Editorial/Transgressing Epistemic Boundaries

By Zian Chen

In the 9th issue of *Curatography*, titled "Curating Against Amnesia," we have brought together a collection of works by artists and writers who utilize visual analysis to delve into exhibition histories, in order to explore the forgotten aspects of public memory. Our objective is to shed light on the processes through which specific epistemological boundaries are constructed and how cultural/historical amnesia takes shape. This project stems from a genuine interest in critical artistic research that has gained significant attention in recent years. Parallel to this trend, within the realm of curating, there has been a growing movement over the past decade involving numerous artist-curators actively engaging in dialogues with intellectual history. Alongside the pioneering influence of the Raqs Media Collective in the region of Asia, we have observed a significant increase in the curatorial exploration of intellectual historiography across various artistic, curatorial, and literary mediums since the 2010s. Artists such as Liu Ding, Park Chan-kyong, Ho Tzu Nyen, Jitish Kallat, Shubigi Rao, and many others have made valuable contributions to this ongoing endeavor.

In the historiography of exhibition making, there is a recurring pattern emerging that both celebrates, and therefore mythologizes, "artist-curators" as pioneering figures who shape curatorial visions. It may be worthwhile to subject these subsequent "artist-curator-intellectual historiographers" to an even more critically rigorous framework of exhibition history, warranting further scrutiny and examination in the future. However, it is important to note that this issue of *Curatography* does not aim to exhaust this vast subject within its limited spatial capacity. Instead, the editorial team provides a glimpse into these individual approaches in historicizing respective narratives and archival materials, thereby elucidating a distinctive style of artistic and critical analysis.

In his essay, "Icon and Network: Solidarity's Mediums and a Materialist Internationalism," written in 2020 during the global pandemic, artist Ho Rui An explores the concept of the "line of transmission" borrowed from virus forensics and employs visual semiotics to distinguish between two distinct logics of international solidarities: the shallow analogy and the "materialist" model of contamination. Ho further provides a close reading of Naeem Mohaiemen's *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017), which traces the project's leftist historiography and explores a turning point in the Non-Aligned Movement, from open internationalism to conservative nationalism. Adopting Mohaiemen's temporal framework, Ho further explores the ideological shifts of the transformative 1970s, a period marked by the rise of global economics and its dialectical sublation of emancipatory politics through technological advancement.

Co-authored by artist Wu Chi-Yu and myself, our essay, "The Settlers and the Unhomely: The Cinematic Visions of Infrastructure in Eastern Taiwan," analyzes various cinematic portrayals of logistical infrastructure in the region. We examine these representative examples as part of the ongoing settler colonial legacy, ironically embedded in manifold indigenous cultures' erasures to the point of oblivion. In this piece, we interrogate a notable absence of decolonial discourse, a factor that can be seen to validate the vital development of Taiwan's infrastructure, despite its undeniable colonial origins. We aim to make visible the erasure techniques evident in the found footages we collected, presented through the lens of Formosan settler logics, as we hope that these settler cinemas will shed light on the limitations of liberal visibility.

In addition to the aforementioned essays, we have extended an invitation to Chen Wan-Yin, a Taiwanese art critic based in the Netherlands, to provide her insightful response by delving into the discourses surrounding exhibition history that have piqued her interest in recent times. Inspired by an epistolary correspondence between artist Rasheed Araeen and cultural studies scholar Chen Kuang-hsing, which explores the intersection of art and leftwing politics, Chen Wan-Yin seizes upon this evocative exchange to delve into a critical reflection on the relationship between art, research, and their significance within the larger context of our journal's focus on Asia. The untimely recollection of this nearly forgotten

correspondence serves as a master signifier for the essay, stimulating an expansive speculation on the complexities inherent in this multivalent discourse.

Author

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Settlers and the Unhomely: The Cinematic Visions of Infrastructure in Eastern Taiwan

https://curatography.org/9-2-en/

By Zian Chen and Wu Chi-Yu
Translated by Bridget Noetzel

Preface

The eastern coast of Taiwan, nestled amidst majestic mountains, stood as the last bastion that went through the profound transformations wrought by the extractivist practice of modernity. Therefore, the impact of logistics technologies reverberates with heightened intensity, surpassing that experienced in any other part of Taiwan. To date, the master-signifier that most animates populist sentiment in the region is still asking the government for "a safe road home" and an increased budget for construction on the Su'ao-Hualien Highway. This key piece of infrastructure, which is the region's only connection to the metropolis of northern Taiwan, runs through an ecologically fragile area and passes several mines. Yet, since its expansion in the 1990s, the road has been plagued by periodic landslides, intermittently severing this vital connection.[1] While we cannot easily dismiss the importance of transportation connections for the economic well-being of the residents of eastern Taiwan, to fully understand the historical relationship between transportation infrastructure and Indigenous homelands, we must confront the devastating impact this complicated process has had on the ancestral lands of Indigenous communities within the context of colonial history. From this critical perspective, the impact of a road home on the

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[1] For more on the highly political nature of the Su'ao-Hualien Highway's development, see Liu Wei-Chun, "Political Dimension of Tourism Studies: A Critical Introduction to the Politics of Tourism," *Review of Global Politics*, no. 38, (2012): 65-84. For more on the history of the Su'ao-Hualien Highway, see Wang Chih-hsiang, "A History of People on the Road: The Last Lives and the Present of Suhua Highway," *Zhishan* no. 20 (2016): 175-209. For more on the environmental controversies sparked by the Su'ao-Hualien Highway, see Tsai Chung-yueh, "The Su'ao-Hualien Highway is Cut Off Again, Now What?" *The Reporter,* May 31, 2017.

essence of a homeland, whether it fortifies or dismantles, requires further exploration and discussion.

Delving deeper into the workings of settler colonialism in eastern Taiwan, our exploration will center around a series of films that shed light on the intricate relationship between logistical infrastructure and Indigenous communities. Early Japanese colonial propaganda films such as *Southward Expansion to Taiwan* (1940) and *Sayon's Bell* (1943) were the first to show modern infrastructure in the mountains around Su'ao and into Hualien on the silver screen. Another key roadway in eastern Taiwan is the Central Cross-Island Highway. This highway, constructed with funding from the U.S. military, passed through traditional Truku territory and made its cinematic debut in director Pan Lei's propaganda film *On Mount Hehuan* (1958), the first to address the impact of major infrastructure development on Indigenous homelands. Later, director King Hu would choose to set portions of *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971) along the Central Cross-Island Highway. The contrasts between these film clips and historical photographs help us to further consider the settler colonialism underpinning this infrastructure. The Central Cross-Island Highway also involved settler veterans sent to develop wilderness areas, supported by the Veterans Affairs Council. Taiwan's most notable early avant-garde film—Richard Chen's *Liu Pi-Chia* (1965)—records this program for retired soldiers, which we will compare with the idealized settler veteran trope seen in *On Mount Hehuan*. Forty years later, anthropologist Hu Tai-li interviewed that same veteran, Liu Pi-Chia, for her documentary *Stone Dream* (2005) and considered the relationships between disadvantaged settler veterans and their Indigenous spouses. Finally, we will discuss *Song of Orchid Island* (1965), another Pan Lei-directed drama which foreshadows the emergence of tourist photography that would later pose challenges to the Tao Indigenous community's islandic homestead. Once again, this drama provides us with a valuable comparative perspective, enabling us to pair it with Hu Tai-li's ethnographic documentary *Voices of Orchid Island* (1993). In the realm of critical discourse surrounding these early films, the spotlight often falls on the characters portrayed, such as how the myth of Sayon built a specific model for Japanese-Indigenous relations, or how Taiwanese filmmakers of Han descent replicated ethnic chauvinism. Indeed, this othering gaze is still ubiquitous in contemporary Taiwanese society, making a

critique addressing this racism vitally important.[2] This article furthers this line of inquiry by delving into the underlying logic of racialization intricately woven within the newly developed transportation infrastructure of that era. Notably, the recognition bestowed upon Pan Lei for directing location-based films brings to the forefront the significance of the transportation infrastructure that facilitated these engagements within Indigenous territories, even if the biases are clear. The selected films in our study center on eastern Taiwan, encompassing narratives that depict the appropriation of specific lands and symbolic acts of violence, all unfolding around the subject of modern infrastructure. In the visual tapestry of this region, home and the unhomely are inevitably entwined with the creative destruction of infrastructure. This realization served as the impetus for our research, as we delved into the latest infrastructure endeavors in eastern Taiwan and their cinematic portrayal. Through the lens of these films, we aim to unearth the profound significance underlying development, wilderness clearing, and the tourist gaze.

The Su'ao-Hualien Highway: Recalling a Negative Legacy

Shooting began on *Southward Expansion to Taiwan* in 1939. The documentary covers the entire island of Taiwan, enumerating the accomplishments of the Government-General of Taiwan, as the Japanese colonial government was formally known. The film brings viewers to locations following an animated map of railways, highways, and shipping routes, while recording the realities of modern urban planning and resource extraction. It is hard to ignore the fact that the majority of the infrastructure used by the production team was adjacent to a natural resource; some modes of transportation, such as a private car driving

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[2] Documentary director Mayaw Biho noted that, without anti-discrimination systems, this kind of film would continue to be made. Mayaw Biho in "Genduet Episode 32: Indigenous Characters in Film? Returning to an Ethnic Group's Right to Cultural Interpretation," YouTube, *TITV Genduet*, November 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMQI4fm_V0w. For more archival research on this issue, see Leo T. S. Ching, *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 263; Ni Yen-yuan, "Hong Kong's Gaze and Taiwanese Aborigines: Representations of Aborigines in 1960s Hong Kong Cinema," *Journal of Communication Research and Practice* 10, no. 2 (2020): 115-139. See also Atayal film critic Yawi Nokex's blog "Casually Read My Casual Writing" (*Wo Suibian Xie Jiu Suibian Kan*).

along the Central Shrine Trail or the bridge through the Taroko Gorge, were not available to the average citizen under colonial rule. In this regard, *Southward Expansion to Taiwan* can be seen as a film version of a colonial bureaucrat's inspection tour, a theme that is made clear by the interpretation of the phrase "southward expansion" offered at the end of the film.

While functioning as a work of fiction, *Sayon's Bell* (1943), categorized as a national policy film, incorporates numerous scenes that showcase local infrastructure, evoking the documentary style of the colonial inspections depicted in *Southward Expansion to Taiwan*. *Sayon's Bell* is based on the true story of an Atayal girl from the Nan'ao mountains in Yilan, who drowned helping a Japanese police officer transport his luggage. The beginning of the film pans over the Leyoxen village and the suspension bridge construction underway. Beneath its apparent nationalist agenda, this incident also serves as a means to endorse the importance of modern infrastructure that ensures safety, foreshadowing the subsequent discussions surrounding the need for a "safe road home" in the years to come. However, actually visiting that Leyoxen community was not as easy as the propaganda made it out to be. The shoot ran up against logistical difficulties, so the film was actually shot in a Musha community instead. It is worth noting that the Musha, known for their tragic history of racial elimination under Japanese rule, stood as a stark contrast to the idealized image presented in *Sayon's Bell*. Today, when we visit the Old Nan'ao Road where the story was set, we can still see that abandoned bridge. At the 19 km marker on the Old Road, a plaque enlightens visitors about the contrasting nature of Indigenous hunting trails and modern roads. According to the description, the paths forged by Indigenous peoples traversed the mountains in straight lines, leading to dramatic changes in elevation. In contrast, modern roads were often cut along meandering contour lines to accommodate large machines and more logistics capacity.

After World War II, despite the change in political leadership, the intention behind the settler colonial gaze lived on in the need for infrastructure. In the news series produced by the Taiwan Film Production Company in the 1960s, focusing on cities and counties "in progress," many scenes inspire a sense of déjà vu. The camera sometimes follows the paved

road that connects the frontier, or enters large settlements; these shots are interspersed with the occasional Indigenous song or dance scene. On arriving in the Hualien hinterland, the film is shot from almost exactly the same angles as *Southward Expansion to Taiwan*. The two films coincidentally focus on local transportation routes such as the Su'ao-Hualien Highway and the Taroko Central Cross-Island Highway, then inventory the area's natural resources and frontier infrastructure. The striking similarities between the two works are so pronounced that, if the rediscovery of *Southward Expansion to Taiwan* had not occurred until as late as 2003, one might speculate that this news series had drawn inspiration from the earlier film reel.

Spaces commemorating the laborers who built the Su'ao-Hualien Highway show how the settler regime perpetuated its former Japanese colonial legacy. Take, for instance, the Temple of the Trailblazing Martyrs nestled alongside the Su'ao-Hualien trail. Initially built as a tribute to Japanese workers whose lives were claimed by construction mishaps, this monument took on added significance after World War II. As the Kuomintang (KMT) government pressed forward with expanding the Su'ao-Hualien thoroughfare upon existing foundations, it incorporated further layers of remembrance, immortalizing additional workers who had met a tragic end. Thus emerged the Temple of the Trailblazing Martyrs, etched into history as we know it today. Yet, lost within this narrative are the lives of the Indigenous Amis. Based on the oral history given by Tafalong Amis elder Namoh Onor in *Talacowa Kamo* (2020), the Karenkō Prefecture (now Hualien County) government sent many Amis people to help build the road, but their stories have eerily disappeared behind the Japanese heroic image. Once this collective amnesia became woven into the very fabric of the infrastructure itself, it persisted as a negative legacy that continues to permeate the Temple of the Trailblazing Martyrs, established unwittingly by the subsequent Kuomintang government.

The Central Cross-Island Highway: Layers of Oblivion

In 1958, Taiwan received American aid in developing the Central Cross-Island Highway, leading to significant transformations in the landscape. There were also funds for the propaganda drama *On Mount Hehuan* (1958), directed by Pan Lei. The film is primarily set in the Slamaw community of Atalyal people, which later evolved into the Lishan veterans' settlement due to the highway construction. Through an analysis of this film, we will explore the visual remnants of settler colonialism related to the Central Cross-Island Highway.

The central storyline of the film revolves around a love triangle involving a pair of Indigenous sisters and a young engineer who retreated from mainland China together with its settler government. The sisters each have their own opinions regarding the impact of the ongoing highway construction on their community. Through the protagonist's persuasive efforts, particularly regarding the elder sister, who initially opposed the development, the love story becomes intertwined with the triumph of progress. At the end of the story, the engineer, now married to the elder sister, finds contentment in building their new life together in the mountain settlement. While the narrative has been rightly critiqued for its Han settler biases, few discussions focus on its filmic technique. For one, Pan Lei opens the film with a meta-narrative scene: the male protagonist, acting as a journalist, directly addresses the camera and leads viewers on a journey via helicopter. The next few minutes of the film are filled with aerial shots of the construction of the highway amidst the snow on Mount Hehuan. Later on, he incorporates found footage of veterans working unprotected on a steep cliff and a visit from General Chiang Kai-shek and his wife Soong Mei-ling. Pan Lei expertly incorporates journalistic techniques, hinting at the propagandistic nature of the film. However, Pan's way of revealing the filmic nature cannot be interpreted as true meta-cinema. While meta-cinema aims to cultivate awareness of the mechanisms of a film's production, in *On Mount Hehuan*, Pan incorporates the methods of documentary film, which, if not directly evocative of *Sayon's Bell*, lends the didacticism of military propaganda a soft power.

Scholarly investigations into Pan frequently highlight his prowess as a screenwriter, which served as a stepping-stone for his move into directing. However, Pan was better known at

the time for anti-communist literature, the artistic quality of which is highly debatable. Prior to his directorial debut, he had only worked on the screenplay for *A Miracle of Leprosy* (1957), and had no experience in on-location filming. Thus, the only reason he was entrusted with documenting the construction of this American-funded road, then lionized as the highest-elevation highway on the island, stemmed from his involvement in building the Burma Road as part of the Chinese Expeditionary Force in the 1940s. Other commentators also draw connections between *On Mount Hehuan* and the romance depicted in Pan's autobiographical novel, *Private First Class*, involving a Burmese local. These two layers of associations allow us to reinterpret *On Mount Hehuan*: the romantic plotline in the film represents the settler's attempt to brainwash Indigenous people into thinking that the transportation infrastructure would contribute to the prosperity of their hometown, rather than destroying it. However, it is highly unlikely for Pan to have provided a logical justification for this developmental perspective to the Indigenous residents of eastern Taiwan, as the portrayal of the Indigenous people in his film lacks authenticity and depth, indicating his limited factual knowledge of their cultures. At best, he could merely reference the strategic significance of the Burma Road in recovering the lost Chinese motherland from Japanese military expansionism.

Despite Pan's personal stance, the selection of him by the film studio resulted in the overshadowing of any underlying local narrative by the heroic portrayal of the Burma Road. As Pan rapidly gained prominence, he also acquired the freedom to select his own film studio, ultimately joining Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers in the 1960s, where he further honed his on-location filmmaking style. As Pan's name became known within the Hong Kong scene, Taiwan's appeal, with its inexpensive labor and abundant natural resources, caught the attention of esteemed directors such as King Hu and Yuan Chiu-feng. Consequently, many filmmakers flocked to Taiwan during the 1960s to shoot movies on location, contributing to the burgeoning trend of outdoor filmmaking on the island.

Traces of the Truku War along the Central Cross-Island Highway. From left: A still from *A Touch of Zen*, King Hu (dir.), 1971; A still from *Dragon Gate Inn,* King Hu (dir.), 1967; Japanese troops marching toward Truku territory in the Liwu River Valley, 1914; A Japanese expedition to Mount Hehuan, 1913; The Liwu River Valley seen from the Central Cross-Island Highway, 2023.

Of the directors who traveled to Taiwan to film, King Hu was most interested in casting off the restrictions that studio environments imposed on martial arts films. In 1966 and 1970 respectively, he came to Taiwan to shoot the martial arts films *Dragon Gate Inn* and *A Touch of Zen*; for *Dragon Gate Inn*, Hu selected the picturesque Hill of Yu the Great, named after the legendary Chinese king, situated along the Liwu River and the Central Cross-Island Highway. Back then, the Central Cross-Island Highway was a rustic dirt road, devoid of any electrical infrastructure. This premodern ambiance provided the perfect backdrop for the culminating scene in *Dragon Gate Inn:* the confrontation between heroic royal swordsman Hsiao Shao-zi, played by Shih Chun, and the evil eunuch Cao Shao-chin.

A Touch of Zen centers on the same eunuch-led secret police force in the Ming dynasty. In the captivating twist towards the film's conclusion, Shih Chun, playing the male lead Gu Sheng-tsai, tracks down the female lead Yang Hui-zhen, who is being held by the eunuchs. The camera follows Gu's journey along the serene river, which finally ends in what appears to be a traditional Chinese temple perched atop a cascading waterfall. This five-minute

scene was shot on the Central Cross-Island Highway that runs through the Liwu River Valley.

Driven by the aspirations of the settler government, eager to reclaim lost Chinese territory from the clutches of communism, the construction of the highway became infused with patriotic myths, manifested in archaic Chinese architecture masquerading as historical landmarks. Noteworthy sites such as the Eternal Spring Shrine, the Hill of Yu the Great, and pavilions named after the revered general Yue Fei and poet Wen Tianxiang, accentuated heroic Chinese nationalist narratives associated with their namesakes.

In *A Touch of Zen*, the temple that seems to fit perfectly into the landscape is, in reality, the Eternal Spring Shrine. Built in the traditional Chinese style, it commemorates over 100 veterans who died building the Central Cross-Island Highway. However, the function of this traditional Chinese architecture is not to preserve memories but rather to facilitate their erasure. Prior to 1958, the region held no collective memories associated with China. By blending harmoniously with the landscape, the traditional Chinese memorial architecture reimagines the area as an extension of the Central Plains of mainland China, effectively obliterating local memories.

It is within this historical context that King Hu ingeniously situated a crucial scene in *A Touch of Zen*, leveraging the settler colonial aesthetic to reinforce themes of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. However, very few visitors know that the seemingly uninhabited area surrounding the Eternal Spring Shrine was actually the ancestral home of the Lowcing community of Truku people. After losing the Truku War against colonial troops in the summer of 1914, the old community was forced to relocate to the mouth of Taroko Gorge. Today, several of the communities that were compelled to move are confronted with another imposing piece of vertical infrastructure on their territory: the Asia Cement Corporation Mine.

In this captivating journey, we find ourselves immersed in the interplay between King Hu's evocative films and the historical parallels that unfold along the Central Cross-Island

Highway. One such parallel emerges as we witness the march over the Hill of Yu the Great in *Dragon Gate Inn*, resonating with a photograph captured during a 1913 Japanese expedition to Mount Hehuan in preparation for the attack on Truku territory the next year. And yet, the reverberations do not end there. As we watch *A Touch of Zen*, a profound sense of déjà vu envelopes us when the Chinese swordsman traverse the valley, conjuring up another historical image that bears witness to the forces behind an imperial war crime that once trod the same path in the summer of 1914. Many commentators have noted that *Dragon Gate Inn*, which Hu began shooting in 1965, acted as the genesis of a series of films set in the context of the Ming-era eunuch spy networks that obliquely offer his critiques of Cold War politics. In light of the shared intimacies between different kinds of grassroots struggles, King Hu's anti-Cold War legacy beckons us to utilize his artistry as a vehicle for unearthing hidden narratives of racial violence concealed beneath the very infrastructure upon which his films unfold. This re-stratification of historical layers may give us a better grasp of this work of colonial logistics infrastructure: the origins of the Central Cross-Island Highway trace back to the Truku War of 1914 and the ambitions of the Japanese colonial government, persisting through the completion of the road in 1935, which stretched westward to Mount Hehuan. The discourse of contemporary decolonization struggles to penetrate this complex tapestry, muffled by an oppressive logic that seeks to obliterate the deep-rooted narratives embedded within its more ironic implications.

Kuanghua Village: The Sorrows of the Disadvantaged

Pictures of the Mglu River. From left: A still from *Liu Pi-Chia,* Richard Chen (dir.), 1965; A still from the *Taiwan's Cities and Counties in Progress* series, 1965-1967; Reclaimed land by the Mglu River, 2023.

When Richard Chen debuted his groundbreaking documentary film *Liu Pi-Chia* (1965) at the Cardinal Tien Cultural Center, it resonated with many leftist cultural figures, who considered the film to be Taiwan's first work of cinema verité. They perceived the film as presenting an individual life within "the dual frame of the Cold War and the Chinese Civil War."[3] The screening marked a significant moment in Taiwanese cinema history.

The film, set on the banks of Hualien's Mglu River, opens with soldiers from the development team filling a riverbed. They manually dig a huge rock out of the riverbed to create usable agricultural land. One member of the development team, Liu Pi-Chia, was press-ganged into the KMT army in Hunan Province and sent to fight in the Chinese Civil War. Like the veterans in Pan Lei's *On Mount Hehuan*, after Liu Pi-Chia arrived in Taiwan, he was compelled to help build infrastructure in exchange for demobilization. From one riverbed to another, the task of development is a timeless cycle underpinned by the seeming endlessness of Cold War animosity.

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[3] Chuang Wan-hua, "From Pioneer *Liu Pi-Chia* to *Stone Dream*," *United Daily News,* February 25, 2005.

Almost half a century after his debut in Richard Chen's film, the Hunan-born settler veteran attracted another attempt at reportage. This time, the esteemed settler ethnographer Hu Tai-li encountered Liu Pi-Chia during her fieldwork near the Mglu River. In the resulting documentary film *Stone Dream* (2005), Liu Pi-Chia's story takes a new turn as he retires to a neighboring village, offering him an escape from endless toil. Unlike *Liu Pi-Chia*, which focused on an individual set against the larger arc of history, Hu's documentary delves into Liu's immediate community. Through on-screen interviews and observations, the film reveals a different perspective on inter-ethnic relationships than Pan Lei's inaccurate portrayal. Kuanghua Village, for instance, had a high rate of Han-Indigenous intermarriage, and many Indigenous women shared their experiences of remarrying due to the difficulties they faced. Marriage became a means of mutual support. *Stone Dream* presents the perspective of Liu's adopted son, friends, and family, highlighting the intersectionality between a proletarian settler and members of ethnic minorities.

Following the intersectionality and settler-indigenous collaboration from Hu's interpretation of Liu Pi-Chia, it is worth mentioning another Richard Chen film: *Through the Years* (1966). Blending fiction and documentary, it delves into the history of the transcontinental railroad in the American West, shedding light on the experiences of Chinese migrant laborers and the struggles of Native Americans against encroaching white settlers. From both sides of the Pacific Ocean, *Through the Years* explores similar themes of infrastructure, exploitation, and historical racial dynamics. An intriguing dialogue emerges between Hu Tai-Li's portrayal of the Liu family and Richard Chen's *Liu Pi-Chia* and *Through the Years*, whereby Chinese migrant laborers encounter issues of settler colonialism in distinct contexts.

Orchid Island: Reflecting on the Settler Gaze

Front image: A still from the front of a car driving on the Sacred Trees Trail along the Chushui River in Nantou, 2021. Back images: Pan Lei (dir.), a scene from *Song of Orchid Island* (1965) shot from a boat and scenes from *Typhoon* (1962) shot on a train.

As we have mentioned, Pan Lei brought shooting on location in nature to Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers studio, inspiring other filmmakers to shoot in Taiwan. In fact, Pan caught the attention of the Shaw Brothers for his film *Typhoon* (1962), set in Taiwan's Arithan Forest. In a key scene from that film, an Arithan Forest locomotive is used to propel the camera forward, capturing the unfolding landscape and immersing the audience in a sensory voyage. This technique echoes Pan Lei's earlier endeavors, such as filming the Central Cross-Island Highway from a military helicopter, and the later use of other transportation means to move the camera in other outdoor shoots. This method—using extractive infrastructure to drive the film's plot—also appeared in several other Chinese-language films from this period, such as *The Black Forest* (1964), *Mist Over Dream Lake* (1968), and *Girl Friend* (1974). In these stories, the male and female protagonists are often situated within natural resources and logistics infrastructure, which drives the emotional depth of the narrative. In *Song of Orchid Island* (1965), Pan Lei, having joined the Shaw Brothers studio, assembled a cast of Hong Kong stars for the production. The film revolves around Dr. Ho's journey to Orchid Island in search of his father, who has dedicated himself to medical research. Amidst this backdrop, Dr. Ho embarks on a settler-Indigenous love affair intertwined with the tourist gaze. Pan, who often uses transportation to create

cinematic spectacles, employs a boat as a cinematic device in this film. We see a settler photographer and an assistant setting up a camera on the boat to Orchid Island, and they make quite the production of arranging the shot. Meanwhile, Indigenous islanders peer through binoculars, establishing an intriguing exchange of gazes between the boat-mounted camera and the telephoto lens on the shore.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Pan chose Orchid Island on which to epitomize these scenes of the settler gaze. Hu Tai-li's documentary *Voices of Orchid Island,* shot in 1993, tells us that Orchid Island is the Indigenous Taiwanese living space that has been the most disturbed by tourism. In the opening scene of *Voices of Orchid Island*, Hu Tai-li presents a seaside discussion featuring Tao anti-nuclear activists Syaman Rapongan and Shaman Fengayan, as well as Bunun author and physician Topas Tamapima, who practices medicine on Orchid Island, and Hu herself. They consider what model of settler-Indigenous collaboration is acceptable and how Han settlers can correct their gaze toward Indigenous people when they have cameras in their hands.

Next, the film addresses the rise of tour groups to the island and presents local people describing the issues with tourist photography. Discussing subjects as diverse as beliefs around evil spirits, medical care, and nuclear waste on Orchid Island, environmental activists reveal that Orchid Island has always been an externality for Taiwan. The most interesting debate of all of those raised in *Voices of Orchid Island* is: How can a settler director correct a racialized gaze, while also expressing her own opinion? Realist photographer Kuan Hsiao-jung centers his attention on the discussion at the beginning of the film, where Hu Tai-li acknowledges herself as a settler filmmaker and reveals a sense of inherent guilt in her gaze. Kuan further made the point that, while the filmmaker tends to conceal her own opinions in front of the camera, the film nevertheless disguised its settler viewpoint as "the voices *from* Orchid Island." However, others believed that there is no way for the documentary medium to be objective, and since there is no way to conceal a

personal opinion in such a medium, Hu Tai-li invariably expresses her views in the editing process.[4]

Before shooting *Voices of Orchid Island*, Hu Tai-li had witnessed the cameras of her settler colleagues from the Academia Sinica being angrily taken from them on Orchid Island,[5] so any sensible settler with a movie camera could never shake off their guilt over their settler gaze. In fact, if we consider the negative legacy of the settler gaze from films like *Song of Orchid Island* back in the '60s, there is no way for Hu Tai-li to recklessly project her settler gaze in a subjective medium like film. Beyond the two sides to the issue articulated in *Voices of Orchid Island*, we can envision a third kind of response: that the anxiety of the settler gaze cannot be entirely eliminated. A filmmaker can, at most, see film as a space for negotiating among different points of view, which would accommodate anxiety around reassessments of ethnic representation. This may fit with many reflections on settler guilt, as the settlers cannot leave behind that aspect of their identity. If settlers want to escape an inter-generational debt, they actually fall into another form of settler colonial violence exerted through a process of self-indigenization.[6]

Conclusion: Roads and the Limits of Visibility

In the realm of transitional justice in Taiwan, a captivating phenomenon has emerged in recent years: tours of negative cultural sites. These immersive experiences seek to dismantle the veils of an obscured history and bring to light the untold stories of an unequal past. While discussions of political democratization have dominated, the haunting violence of Taiwanese settler colonialism has languished in the shadows. Drawing inspiration from cinematic works, we embark on a journey to unravel the tapestry of

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[4] Chiu Kuei-fen, "Documentary/Spectacle/Cultural Heterogeneity: *Voices of Orchid Island* and *Corners*," *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (April 2004): 123-140.

[5] Chiu, "Documentary/Spectacle/Cultural Heterogeneity," 123-140.

[6] See Darryl Sterk, "A Tale of Two Settler Nationalisms: The Formosan Aborigines and Settler Nationalism in Han Chinese Fiction and Film," *The Proceedings of the 2007 UCSB International Conference on Taiwan Studies*, ed. Robert L. Backus (Santa Barbara: University of California, 2008), 85-105.

colonial encounters within the intricate spatial fabric of eastern Taiwan's infrastructure. Here, the visual landscape is interwoven with transportation networks, shaping perceptions of home and the unhomely. Unlike previous analyses fixated on representational politics, we venture into uncharted territory by exploring the symbiotic relationship between cinematic narrative and the infrastructure that underpins it.

In our analysis of cinematic portrayals of logistical infrastructure, we have observed a notable absence of decolonial discourse that engages with this vital infrastructure, despite its undeniable colonial origins. This highlights a distinct disparity between its historical roots and its seemingly benign contemporary façade. It is through the examination of these films within this contextual tapestry that we gain insights into its nuanced cinematic politics, addressing the intricate interplay of instrumental rationality driven by logistical infrastructure and the erasure technique of settler colonialism. It is through this lens of Formosan settler logics that settler cinemas have aided in delineating the limits of liberal visibility.

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Memories of Underdevelopment: Revisiting Curatorial Methods and the Asian Context

https://curatography.org/9-3-en/

By Chen Wan-Yin
Translated by Zian Chen

An Eurasian Epistolary: Reflections from a Decade Past

On the Asia Art Archive's online repository, one can still read the once heated intellectual correspondence back in May 2013 between the Pakistan-British artist Rasheed Araeen, and Chen Kuan-hsing, a Taiwanese left-wing cultural theorist. Notably, this lively exchange was ignited by Araeen's critical reception toward Chen's seminal opus, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010) that recognized as a rarity within the landscape of East Asia. In Araeen's letter, he highlights the cooption of Postcolonial Studies by exemplifying how British Cultural Studies got involved with the allocation of government funding for arts and culture. This assimilation aligns with the state's multiculturalism agenda but curtails the potential for de-imperialization. Araeen argues that progress lies in advocating for struggle and engaging in art practice in order to prevent the vulnerability of intellectual work to power dynamics. While the constraints of Postcolonial Studies did constitute a central concern discussed in *Asia as Method*, Chen proposes a reorientation of the analytical framework, emphasizing the unique complexities of Asia, and promoting the development of "Asian studies in Asia." [1] In response to this proposition, Araeen challenges Chen's inclination to overestimate the impact of the Cold War, emphasizing that the endeavor towards anti-imperialism requires a dedicated site that offers a critical framework, rather than relying on regional identities as a method that may be deemed too "ambiguous and general":

> It does not lead us into a concrete discourse by which we can confront
> the particularity of neo-imperialist knowledge and produce counter-

knowledge. Instead, I would propose Art as Method, because it is art by which modernity as an advancing force is defined with its exclusive European subjectivity; only art can confront neo-imperialism and offer a model of decolonisation. Moreover, art is concerned with making things and thus can enter the everyday and become part of its collective productivity. Only through collectivity can we win the struggle. [2]

In his response to Araeen, Chen straightforwardly expresses his skepticism towards the transformative capacity of art. On one hand, he observed that our notion of art has not been problematized and still follows the European understanding, while on the other hand, he highlights the conflicts arising from the interests involved in art and the livelihood of artists, alongside the tendency of art to become institutionalized and aligned with capital. While Araeen courageously confronts the lingering colonialism of the British Empire, Chen, firmly grounded in East Asia, passionately seeks out avenues for engaging in critical discourses. Reflecting upon their brief encounter a decade ago, it becomes evident that their disagreement foreshadowed the growing divide between critical knowledge in the realms of art and academia, as well as the gradual erosion concerning the role of art criticism.

In my view, both Araeen and Chen provide accurate assessments. When juxtaposed, their perspectives illuminate the challenges and possibilities inherent in the realms of art and academia with regard to decolonization, yielding valuable insights for further exploration and discourse. The very fact that their exchange took place under the auspices of the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong highlights the presence of a space within the contemporary art context, encompassing both social and aesthetic dimensions, and crucial for negotiating with political realities and economic structures.

However, a looming reality that may not have been fully considered by Araeen and Chen is the unprecedented potential that technology and media have bestowed upon both capital-political hegemony and the alliance with alternative actions. As these two divergent

domains increasingly converge and become ubiquitous. Their meilding compels us to learn new critical languages.

To me, the significance of the brief exchange between Araeen and Chen in ten years ago lies in its potential implications. Let's imagine, for a moment, the presence of a Chinese-language intellectual work firmly rooted in the principles of Third World internationalism. How might such a work have made a profound impact on the local art communities, offering a platform for deep contemplation and rich discourse on the intricate challenge of reconfiguring regional constellations and discursive spaces? Ultimately, the core issue may not solely lie in the choice between the arts or Asia as a methodological approach, but rather in our capacity to critically examine and interrogate the precise definition and contextual positioning of "art" and "knowledge" within a local framework. This goes beyond mere rhetoric, aiming to further differentiate between a depoliticized knowledge that conforms to the system and one that emerges from dissenting voices in marginal spaces, engaging in alternative networks and disobedient memories. Only through such an approach can we hope to break free from the ideological constraints imposed by nationalist lenses, transcend the barriers between academia and art, and discover a realm where meaningful dialogues can take place.

The Long Shadow of Developmentalism in Curating

When exploring the exhibition history so as to identify a sequence of events that counterpoints the paradigm shift into geopolitics discussed earlier, one may think of the rise of curating subsequent to the fall of Soviet Union and that of the Berlin Wall. This seismic political event proved to be a transformative force, igniting a profound narrative shift within the art world. Against this backdrop, Manifesta emerged in the mid-1990s as a nomadic exhibition endeavor, aiming to bridge the political and historical divides between Eastern and Western Europe. This marked a significant milestone in the evolving art landscape. Simultaneously, a cohort of emerging art institutions, often characterized by their modest scale, embraced the ethos of New Institutionalism. Among them, BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) stands as an exemplary institution that defied the odds with its

enduring presence. BAK adopted a distinct approach that prioritized knowledge exchange and public discourse, thus negated the exhibition-spectacle model. It is within this context that "Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989" (2008–2016) reached its culmination. "Former West" undertook the critical task of examining the multifaceted impacts of political, cultural, and economic events after 1989 on contemporary conditions. Employing contemporary art and social theory, the project unfolded through transnational research, education, publishing, and exhibitions. Its primary objective was to provide a platform for incisive discussions and alternative narratives that challenged prevailing Western-centric perspectives.

The geographical implication of the Former West paradigm responded to two key historical constructs: firstly, it reflects the emergence of the Former East following the integration of Eastern Europe into that of the West, and secondly, it refers to the postwar emergence of the First World and its subsequent hypermodernity. The project highlights the paradoxical nature of both communism and capitalism, which, despite their Cold War rivalry, found themselves trapped within the confines of Developmentalism—an ideology centered around the relentless pursuit of economic, technological, and political progress—extending its domination and exploitation to other subordinated countries. The project aims to critique the colonialism implicit in the Cold War paradigm and the imperialism implicit in hypermodernity, advocating for an alternative constellation beyond the narrative of the West disguised and promoted as universality.

With such expansive geo-temporal bandwidth of the Former West in mind, it is worth examining how contemporary exhibition practices reimagine the very essence of the West through a skillful synthesis of diverse forms of alterity. One such example can be found in the recent history of documenta. Notably, Okwui Enwezor made a profound impact by curating yearlong itinerant forums held in cities such as Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, Saint Lucia, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos. These forums provided fertile ground for the emergence of non-Western discourses, leading up to the anticipated opening of documenta 11, 2002. Similarly, in 2012, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev extended the exhibition venues of documenta 13 to include Kabul, Afghanistan. This curatorial move

addressed the aftermath of the United States' military invasion while contributing to the cultural renewal in the postwar context. Biennial platforms often demonstrate a keen interest in expanding their influence into regions experiencing political or economic emergencies. Following documenta in Kabul, its next edition has further confirmed this trend by selecting Athens, a city burdened by debt due to EU creditors, as its venue. Similarly, Manifesta has announced its upcoming exhibition in Ukraine in 2028. However, these endeavors carry potential risks as they may face strong criticism from local art communities, often centering around the perception that these shows either promote crisis tourism or perpetuate cultural imperialism.

During one of the Former West events held at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, titled "Documents, Constellations, Prospects," Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski lauded the curatorial effort as a regional "Agoraphilia," driven by a deep passion for engaging in public discourse. Furthermore, he envisioned a "Global Agoraphilia," which would extend this practice to a globally interconnected context. Piotrowski outlined a timeline of such intellectual anticipation, crediting various individuals for their visionary aspirations. Thomas Fillitz's envisioning of Senegal's Dak'Art biennale as "zones of contact" inspired by the 2006 Biennale of Sydney; Ranjit Hoskote's observation of Okwui Enwezor's 2008 Gwangju Biennial as the "biennial of resistance"; Boris Groys's coinage of a "global politeia" during the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, to which Charles Esche seconded by referring to the agency shown in 1989 Havana Biennial; and finally, the 2012 Berlin Biennial curated by Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsz as the most recent instalment. Piotrowski's vision can be seen as the final curatorial constellation that harkens back to the spirit of New Institutionalism, leading to the popularization of the concepts of assembly, community, and commons in recently curated projects. [3]

In the context of the ongoing fascination with "Agoraphilia," which effectively encapsulated BAK's Former West project, we can expand Piotrowski's exhibition timeline from the year 2013 onwards, observing the continuation of this trajectory. One noteworthy development is the transformation of Casco, BAK's adjacent institution, which recently rebranded itself

from an office of art, theory, and design into an institute dedicated to producing intellectual work for the commons.

In 2018, Casco initiated a research project titled "Unmapping Eurasia." Curated by its director Binna Choi and guest curator Mi You, the project shifted its focus to the nomadic spaces of the expansive Eurasian steppe. By exploring the symbiotic relationships between these regions and nonhuman species, the project aimed to envision an ecological commons that transcends anthropocentrism. It offered an opportunity to delve into the lesser-discussed connections between Asia and the European continent, often overshadowed by the remnants of the Cold War.

In the past year, the Berlin-based organization Savvy Contemporary, known for its emphasis on non-Western knowledge manifestation, has undertaken a perennial curatorial project titled "Unraveling The (Under)Development Complex, or: Towards a Post-(Under)Development Interdependence" in the past year. This project aims to revisit Walter Rodney's postcolonial canon, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), which critically analyzes Europe's colonial plans through a political-economic lens of underdevelopment. Given the persistent historical complexities of developmentalism within contemporary transnational infrastructure projects, Savvy Contemporary has thematized the "Development Complex" by collecting research writings and investigative reports on various forms of development projects. Through this collection, they seek to explore the enduring presence of developmentalism within geopolitical, financial, urban design, and ecological networks.

One of the key figures in New Institutionalism, Charles Esche, commented on documenta 15 curated by ruangrupa, calling it "the first exhibition of the 21st century." He referred to it as an acknowledgement of capitalism's destructive nature, without attempting to reform it, but rather emphasizing the importance of survival through resistance. [4] As a result, it no longer adheres to the mission of post-War cultural reconstruction, which has been a central objective of documenta since its inception. Instead, it emerges as a response to the financial and climate crises of the 2010s. While Esche's statement might have been shaped by

personal factors, given his involvement in selecting ruangrupa as the artistic director, the catchphrase "the first exhibition of the 21st century" undeniably signifies a significant departure from the political economy of the previous century. It firmly grounds us in the present-day context, urging us to confront the genuine challenges we face and offering an alternative approach to periodization in contemporary curatorial practices.

Engaging with the Future: Art, Asia, and Knowledge Production

Adapting this alternative periodization to the context of East Asia, the 2008 Guangzhou Triennial challenged the rigidity of post-colonial theory with its provocative title, "Farewell to Post-colonialism." Similarly, the 2008 Taipei Biennial explored alternative modes of production within the global economic network, constructing an imaginative landscape of resistance against the rising tide of neoliberalism. During the late 2000s, post-colonial discourse and globalization emerged as the focal points of debate in East Asia's contemporary art scenes, but it was in the subsequent decade of the 2010s that a notable shift in critical discourse occurred, highlighting the region's increasing emphasis on ecology discourse and addressing climate change, interspecies ethics, and indigenous justice, which consequently became dominant curatorial themes.

In recent years, there has been a notable resurgence of a distinct branch of the decolonial discourse in contemporary art, prompting East Asia, with its complex colonial histories, to reexamine the multifaceted aspects of colonization. For example, Taiwanese curator Chien-Hung Huang introduced the concept of Paracolonialism in 2019, emphasizing the pervasive influence of colonization through technological media, going beyond the conventional colonial discourse focused on the nation-state's political economy. In the context of decolonization discourse, the question arises: who do we consider as "we"? The assertion made by posthumanist feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti continues to resonate in contemplating non-Western discourse and the process of art production: "*We* are in this together, but we are not one and the same." In light of the diverse historical and contemporary discourses, as well as the emergence of a redefined concept of "decolonization" specific to their local contexts, diverging from mainstream Western

discourses, it remains intriguing to contemplate how contemporary art practices and critical agency in East Asia will navigate with their unique colonial complexities, ultimately seeking new pathways for renewed alliances.

[1] Chen Kuan-hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) p.1.

[2] Chen Kuan-hsing and Rasheed Araeen, "A Conversation between Chen Kuan-hsing and Rasheed Araeen," *Field Notes 03*, edited by Claire Hsu and Chantal Wong (Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2013).

[3] Piotr Piotrowski, "Dissident Knowledge. Global Agoraphilia." Filmed 2013. 39:35. https://vimeo.com/144115088

[4] John Roosa & Charles Esche, "Let there be lumbung (Day 2) - John Roosa & Charles Esche." Filmed 2022. 3:26:25. https://tv.lumbung.space/w/024121bb-93f4-4d3a-b80e-7b84ec9664ac

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Icon and Network:

Solidarity's Mediums and a Materialist Internationalism

https://curatography.org/9-1-en/

By Ho Rui An

In May 2020, as Singapore, like many countries, was hit by the COVID-19 outbreak and went into national lockdown, scenes of large-scale protests against the police killing of Black American George Floyd were taking place across the world, rattling residents of the city-state where such public gatherings of a political nature are unheard of. For all the sympathies that many would have felt for the protesters' grievances, strict laws governing public assembly have not only severely curtailed the scope of any kind of protest in the country, but have also produced over time a public pathologically averse to confrontational forms of civil resistance.[i] But to a younger generation becoming increasingly passionate about issues of racial justice—a result not only of exposure to social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM), but also of public incidents in recent years that have brought to light the persistent discrimination faced by racial minorities in Singapore—such constraints experienced amidst the lockdown produced a sense of immobilization that could only find relief on social media.[ii] As protests intensified in much of the Western hemisphere, expressions of solidarity circulated online accompanied by comparisons to similar conditions of systemic injustice in the country. For one, if Black lives matter to Singaporeans, surely what must also matter are the lives of the over one million low-wage migrant workers living in their midst, whose lives are rendered precarious by abusive employers and deficient labor laws. That these same workers had been affected by the outbreak in overwhelmingly disproportionate numbers, owing to their overcrowded and often unsanitary dormitory conditions, only underlined the urgency for collective action. Memes calling for migrant lives to matter quickly went viral.

Unsurprisingly, such attempts at drawing analogies between Black lives in the U.S. and those of marginalized communities in Singapore brought out the standing brigade of detractors peddling the tired argument of Singapore exceptionalism, albeit retooled for the

new digital-nativist campaign against "wokeness."[iii] As the argument goes, the material circumstances of Singapore and the U.S. are so different that any suggestion of comparability between the two can only be a projection of the foreign (read: Western) upon the local that denies the specificity of the city-state's unique history and demography. These commentators would further substantiate their claims by dredging up "facts" that presumably delegitimize the movement in the U.S., for example, by pointing to a handshake between the movement's founders with Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro as evidence of their links to "radical leftist" ideology, or by framing affluent supporters of the movement as "champagne socialists" calling to "defund the police" while nestled within their gated communities.[iv] Against the perceived naiveté of international supporters of the movement drawing analogies based on shallow resemblances facilitated by the speed of circulation on social media were thus held up the "real" networks of influence and capital enabling this economy of appearances.

What are we to make of this holding up of the real against expressions of transnational solidarity often accused of having lost touch with reality by virtue of their technomediation? Might this "return" of the real speak less to the validity of the arguments against wokeness than to an entrenched vulnerability within the social justice meme as a means of making progressive ideas "go viral"? Is it not remarkable that, for all the analysis that was borne out of the semantic slippage between the "virality" of racial justice and the "virus" itself, this critical appropriation of the contagion would be tested by an oppositional account of transmission that apparently cut closer to the real of the (viral) network?

To begin, for all the conflation of the virus and the Internet meme, the transmission of the latter, unlike the virus, occurs, as do all memes, mimetically. Its transmission depends upon iconic reproduction, that is, the imitation of an object's likeness. In contrast, the mode of transmission that is understood to constitute the "real" network behind this mimetic economy is truly contagious in the sense that it happens through contact relations. Just as the COVID-19 virus is transmitted through a handshake or an exchange of breaths, the networks of influence and capital often brought up to cast social movements like BLM as duplicitous are established through material flows that often belie the lack of overt

resemblances between the parties implicated. Such transmissions leave in their wake not so much an image with iconic value as a trace leading us backwards in time along the chain of material transfers that gave rise to the indexical sign—not unlike how asymptomatic carriers of the COVID-19 virus were tracked down through contact tracing at the height of the pandemic. This leaves us in rather peculiar discursive territory: somehow it is on the side of those in denial over the grievances expressed by BLM where we find ourselves anywhere close to a materialist critique.

While it is true that broad-based movements like BLM encompass positions substantive enough to call the bluff on the "materialist" attack against them, their technomediation through the social justice meme in the past few years has inevitably lent credence to the perception of these movements being founded on a fundamentally hollow iconology. The backlash expressed online against the "woke" brand of liberal identity politics has sometimes even spilled offline to produce seismic political shifts. In the U.S., for example, the rise of a "materialist left" calling for a genuinely redistributive left politics, as championed most prominently by supporters of Bernie Sanders, has proven to be no match for the "materialist" right and its barrage of conspiracy theories on the nefarious networks of "special interests" backing the "liberal left."[v] Here, the turn to conspiracy is motivated, above all, by an iconoclasm that seeks to peel away at the liberal facade of propriety and expose the entanglements of elite interests beneath. However, conspiracy claims inevitably culminate in their own iconicity, as best seen in Donald Trump's compelling metaphor of "draining the swamp" in reference to his mission of ridding Washington of said special interests, that left unexamined his own contamination by these same interests.

For all its contradictions, such a mode of critique acquires significant rhetorical force when harnessed against expressions of transnational solidarity that sometimes struggle to articulate the material stakes that would allow these expressions to go beyond virtual signaling. In fact, even when the conditions of global capitalism are broached, it is often not on the basis of the actual circulation of goods, labor and capital that solidarity is articulated, but an analogous connection made between how "they" are being exploited by capitalism "over there" *just like* how "we" are being exploited by capitalism "over here." This "because

capitalism" argument, to put it bluntly, falls short of accounting for the global chains of value whereby the interests of large portions of the middle class in a city-state as financialized as Singapore are so intimately bound up with those of the global billionaire class that the turn to analogy serves less to imagine a basis for solidarity with the global underclass than to obfuscate the material circulations between "here" and "there" that are determinative of one's proximity to capital. That these circulations remain so critically unexamined has little to do with our inability to represent them. Rather, it results from the thrall of iconicity that reduces representation to its analogical function and displaces the patient but necessary labor of explicating the relations of power that make representation actually matter. As we shall see later in this essay, such concerns were already raised over forty years ago by a Third World internationalism that ended up being consumed by its own iconology. After all, what are icons but images that efface more than they make visible?

"Crazy Rich" Materialism

Two years before the protests against the killing of George Floyd inspired a reflection on racial justice in Singapore, another cultural moment in the U.S. sparked off a debate on race, wealth and privilege in the Southeast Asian city-state, except that this time the connection between the two countries required no recourse to analogy. The occasion was the release of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, the first major Hollywood production with a majority Asian cast in over twenty years that is set almost entirely in Singapore. Based on the best-selling novel of the same title by the Singaporean-American author Kevin Kwan, the film follows a Chinese-American professor on her first trip to Singapore where she meets the family of her boyfriend only to realize how unimaginably wealthy they are. In the U.S., the film was lauded within the mainstream media as a milestone for Asian American representation. This reception stood in contrast to the horror expressed by some within the community, as well as the larger Asian diaspora in the West, in seeing themselves represented by a film that at best expressed an amused indulgence with an untamed capitalist class.[vi]

Meanwhile, the critical opinion in Singapore largely questioned the representational premise upon which much of the celebration of the film was based by focusing on its

marginalizing of the city-state's ethnic minorities, who mostly appear as service staff attending to the wealthy Young family, whose members are all part of the Chinese majority.[vii] The film's conservative gender dynamics also invited scrutiny.[viii] However, when it came to the prickly issue of wealth, it was curiously not the family's immense fortune that was problematized, but the absence of Singapore's largely middle class society from the film. Whereas the critique of the film's depiction of the super-rich coming from left-leaning media outside of Singapore condemned its sanitization of the global wealth gap, the domestic reception largely took issue with the portrayal on the basis not of the distributional crisis it effaces, but of a failure of representation (not unlike the reasoning that underwrites the critique on race and gender).[ix] The problem, as expressed by a common refrain, was that 99% of the people in the country, unlike the characters in the film, do not have the privilege of inherited wealth, and are, more likely than not, living in one of the country's successful public housing projects—a quasi-socialist exception within the hypercapitalist tax haven—which do not appear at all in the film. In other words, the problem was not wealth inequality per se, but the grossly disproportionate representation within the film of the lived experiences of the country's most wealthy 1% at the expense of the 99%.

This pitting of the top 1% against the 99% standing for "the people" is, of course, not an original figuration, but one that can be traced to the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, during which the slogan, "We are the 99%," went viral and came to influence other social movements across the world. Happening in the wake of the economic devastation wrought by the 2008 global financial crisis, the slogan, at least in its original appearance in the U.S., spoke to the enormous wealth gap between the top 1% and the rest of the population that had widened since the crisis. Much of the anger centered on how workers in non-financial sectors had been made to bear much of the fallout, despite their holding little responsibility for the crisis. Yet, for all its expressed intent of foregrounding inequality under capitalism, this critique on wealth does not, in the final analysis, constitute a class discourse. As Rosalind C. Morris observes, the delineation between the 1% and the 99% glosses over the vast socioeconomic disparities within the 99%, which includes everyone from the most destitute to the well-heeled managerial class. In fact, in stretching the idiom of majoritarianism toward its limit in the expression of "near totality" that is the 99%, what is ultimately espoused by

the discourse is not even an ethnopolitical project but a "moral iconology" wherein justice is served on the basis of calculative reason.[x]

This depoliticization by numerical count becomes especially pronounced in its co-option by the critique of *Crazy Rich Asians* in Singapore, wherein the demand for an isomorphism between what is perceived as the material conditions of the 99% of the country and their representation on screen can only suggest an uncritical acceptance of already existent class relations interior to the category of the 99%. How else can we understand the framing of the problem of the super-rich as a problem of elitism, of the lives of the 1% being divorced from those of the 99%, when it is how capital circulates (or does not circulate) between the different socioeconomic classes that is determinative of class relations and the resultant wealth gap? How can one even translate the statistical abstraction upon which the defining iconology of Occupy Wall Street is based onto a city-state with an economy so financialized that it practically stands for the Wall Street of the region, and where significant segments of the middle class depend upon this financialization to sustain their modestly affluent lifestyles? Has the question of class been so utterly foreclosed by liberal identity politics that even in the face of the distributional crisis of late capitalism the only means of addressing the staggering inequality is a set of icons expressive of a self-present "we" stripped of any class positionality?

Perhaps this is too much to ask of a society that had since the late eighties imbibed the narrative promulgated by the long-ruling party that it had successfully transformed itself into a largely middle class, home-owning society.[xi] Reinforcing this disavowal of class politics is the relative opacity of the forms of capital accumulation that contribute to the extreme wealth of the city-state, as reflected in the film by the young scion's reticent reply when his girlfriend probed him on the source of his family's wealth: "real estate, investment, other things, nothing interesting." And indeed, judging by the public sentiment, there is nothing interesting about the lack of capital gains or inheritance taxes in Singapore that would have allowed the Youngs to grow their fortune over generations, or about its entire financial services industry that can be considered to have truly underwritten the film. Such is the profane reality of the global financial centre that has, ever since it established the Asian

Dollar Market in 1968, seen the financial industry less as a source of capital to grow local industries than a site of capital accumulation in and for itself, effectively decoupling it from the domestic real economy and its circulation of goods and services in the public sphere where capital accumulation is most observable.[xii]

With the liberalization of its banking and capital markets after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the city-state has further seen the rapid expansion of its bond and equity markets and its rise as the region's leading asset management centre. Despite the characterization of the Youngs as "old money rich," it is really "new money" from Asia that has driven the sector's growth, with many among the growing number of ultra-high-net-worth individuals in Asia relocating their assets to Singapore in order to benefit from its low taxes, strict bank secrecy laws and vast pools of financial and legal talent. This offshoring of the private assets of the super-rich has proceeded alongside the securitization of the larger global economy through innovative arrangements that "liberate" debt instruments from the actual value of the assets backing them, thus prioritizing their availability for speculation over the heightened risks borne by the owners of these relatively modest assets.[xiii] As Saskia Sassen notes, this development marks a turn towards more directly extractive, or in other words, "primitive" modes of accumulation that require ever-more complex financial and legal infrastructures to achieve what amounts to a direct pillaging of the working class, therefore embedding the sizeable managerial class in a financial centre like Singapore even more deeply within a system responsible for exacerbating the global wealth gap. [xiv] Unsurprisingly, no one in the city-state is making the argument that has been taken up by left-wing movements internationally that "billionaires should not exist."

Given this, my contention is that the collective disidentification that some in Singapore have expressed towards *Crazy Rich Asians* on representational grounds can only be sustained through a disavowal of the material circulations that render the city-state an essential conduit for diverting the social surplus away from the global underclass, including the precarious Black lives that would gain much attention two years later. It follows that when the turn to an analogous Blackness—by way of projecting Blackness onto the country's own racialized and marginalized communities—was made, this time in *identification* with an

American cultural moment, what was likewise obscured were the actual, material flows that draft the city-state as a direct participant in the lived experiences of Black America.

Between Here and There

Marina Bay Sands in Singapore. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

One moment worth recalling is the 2008 financial crisis that saw Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF), including those from Singapore, enter the U.S. market to "rescue" insolvent banks which were failing as a result of untenable levels of defaults in the so-called subprime mortgage housing market. Previously scorned by many Western governments owing to their lack of transparency and high level of government involvement in investment decisions, SWFs from Asia and the Middle East were quickly rehabilitated as "white knights" when they bought over sizeable stakes in major U.S. financial institutions, sometimes incurring heavy short-term losses as a result.[xv] However, in the discourse that followed, which contrasted the long positions taken by SWFs against the speculative frenzies that drove the U.S. economy to the ground, what was excluded from the recuperative process were the subprime borrowers whose homes were foreclosed due to predatory lending practices and regulatory lapses. As studies show, such practices were racially targeted and resulted in the borrowers being disproportionately Black.[xvi] Despite this, the narratives in the U.S. at the time tended to ascribe the quality of "subprime" not to the lender but the borrower, thus marking the latter as an "undeserving and undisciplined" capitalist subject.[xvii]

The competing narrative from Asian financial institutions seeking to validate their own policy decisions would later turn the "subprime" signifier on U.S. regulation, but in this refiguration what was achieved was not any dismantling of the racial schema but a

strengthening of the positions of these institutions within the global capitalist system that continues to profit off the dispossession of racialized bodies.[xviii] It is notable that following a massive taxpayer bailout of Citigroup in 2008, the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, an SWF owned by the Singapore government, turned what was initially a major loss into a US$1.6 billion profit.[xix]

The trouble today is that it's easier to imagine that everything is connected than to figure out how exactly two things are connected. While the historical reasons for the decline of a materialist critique adequate to this task are too manifold and complex to discuss here, it appears that what has become newly at play in the last decade or so are the forms of technomediation, through which today's transnational imaginaries are channeled, that harness the affective, associative affordances of global networks while occulting the power relations that constitute and are constituted by them. The desire to access media immediately and for media to mediate immediately first seen with the 24-hour news cycle has been extended through social media in the desire for the audience-turned-user to respond immediately to these immediations. The Internet meme meets this desire through its instant relatability and shareability, virtually collapsing the two processes into each other in a short-circuiting of communication that nullifies the distinction between sender and receiver. Having given up on the prospect of a dialectical encounter with the other, the meme addresses itself directly to the anonymous masses gathered by social media whose projected enormity would alone permit the association of literally any two discrete phenomenon in the world with each other.[xx] Regardless of whether a protest movement is happening in the U.S., Hong Kong, Thailand, Iran, Lebanon or Chile, all it takes to overcome the distance between "here" and an ostensibly remote "there" is the technomassifying, analogy-drawing power of the social justice meme.

However, for all its efficacy, what is eclipsed by this all-connecting, ready-to-share model of transnational solidarity is the prospect that what is "there" might already be "here," and not by virtue of a network of traveling comrades. That is, what if it is *in* Singapore that Black lives must matter? It is perhaps ironic that an articulation of this spatial convergence that cannot be more explicit comes in the crowning image of *Crazy Rich Asians*: its parting

shot, as captured by a drone, of the protagonist's engagement party on the roof of Marina Bay Sands (MBS), with the camera gradually pulling away to reveal the full extravagance of the luxury resort's iconic curved towers surrounded by fireworks. Should one cringe or chuckle at how a film that spends most of its time playing up the differences between America and Asia and looking past their shared networks would, in the moment of cross-cultural romantic consummation, give us an image of America in Singapore? Or more specifically, Las Vegas in Singapore?

As it is well known, MBS is owned by Las Vegas Sands, the American casino and resort developer founded by the late Sheldon Adelson. Outside of his business and investment activities, the multibillionaire was a major Republican Party donor who made the single largest contribution to Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. However, in taking in that splendid view of MBS, even the most ardent critic would miss this connection, given that the very architecture of the building was specifically conceived to ensure this. Not only does MBS look nothing like any of the other properties developed by Las Vegas Sands, it was intended that its function as a casino property be architecturally concealed—a move undertaken to reconcile long-standing official disapproval of gambling with the economic benefits of casino legalization.[xxi] As Lee Kah-Wee has documented, this "aesthetic of effacement" was achieved through a vision of "ultra-pastoral modernity" created by the Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie that fully assimilated the resort within the downtown waterfront area that is the city's financial and civic centre.[xxii] With its breath-taking cantilevered SkyPark, water pavilions and a lotus-inspired structure hosting a museum—extraneous features that were reportedly unappreciated by Adelson—the design of the complex refutes the gaudy kitsch that has typified the casino resort aesthetic while disappearing the casino itself—and its connection to Adelson, Trump, his abhorrent politics, his anti-Blackness—within its mirrored façade, therefore allowing the city-state to continue revelling in its own sparkling clean image.[xxiii]

However, in this very reflection there is another more consequential narrative of effacement. History tells us that the entire bay area that has become the most recognizable symbol of Singapore's economic prowess is only what it is today through a state-led

revitalization in the late seventies to clear out the slums that were turning the area into what the authorities called a "low-income ghetto" in reference to inner-city neighborhoods in the U.S. heavily populated by Black Americans.[xxiv] At the time, urban planners in Singapore had already been studying the social unrest and urban decay often found in these neighborhoods for over a decade and eventually used the experience to shape their policy of mixing housing for different income groups within the same neighborhood.[xxv] This would be followed in the eighties by the Ethnic Integration Policy that established ethnic quotas for public housing. With confidence growing in the continued success of its public housing scheme, the city-state which had in 1967 hosted the Second Afro-Asian Housing Congress no longer saw the ghetto as a site for the collective struggle of those bearing the brunt of development's costs; instead, the ghetto was now its spectral other.[xxvi]

But the seventies were a funny decade. While by the end of it, Singapore was positioning itself as a key player within an ascendant East Asian capitalist modernity, the decade had in fact begun with the fledgling nation-state seeking to claim its place within the socialist-leaning internationalist imaginaries that animated what was known as the Third World. It is to these imaginaries that we will now turn.

Technical Breakdown

Before "going viral" became a force for transnational mobilization, there was already a history of social justice as a contagion spreading the world over. Encompassing the numerous anti-colonial and liberation movements of the twentieth century, this history is marked by key moments of dissemination that include the 1927 League against Imperialism conference in Brussels, the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung and the 1961 founding summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade along with its subsequent iterations. [xxvii] If the technomediation of today's transnational solidarities has enabled its iconic reproduction to acquire an immediacy at the expense of the increasing remoteness of the material networks determinative of the limits of such solidarities, might re-examining this history turn up discourses of solidarity capable

of withstanding the materialist test, notwithstanding their premature foreclosure by an iconology all too monumental to resist?

At the Fourth Non-Aligned Movement Summit held in Algiers in 1973, it was a speech by the foreign minister of Singapore, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, that foreshadowed the imminent passing of the Movement into irrelevance. In a deviation from his prepared remarks, he opened his speech by addressing a technical breakdown that had taken place the day before:

> Yesterday, Mr. Chairman, for some reason, we had a technical breakdown. All the equipment that we are using to threaten the big powers is provided by them. It broke down and we could not communicate. We are all sitting here in planes made and built by the great powers. Without that we cannot hold this conference. We sent telegrams to our home countries. We had to send one to Singapore. It had to go to Paris, London, Singapore. They turn it off; we are lost.[xxviii]

Coming on the fifth day of a high-stakes conference where such issues as independence for colonies in Portuguese Africa, Palestinian liberation and OPEC were being debated, this reflection on logistical and communication networks by the representative of a politically stable, newly industrializing city-state must have felt almost trivial. However, when seen against the significant geopolitical shifts that have occurred in the lead-up to the summit, Rajaratnam's concerns were far from misplaced. This was a time of mutual accommodation: the ink was still wet on the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Treaty between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, Nixon had visited China and the Vietnam War was coming to an end.[xxix] Rajaratnam signaled these "change of winds" later in this speech when he called for non-aligned countries to disentangle themselves from political battles of the major power blocs and focus instead on technological autonomy and economic cooperation.[xxx] He argued that their failure to do so would strip the movement of its purpose when the present geopolitical alignments inevitably come to an end.

This existential reckoning was overdue for the Movement that had built its identity on being united in its oppositions against colonialism and imperialism, against racism, and,

as declared by its name, against alignment with the major power blocs led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. First conceived at the 1955 Bandung conference, these founding principles reflected the internationalist ethos that framed the struggles for self-determination in parts of the world unshackling themselves from the yoke of colonialism. The 1961 Belgrade summit saw the movement's geography expand into Eastern Europe and Latin America, increasing its political clout while further complicating efforts at building a consensus around the ways to deliver material change to the people represented at each summit. The array of socioeconomic doctrines subscribed to by the leaders who literally wore their ideologies on their sleeves was on full display at each meeting: military dictators decked in full regalia, Arab leaders espousing a petro-fuelled concoction of Islamism and socialism, card-carrying Marxist-Leninists and self-styled pro-trade pragmatists like Rajaratnam, eloquently rebuking dependency theory in a Western suit.

That the Movement was able to accommodate such divergences was partly due to its uniquely non-hierarchical, rotational and inclusive organizational structure that was adopted from the outset to prevent it from becoming another power bloc.[xxxi] Drawing on the "Bandung spirit" of consultation and consensus, the movement succeeded in normalizing a new model for multilateralism but remained frustrated in its articulation of an identity independent from its declared oppositionalities.[xxxii] It is against such conditions that the 1973 Algiers summit has been rightly recognized as a watershed, for it was there that calls were made for a new international socioeconomic compact. Rajaratnam was thus no maverick in this respect. In fact, the most prominent plea came from the host of the summit, Algerian president Houari Boumédiene, who began sowing the seeds for what would become the New International Economic Order (NIEO) that sought to redress the systemic inequalities in the global capitalist system. From preferential trade policies to stricter regulation of multinationals to technology and resource transfers, these conditions that were formalized as the NIEO a year later at the United Nations General Assembly managed to translate a broad range of oppositions to the global capitalist system expressed by individual member states into a set of positive demands that most within the Movement, despite their ideological divergences, were able to get behind.[xxxiii]

While Rajaratnam's staunch anti-protectionism and conciliatory attitude towards multinationals made for an awkward fit within the socialist-leaning formulation of the NIEO, his speech trod on the same materialist ground, indeed extending the critique by turning it upon itself, that is, upon the very technical infrastructure that had allowed the speakers to gather and make their demands in the first place. Furthermore, by foregrounding how his demand for smaller nations to have greater ownership over global logistical and communication networks could only be delivered through these same networks, the charismatic statesman thematized the limit of Third World solidarity movements as a failure of the representational power of speech-making in transforming its material base, thus relegating the leaders speaking on behalf of the vast majority of the world to the role of representation by mere invocation. He would reiterate this position years later at the General Assembly in 1979: "I do not think we are going to get any free ride however much we shout."[xxxiv]

The Lure of the Indexical

Marxist historian Vijay Prashad examines old card catalogues at the United Nations headquarters in a scene from Naeem Mohaiemen's *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017). Courtesy of the artist.

For all its forcefulness, Rajaratnam's speech gained little traction among the delegates of the summit and would have faded into obscurity if not for Bangladeshi artist and filmmaker Naeem Mohaiemen's expansive three-channel film, *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017). Coming over forty years after the speech was made, the film opens pointedly with the Singaporean minister's prescient remarks on the technical breakdown experienced at the

summit. From this infrastructural overture, the narrative moves across multiple decades and locations to recount the passing of an era of Third World solidarities. A key moment is the pivot between the two meetings invoked in the title, namely the 1973 Algiers summit and the 1974 summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Lahore, which is described in the film as a displacement of a socialist-leaning Third World internationalism by a conservative pan-Islamism tethered to a global neoliberal project, at least when seen from Dhaka where the artist is based and which also serves as the site for the metaphorical funeral mentioned in the title. The film does not pretend to exhaust the historical reasons behind this pivot, choosing instead to draw out a chronology of events interspersed with archival footage and contemporary interviews with a cast of intellectual and political figures, but a consistent theme that emerges is how the developmental and redistributional aims of the Movement were overpowered by its galvanizing but ultimately impotent iconology.

This tension is elaborated in the film by putting contemporary footage shot across New York, Algiers and Dhaka at modernist architectures designed to reflect the burgeoning internationalism of the day into dialogue with archival material of the two meetings sourced exclusively from institutional archives. This choice of working through images already suffused with mythic value distinguishes *Two Meetings* from Mohaiemen's previous works wherein a focus on marginal figures of the international Left necessitates an archaeological process of discerning figuration from the shattered ruins of a little-known phenomenon.[xxxv] Certainly, the narration of a history directed largely by powerful state actors demands something different. Archaeology must give way to a process better described as forensic. That is, of seeking within a set of fully contoured figures traces that might serve as indexical signs of occulted histories or unrealized futures foreclosed by solidarity's all-consuming iconology in the moment.

At the United Nations headquarters, we see Marxist historian Vijay Prashad at the organization's old card catalogues wondering aloud about how information on the NIEO, which was voted on by the General Assembly in 1974, would have filled one of the drawers back in the day. He laments that the bold set of demands which never went beyond their formal declaration are now as dusty as these drawers. In Algiers, he is moved by the

developmental ambitions expressed by the gigantism of the La Coupole d'Alger Arena constructed by the Brazilian communist architect Oscar Niemeyer. However, he is vexed by its impracticality and strains to identify motifs of the anticolonialism espoused by its makers. From one location to the next, the camera and its protagonists search for such elusive signs inscribed in their environment. Going by the Peircean taxonomy of signs, they thus perform their functions best neither as icons nor as symbols, but as indices. Whereas icons invoke their referents through resemblance and symbols through routinized association, these signs, as indices, are bound to their referents by contiguity and as such are the only signs for which the material world can be given as a direct cause.[xxxvi] This is what allows them to interrogate the awesome iconic and symbolic force of these monuments and turn our attention instead to the material networks that sustained the internationalist solidarities of the day.

Perhaps this is what accounts for the film's attachment to being physically present at the sites associated with the internationalism of the day, despite how little public consciousness of their significance has remained. From architecture to furniture to index cards, each of these relics, for all the information provided through their iconic and symbolic value, are sought primarily for their indexical link to a history that today appears so remote that it might even provoke incredulity. Indeed, if icons and symbols depend upon a prior repository of experience to invoke the world, the contiguity that occasions the formation of indices endows them with the unique capacity of opening us towards material histories hitherto unexamined but that have nonetheless constituted the world as such. By this token, the technical breakdown mentioned by Rajaratnam is an exemplary instance of an index where, in the virtual absence of any attendant iconicity and symbolicity, we are alerted to the fact of materiality itself in its crudeness and opacity: something has happened in the world, but we don't know exactly what it is. As Mary Ann Doane puts it, the index is a "hollowed-out sign"; evacuated of content, it confirms the presence of something but cannot describe it. What therefore follows this "lure of the indexical" is necessarily a kind of "hermeneutic straining", and a turn towards a supplemental system of signs that can carry out this speculative work.[xxxvii] And this was why Rajaratnam spoke.

We are now better placed to appreciate the ingenuity of the Singaporean statesman's intervention in Algiers. It seems that in turning to the technical breakdown, Rajaratnam was summoning the index's privileged relation to materiality to substantiate his call for a *materialist* internationalism capable of explicating and rearranging the material networks that continue to prop up the hegemony of the major powers while impoverishing developing nations. That the fault had interrupted the delivery of speech itself further allowed him to deliver his riposte to what he had long perceived to be the moral grandstanding that often took place at such conferences. Spurning the usual rhetoric that attempted to equivocate the struggles of the different peoples represented at the summit under the banners of "anti-imperialism" or "anti-Western," he chose instead to bring up a material *fact* that no one in attendance could dispute. Hence, he needed no recourse to analogy to make his argument on the monopolization by the major powers of the material grid upon which virtually all internationalist movements subsisted.

And so it is that, for all the mastery that the towering figures of the Algiers summit like Josip Broz Tito and Fidel Castro had over the discourse centered around the signifiers of "imperialism" and "capitalism," it was the emissary of the former British port-city spared the worst of imperial rule who came closer to making a materialist critique of the incumbent international order. What's significant here is how Rajaratnam, by way of his indexical turn towards the material apparatus of the summit itself, decisively shifted the discourse from one focused on "imperialism" and "capitalism" to one that addressed *capital*. As it was clear to him, the ability to explain the abstract dynamics of imperialism or capitalism did not necessarily allow one to account for the actual circulation of capital in the world.[xxxviii] Moreover, the reliance on an iconology of collective exploitation to connect the experiences of the vast number of countries in the Movement unevenly touched by the legacy of colonial capitalism, problematic already as it was, was proving increasingly untenable as some countries began climbing the developmental ladder through their participation in global markets, often by pursuing a state-led model of export-oriented industrialization.

Rajaratnam knew this intimately, given that a year before he had delivered a now-historic address in Singapore where he vividly described the city-state as a "global city" by

rhetorically "tracing on a map the daily movements of aircraft and ships, the contacts made by telephone and cable and external trade and money transactions." The complexity of these material flows, at least by the minister's estimation, exceeded the discourse on capitalism and could only be accounted for by a discursive turn towards the frictions and agencies that determined the movements of these flows along the global "chain of cities" connected "through the tentacles of technology." [xxxix] Time and again, this emergent reality of a globalized world eroding the national or ideological borders that defined the post-war years would be missed by the Movement. Yet, for all its prescience, Rajaratnam's critique would also soon be uncoupled from any aspiration to Third World solidarity as Singapore's participation in an increasingly neoliberalized global market meant that the way it "actually" accumulated its capital could only be seen as exemplary of "imperialism" and "capitalism." Most egregiously, in the eighties, the city-state even reneged on its avowed opposition to the apartheid government of South Africa by becoming a transit hub for the smuggling of arms to the regime.[xl]

But as the archival footage revealed by Mohaiemen shows, many of the delegates were not even listening to Rajaratnam. We know this because many of them would have required interpretation, yet their headphones were on the table.[xli] But even if they did make the effort, it's unlikely that they, consumed as they were by an iconology held together by a discourse of equivalence—such as in claiming that American imperialism would be defeated in Latin America as it was beaten in Indochina—would be as taken by a discourse founded on a trace. This is insofar as the indexicality that grants the trace its evidentiary force also imbues it with a hermeneutic openness that calls upon the arduous and infinitely prolonged undertaking of representing the material networks that produce the trace as such. That these networks can be made further opaque by complex legal infrastructures, such as those that today secure Singapore's status as a regional asset management hub, only adds to the strain. On the occasion of a meeting wherein the attraction was speech's capacity for immediate representation, the sense of deferral internal to Rajaratnam's contemplation of networks so vast and all-encompassing as to almost defy representation must have felt like a distraction.

Surely, we shouldn't forget that the cameras were always rolling, and that it was ultimately to these cameras that the representatives of these nations spoke. The rambunctious crowds that had greeted them upon their arrival in Bandung were now the captive masses gathered on the other end of their televised image. A precursor of today's digital mediations, the mass media of the previous century, as Walter Benjamin diagnosed, established a stage whereby the leaders would encounter the masses in the moment that the latter were constituted by giving themselves to be seen as an image.[xlii] The difference today with social media is that this circular but non-dialectical return of the image to itself takes place in the absence of a stage as a singular locus for speech, resulting in the self-perception that the people, in seeing themselves speak, have truly become their own mediums.[xliii] If this forgetting of who truly owns the means of meme production today feels farcical, the relation that the leaders of the Movement had to media in their time would be the tragedy as dramatized by Rajaratnam: these leaders, for all their actual and projected power, did not own their mediums.

Looking

How can we protest the lapsing of the materialist internationalism articulated by a neglected chapter of the NAM in a time when solidarity substantively manifested has never been more urgent? Going by the approach of *Two Meetings*, it appears that what's crucial is first sustaining the indexical link between the Movement and what remains of it today. But in its encounters with the architectures that have become the most enduring remnants of the Movement, the film also performs another kind of indexical turn: one oriented not towards historicity and materiality but futurity and possibility. In a sequence set at the Boumedienne University in Algiers, one channel plays contemporary footage of students, presumably walking between classes, while another shows archival footage possibly shot in the seventies of students at what appears to be the same location. The conjunction of the two images might suggest that what is at stake is iconicity, that we are called to look for resemblances, but the voiceover by Algerian publisher Semia Zennadi suggests otherwise. She bemoans how students in Algeria have turned their backs on the Third World and blames it on the lack of transmission between generations. Pan-Africanism, she says, has been reduced to trade

relations, so much so that the students don't even recognize themselves as belonging to the continent. No wonder then that when the BLM movement went viral across the globe a few years after the filming, these students would stand out for their silence on the systemic racism against sub-Saharan Africans in their part of the continent.[xliv] This continental drift that cannot even be bridged by the social justice meme is historicized in the film through the meeting of the two images: for all their resemblances, no line of transmission runs between them.

Still, we are called to look. In fact, by holding its prolonged gaze upon these two scenes at once, the film declares itself to *be* that line of transmission. This "blind compulsion" of the cinematic frame is thoroughly indexical, yet it lacks the quality of the trace aligned to the that-has-been.[xlv] Instead, this is the index as deixis, as formulated within Peirce's taxonomy but oft-forgotten in favor of privileging indexicality's evidentiary force. This second understanding of the index establishes contiguity, however tenuously, by declaring a gap between sign and object that is to be closed with the application of our attention.[xlvi] Like a pointed finger or a command to simply look "here," the cinematic frame, in performing this deictic function, forcibly orients us towards something that nonetheless can only be brought into view through our reciprocal pursuit of the sign. And so we look, between the two images, between "here" and "there," between "then" and "now," occupying and somewhat suturing, however partially and momentarily, the gap between them. That is, between the materialist Third World internationalism declared at Algiers in 1973 and a present marked as much by a forgetting of this history as by emergent transnational solidarities seemingly poised to repeat tragedy as farce.

We get an even more sobering sense of this gap towards the end of the film. In its final chapter set in Dhaka, we follow Bangladeshi politician Zonayed Saki on a visit to the Bangabandhu Centre originally constructed for the 1990 NAM summit before its indefinite postponement following the country's pivot away from the Movement. Unlike most of the other buildings featured in the film, the centre is completely packed due to a trade fair. For a moment, the size of the crowds appears to confirm that the global market has delivered in material terms what the Movement could only invoke as aspiration—Bangladesh, it bears

mention, is today one of Asia's fastest-growing economies. But then, we hear the security ordering the crew to switch off their cameras. The image goes black. While sudden, the prohibition comes as no surprise, for it is exactly at the site that claims to reveal a world of material circulations in all its transparency that we mustn't be allowed to look any further.

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[i] The free speech zone known as Speakers' Corner located in a public park in downtown Singapore is the only space in the city-state where protests can be lawfully held without a permit.

[ii] In July 2019, an advertisement featuring a Chinese actor putting on "brownface" to play Malay and Indian characters was heavily criticized for its racial insensitivity. Subsequently, a rap video produced by YouTube comedian Preeti Nair and rapper Subhas Nair lampooning the advertisement attracted even more controversy when it was investigated by the police for incendiary rhetoric. For a concise account and analysis of the events, see Ruby Thiagarajan, "Brownface and Racism in Singapore," *New Narratif*, August 1, 2019, https://newnaratif.com/journalism/brownface-and-racism-in-singapore/.

[iii] While the term "woke" originated in African American slang as a variation of "awake," it is used today more generally to refer to a condition of being conscious of social justice issues, especially where it relates to race, gender and sexuality. As a term which gained currency through its circulation on social media, its changing connotations have been shaped by its weaponization in the online "culture wars" of recent years. See Aja Romano, "A history of 'wokeness'," *Vox*, October 9, 2020, https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-wokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy.

[iv] In Singapore, the use of "champagne socialist" as a derogatory term for persons of middle to upper class upbringing who espouse socially progressive causes was popularized by Calvin Cheng, a prominent online commentator and supporter of the ruling government. Apart from Cheng, Critical Spectator, a Facebook page ran by a Polish expatriate in Singapore, was especially vociferous in its critique of the BLM movement and its influence on the younger generation in Singapore.

[v] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (London: Zero Books, 2017), 68.

[vi] See, for example, Fatima Bhutto, "Crazy Rich Asians is no racial triumph. It's a soulless salute to the 1%," *The Guardian*, September 12, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/sep/12/crazy-rich-asians-racial-triumph, and Mark Tseng-Putterman, "One Way That *Crazy Rich Asians* Is a Step Backward," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/asian-americas-great-gatsby-moment/568213/.

[vii] See, for example, Kirsten Han, "Crazy Rich Asians is a win for Asian Americans. But it gets Singapore wrong," *Vox*, August 17, 2018, https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/8/17/17715124/crazy-rich-asians-movie-singapore, and Pooja Nansi, "Crazy Rich Asians is one of our saddest moments," *Inkstone*, August 22, 2018, https://www.inkstonenews.com/opinion/pooja-nansi-crazy-rich-asians-hailed-representative-it-ignores-people-singapore/article/2160802.

[viii] Jerrine Tan, "Asian Male Sexuality, the Money-Phallus, and Why Asian Americans Need to Stop Calling *Crazy Rich Asians* the Asian Black Panther," *Medium*, September 1, 2018, https://medium.com/@jerrinetan/asian-male-sexuality-the-money-phallus-and-why-asian-americans-need-to-stop-calling-crazy-rich-e296abb77231.

[ix] Kirsten Han, "Hollywood Has No Time for Crazy Poor Asians," *Foreign Policy*, August 17, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/17/hollywood-has-no-time-for-crazy-poor-asians/.

[x] Rosalind C. Morris, "Theses on the New Öffentlichkeit," *Grey Room* 51 (Spring 2018): 96.

[xi] The ruling People's Action Party has governed the country continuously since it achieved self-governance in 1959.

[xii] The Asian Dollar Market is a regional market for deposits denominated in US dollars. It was established to leverage Singapore's favorable time zone that allowed transactions to take place between the closing of American markets and the opening of markets in Europe on the next day. See J.J. Woo, *Singapore as an International Finance Centre: History, Policy and Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 45.

[xiii] While risks are certainly borne by those who speculate on these assets, there is a significant asymmetry in terms of who bears the fallout in the event of a default. The stakes are especially high in the financialization of the housing market. While among speculators there will always be winners and losers depending on the "bet" placed on the home, homeowners face certain eviction when they cannot meet their mortgage obligations. See Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 125.

[xiv] Sassen, 128.

[xv] Jerome Couturier, Davide Sola and Paul Stonham, "Are sovereign funds 'white knights'?" *Qualitative Research in Financial Markets* 1, no. 3 (2009): 142–51.

[xvi] See, for example, Elvin K. Wyly, Mona Atia, Elizabeth Lee and Pablo Mendez, "Race, gender, and statistical representation: predatory mortgage lending and the US community reinvestment movement," *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2007): 2139-2166.

[xvii] Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "The Uses of Asianization: Figuring Crises, 1997-98 and 2007-?," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (September 2012): 411.

[xviii] Ibid, 428-9.

[xix] Rick Carew, P.R. Venkat and Costas Paris, "Citi Bailout Also Bails Out Singapore Fund," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2009.

[xx] Morris, 106.

[xxi] It bears mention that MBS is never officially referred to as a casino resort, with "integrated resort" being the devised alternative.

[xxii] Lee Kah-Wee, *Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, Progress and the Crisis of Nationalist Modernity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), 234-6.

[xxiii] As Lee observes, what's further established by this vision is the establishment of a synecdoche whereby "the Integrated Resort stands for Marina Bay in the same way that Marina Bay stands for Singapore as a whole." See Lee, 222.

[xxiv] "Ministry aims for a city revival," *Business Times*, January 5, 1979.

[xxv] William S.W. Lim, "The Quality of Urban Life: With Special Reference To Developing Countries,"

Asian Journal of Social Science 1, no. 1 (1973): 81-96.

xxvi Given their focus on the unequal distribution of wealth, there is little to suggest the racialization of the ghetto by urban planners in Singapore. Nonetheless, the discursive turn in the seventies towards a comparative methodology would see the ghetto consistently described as a site of local policy failure so as to bring out the successes of the Singapore model. This was a marked divergence from the discourse during the 1967 Afro-Asian Housing Congress that tended to attribute the housing crisis in the region not to problematic local governance but to the rapid urbanization that was understood as a universal condition of modernity. See Chia Poteik, "Afro-Asian Builder's Manual," *The Straits Times*, October 15, 1967.

xxvii The trajectory is based on Vijay Prashad's history of Third World internationalism. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

xxviii Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, "Speech at Fourth Summit Conference of Non-aligned Countries" (Algiers, September 9, 1973).

xxix Given the ongoing military action supported by the U.S. in Latin America throughout the seventies, this impression of the times was highly deceptive. Indeed, just two days after the summit, the democratically elected socialist president of Chilean Salvador Allende would be ousted and killed in a CIA-backed coup.

xxx Rajaratnam, 1973.

xxxi A.W. Singham and Shirley Hune, *Non-alignment in an Age of Alignments* (Harare: The College Press, 1986), 47.

xxxii Amitav Acharya and See Seng Tan, "The Normative Relevance of the Bandung Conference for Contemporary Asian and International Order" in *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order*, eds. See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 10.

xxxiii United Nations, General Assembly, Resolution 3201, Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, A/RES/3201(S-VI) (May 1, 1974), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/218450.

xxxiv Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, "Speech at the 34th Session of the United Nations General Assembly" (New York, September 24, 1979).

xxxv Vijay Prashad, "Naeem Mohaiemen's Tragic History of the 1970s Left," *Afterall* 47 (Spring/Summer 2019): 56-65.

xxxvi Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 104-15.

xxxvii Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 133.

xxxviii My analysis here is indebted to Ching Kwan Lee's concept of "varieties of capital." See Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

xxxix Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, "Singapore: Global City" (speech, Singapore Press Club, Feburary 6, 1972).

xl Hennie van Vuuren, *Apartheid Guns and Money: A Tale of Profit* (London: Hurst, 2018), 434-7.

xli This observation was made by Mohaiemen in a lecture focusing on Rajaratnam's speech. See Naeem Mohaiemen, "The Shortest Speech" (lecture, Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, May 17, 2019).

xlii For Benjamin, the medium that best demonstrated this capacity is aerial photography. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schoken, 1968), 251.

xliii Morris notes that the political value of "having a voice" has been displaced by that of "being seen to speak". She attributes this to the technomediation of today's protest movements that has allowed "self-expression to substitute for communicative relation." Morris, 98, 108.

xliv "Black Lives Matter skirts North Africa despite everyday racism," *France 24*, July 20, 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/20200720-black-lives-matter-skirts-north-africa-despite-everyday-racism.

xlv Peirce, 108. Roland Barthes devised the expression "that-has-been" to describe photography's authentication of its referent through a separation in time that endows the medium with a necessary sense of belatedness. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

xlvi Doane, 136.