

**Where the Sand Meets the Sea, and Eats It**  
*Contemplating Imageries of Land Reclamation in Singapore*

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## PROLOGUE

I hate sand. I hate how its grains stick to your skin, find their way between your toes, crunch beneath the soles of your bare feet where you've slipped them into your once-clean sandals. When I was a child and my mother first brought me to the beach, I stepped upon the sand and immediately froze. "What's wrong?" She asked. "The sand," I replied, as if that explained everything. "Well, it's the beach," she said, exasperated, "you have to walk across the sand to get to the sea." I would begrudgingly walk to the shoreline, if only to slip my feet into the water to wash the sand off. Of course, I had to walk across the sand again when it was time to go. But after, with feet and sandals washed, stepping on pavement, an anxiety departed my system. This was, and still is, my comfort zone – the uniform predictability of concrete.

I am that "postcolonial subject" Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes, who "due to the imposition of colonial historical narratives, is often decolonized through a decoupling from nature."<sup>1</sup> In 1819, the island of Singapore was colonised by the British for the establishment of a trading port. For two hundred years, so-called "modern" Singapore has been defined by its economic value as conferred by its geographical and oceanic context. Today, many of its citizens, including myself, are descendants not of indigenous people, but of immigrants who came via sea in search of better lives – better economic opportunities that grew out of the port's key position along international maritime trade routes.

Singapore's "decoupling from nature" began during the colonial period – by the late 19th century, most of the primary forest had been cleared to accommodate plantations, farms, and the migrant population.<sup>2</sup> But it was accelerated post-1965, when a newly independent Singapore began the intense urban and economic development that irreversibly rewrote its landscape. The state's solution to the country's small size was not to work within its natural boundaries, but to embark on a long-term project of land reclamation, extending and regularising its coastlines. Singapore has grown from around 590 square kilometres in 1965 to 720 square kilometres in 2014, reclaiming around 22% of its total ground area from its territorial waters.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the world's largest importers of sand per capita, for reclaiming land and later constructing upon it. What is today our most iconic landscape – one that most

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Ordinary Futures: Interspecies Worldings in the Anthropocene," in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 367.

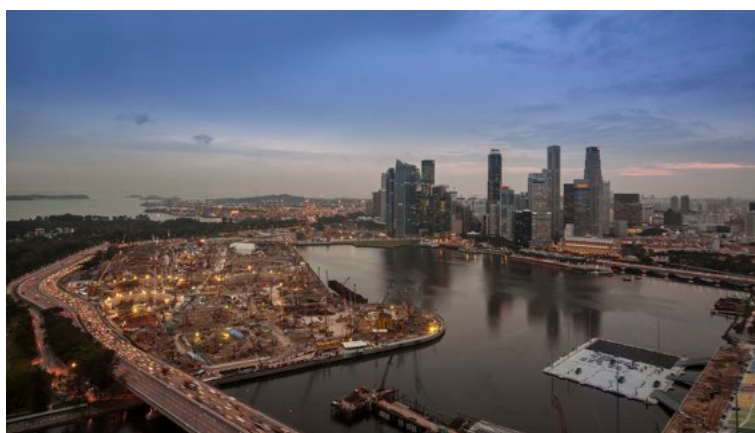
<sup>2</sup> Goh Lee Kim, "When Tigers Used to Roam: Nature & Environment in Singapore," *BiblioAsia*, last modified January 10, 2018, <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2018/01/10/when-tigers-used-to-roam-nature-environment-in-singapore/>.

<sup>3</sup> William Jamieson, "In Conquering the Sea, Singapore Erases its History," *Failed Architecture*, last modified March 12, 2018, <http://failedarchitecture.com/in-conquering-the-sea-singapore-erases-its-history/>.

of its citizens embrace, and which was also backdrop to the popular 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians* – only came into being in the last decade, constructed on land that did not exist forty years ago. This postcard-perfect spectacle of Marina Bay, featuring the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort, Gardens by the Bay, and parts of the Central Business District (figure 1), was built almost entirely on reclaimed land (figure 2). Once, the Singapore River emptied not into this bay, but into the open sea. Once, I flew kites at the grass fields on this reclaimed land, before all the construction began, when the sand must still have been settling. I did not know that land was new, its fields temporary. Reclamation is a reality of our existence that we can only *fully* comprehend through images, rather than the lived-in spectacle, or banality. Once sand is made concrete, metaphorically and materially, it disappears from sight.



**Fig. 1** “19th December, 2016. Dusk Aerials over Marina South toward Gardens by the Bay and MBS.”  
Darren Soh, *Becoming Marina Bay Sands*, 1990-2016. © Darren Soh.



**Fig. 2** “4th March 2008. View from the Singapore Flyer.” The construction site is where the Marina Bay Sands (the three connected buildings on the left in figure 1) now stands today.  
Darren Soh, *Becoming Marina Bay Sands*, 1990-2016. © Darren Soh.

Sand is not just on Singapore's beaches – many of which are now manmade, post-reclamation. *Sous les pavés, les plages* – beneath the pavement, the beach – but not a beach metaphorically free from the forces of capitalism (as the situationists implied in their use of the slogan during the May 1968 protests in France), but an accumulation of sand as urban and constructed as the streets and buildings above. To see what lies beneath the pavement is not to search for freedom, but to complicate the assumed inevitabilities of an island seeking to *reclaim* in order to expand, as if wresting a right to land from the waters that surround it, to transform ocean into not-ocean. I may hate sand, but sand lies beneath my feet, beneath the concrete pavement that comforts me – in place of a dislocated sea.

## I. SAND



**Fig. 3** “Changi, Singapore, possibly 1970s”.

Robert Zhao Renhui, *As We Walked On Water*, 2011. © 2011 The Land Archive.



**Fig. 4** “Sand from Ulu Tiram, Gali Batu-Bukit Panjang, Singapore”.

Robert Zhao Renhui, *Singapore 1925-2025*, 2015. © 2015 Institute of Critical Zoologists and The Land Archive





**Fig. 5** Singapore, 2017.

Sim Chi Yin, *Shifting Sands*, 2017. © 2011 Sim Chi Yin.



**Fig. 6** Singapore, 2017.

Sim Chi Yin, *Shifting Sands*, 2017. © 2011 Sim Chi Yin.

In a series titled *As We Walked On Water*, pastel-toned photographs depict tiny human figures walking across vast sand dunes (figure 3). Artist Robert Zhao Renhui captions them simply, identifying their location (coastal areas of Singapore) and time period (1970s-80s). The series is framed by a narrative that states these people are walking the “desert-like landscapes” of newly-reclaimed lands in Singapore towards the “new shore-line, in the hopes of reaching the beach they once knew.”<sup>4</sup> It is written nostalgically, though framed as a historical event. But one is unsure of its truth – the idea of freely accessing newly-reclaimed land in Singapore today is ludicrous, given the security at the sites, but one wonders if forty or fifty years ago, it might have been possible. Nonetheless, these images do possess an un-truth: they were not actually captured in the country. Instead, Zhao shot them in places such as the Tottori Sand Dunes in Japan. They look foreign, if one knows Singapore – but if reclamation creates new land, that new land must, at some point, look foreign too.

In an image from another series, *Singapore 1925-2025*, a giant stockpile of sand is surrounded on one side by forest, and the other by Singapore’s ubiquitous public housing estates (figure 4). The pile is so tall it is practically the height of the nearby blocks of flats. The caption identifies the sand’s origin as Ulu Tiram, a suburb of Johor in Malaysia, purportedly moved to and stored in Bukit Panjang, a suburb of mainland Singapore. In reality, this particular sand reserve does not exist, but much smaller ones do around the country, of the same trapezoidal shape. And it is true that Singapore imports sand from its (poorer) Southeast Asian neighbours – so much sand, in fact, that Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia have all banned exports of sand to the country.<sup>5</sup> The image is an invented one, but the title of the series does extend to 2025; is this landscape in Singapore’s future?

Zhao’s investigations of man’s relationship with nature are situated, uncomfortably, between fiction and reality. He has presented his work as research projects by the Institute of Critical Zoologists and The Land Archive, organisations that essentially consist of himself. He draws from his extensive archive of found images, or travels the world to shoot his own; he might or might not edit them, might or might not allow the artificiality of the edited image to come through. He manipulates the implied objective ‘truths’ of nature photography, even supporting them with physical artefacts. But his work hinges most of all on the context (or confusion) provided by his matter-of-fact text, ranging from the single-sentence caption to extensive description and documentation. As with his images, some texts describe the ‘truth’, or at least a version of the truth, while others are merely written to sound like objective fact.

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<sup>4</sup> “As We Walked On Water,” *The Land Archive*, accessed January 27, 2019, <http://www.landarchive.org/water/>.

<sup>5</sup> Samantha Subramanian, “How Singapore is Creating More Land for Itself,” *The New York Times*, last modified April 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/magazine/how-singapore-is-creating-more-land-for-itself.html>.

One never knows what to believe, but only because, like the best lies, Zhao's projects all contain some degree of believability.

The two aforementioned images are disconcerting not because they are fantastical, but because they seem only a hair displaced from reality. This is made more obvious when compared to images from Sim Chi Yin's series *Shifting Sands*, which documents the global demand for and depletion of sand through land reclamation projects in Singapore, as well as Malaysia and China. In figure 5, the milky interweaving of sand and sea on a bed of freshly reclaimed land echoes the dreaminess of Zhao's imaginary beach. In figure 6, a sand depository in Bedok, in the eastern part of Singapore, may not rise as high as Zhao's pile in Bukit Panjang, but its similar trapezoidal form – lit by a shaft of bright sunlight – is just as alien. Sim's photographs often look stranger than fiction, stranger even than Zhao's images exactly because they are depictions of reality. Perhaps this strangeness permeates because reclamation is an aggressive act of fiction-made-reality, a 'nonfictionalisation'. William Jamieson observes that land reclamation "mobilises the literary aspects of geography through the supervening relation between author (the state), the text (the reclaimed land), and the reader (the citizen)."<sup>6</sup> There is something alchemical about declaring a need for land, transforming water into said land, then shaping that land into whatever it needs it to be: public housing estates, military training ground, industrial facilities, postcard-perfect landscape of Gardens by the Bay blending into Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort blending into Central Business District.

The 'nonfictionalisation' of land reclamation extends into state rhetoric, which almost exclusively frames it in pragmatic terms. On September 6, 2003, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press statement in response to an ongoing dispute with Malaysia regarding its reclamation works, including the sentence: "Singapore is a very small and land-scarce country, and reclamation is necessary for our survival and prosperity."<sup>7</sup> The 2014 Land Use Plan projected a need of 5,600 hectares of land to accommodate a population of 6.9 million by the year 2030.<sup>8</sup> Land reclamation is framed at the intersection of anxiety at the country's small size, and the desire for continued growth in a competitive global economy, and the utter conviction that land reclamation is the inevitable solution. It is myth construction

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<sup>6</sup> William Jamieson, "There's Sand in My Infinity Pool: Land Reclamation and the Rewriting of Singapore," *GeoHumanities* 3, no. 2 (2017): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2017.1279021>.

<sup>7</sup> "MFA Spokesman's Comments - Land Reclamation," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Singapore*, accessed January 29, 2017, <https://www1.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2003/09/MFA-Spokesmans-Comments--Land-Reclamation>.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Chang, "5,600 hectares more land for bigger population: Land Use Plan," *The Straits Times*, last modified February 16, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/5600-hectares-more-land-for-bigger-population-land-use-plan>.



couched not in grandiose terms, but in necessity, in dry fact, in irrefutable statistics. It has already assessed the losses and found them negligible in face of the gains. There are few mentions, if at all, of the negative impact on those evicted from seaside villages and offshore islands, or on marine biodiversity that remains so invisible to the average urbanite. Even so, well, what can we do? That's just the way it is. We need the land. Look at the numbers.

I think here of that objective language that Zhao uses to reframe the 'truth' of a photograph. But unlike his images, in the face of reclamation, there is no room for, or point in, skepticism. Before you know it, the 'truth' has been efficiently engineered – written – into being. What once seemed fantastical has been moulded into reality, the very land we walk and build on. You cannot count on nature to give you more land, no matter how long you wait, but you can pour sand into the sea. With the right resources, and the right language to frame it, Singapore can always alter, and ignore, its geographical realities. We walk on land, on water.

## II. COAST



**Fig. 7** The process of land reclamation in Singapore, in three videos by Charles Lim.

Columns left to right: Two screenshots each from *drag*, *drop*, and *pour*.

Charles Lim, *SEA STATE 9: proclamation*, 2015-ongoing. Screenshots by author.

In January 2018, I walk into an art gallery in Gillman Barracks, an arts cluster housed in a former military compound not too far from Singapore's southern coast. On the walls are flatscreen televisions, turned ninety degrees such that they are portraits rather than landscapes. A giant column of a dark brown semi-liquid substance torrentially pours into the frothing ocean, accumulating into a mountain of wet sand; the verticality only emphasises its erasure of the water. A barge floats, slow and ominous, emptying its load of sand from its underbelly into the sea. The gaping maw of an excavator rhythmically scoops, then releases sand into water. These are the technologies of land reclamation, captured via drone and made visible – and violent – in a way I had never witnessed (figure 7). Hypnotising in its cycle of destruction for creation, these scenes haunt me; there is a palpable suffocation in the mercilessness of sand-burying-sea. These videos, titled *drag*, *drop*, and *pour*, are part of *SEA STATE 9: proclamation*, by former Olympian sailor turned contemporary artist Charles Lim. Lim has been working on *SEA STATE* since 2005; it comprises ten sub-projects, numbered 0 to 9 like the oceanographic scale that measures the condition of the free surface of a large body of water. Each sub-project “examines the biophysical, political and psychic contours of Singapore through the visible and invisible lenses of the sea”.<sup>9</sup> *SEA STATE*'s underlying principle is that “the sea is not infinite”<sup>10</sup> – the sea is a finite resource, and our territorial and capital-driven interactions with it are unsustainable. In *drag*, *drop*, and *pour*, the finitude of the sea is presented in its most elemental form; sand literally fills the screen, engulfing the water. The coastline is continually consumed and redrawn in the quest for expansion.

Fourteen months later in March 2019, a sixteen-minute documentary called *Lost World* makes the rounds on social media in Singapore. It follows a Cambodian woman, Phalla Vy, an activist from the island of Koh Sralau, where the mangrove forests are being decimated by indiscriminate sand dredging. Millions of metric tons of sand are exported from Cambodia each year; one of their destinations *was* Singapore until it was permanently banned in 2017. Towards the end of the film, Vy is brought to the reclaimed Marina Bay. She opines:

When I see all the people walking, I want to tell them this land is my land. This land is from my country. But I can't express this because I don't speak their language and I don't know what to do so that they will understand. I can only grieve for the land.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Charles Lim Yi Yong: SEA STATE”, *NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore*, accessed November 21, 2018, <http://ntu.ccasingapore.org/exhibitions/charles-lim-sea-state/>.

<sup>10</sup> Hanae Ko, “Navigating the Unseen: An interview with Charles Lim and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa”, *ArtAsiaPacific*, accessed November 21, 2018, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/93/NavigatingTheUnseen>.

<sup>11</sup> *Lost World*, directed by Kalyanee Mam (Emergence Magazine and Go Project Films, 2019), <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/lost-world/>.

While discussing the film with a friend familiar with government policy, she notes (without excusing the Singapore government's lack of regulation on sand imports) that the sand used to reclaim Marina Bay was not from Cambodia at all. Part of me thinks it is disingenuous to plant Vy at that location, yet I feel compelled to excuse this inaccuracy as creative license, if only to give a human face to this crisis of "slow violence" that Singapore was in part perpetuating. Rob Nixon defines slow violence as that which "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>12</sup> Embedded in his definition of the term is an invisibility – what better to remain invisible than ecological devastation occurring in a country entirely other (and poorer)?

Philip E. Steinberg observes that coastlines are "liminal spaces that are neither purely sea nor purely land", and are thus useful for "unpacking the fundamental binary between land and water (or dry space and wet space) that underpins the modern notion of state territoriality."<sup>13</sup> In Singapore, the theoretical richness of the coastal space, which also makes it ripe for the acts of ecological violence committed upon it through land reclamation, lies precisely in how it is conceived of as the site, not of the binary, but for wet territory to *potentially become* dry territory. In Koh Sralau, the mangrove forests are neither "purely sea nor purely land" but a space where wet and dry are inextricable. Mangrove plants have adapted to grow in saltwater, and they protect the coast from erosion – but not from a destruction so violent as that inflicted by humans and their machines. For sand to be mined from these "liminal" natural environments neither wet nor dry, they had to be reconfigured as merely dry space into order to become disposable.

Throughout *Lost World*, I notice that director Kalyanee Mam has inserted Lim's footage from *drag*, *drop*, and *pour*. Now, adjacent to the zealous aggression of the reclamation process as documented in Lim's videos is a brutality of a more protracted, insidious nature. Where Lim's scenes are abstract in their focus on form, speed, and repetitive movement, Mam shows the machines removing sand from Koh Sralau in sequences arguably less beautiful, but more narratively situated. She uses Vy's interaction with her community to illustrate how sand dredging has impacted Koh Sralau's ecosystem, as well as its residents' livelihoods, beyond the physical disappearance of its land. "With all the islands gone," Vy says, in a hut with other villagers, "there's no more crabs." Another continues, saying that with less crabs to harvest,

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<sup>12</sup> Rob Nixon, "Introduction," in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Philip E. Steinberg, "Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 163-164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785192>.

“women are the most affected. They have to leave their children and their home to work.” Furthermore, whereas sand in Singapore is seen as an economic resource, a territorial building block, sand in Koh Sralau is framed as the root of their culture – Vy says, “our identity in this coastal region is dependent upon sand”. The *SEA STATE* projects, focused as they are on structures already inscribed by a state discontinuous with nature, do not elaborate on alternative ways of “being-with-the-world” (and by extension alternative forms of violence) that occur in indigenous coastal communities.<sup>14</sup> It is only in Mam’s documentary that his archive of the pure physicality of reclamation technologies find new narrative possibility.

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<sup>14</sup> DeLoughrey, 358.



## III. SEA



**Fig. 8** Marine forms documented in Singapore's intertidal zones. (Bottom left image has been mirrored.)  
 Juria Toramae, *The Sea Around Us* (part of *Field Notes from the South Seas*), 2013-18. Screenshots by author.

Singapore's official mascot is the Merlion, a kitschy chimera with the body of a fish and the head of a lion. It is not extant in myths of the region, but was instead originally designed as the logo for the Singapore Tourism Board in the 1960s. Given that one of the country's major national symbols is this crude part-oceanic amalgam, and given that one is never more than a thirty-minute drive from the coast, it is perhaps one of the country's great ironies that there is pervasive ignorance about the rich marine ecosystems that call its waters home. This is due in part to the fact that only 7.5% of its coastline is publicly accessible; that includes already-reclaimed areas such as Marina Bay, as well as East Coast Park, which was opened in the 1970s following the first major phase of land reclamation efforts.<sup>15</sup> Any marine ecosystems that once thrived in those areas have long since disappeared, as have the human communities that were relocated to facilitate reclamation, and who might have been carriers of the knowledge of marine life.

It is within this context that artist Juria Toramae has been researching and documenting Singapore's marine biodiversity since 2013 – the only artist in the country to do so for a sustained period. Toramae, like the artists mentioned previously, maintains a primarily

<sup>15</sup> Milica Topalović, "Constructed Land: Singapore in the Century of Flattening," in *Constructed Land: Singapore 1924-2012*, eds. Uta Hassler and Milica Topalović (Singapore: ETH Zürich Department of Architecture, Singapore-ETH Centre and Future Cities Laboratory, 2014), 55.



image-based practice. But rather than documenting the surrealities of land reclamation, she has instead amassed photographs and video footage of marine life in the country's waters. In her 2016 visual essay, 'Notes on Some Outlying Reefs and Islands of Singapore', I was stunned to see colourful images of sea anemones, corals, and sea stars, alien not just in their form but in the very concept of their presence in Singapore. In a recent installation, *Field Notes from the South Seas*, Toramae projected a short video of close-ups of anemones and corals onto the floor. Eventually, these turn into kaleidoscopic sequences in which intertidal landscapes are interwoven with mirrored images of the extensive coral bleaching that has occurred as a result of pollution. The audience was welcome to sit within the projection, which was more than large enough to encompass the human body, or peruse images of marine life embedded in sand piled on shelves nearby. It is not quite Donna Haraway's "making kin"; Toramae relies on simple gestures that do not fully assert that "All critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically."<sup>16</sup> There is in fact an unnerving quality to the work that may not have been altogether intentional – this life within Singapore's shores could only be experienced by the flattened proxy of two-dimensional images. The non-human biology has to be mediated by human technology.<sup>17</sup> But Toramae's work, in its expansion of our visual comprehension of Singapore's marine environments, nonetheless complicates Roland Barthes' oft-quoted assertion that the sea "bears no message."<sup>18</sup> It is precisely because we are unable or unwilling to read the messages of the sea – as conveyed by the flora and fauna that reside within it, the ontologies that affirm it as 'alive' – that we can relegate it to a blank space on which to inscribe human will.

Toramae's methodologies seem straightforward, but within a dearth of understanding of Singapore's marine biodiversity, even simple documentation can be powerful. There is one precedent for this in a successful resistance effort against seemingly unstoppable coastal erasure. In 2001, a wetland area called Chek Jawa, that had somehow gone unnoticed despite its unique mix of six types of coastal habitats, was discovered off the eastern coast of the offshore island Pulau Ubin. Upon learning that the government had slated the area for reclamation, a group of volunteers scrambled to conduct a biodiversity survey, which was then submitted to the relevant authorities. Their efforts – and the visual documentation of the area – also received substantial media attention. For the first time, Singapore's marine biodiversity was made visible to the wider public, destabilising prevailing assumptions about the lack of

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<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, no. 6 (2015): 162.

<sup>17</sup> While this, as an aesthetic experience, reinforces human-nonhuman binary, it is also necessary for the sake of environmental conservation to keep these ecosystems as pristine and free from human contact as possible.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 112.

vibrant natural ecosystems in the country, and prompting thousands of people to visit Chek Jawa in person. More importantly, it was made legible to the state, which agreed to defer reclamation by at least ten years, a deferment that remains in place. It is one of the few examples in Singapore of the reversal of a state policy decision in response to ground-up advocacy, and is the only instance of government reversal on land reclamation.

In the 2007 documentary *Remembering Chek Jawa*, which tells the story of the 2001 survey, various interviewees mention the importance of *seeing* as a means of *knowing*, and by extension *caring for* a space.<sup>19</sup> If our epistemology of the sea can accommodate these ontologies of its marine life, in part elaborated through visual documentation, perhaps there is a chance for an “ethics of care and obligation” that DeLoughrey positions as one possible solution to that apathetic “decoupling from nature”.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it is still too convenient in densely urban Singapore to disconnect from nature; I am ashamed to say that I have never visited Chek Jawa (it can only be seen at low tide, which always seems to be at an ungodly hour of the morning). It is also telling that the state chose only to *delay* reclamation, suggesting that reclaiming Chek Jawa might just not have been particularly pressing. Deleuze and Guattari declare, “the sea is a smooth space fundamentally open to striation”. While I disagree with their characterisation of this maritime “smooth space” as one of “affects, more than one of properties”, as “*haptic* rather than optical” (it is important that environmental advocates, including Toramae, make marine environments *tangible* and *visible*), I do think the state perceives Singapore’s waters as pre-striated space.<sup>21</sup> The sea is territorialised not just through grids and calculations, as examined in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but through the literal transformation of marine into urban. The documentation of its marine biodiversity might ultimately do little to sway the more stubborn intentions of the state, for whom land reclamation remains fundamental to the country’s development and survival.

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<sup>19</sup> *Remembering Chek Jawa*, directed by Lin Youwei Eric (Lin Youwei Eric, 2007), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJI8Hr22-OE>.

<sup>20</sup> DeLoughrey, 363.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “1440: The Smooth and the Striated,” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 557-559.

## EPILOGUE

Just over three years ago, my father was on the verge of retirement after decades of rising through the ranks at PSA, one of the world's largest port operators.<sup>22</sup> It was time for him to start clearing out his things, and for the first time in all the years he had worked in that office, my mother and I had the opportunity to visit. From his corner unit on the thirty-eighth floor, my father had a grand view. To his left stretched the office buildings and public housing blocks that have become emblematic of the country's rapid socio-economic development; to his right stretched the cerulean sea, dotted with anchored vessels, waiting to enter the port or leave Singapore's shores (figure 9). It struck me that I had hardly ever thought of Singapore's waters as particularly blue, often only witnessing its murkiness in my close encounters with it at the beach or along the Singapore River. Then, I realised how easy it would be to turn your back on one section of the view or the other, to see only the urban or the maritime.



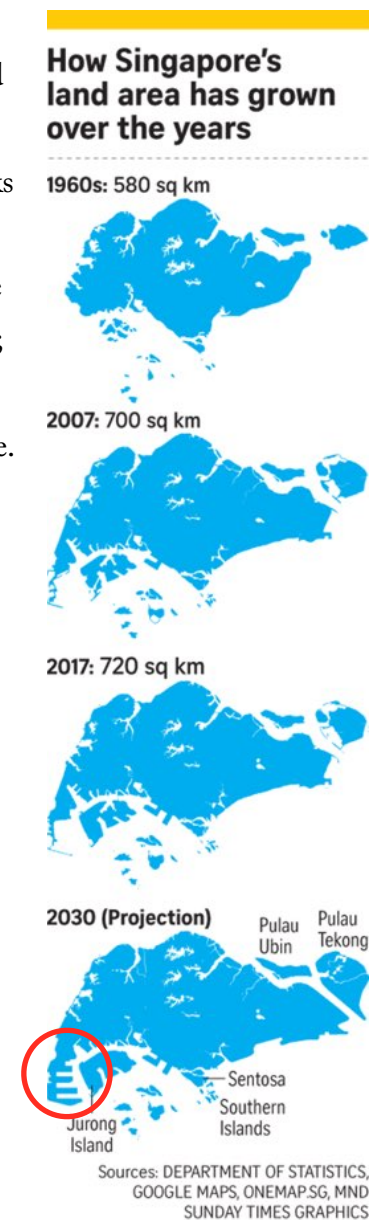
**Fig. 9** Views to the left and right of my father's old office at Pasir Panjang, Singapore, through the slightly tinted windows. Images by author.

Amidst the rise of image-based art practices in the past fifteen years documenting the different faces of land reclamation in Singapore, it remains easy to avert one's eyes. No – it remains easy, *natural*, to look directly at these realities (or in some cases fictions), to accept and dissociate from them simultaneously. I think we see land reclamation for exactly what it is, in all its ruthlessness. We either believe that it is necessary, or are resigned to its continued existence. Where, then, does the power of the image lie: in changing the way we see, or in seeing the way we've changed?

<sup>22</sup> PSA once stood for Port of Singapore Authority. Privatised in 1997, it retains the letters as a brand.

Growing up, as we drove along expressways running parallel to the southern coasts of Singapore, my sister and I would cast our eyes upon the container terminals, the seascapes of our youth. Through my young eyes, and perhaps even now, those stacks upon stacks of colourful containers looked like children's building blocks, and the gantry cranes stretching their necks to the sky like gigantic metal giraffes. We jokingly called it our father's kingdom; it was in part responsible for all the privileges we've been so lucky to have. But by 2040, none of the container terminals will be there. Though one of them, Pasir Panjang, was fully completed only as recently as 2009, the government intends to free up valuable land in the southern central area for redevelopment, in a project ambitiously named the "Great Southern Waterfront". Singapore's entire port operations will by then have moved to the Tuas Megaport on the southwestern coast.<sup>23</sup> On a map projecting Singapore's land area in 2030, the regularity of the port's berths splay out awkwardly like blocky fingers curling in on the island, smooth and geometric as the rest of the reclaimed land on the southern coasts of Singapore (figure 10).

And so, as with everything else in Singapore, the coast shifts again, straightens...



**Fig. 10** Infographic by *The Straits Times* illustrating Singapore's changing land area from the 1960s to 2030, with addition by author to indicate location of the megaport. (Ng Jun Sen, "New ideas to feed a growing island," *The Straits Times*, last modified February 4, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-ideas-to-feed-a-growing-island>.)

<sup>23</sup> "Harbouring ambition: 3 questions you may have about Singapore's ports moving to Tuas," *The Straits Times*, last modified December 10, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/harbouring-ambition-3-questions-you-may-have-about-singapores-ports-moving-to-tuas>.

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