript{30} See, for example, Lucy Davis, ed., \textit{Regional Animalities: FOCAS Forum on Contemporary Art and Society} 6 (Singapore/Kassel: The Substation/documenta #12 Magazines Project, 2007).
Fig. 5-4. Lucy Davis, *Bangku terentang*, 2009, print of *terentang* stool with mixed ink & paper, 105 cm x 75 cm. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.
Although the wood had already been cut into pieces by unknown carpenters, there was an integrity to these forms and I found I could not do further violence to by reducing them to my stories. My response, instead of cutting into the objects, was to make primitive prints of each part. (Fig. 5-4) On the one hand, I attempted to get as physically, positively close to the object as possible to let the wood grain reveal its story. On the other hand, I arranged the fragment-like prints in the cold, dissected manner of natural history drawings in order to empirically display each constituent part to greatest effect.

Fig. 5-5. Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*. 1959 Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

At the same time, I asked writer friends Alfian bin Sa’at and Isrizal (who half-jokingly called themselves “native informants”) to teach me Malay names of the objects I had collected. In doing this I was performatively channeling equally earnest attempts by colonial natural historians to learn local names of specimens as well as a practice whereby the Chinese migrant-artists of the mid-twentieth century aimed for greater
“permanent residence” in the region via the learning of Malay. Although the centrality of the Malay language in Singapore has waned in the last half century, in the late 1950s Malay was considered the “National Language” both at the official level and in vernacular everyday practice. As illustrated in this iconic painting by Chua Mia Tee, migrants of all kinds, including Chinese artists and intellectuals such as Chua’s contemporaries (members of a leftist arts organization called The Equator Society), took pains to naturalize their residential status in the region, both via language-learning and via depictions of Southeast Asian life. (Fig. 5-5)

Once DoubleHelix identified the species of trees from which my collection of objects derived, a second search began: a pilgrimage to living Singapore specimens of the trees themselves, either in the Singapore Botanic Gardens or Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, the last remaining sites of primary forest on the island. This process was carried out with assistance from Dr. Shawn Lum, plant biologist and president of the Nature Society of Singapore. It involved an at once more laid-back and more technologically-mediated “initiation” compared Lim Yew Kuan’s breathing-session (described above), when Shawn, who knows practically every inch of Bukit Timah Nature Reserve from memory, guided me to sites of specific species via my mobile telephone. Figure 5-6 depicts a *Terentang* (*Campnosperma auriculatum*) tree, the kind from which the four-legged stool we found at Kampong Kapor Road originated.

A second series of works involved a Humpty-Dumpty task of putting the tree back together again. This method involved my spending hours repetitively printing layer upon layer of all parts of each object in different gradations of ink in an attempt to rebuild, for example, a *terentang* tree, assembled exclusively from chopped-up pieces of paper, all of them separate impressions of the wood-grain of the one wooden stool. As I was working backwards in this process from a tangible object to an imagined tree, my “interpretive bias” became as much towards a “fourlegged-stool-ness” of the tree, the spirit-of-an-object-in-a-tree, as it was towards the spirit-of-a-tree-in-an-object. In these large-format, cut-and-pasted collages, the fine grain of the wood is very apparent, as are the

31 Today Malay is still the National Language, but due to various political-cultural pressures it has become less common as a lingua franca, only somewhat tokenistically used in official and military ceremonies.
32 Only much later did I also notice the wooden stool in the far right of a painting I had been looking at and discussing in class for decades.
33 These were the days before either of us had GPS or Facetime apps on our cell phones, so Shawn’s instructions were entirely verbal.
Fig. 5-6. Lucy Davis, ‘Terentang Stool Tree’ Terentang/Campnosperma Auriculata, 2009, assembled print fragments of found terentang stool with mixed ink and paper, 150 cm x 237 cm. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.
specific characteristics of each object: the joins, the nuts and bolts, the scratches and incidental cuts from human impact. They do not posit a pristine, romantic source but rather something that was becoming out of layers of paper print and fragments of story that had migrated to a quarter of Singapore.

A second play on the naming of names took place where I enlisted the assistance of friends to create a new Latin genealogy of this “Four-Legged-Stool Tree.” Here, I was rehearsing a practice of naming newly discovered species and human cultivars alike, after lovers, royalty, politicians, movie stars and, in the case of the orchid collection in the Singapore Botanic Gardens, a trail of visiting dictators and their wives. A Latin text which ran alongside this “Terentang Stool Tree” read, for example: “This is the stool found on the corner of Kampong Kapor Road and given to us by the karang guni seller in the black hat with the black dog.”

**Genetic Imprints**

After a series of exhibitions exploring this woodprint collage method, a group of us with myself as Principal Investigator was awarded a Tier 1 Singapore Ministry of Education grant to extract DNA from one specific teak bed and to travel to wherever the DNA suggested the timber originated. This research collaboration also included the aforementioned DoubleHelix Tracking Technologies, photographer Shannon Lee Castleman, Dr. Shawn Lum, musicians, Zai Kuning and Zai Tang, and ten student and graduate assistants from Nanyang Technological University.

Each individual tree has a unique DNA identity, termed with some anthropomorphic arrogance a “fingerprint.” DoubleHelix Tracking has pioneered the use of DNA fingerprinting technology to certify the legal plantation origins of timber. However, in this instance we were challenging DoubleHelix to move backwards through a supply chain, interpreting degraded wood from a mid-twentieth-century bed that was estimated to have been made during the lifetime of the members of the Malayan Modern Woodblock Movement. This was not an exact process, as complete genographic archives for teak do not exist. However, DoubleHelix Tracking collaborators were excited when preliminary tests suggested a connection between DNA from our bed and teak in southeast Sulawesi. One theory held that teak, imported to Indonesia for centuries,

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34 See note 27.
had “naturalized” in southeast Sulawesi and that this phenomenon might be evident in its genetic structure. So, a Migrant Ecologies team travelled to Muna, a Southeast Sulawesi island with a reputation for the best teak in Indonesia, in search of stories.

Uncertainty at the beginning of investigations is in stark contrast with the figuring of DNA in popular imagination. While a DNA sequence might lead a geneticist through rich and variegated encounters, the spirit of nineteenth-century positivism persists in mass-media projections of DNA: a “Journey to the Source,” colonizing new frontiers with the value-added, economistic timbre of the “The Barcode.” I am grateful for the journeys our bed DNA has taken us on, and I am persuaded of the macroecological possibilities of (open-source) genographic archives. But, there were also complications in our collaborations. Whereas the processes of DNA-extraction in an Adelaide laboratory were made completely transparent to us, the methods of matching our bed DNA to Sulawesi teak remained obscure. We were basically presented a gel printout and informed this was a “confident match” with a sequence from our bed. We took this information in good faith even though we had been advised that most teak entering Malaya in the mid-twentieth century came from Burma. Another complication concerned our own project premises, which aimed to appropriate neither investigative journalism, nor “lab aesthetics,” nor illustrative science. Instead, at that moment in the project, I hoped to explore the way a dream in DNA code might seed itself, like teak across the archipelago, exposing what I envisaged would be grounded

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35 And indeed in the marketing of Double Helix Tracking Technologies. See note 27.
36 Judith Roof argues in The Poetics of DNA, “DNA…is not just another scientific fact. DNA’s overt connection to processes of representation (the alphabet, the book, the map [one might add here, the imprint LD]) makes… representations of DNA particularly rich sites for understanding the interrelation of science, metaphor and narrative.” Judith Roof, The Poetics of DNA (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 24.
37 Together with Double Helix Tracking Technology, we proposed a larger grant project to DNA-profile teak from the whole Asian region, in order to collate an open-source archive for use by NGOs, government timber boards and so forth. However, this proposal did not reach the final rounds. This outcome might possibly have been due to IP considerations by the funding agencies and because being open-source, it was not a venture that would bring in profits.
39 David Antiques, interview with author, 215 Rangoon Road, 17 October 2009.
but mutable ecologies of power, economics, labor, gender and species. A later addition would be ecologies of spirits.

**Colonies of Teak**

The creation myth for *kulijawa* or teak in Muna language\(^{40}\) recalls that teak seeds\(^{41}\) arrived on the island over five hundred years ago in the form of gifts by a royal Javan envoy to the Muna King. Teak enabled that envoy, a Javan nobleman, to implant himself and a timber economy into Muna and its aristocracy via marriage. For centuries, only royalty could cultivate teak, with capital penalties for smugglers. Later, the Dutch intensified production, taking over plantations on the pretext of rescuing islanders from Bugis slave-raids.\(^{42}\) After independence the Indonesian government took over, and, after Suharto opened plantations and forests for international logging and internal cronies in 1967, a major timber boom ensued. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, demand from Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia exceeded supply; sawmills lined the Muna harbor; and “rivers were thick with logs... you could walk on wood all the way to the sea.”\(^{43}\) Today, practically all commercially viable teak has been cut. No primary forest remains, and sawmills are overrun with creepers.

At first it appeared that teak, had completely “monoculturalized” Muna life, demanding subsistence farmers transform into plantation-workers and village headmen into labor supervisors for a logging economy. A saying heard repeatedly was *politik Muna adalah politik kayu*, “Muna politics is a politics of wood.”\(^{44}\) Village buffalo, central to subsistence cultivation,

\(^{40}\) La Ode Sirad Imbo, Muna oral historian and philologist, interview with author, October 2010.


\(^{42}\) This process was followed closely in the English-language press of the Straits Settlements. See, for example, “Our Neighbours: Slavery in Celebes,” *The Straits Times* (10 January 1907), 8; and “Situation in Celebes: Striking Advantages of the Argument of Force,” *The Straits Times* (March 28, 1908), 7.

\(^{43}\) Village Head and Community Elders, Tampo District Muna, interview with author, trans. Laksana Pelawi, October 2010.

\(^{44}\) Anthropologist Jennifer Gaynor, who researched fisheries and maritime history in eastern Indonesia’s rural littoral and did field work in Muna in the late 1990s, remarked in email correspondence that this saying was also common at the time she was there. Jennifer Gaynor, email conversation with author, 9 November 2011.
were initially loaned-out to drag logs to river-floats. Later, as the industry automated, the buffalo were sold-off. Although subsistence farm plots and fishing along the plastic-clogged, mangrove-depleted coasts still remain, the main preoccupation of the twentieth century appears to have been teak.

Alongside macro-ecological perspectives, our project also aimed to trace everyday and micro-gestures. It was only in 2000 that smallholder teak plantations were finally permitted on Muna Island. For centuries before this, islanders could legally fell teak only for domestic purposes. But commercial teak takes thirty years to mature. Thus, according to the discourse of DNA-certification, villagers will continue practices considered “illegal,” as they cut more quality teak than needed to build houses with double walls and keep extra stocks underneath their homes for “repairs” and savings. A week before we arrived in Muna, a forest police officer was attacked with parang knives while trying to apprehend woodcutters in a hutan konservasi, a plantation which had been awarded konservasi or “conservation” status, not for maintaining biodiversity but in order to protect the groundwater.

Halfway through our fieldwork, we discovered what photographer Shannon Lee Castleman calls “tree-wounds,” a moment whereby microgestures of Muna islanders came together with my initial interest in recasting the modern woodcut. As Shannon puts it, “We discovered these enormous tree-wounds on the edges of konservasi plantations. Mr. La Ode Sirad Imbo explained that villagers would make cuts in the trees over a period of time on the side not facing the road until the tree eventually died. The tree was then removed, as it is understood to have fallen on its own.” This process also enables the tree to dry out and the wood to become ready for use while still standing.

45 After the fall of Suharto in 1997, a decentralisation process has taken place across Indonesia, the results of which are uncertain. For Muna islanders it has meant finally a possibility to establish independent, smallholder teak plantations. Elsewhere, decentralisation has meant more power to local gangsters, militias, and, ironically, former Suharto cronies who were awarded forest concessions during the dictatorship.

Figs. 5-7 and 5-8. Shannon Lee Castleman, ‘Tree Wounds in a Konservasi Forest,’ Scenes from an Island After a Timber Boom, 2010 (Fig. 9) and 2011 (Fig. 10), Muna Island, Southeast Sulawesi.

The “tree-wound portraits”, which Shannon shot outdoors with a black velvet backdrop, are quite literally “woodcuts,” cut by the axe and then cropped by the camera in a space somewhere between life and death, between tree and wood. Hard not to anthropomorphize, they resemble wounded limbs. And yet a tremendous affective presence pervades. This was a presence that compelled Shannon to return six months later to photograph them again. Figure 5-7 shows a tree-wound that Shannon photographed in November 2010. Figure 5-8 is the stump of the same tree that she photographed again in April 2011. Once these photographs were enlarged, new micro-ecologies appeared. We found growing out of these monuments grasshoppers, spiders, termites and plants that Shannon had not originally noticed.

Teak Zombies and Hutan Hantu

Once we noticed the first set of tree wounds, we began looking at the backs of all the teak trees we saw and realized that these still standing, “teak zombies” were in fact everywhere. Indeed, the only konservasi plantations left uncut were those considered to be haunted.
In this snapshot by Shannon, we are standing around the largest teak tree we found in Muna in a *hutan-hantu*, or haunted forest. (Fig. 5-9) It was estimated to be over a century old. Just visible in the top left is evidence of a strange “battle” that has been playing out in these *hutan hantu* between plantation teak and the indigenous banyan/beringen, or strangling-fig. The banyan starts as a seed, dispersed in the canopy by a bird or a bat. The banyan seedling puts out aerial roots which, when they reach the ground, enforce a complex, ribcage-like architecture. “Possessing” and suffocating their hosts, strangling-figs are, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, thought to house potent spirits throughout Asia—even in ultra-modern Singapore. (Fig. 5-10)
Fig. 5-10. Lucy Davis: *Banyan and Teak*, Muna, Southeast Sulawesi, 2010. Woodprint collage. Woodprints from a 1930’s teak bed found in Singapore on paper, 240 cm x 150 cm, 2012. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.
While Shannon was photographing this tree at dawn, I looked around the still-rhythmic topography of the old plantation, observing how the light cast shadows of the large floppy leaves onto a comparatively clear, dry forest floor. These regular patterns were interrupted sporadically by dark braids of aerial roots and a deeper, knotted shade where a banyan had taken hold, the parasite becoming in turn a host for other migrant flora as animals arrived to eat figs and deposited more seeds. As the sun rose, I heard a familiar clatter-squawk in the canopy—perhaps a banyan was fruiting? The birds resembled the yellow-crested cockatoo, critically endangered in its native islands and yet escapee crackles thrive in cities like Hong Kong and Singapore. One noisy individual occasionally visits the pong pong tree outside my window in an interspecies gang of correllas. It became all the clearer to me that the active agents of conservation on Muna were neither the forest police, nor the few island NGOs, but rather cockatoos, banyans, and spirits.

The ability to divine which spirits have made a tree or piece of wood their home is the purview of dukun-dukun, or shamanic wood-doctors. A dukun conventionally advises whether a particular tree should be felled and which wood to use in house construction, providing incantations for each process. In Muna architecture, the root-end of a plank should point groundwards and the crown-end skywards. For overhead beams, the crown points towards Mecca. Over the centuries, Muna dukun-dukun have migrated their arboreal expertise to encompass teak plantations. Muna dukun-dukun claim to know crown or root ends of a plank by holding it in their hands.

On the advice of a Muna oral historian, meetings were arranged with two dukun-dukun. Before we left Singapore, I had fashioned samples of our bed, leftovers from the DNA extraction into “team talismans” for us to wear during our fieldtrip. I presented one of these samples and a photo

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47 As we learned in Singapore primary school, the pong pong, or cerbera odollam, has mango-sized fruits with a deadly seed containing the poison, cerberin. However, escapee cockatoos in Singapore seem to have found a niche food source with the pong pong, managing to pull off the meat of the fruit, without touching the seeds.

48 An ever-invasive array of dukun-dukun have transplanted themselves into modern life throughout the archipelago and are consulted on matters from healing, marriage, agriculture, and architecture to urban planning, finance, and politics.

49 See, for example, Roxana Waterson, The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).

50 La Ode Sirad Imbo interview. See note 40
of our bed to each dukun and asked what they thought. Neither appeared impressed. Smoking a clove cigarette, the male dukun sat in the front of his new, concrete-walled house surrounded by neighbors and children. He seemed relaxed ... perhaps a little amused? He told us that our teak was jati-hitam [black teak] of the lowest grade—used only for the lavatory and back-areas of houses. Laughing, he tossed our “talisman” to one of his children as we drove off. The female dukun invited us into her older teak house with bright blue panels. We sat on a bench opposite her husband and niece (a dukun-in-training). It was dark inside, but strips of sunlight slid in through slits in the boards. She talked about her work, mostly with women’s health and sometimes exorcisms. She explained that spirits were not of the trees themselves, but that they settled in various trees, sites, and timber. Her personal encounters included tree spirits with no heads but with eyes under their armpits. After examining our sample, she declared our wood was not from anywhere in Sulawesi.

By the end of our Muna trip we had quite a collection of spirit stories from various sources. Other village elders living next to the hutan hantu told us of domestic cats they found as road-kill beside the forest. When carried away, they morphed into were-tigers. Cats have a special sacred status in Muna and must be given Islamic burials when they die. While driving, if you run over a cat; you must stop, pick it up, and give it a ritual burial.

The Muna PR Chief, who arranged most of our interviews and who accompanied us everywhere in his khaki uniform, appeared to thoroughly enjoy our discussions with the dukun-dukun. But our collaborators, the DoubleHelix Indonesia country-officer, originally from Sumatra and our “fixer,” an engineer from Kendari on the mainland, were resistant. The country-officer dismissed our dukun-dukun expertise as “animist magic,” declaring his Catholic and our fixer’s Islamic faiths to be more “modern” and “scientific.” But one breakfast while showing on my laptop an

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51 It was actually quite difficult for me to give my own “talisman” away. I had become quite used to having it around my neck, that unmistakable teak fragrance wafting up from the wood. And, I had developed a habit of turning it around on its string while we talked to people.

52 I am not an anthropologist and I regret that our meetings with both Muna dukun-dukun were so fleeting. Instead of analysing these encounters, I have tried to describe them in as much not-completely-understood detail as possible.

53 It is, of course, not only my Indonesian collaborators who have had a problem with animism. Bruno Latour among many others have argued how the rational self-perception of modernity is constituted via iconoclastic denigration of the animism of the Other, even as “the moderns” ascribe agency, emotion, and
earlier animated film of mine, featuring Alfred Russel Wallace, I recounted the legend of how, while recovering from malaria in the Malay archipelago, Wallace formulated a theory of natural selection independently of Darwin. Although neither of our advisors were familiar with Wallace or his fever-dream, at the mention of Darwin both went quiet, then moved to the other end of the balcony to converse. Our fixer went to his room and the county-officer came back smiling. They had discussed together and agreed that although they both believed in DNA, neither believed in Darwin’s evolution.\textsuperscript{54}

The DoubleHelix officer also seemed quite exasperated by my repeating the same questions to villagers about the provenance of our bed, when we could get the results from DNA. His main objective was to collect samples: leaves and his own series of small wood-cuttings, chipped from the sides of older trees with a special chisel. This collection he meticulously arranged in airtight containers in the boot of the car. Besides confirming a match with our bed, DoubleHelix wanted to collect a range of older Muna teak samples. In the end, although samples from Muna did indeed match DNA from our bed, the results were nevertheless inconclusive, as tests of newer beds appeared equally close to profiles from Burma.


\textsuperscript{54} One of my challenges in this project has been to take seriously the little I could fathom of \textit{dukun-dukun} gestures without reproducing familiar dualistic frameworks. In this project, I hoped not to reduce our exchanges to (merely) rural-urban resistances, with \textit{dukun-dukun} summoning tree-spirits to fend off more international timber prospectors (us). Nor was I trying as artist to denigrate/relativize DNA-tracking by revealing how we blindly accepted a Sulawesi match for our bed without understanding how this particular iconography of genetic certitude “spirited” itself onto the paper, or how we “believed in DNA” the same way Muna islanders “believed in tree spirits.” Finally, as an offshoot, I hoped also not to reproduce another familiar dualistic dynamic, namely that of the romantic artist championing an encounter with the Other to “animate” her art or self-realization. I am not sure I am really off the hook with any of the above, but my understanding of these encounters has been both enabled and complicated by re-reading Donna Haraway on multiple ways we becomings-with, as well as Haraway’s more recent writings on the many-tentacled experiences of what she prefers to calls the \textit{Chthulucene}. See Donna J. Haraway, \textit{When Species Meet} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16–17 and 25; and Donna J. Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” \textit{Environmental Humanities} 6, (2015): 159-165.
On my return to Singapore, I spent one year in a darkened studio, pressing paper against the black-inked boards of my teak bed and amassing variegated mounds of woodprints, which I tore into strips. In an attempt to work through our multiple Muna encounters, I shuffled these print fragments around the floor for months.

Fig. 5-11. Animated film still from *Jalan Jati* Teak Road 2012. Wood-print fragments from a teak bed and charcoal. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

Fig. 5-12. Animated film still from *Jalan Jati* Teak Road 2012. Wood-print fragments from a teak bed and charcoal. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.
From this process, an animated film evolved slowly. And, a dark and dense aesthetic issued from these ever-metamorphosizing print-fragments and charcoal. The main actors in the film were a bed, a cockatoo, and a banyan. In a series of instances, the cockatoo flies into the frame and settles on a bed, a boat, a teak stump, the remains of Moshe Saifdi’s Marina Bay Sands, and then shits a banyan seed. (Figs. 5-11 through 5-13) Writing is, of course, another practice in which things emerge in the telling. It is only in writing this chapter that I realize how a final abstract scene of the animated film is part echo of the detritus of Lim Yew Kuan’s *After the Fire*. In this scene, I placed together every single print fragment that I had cut over the year of shooting and that was lying on the floor of my studio. Remains of container ships, Japanese World War Two bombers, Singapore skyscrapers, housing development flats, City Hall, the bed, all were eventually sucked up into this monstrous, parasitical tree.

These encounters animate a dance between plantation teak and the migratory ficus, Muna tree-lore and plant genetics that I only partially understand, but in which perspectives of country officers, woodcutters, artists, engineers, *dukun-dukun*, tree spirits, and DNA code turn together and break apart in an urgent struggle over cut wood in rising seas on two islands after a timber boom.
Wood and Men

In the fourth major exhibition of this project at National University of Singapore Museum from 2014 to 2015, two woodprint-collages were mounted side-by-side. One is a large-scale reconstruction of an undated photograph of the late Alex Bermuli, a Muna sawmill-owner, in a plantation with a group of men gathered around a tree upon which Bermuli has placed his hand. (Fig. 5-14) His son, Walter T. Bermuli a retired sawmill engineer, told us his father had migrated in the 1950s from Menado in the North of Sulawesi to Muna. Walter allowed us to re-photograph his collection of photos dating from the timber boom years. For three generations, the men in Walter’s family had worked with teak plantations. At the time, Walter’s son was a forest policeman.

One photograph of Alex Bermuli is a kind of foreshadowing of Shannon’s snapshot of the Migrant Ecologies team as they stood around that one large teak tree. A teasing question arises: Could it be the same tree? *Politik Muna adalah politik kayu*, as in our snapshot from 2010, multiple politics of wood are suggested: politics of class, gender, age, ethnicity (the Bermulis, as Christians, regard themselves as a separate ethnicity to Muna islanders). But there are arboreal influences at stake, too. Both photographs, for example, attest to that inescapable temptation for humans to place the palms of their hands on the trunk of a tree.

The second woodprint-collage reconstructs a photograph of Simon Oei of Nature Wood Pte. Ltd, Singapore, at around four or five years old. (Fig. 5-15) His father, timber merchant Allen Oei, had placed him on top of a huge *meranti* log in the Danish-run timber yard in which he worked in the 1970s. Like Walter Bermuli, Allen Oei, whose family migrated to Singapore from Surabaya before the war, gave us access to his photo album alongside a surprisingly frank series of interviews detailing his rags-to-riches journey from itinerant timber-grader to influential merchant. Allen Oei had been to Muna and confirmed that Muna teak was superior to any other outside Burma. By Simon’s reckoning, his father controlled a significant proportion of the (legal and illegal) teak trade passing through Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s. But Simon does not recall this childhood photograph being taken. As a young man, Simon found

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55 Oei recounted, for example, how in the 1970s when local authorities discovered his Indonesian colleague logging illegally in Riau forests for a French company, the colleague burned the whole forest area to cover their tracks. Allen Oei, interview with authors. In Lucy Davis and Kee Ya Ting, *I am Like A Karang Guni of Teak* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Museum/Migrant Ecologies Project, 2014), 11.
Fig. 5-14. Lucy Davis. *Alex Bermuli and colleagues*. Reproduction of a photograph of the Muna Island teak industry from the collection of Mr W. T. Bermuli, in woodprints from a 1930’s teak bed found in Singapore and charcoal on paper. 240 cm x 150 cm, 2012. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.
Fig. 5-15. Lucy Davis. *Simon Oei*. Reproduction of a photograph of timber merchant Simon Oei as a child in the 1970’s standing in the grounds of P. Bork A/S International Kranji where his father Allen Oei was employed. Reproduced in prints of one of the last logs from Burma to be imported to Singapore after a 31 March 2013 log export ban. 220 x 150 cm, 2014. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.
the sweaty, dirty gangster-like world of the sawmill repulsing. He studied computer science at university and worked for a series of multinationals before joining at age of 28 his father’s business. When we interviewed Simon in 2014, he was poised under Allen’s watchful eye to take over Nature Wood. Aware of the ecological complexities of his position, he tried to find ways to defend it: “Timber is of course an excellent way to contain carbon.”

Singapore, like Muna, is now a post-timber boom island. Whereas Muna was devastated during the boom years, in Singapore fortunes were made and, as recently as the 1980s, “legal” timber was the island’s fifth largest export. But, the Chinese middlemen who once dominated the trade are no longer required. International buyers can now go directly to Burma or Java. The Oei family has Burmese connections going back to the 1970s and maintains partnerships with Burmese government timber concerns. At the time of our interviews, they received a shipment, claimed to be the last import of logs to Singapore after a ban imposed by the Burmese government at the end of March 2014 on whole-log export. A European buyer (we were told he was Danish) was already on hand. Allen Oei donated two ends of these logs to the exhibition at NUS Museum, which were displayed as evidence together with their prints. The title of the NUS Museum exhibition, *When you get closer to the heart you may find cracks*, was taken from something Allen Oei said. He meant this quite literally to be about the cracks in the heartwood of a teak log, but the phrase migrated to our exhibit and took on another resonance to do with the productive-futility of “journeys to the source.”

While reconstructing both woodprint-collages, the protagonists—without my fully intending—began to seem like they were turning into wood. The hand that Alex Bermuli placed on a sunspot on the tree became dark, bark-like. So did Simon Oei’s features, when I began to layer them. These two works were installed at NUS Museum at a right angle with a third print-collage, a reconstruction of the thumbprint of David, the collector from Rangoon Road, who originally gave us the teak bed. David’s thumbprint is the same size as both of the portraits. (Fig. 5-16) Together, all three perhaps suggest modern desires to make one’s mark, via wood collecting, via timber-trading, via DNA-tracking, but the material does not submit so easily. Trees find ways to resist.

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56 Simon Oei, interview with author and Lai Chee Kien. February 2014.
57 For a sensitive reading of these works, see Rui An Ho, “Photographies of Trees,” *ANTENNAE, Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 36 (2016): 64-80
Fig. 5-16. Lucy Davis, *David’s Thumb*. Woodprint collage reproduction of furniture dealer David’s thumbprint in prints of a 1930’s teak bed found in Singapore, made on paper, 240 c. x 150 cm, 2012.
Woodcut Shadows

Fig. 5-17. Lucy Davis, *Building Nanyang University*. Balau scaffolding and woodprint shadow installation inspired by the woodblock print *Nanyang University* by Lee Kee Boon, 1955. Photograph by Norman Ng, 2014. Collection of the National University of Singapore Museum.

A most recent series of works exhibited for the first time at NUS Museum attempted to translate that fragile exoskeleton of *bakau* scaffolding, depicted in the construction of Lee Kee Boon’s *Nanyang University* woodblock into a room-size installation piece. (Fig. 5-17)

Inside a recycled mangrove scaffold, constructed by one of the remaining scaffold-binder artisans in Singapore, “slept” wooden archival boxes, approximating windows of the original building. These boxes contained print-collage, shadow puppet-interpretations of modern woodcut works. (Fig. 5-18) Other boxes housed scenes from mid-1930s Singapore, where a belated discovery of the original advertisement for our bed in *The Straits Times* finally revealed its exact date. \(^58\) The shadow puppets, like everything else, were made from woodprint-collage from the teak bed or from Allen Oei’s teak logs.

\(^{58}\) “Diamond Bedsteads” advertisement *The Straits Times* January 10, 1937.
Fig. 5-18. Lucy Davis, *Together Again* (Wood:Cut). Part IV Art History: *Persuading* Photograph by Norman Ng, 2014. Collection of the National University of Singapore.

Fig. 5-19. Lucy Davis, *Building Nanyang University*. 2014 detail of shadows. Photograph by Norman Ng, 2014.
Fig. 5-20. Lucy Davis, *Malayan Timber Samples*. Boxes of assorted timber samples with the Malay names of trees punched into each block, formerly belonged to the Botany department of the University of Malaya.

Fig. 5-21. Lucy Davis, *Malayan Timber Samples*. Boxes of assorted timber samples with the Malay names of trees punched into each block, formerly belonged to the Botany department of the University of Malaya.
This room of shadows, slowly animated by swinging light pendulums, aimed to conjure half-built, still-breathing dreams of wood which seep into each other: the shadow of the last tiger killed in 1937 in Choa Chu Kang Village, merging into the teak bed advertisement from Diamond Bedsteads of the same year.\textsuperscript{59} (Fig. 5-19) Also inside the scaffolding and on the floor were six boxes of assorted wood samples with Malay names of trees punched into each block. (Figs. 5-20 and 5-21) They once belonged to the Botany Department of the University of Malaya during a time when the department retained connections to commercial forestry. These blocks are no longer used for teaching and were given to me during a storeroom clear out by the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, which opened in 2015, the fiftieth anniversary of Singapore’s independence. Each sample is of a size that fits comfortably into the palm of one’s hand. They are quite lovely to hold, with a remarkable range of colors, densities, scents, and sounds.

The only sample in any of the boxes that sometimes had its name printed in English and not Malay was “teak.” This is possibly because teak was originally an imported species, possibly also because at the time of these collections, teak was already one of the most internationally valuable

\textsuperscript{59} A second incarnation of this installation took place during the Taiwan International Video Exhibition at Hong Kah Museum, Beitou Taiwan in 2016, curated by Fang-Tze Hsu. The installation was entitled \textit{Wood: Cut Cinema}. In the exhibition catalogue Hsu writes of the temporal ecologies moving though these woodprint shadows: “If time could be a form of language, what Lucy Davis has done is to make the moving time during the recording the life and migration of wood (in the biological and political senses) a bridge for a sort of language between the human world and the ecosystem. A reconfiguration of [the animated film] \textit{Jalan Jati} (Teak Road) evolving from the \textit{Together Again} (Wood:Cut) projects, \textit{Wood: Cut Cinema} not only reverberates with the curatorial inquiry of “Negative Horizon”—the violences of modernity in forms of mobility—but also interrogates the anthropocentric apparatus of the moving image by rearticulating the formation of Singapore as a modern state from a wooden sense of time. The historical experiences of diasporic Chinese intellectuals interweave with the timbers used in their artworks and the teak that has been traded across the oceans since the 16th century. Davis deliberately sets up a constellation of times, including the time of wood, the time of developmentalism, and the time of the faded collective memories of Nanyang University from those woodblock print artists. Motivated by the global context of deforestation and illegal logging in the region and by the collective oblivion of the historical trajectory of art with socialist affiliations, \textit{Wood: Cut Cinema} argues for the alternative epistemology of the aesthetics of moving images.” Fang-Tze Hsu, Curators note: \textit{Negative Horizons, Taiwan International Video Art Festival}, October 2016-January 2017.
of the timbers of the region. While the word “teak” is most likely of South Asian, Dravidian origin, in Malay/Indonesian the wood is called Jati. Jati-diri and sejati are common words. Diri means “self”; jati-diri is often taken to mean “identity,” “personality,” or, most accurately, “the essence of self”; and sejati is taken to mean “pure,” “true,” “authentic,” “original,” or “genuine.” Such translations of jati suggest an ironic, poetic layering of our quest, returning our project to the efforts of colonial natural historians and migrant Chinese artists alike to authenticate their presence in the archipelago via the adoption of languages, transcription of forms, cuttings of wood and quests for origins, as well as my own efforts to follow a process led by teak wood, not in spite of, but more because of, the “cracks at the heart.”

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60 The English word teak is variously thought to have been derived from the Portuguese teca, which was in turn a likely interpretation of the Malayalam (Dravidian) tekka, cognate with Tamil tekku, Telugu teku, and Kanarese tegu “the teak tree.” See for example, Etymology Online, “teak (n.).” www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=teak. Accessed 13 January 2015.

61 Hera, Migrant Ecologies Designer and Laksmi Pamuntjak writer and translator, email correspondence with author. 2-6 November 2012.

62 Curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa reminded us how in South Asian and perhaps there is another South Asian etymological link here, “jati” has been used (and misused) as a reference to exclusionary, essentialist social categories. Hussain Mustafa Shabbir, email correspondence with author, 1 November 2012. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 222.


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