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Blurring the future: AI regurgitation and the Singapore Muslim community

Mcgrail, J.M.

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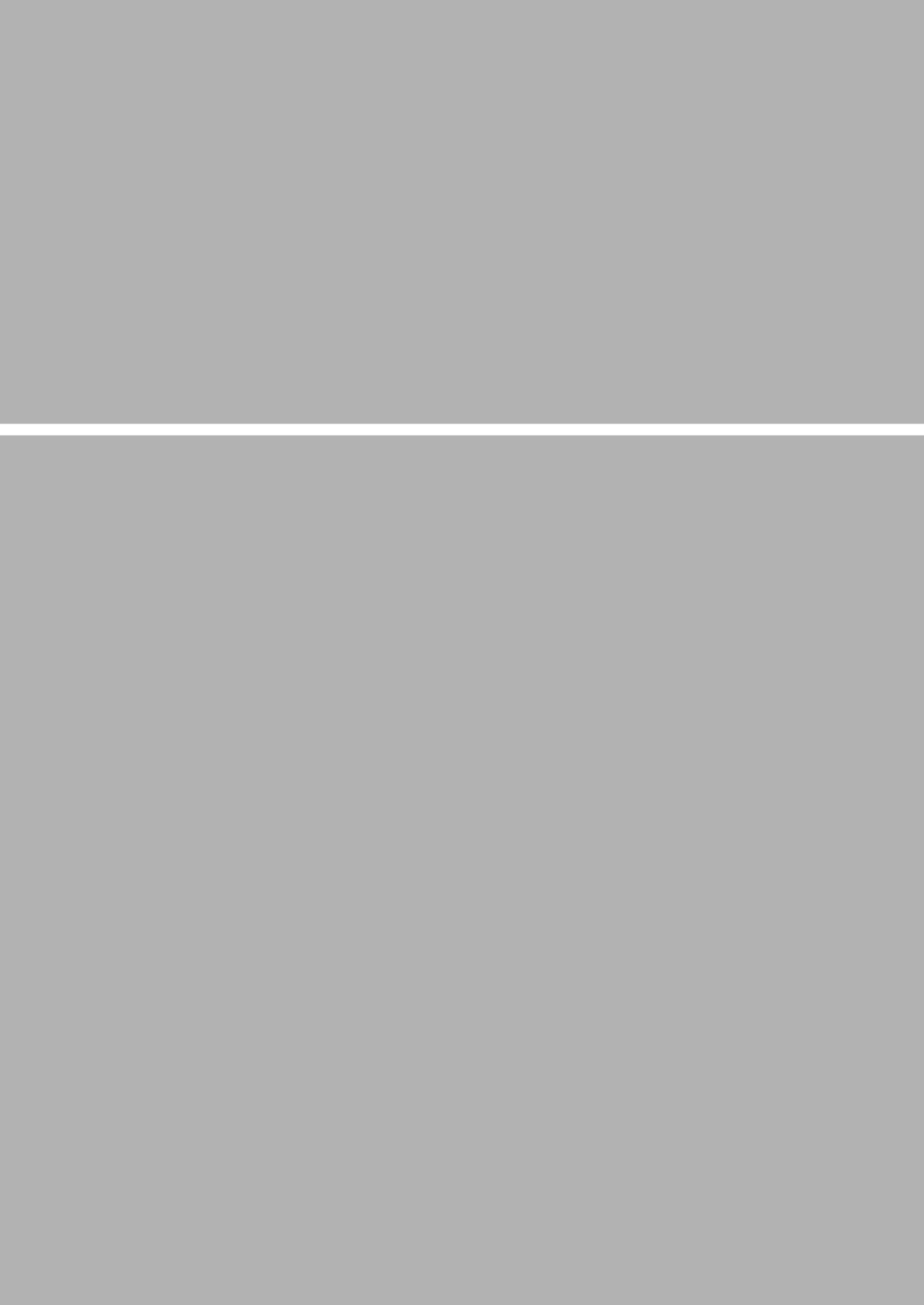
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Chapter 6

What Does the Future Sound Like?

INTRODUCTION

As this thesis has repeatedly explored, the role of AI is frequently invisibilised in Singapore. In recent years, technology has played an increasingly central role in the governance of Singapore, including the governance of the country's Muslim minority. Ethnographies behind the scenes of such digital systems like Monserrate's (2023) on American data centres show that these systems operate in messy and affective ways. For example, Monserrate shows that data centre stewards frequently listen to the servers to try and understand their needs and see themselves not as objective robots but as human caretakers. However, I often found that the subjective processes which underlie AI systems were not easily accessible in Singapore. A close friend and technology researcher has tried without success for several years to tour a data centre in Singapore. Data centres often do not appear on maps and are grey anonymous buildings with signs on their fences declaring them "protected areas." More than once, I found myself scuttling by these buildings with my microphone recording in my backpack, trying to experience these sites first-hand whilst not getting into trouble. The message is clear: do not look here.



Figure 14- Warning found outside data centers.

Likewise, I only heard about the construction of the AI Fatwa bot after the fact and so never got to witness the negotiations and choices made during its creation. When I did hear about it, I was assured that it would be for internal use at MUIS only, again reducing the opportunities to see the system in use and the interesting contradictions that would arise. What I learned about the AI Fatwa bot came to me second-hand from its designers and what they were willing to divulge later on. This is not a surprise really, given my position as an outsider and theirs as a government body. It is rare indeed that ethnographers gain access to the state, as I describe in my methods section. The consequence is that my experience of AI systems within the Singaporean State came from the polished presentations of government officials at public events.

Further, as we have seen, ChatGPT—which underlies the AI Fatwa bot—manages the data collected by the Smart Nation. It is installed in the software of civil servants, which is built on an archive of human texts that cannot be accessed. As a consequence, my interlocutors and I could only imagine the archives' content by tracing the outlines of what was present and absent in its outputs. By the time of those interactions, the AI which we experienced together was one which had already been rendered as an 'objective' output.

As Monserrate (2023) argues, all digital infrastructures are cultural objects created by subjective people, not objective systems run by robots. Throughout my fieldwork I struggled to access the human parts of AI. Often, I glimpsed AI only after it had been transduced by various state apparatus imbuing it with the ideologies and epistemologies of the state as described in Chapter 2. I use 'transduce' throughout this chapter under the definition put forth by Helmreich. His definition of 'transduce' is that it "names how sound changes as it traverses media" (Helmreich 2015, 222). Here I expand its definition to include how anything is changed when moving through a medium. In this case, how AI is changed from a cultural process into an objective outcome when passing through the Singaporean state. Consequently, I mostly experienced AI after it had been 'transduced' to have the rough edges of human involvement sanded off, just like the data which flows into AI systems and state definitions of Muslim identity. Often my interlocutors felt similarly, as we will hear in the upcoming sonic ethnography. LC an activist and writer argued that this was their experience of Singapore in general, stating, "I think that is what a lot of Singapore is like, they conceal a lot of things then make it seem nice for you to experience".

The question I faced as I re-entered the field in summer 2023 was how I might allow my interlocutors to experience the affective aspects of AI systems. How might the seemingly objective and invisible be transduced back into the subjective and sense-able? At that time, I had come across the work of the artist Christina Kubisch, who uses electromagnetic microphones to transduce a representation of the electrical soundscape. The project allowed people to experience electromagnetism, which is constantly being produced by technology, but which is not usually audible. In the sonic ethnography which follows, I attempt to do something similar.

Armed with my own electromagnetic microphone, I organised to meet with three of my interlocutors at sites they chose within Singapore that made them think of the future. These interlocutors were ones I had met on several occasions and built rapport with. They were also interlocutors who had strong visions of Singapore's future. When we met, I would set up the microphone and give them headphones so they could hear the electromagnetic waves of the area transduced into sound. Iskandar, who we already met in the chapter "Act Blur, Live Longer," took me to the two remaining locations in Singapore where the call to prayer can still be heard: Kampong Glam in the centre of the city; and Woodlands Waterfront Park, next to the causeway to Malaysia, where the Azan can be heard drifting across the water from Johor Bahru. LC, a Muslim writer and activist, met me at Marina Barrage in the heart of Singapore's central business district, a man-made park built on top of a dam which protects the city from flooding and produces electricity. Finally, Wan, an indigenous rights activist whose family lived on Ubin Island until Singaporean Urbanisation plans of the 1970s, took me to Pulau Ubin. After I had the microphones set up, we walked through the areas they had selected while I asked them to imagine the future of Singapore.

I wanted them to choose places in the city that were familiar because, as I have argued in Singapore, there is a second city. A city constructed from data extracted by the cameras and sensors which form the Smart Nation. However, it is a city that cannot be seen by walking the streets. Only its traces—a camera here and a data centre there—can be perceived. In spite of this invisibility, the future of Singapore is tied to this second city, the data it produces, and the visions that data conjures. When I interviewed people during my fieldwork, I often found myself asking "what does the future look like?" But how can Singaporeans imagine an alternative to something they cannot see? By making electronic infrastructures of Sin-

gapore's Smart Nation tangible through sound, I allowed my interlocutors to re-engage with the city they know through the one they do not (Cobusson 2022 and Heine 2023).

To be clear, what Iskandar, LC, and Wan heard during these walks were likely not the literal sounds of AI. To me this is not what is most important, as Helmreich argues "transduction affords a way into thinking about the infrastructures through which the vibrating world is nowadays apprehended" (Helmreich 2015, 226). By using my electromagnetic microphone to transduce electrical objects into sound, I aim to make them tangible and therefore elicit affective responses to them from my interlocutors, which I struggled to access in my ethnography otherwise. Similar projects have been conducted by ethnographers using sound. For example, Roosth (2009) showed how by increasing the volume of yeast molecules vibrating, participants would associate these sounds with screaming. Likewise, Espirito Santo (2019) used electromagnetic recordings taken by ghost hunters to show how they constructed the presence of ghosts within the recordings by placing significance on the transduced sounds produced by their microphones. What interests me in these recordings, therefore, is how these new interactions with AI infrastructure, transduced into sound, prompt new and unexpected reflections from Iskandar, LC, and Wan.

It might therefore be argued that these recordings do not reflect the reality of AI systems and their infrastructures. On this I agree with Ruha Benjamin when she writes that "facts, alone, will not save us" (Benjamin 2016, 2). Rather, as she goes on to argue, "fictions...are not falsehoods but refashionings through which analysts experiment with speculative methods [to] challenge ever present narratives of inevitability" (Benjamin 2016, 1). As this thesis has explored the futures of Muslims, and AI, in Singapore are narratives which seem inevitable. By creating an opportunity for my interlocutors to re-encounter the city through electromagnetically transduced sound, I aim to offer a speculative space to imagine futures outside the foreclosed ones which emerge from state narratives.

As a consequence, I try in this chapter to leave the futures described in this sonic ethnography open by trying to refrain from analysing them and shutting down their potential meanings. I prefer instead to leave them open to be transduced and speculated on. Here I hope to offer a perspective on the contents of these recordings as a guide and frame for listening to them.

Iskandar – Ghosts and Circumambulation

Iskandar and I agreed to meet at Mother Dough, a bakery in Kampong Glam. A regular haunt of mine during fieldwork. Kampong Glam, in central Singapore, had been the seat of the Malay royal family, and for many years was a meeting point for South and Southeast Asians on their way to Mecca for Hajj. These historical connections to Malay royalty and the Muslim community mean that Kampong Glam is one of the last places in Singapore where the call to prayer can be heard.

In 1974, the Singaporean state began a campaign to reduce sound pollution throughout the city (Lee 2003, 112). To comply with this new order, mosques around the island turned their speakers inwards, away from the street. The call to prayer would no longer be heard outside the walls of the mosque in Singapore. Having recently been resettled from rural kampongs to high-rise apartments in Singapore's rapidly urbanising centre, this change in the sonic landscape came as a shock to many Muslim residents. As Lee (2003) argues, up until that point, the *azan* itself had functioned as a sign of the limits of a community. It was what Schafer (1994) calls an acoustic community. If you were within earshot of that call five times a day, you could be sure that you were in a Muslim kampong. Since 1974 Sultan Mosque in Kampong Glam has been the only place where the *Azan* could be heard. A last reminder of communities past.

This conflict over sound in public space mirrored that of an earlier one in the 1830s between British colonial officers and the Chinese community, whose noisy religious processions were seen as a disruption of the peace (McCullum 2017). Attempts to end these processions was protested vigorously by the Chinese community. In fact, the furore over the change in 1974 to the *Azan* was calmed by the state pointing out that Chinese religious processions were also being curtailed (Lee 1999, 90). Regardless of who these policies affected, they profoundly changed the sonic landscape of Singapore. Where once religious and cultural sounds could be heard across the island, those noises have since been subsumed by the noise now most commonly associated with Singapore – construction. As it stands, there are only two places in Singapore where the *Azan* can regularly be heard: in front of Sultan Mosque in the traditionally Malay neighbourhood of Kampong Glam, and at the causeway to Malaysia, where the sound floats across the water from the Mosques in Johor Barhu. We began our walk and ended our walk in these sites, reminders of an acoustic community which once existed.

These haunted sites set the tone for our walk. Ghosts would return repeatedly throughout the day. The first time, we walked between two Muslim graveyards, where our discussion was interrupted as the electromagnetic microphone leapt to life. Ghosts? This moment would lead Iskandar to reflect, off microphone, on the way the constant building works in Singapore meant that even the dead could not rest. Graveyards are often relocated in the process of construction in the city. That thought came back to Iskandar as we walked through our second stop, an abandoned railway line which once connected Malaysia and Singapore before the split. There we came across a construction site. Another graveyard, Iskandar commented. Construction sites are not just on literal gravesites but are also built on top of people's memories. Memories of community, like those of Muslims removed from their kampongs in the 1970s. At our final stop over an hour away from our starting point, by the causeway to Malaysia, I asked Iskandar how we could reach a future he would want for Singapore. He replied, "Death", though he said that even in death they do not let you rest, referring to the constant construction which uproots the dead and displaces the living.

As we finished our interview on the causeway, the azan drifted across the water from Johor Bahru—a haunting reminder of the acoustic communities which once existed in Singapore, and of a time when Singapore and Malaysia were a unified country.

I am drawing here on Derrida's sense of haunting, the presence of the past and lost futures which are felt in the present. As Derrida argues, "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (Derrida 2006, 34). In particular, the Singaporean state's insistence on 'survivalism,' which motivates its push toward a technological future, is haunted by the split with Malaysia. Since that split, as we explored in the chapter on the epistemology of AI, Malaysia has been seen as a threat and has motivated the focus of Singapore on self-reliance, including building a tech economy and strengthening its military. When we hear the Azan drifting across the causeway from Malaysia, it is a reminder of this haunting presence in Singapore. Not only because it demonstrates the physical proximity of Malaysia, but also because it is a reminder that Singapore could have been part of a Muslim majority country. It is an acoustic reminder of that community.

In his essay "*What is Hauntology?*" Mark Fisher writes that "what haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the

past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 2012, 16). All the moments of haunting we experienced on our walk through Singapore were reminders. Reminders of the community that could have been. Often these reminders appear in Singapore’s architecture. Golden Mile Mall, which I described visiting in the introduction, is being renovated into luxury apartments. Its iconic façade remains, but the community who inhabited it are gone. The building then becomes a haunting reminder of what once was. Another example is the village mosques which are now demolished, only remembered through photographs posted on the Facebook page “Lost Mosques of Singapore” described in Chapter 5. Singapore is filled with memories of communities cleared away to make way for the futuristic metropolis.

However, Iskandar is not entirely pessimistic. He argues that the future does not exist. Time, in his view, is circular; we circumambulate over paths already once trodden. Instead of the linear futures proposed by techno-solutionism, in which a day will come when all our problems will be solved by technology, Iskandar proposes something else. Instead of Artificial Intelligence, he said to me that Singapore needed Ancestral Intelligence, the knowledge of those who have walked this circle before, as we encounter the problems they faced again.

As Escoffery has written “Ancestral Intelligence are collectively cultivated knowledges, locally specific, balancing our cultural differences with our ever-changing ecosystems” (Escoffery 2023, 2). This is a broad definition, referring to all human knowledge produced and encompassing everything from NFTs to social gatherings (Escoffery 2023, 9) but this is purposely so. As Escoffery argues, this multiplicity goes against the universal claims to truth made by AGI. In Singapore then, this Ancestral Intelligence may reside in the memory of spaces like Golden Mile, or the Islands “Lost Mosques.” These spaces then are not only hauntings but opportunities to re-engage with a past which has been obscured by urban development. Through this a multiplicity of Intelligences emerge and create the possibility of futures not produced by the probabilistic epistemology of AI which regurgitates the most common parts of its dataset.

What drew us to this conversation during the walk was that moment between the Muslim graveyards in Kampong Glam, where Iskandar concluded that what must have been an underground cable intervened in our conversation. It was that electromagnetic interference which drew

Iskandar's mind underground. To the buried, to the dead, and in the end to ancestors. Perhaps we could have had this conversation without electromagnetism, but I would argue that creating a space to speculate about those transduced sounds prompted connections which would otherwise have gone unexplored.

LC – The Singapore You See and the Singapore You Don't

My walk with LC was characterised by contrasts. We met at Marina Bay, a piece of reclaimed land which juts out from Singapore into the sea. Prior to land reclamation projects, which began in the early 20th century, the coast extended right up to Kampong Glam, where I had met Iskandar. As more land was built, the only reminder of Sultan Mosque's former proximity to the sea were the street names, like Beach Road, which was now a fifty-minute walk away from where LC and I stood looking out at the shipping tankers. To be precise, we were standing at Marina Barrage, a dam which produces clean water and electricity for the city. At the dam's opening in 2005, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated that the new dam would ensure a self-sufficient water supply in Singapore, which otherwise needed to be brought in from Malaysia, another haunting reminder of the nation's ties to its larger neighbour.

LC had asked to meet at Marina Barrage because it was, for her, somewhere tranquil in Singapore to sit and think. That said, as we stepped out of the MRT station, we were met by the familiar sound of construction. A reminder of Iskandar's comments that Singapore was building on the graves of someone else's memories. As we walked through the park which had been built atop the dam, LC reflected on what Singapore meant to her, and all the ways it contrasted with the Singapore that is advertised. Hers was one of community and warmth, while the mainstream aspirations of Singapore were of individualism and economic progress. She reflected on the costs of this economic progression. Both on individuals, who need money just to maintain friendships, and on the environment, which is destroyed by the constant construction in Singapore.

As if to highlight this, we stumbled into an area of electromagnetism which was perhaps the loudest I had ever seen. LC cringed at the sound coming through the headphones and showed me the microphone display which showed a waveform that filled the entire screen. Usually, even loud electromagnetic sound produces smaller waveforms which spike erratically. In this case, the waveform suggested a single unbroken wall

of sound. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that we were standing on a hydro-electric dam.

For LC in our conversation, the sound became an allegory for Singapore at large. This beatified park, which LC had thought tranquil, was just a front for the ferocious labour hiding beneath. This, she observed, was like the way things are often obfuscated in Singapore. Or, as she put it, “they make it nice for you to look at.” The future she imagined was likely a perpetuation of this trend: more environmental destruction, more speed, more building hidden by a façade of tranquillity.

By contrast, when I asked her what her ideal future would sound like, she pointed the electromagnetic microphone at a smart bin powered by a solar panel. Its low hum of activity contrasted with the roar of the dam. I am reminded by LC’s comments of Hartmut Rosa’s work on societal speed-up. Technology promises efficiency and, with it, free time. For all its technological innovation, the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore found that one third of surveyed Singaporeans experienced work-related burnout. Rosa argues that this is not a product of technologies themselves, but of the demands of capitalism, which are driven by a focus on economic growth (Rosa, 2016). This is one of the key motivators of AI futures in Singapore, where a small workforce is asked to produce more year after year. Remember that one of the motivators behind the AI Fatwa Bot was to produce religious decisions faster. LC did not propose an end to activity, but a slowing. Not silence, but something quieter. Perhaps such a future could offer Singaporeans more room to dwell in the present, to reflect on the past, and to engage with the Ancestral Intelligence proposed by Iskandar.

Wan – An Impossible Future, Returning to Ubin Island

Wan’s walk returns us to hauntings. When I asked him to do this electro-walk with me, he proposed that I join one of his monthly clean-up projects on Ubin Island. Since 2018, Wan has run “Wan’s Ubin Journal,” a blog which aims to keep alive the cultural heritage of the Orang Pulau, a Muslim community indigenous to Singapore’s Islands. Wan’s mother grew up on Ubin island. East of Singapore’s mainland Ubin Island is one of several islands surrounding Singapore which were the homes of the indigenous Orang Pulau populations. From the 1960s onwards, these Island residents were resettled into new urban developments. This included Wan’s mother and grandparents. Today less than 40 people live on Ubin Island permanently. Otherwise, it is a leisure space for urbanites

searching for a reprieve from the noise and bustle of the city, another recreational area like Marina Barrage.

I first met Wan on a tour he organised for Ubin Day 2023. We stayed connected, and he invited me to join him and a group of students who were heading to the Island to clean the last remaining village on the Island, Kampong durian. For the students it was an opportunity to reconnect with their heritage.

The only way over to the Island is via 'bum boat' from Changi village. These old boats hold 12 passengers and only leave when they fill with that many. Their old engines sputter to life and struggle against the water, revving over and over. I sit with Wan and ten excited members of a Malay student association. Though they have lived in Singapore all their lives, for many of them, this will be their first day on Ubin. It takes us around half an hour to arrive at Kampong Durian, and as we go Wan quizzes them on the names of plants. They struggle, and I am not much help either. When we get to the Kampong, they set up a net on the grass for Capteh, a traditional Malay game where you kick a shuttlecock back and forth. I am drafted in but my team quickly loses, and it begins to rain. I record the game from the relatively dry tree line.

Capteh champion crowned, we get to raking leaves for the rest of the afternoon. Just as we finish the rain stops, and as the students leave, I set up microphones. Sat at a plastic table Wan listens to the electromagnetic audio coming off his phone. He laughs in surprise and then again when I ask if he wants to search the area for more electromagnetism. "It's very likely you will not [hear electrical activity]". Wan commented. I left the microphone running anyway, but later listening proved Wan right, silence.

Wan is not concerned with technological futures. Instead, he dreams of a day when Orang Pulau like his mother can return to Ubin, this time to stay. The first time we met he told me about intertidal foraging practices of the Orang Pulau. Nowadays, foraging is increasingly illegal both on Ubin and on the mainland. He told me that he wishes he could teach the groups he tours around Ubin how to forage, but that is no longer allowed. He tells me that there is a difference between learning about heritage in a book and being able to experience it. The difference between learning the name of intertidal creatures which can be foraged and knowing how to notice their traces in order to find them.

As we walk through the remains of the Orang Pulau community on Ubin, Wan reminisces about the sounds that accompanied that community. Every year more members of the dwindling community leave the island for good as a result of ground rents rising. At the same time, much of the Island becomes foreclosed. A large part of the mangroves, once central to the Orang Pulau community, are now fenced off to become the OCBC (Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation) Mangrove Park. A project which aims to restore the area, a job the Orang Pulau once did as part of their life on the Island.

When Wan first returned to Ubin Island, his mother took him to the area where their family's home once was, but she could not find it. She searched through the mangroves but could find no trace of where the building once stood. Years later Wan returned to try and find the house. After weeks of searching, he came across what remained, a concrete foundation and a small piece of rug. It is no longer possible to reach the site of the house, as it is in a part of the Mangroves fenced off for the OCBC conservation area.

My first time on Ubin Island I joined a tour for Ubin Day, a celebration started by Wan to preserve Orang Pulau culture. The tour ended at a path by the water, where the Indian Ocean and South China Sea mingle. As I joined the congregation around Wan, I heard waves washing across the beach. By the path was a clearing in the trees. There, peeking from the leaf litter, were the posts of Muslim graves, some tied with yellow cloth. Wan pointed to the spot where the island's mosque had once stood. Stood in the absence of a mosque, we watched Wan perform the call to prayer for a community that no longer existed. As he finished the Azan, he began to cry.

Like many of the places I went with Iskandar, walking through Ubin Island with Wan makes me acutely aware of how it is haunted. Standing at the site of the mosque, or near where Wan's family home once stood, or even in Kampong Durian I am reminded of Law's words on absent presence: "what is being made present always depends on what is also being made absent" (Law 2004, 83). The Island is haunted by the absence of the Orang Pulau, and the traces of community they left behind. It is haunted by a future which did not come to be. Where the Orang Pulau were able to stay on the Island and conserve its nature. The future Wan described to me on Ubin reminds me of Iskandar's Ancestral Intelligence,

a future which circles back to the past and its knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge which is slowly being made absent on Ubin.

In this section of the sonic ethnography, we do not hear any electro-magnetism which reflects the recordings I made. It stands in contrast to the sections preceding this one where the electrical sound makes regular interruptions. This remains the case until the very end, when my recording of Wan's Azan at the former Mosque site is interrupted by electromagnetic sound. This recording was made in an industrial area of Singapore, and I edited it into this section of the audio to end on a question to the listener: How long before electronic waves can be heard around the Island?

Formal Choices: Sonic Ethnography and Zine

The sonic ethnography which follows is composed of three parts. The first is my interview with Iskandar and includes three locations: Kampong Glam, the abandoned railway line on Upper Timah Road, and Woodlands Waterfront Park overlooking the causeway between Singapore and Malaysia. A journey which took us over half a day to complete in real time. This is followed by my conversation with LC at Marina Barrage on a day so hot we could only bear to be outside for just over an hour. Finally, we hear from Wan on Ubin Island, a trip that was part of a wider effort to clean the Island which he conducts monthly. Each of these three sections are separated by a poem written by Iskandar about the future of Singapore.

This sound work is accompanied by a zine which includes the transcript of these three conversations. There is a QR code which grants access to the sound file and instructions on when to press play. Within the zine each of the interviewees is represented by a colour from the additive colour model RGB (Red, Green, Blue). This is a colour model designed to produce a range of colours by combining these three base colours, which when combined equally produce white. This system is used primarily on screens and computer monitors. Iskandar is red, LC is green and Wan is blue. Taken together, as with the three colours of RGB, their three views on the future combine to give us the whole picture. However, the RGB colour model is device dependent, meaning that different screens interpret the colour values differently. Likewise, listeners and readers may interpret these three visions of the future differently. The views of LC, Wan, and Iskandar then represent a partial composite vision of Singapore's future for the Muslim community. The zine and sound can be

experienced separately but were designed to be experienced simultaneously so that the listener/reader can follow all of the dialogue and have a sense of space.

I included this zine so that these elements can be easily followed but the focus remains on the sonic parts, not the visuals. The dialogue and spatial elements of this work can at times be challenging to follow because I allowed the electromagnetic sound to at times overwhelm and subsume the dialogue. I decided to edit in this way for two reasons.

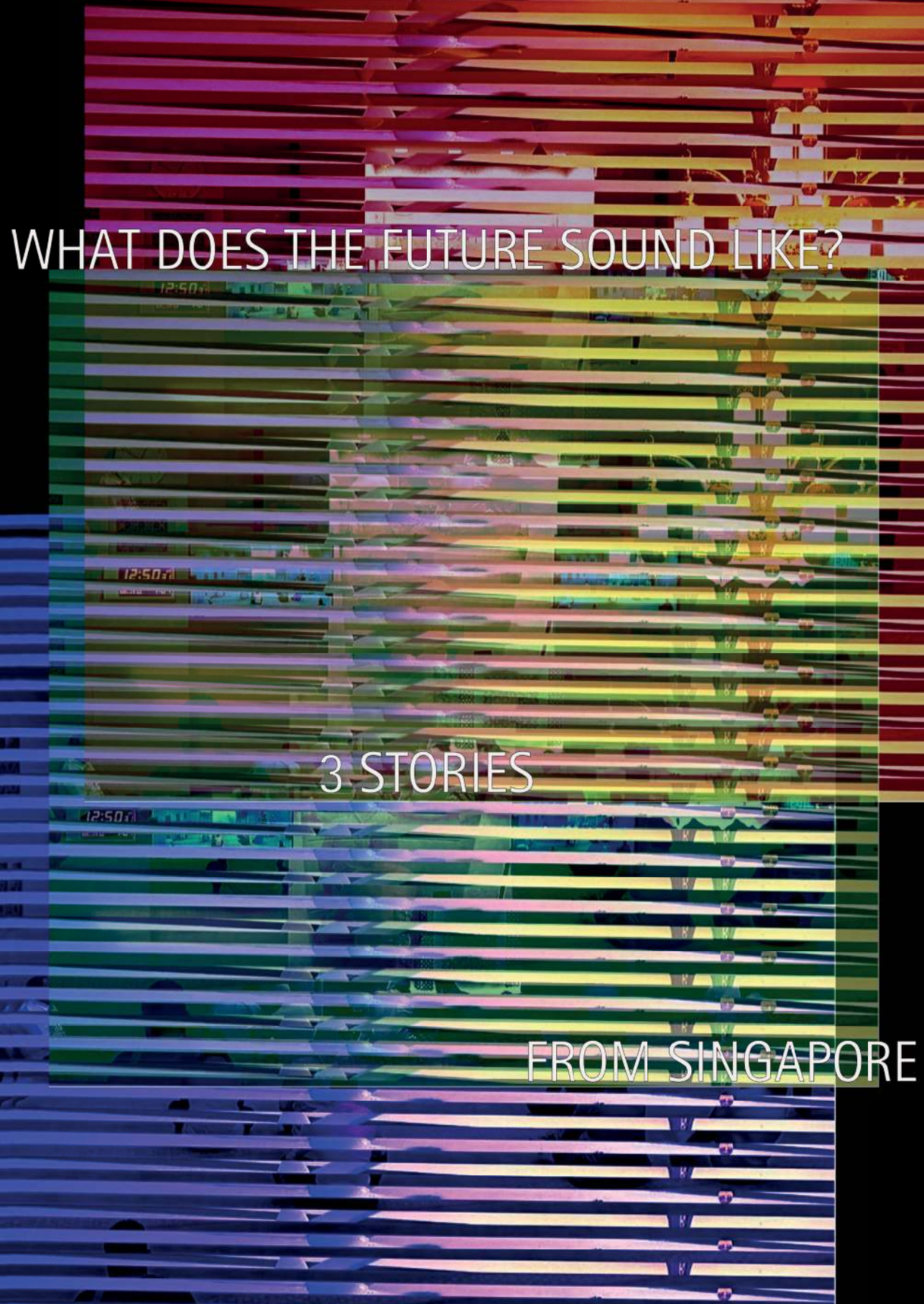
First, as Willerslev and Suhr argue, “strange things happen when two elements are brought together in montage...we see in the juxtaposition of montage components the opening of a gap or fissure through which the invisible emerges” (Willerslev and Suhr 2013, 2). As I have already argued in this chapter, the role of this sonic methodology was to make the usually invisibilised infrastructures of AI tangible and seeing what emotions this raised in my interlocutors. By editing in ways that are sometimes distracting and overwhelming I aim for this juxtaposition to likewise raise emotions in the listener. Do these sounds cause annoyance or irritation? What does it mean that such electrical activities surround us, just below our ability to sense them?

Secondly, I wanted to represent the experience of these recording sessions. Whilst Iskandar, LC, and Wan and I spoke, our conversation would regularly be interrupted by the sounds of electromagnetism. I wanted to replicate the sensory experience of these moments in a way similar to the work of Charette, Lima, and Elliot’s (2022), who reconstructed the sonic experiences of people with serious head injuries. My goal, therefore, was not to create a naturalistic representation of the sounds as recorded, but to edit in a manner that evoked the experience of encountering electromagnetism produced by technological infrastructures. In this way, my editing approach derives from the ideas of visual anthropologists who resisted the naturalistic ‘research films’ of the 1970s, and 1980s (Postma 2021), and their “assumption of life being an uninterrupted process and therefore the longer [the shot] the truer” (Crawford 1992, 79). Instead of trying to replicate the “real” experience by limiting editing, I approached montage as a way to evoke the subjective experiences of my interlocutors. That said, whenever my interlocutors comment on an electromagnetic sound, the listener hears what they were hearing in that moment. I make this concession to naturalism on the basis that hearing the same thing as my interlocutors lends itself to replicating their experiences.

The most notable editing intervention comes at the end of the ethnography. Wan's Azan actually came from a tour he did a year earlier on Ubin Island with a group of people visiting for the annual Ubin Day. Further, the electromagnetic sound edited into this section comes from a recording taken in an industrial area of Singapore's heartlands near Little India. I made this intervention again for two reasons. First, by including Wan's Azan at the absence of the former Mosque on Ubin Island, this moment mirrors the drifting of the Azan across from Malaysia which closes Iskandar's section. In both moments, we are reminded of the ghosts of former acoustic communities (Schafer 1994) and with them their abandoned futures. Second, in contrast to the sections preceding it, Wan's interview contains no electromagnetism, as none was detected on Ubin outside of our smart phones. However, as we contemplate the absence of one acoustic future during Wan's Azan I wanted to provoke the listener to consider another possible future. How long until Singapore's electromagnetic soundscape can be heard on Ubin? Such a future is not so unimaginable. Similar changes have happened to other Islands which used to be inhabited by indigenous groups. For example, Sentosa, formerly called Pulau Blakang Mati, is now a resort home to an aquarium and Universal Studios. I want to leave the listener with a question: what does Ubin's future sound like?

Backup link: <https://tinyurl.com/bd4hezkh>.

Password: Future1



WHAT DOES THE FUTURE SOUND LIKE?

3 STORIES

FROM SINGAPORE

Scan me!



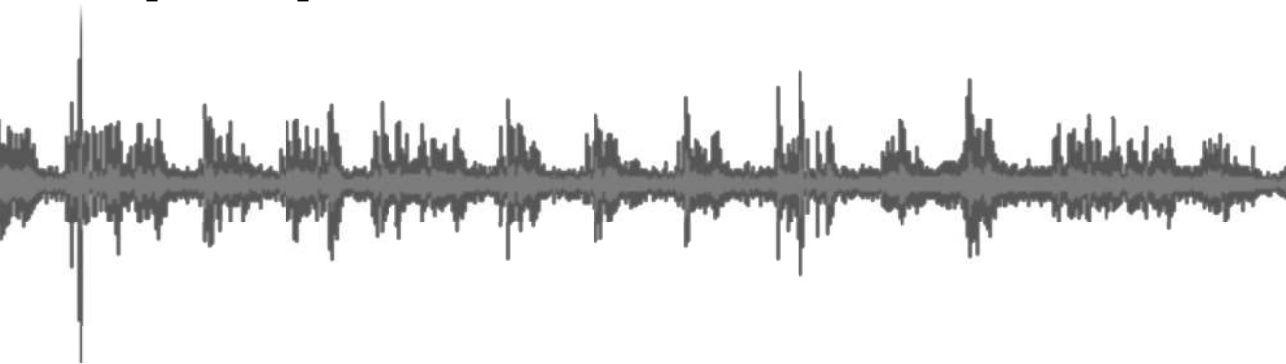
Password - Future1

Press Play

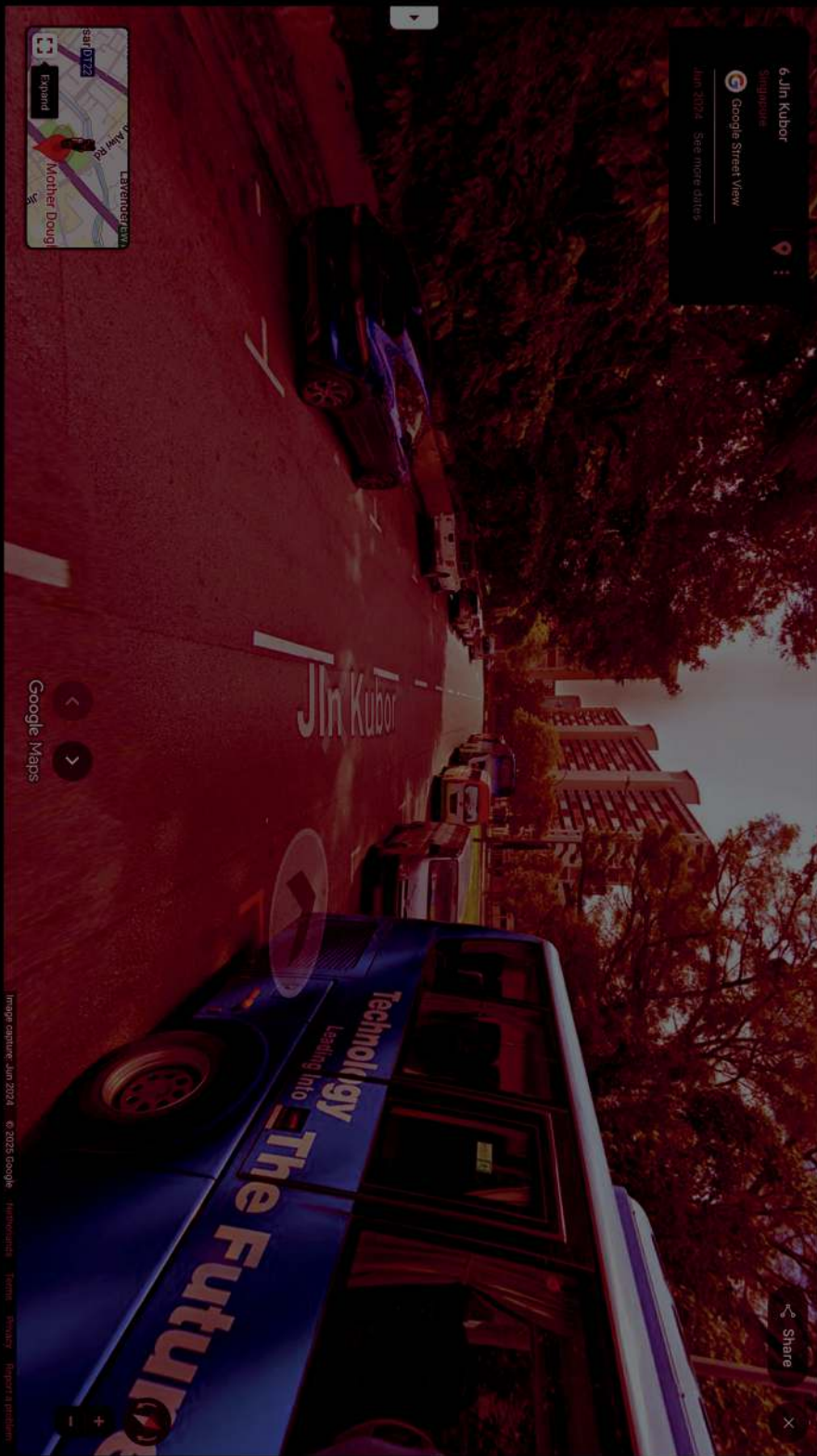
[00:05]

To imagine the future
Is to sleep with the ghosts
Of lovers past hauntings
In ancient languages
Stains and indelible wounds
On tables across warongs [family
restaurant]
Your grandmother's kain [fabric]
Tongues that speak of God
As an embrace, a house of one,
without colonial baggage and reclaimed
recluse
Now minarets high.

[00:39]



[ISKANDAR]



[KAMPONG GLAM]

[00:49]

JM: Going.

I: All right.

JM: Let me just, just talk a little bit so I can...

I: Hello, testing, 1, 2, 3. Recording 1, 2, 3.

JM: You are very quiet.

I: I'm very quiet?

JM: Yeah.

I: But, is that because I think I'm not speaking in my normal voice. Or am I speaking normally to you right now.

JM: Still low.

I: I don't think I should raise my voice to you right now. Testing 1, 2, 3 to you right now.

JM: One more.

I: Testing 1,2,3.

JM: Go loud.

I: [loudly] Hello!

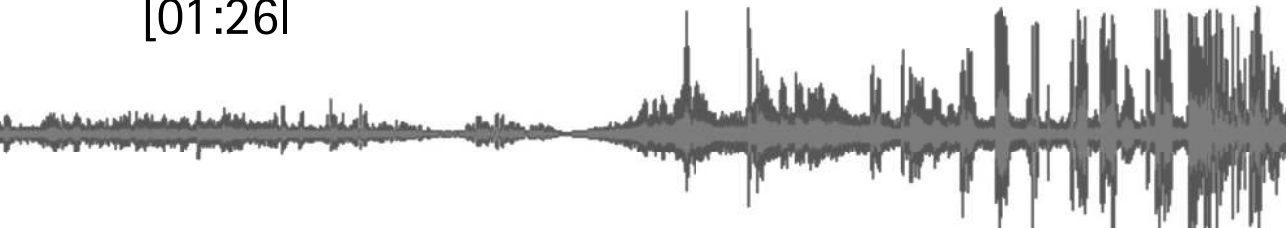
JM: Okay good.

I: But I don't want to speak in a loud manner, so just normal volume?

JM: Yeah normal is fine, I was just checking if the loud is too loud. You know?

I: Okay.

[01:26]



[BETWEEN TWO MUSLIM GRAVEYARDS, KAMPONG GLAM]



[01:36] I: It's picking up something here. Something loud here. Yeah, I'm like a ghost! You know, like there is a spirit here. Yeah, this entire road. This line. There are these very loud disturbances, why? [01:50]

[02:01] I: Because Singapore is all this networks of wires, systems underground it is quite interesting because then it links you to the buried. [02:11]

[02:33]

I: But isn't it funny because the transition between sound and no sound, is very abrupt. There isn't like a gradual lingering. There is something very shrill - here. What is happening here? It is very high pitched. And it stopped. Is it another underground thing also? Could it be?

JM: Could be.

I: It can't be the sky right? Well it's gone.

JM: It's gone it's not there anymore?

I: Oh here, yeah it is here.

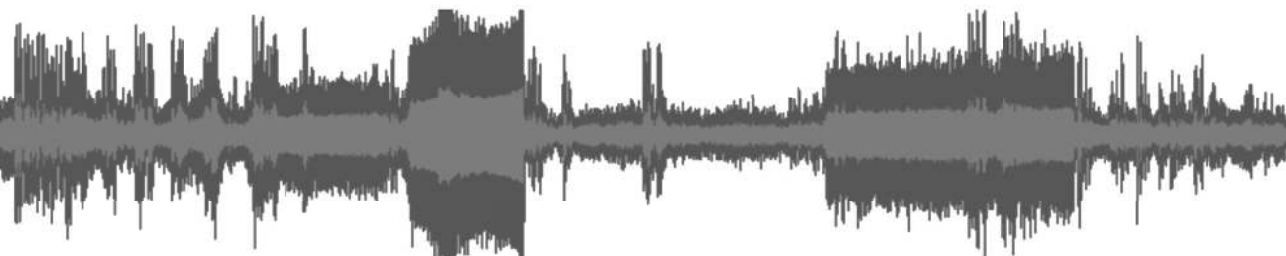
JM: Maybe it's something in that building.

I: It's that far? This is a scary device.

JM: Why is it scary?

I: It can detect - suspicious activity. Yeah it stopped. So it is from somewhere there. Hmm interesting.

[03:27]



[03:33]

[BOARDING THE BUS AT QUEEN'S
STREET BUS TERMINAL TOWARDS
THE CAUSEWAY BETWEEN
SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA]

[03:55]



[04:00]



[04:10] I: I actually didn't want to come here. So, it is quite a last-minute thing. But it makes sense, think since we are talking about the idea of kismet [fate] and sometimes the road, where just now the sound catches on you. As how spaces latch on you. When I was looking at the bus journey of 170 from Queen Street terminal where we are from, to Woodlands, which is going to be a very long journey in its entirety. Then I thought, there is one stop which is going to be the Rail Mall, and I remembered this part of Singapore which is also abandoned right?

[04:46] It's funny right because train tracks are something which is networks above ground. Overground. And it is something which you straight away know is taking you somewhere, there is a destination. There is arriving and departing. But we don't see that much often about what is underground, but they are also carriages in that sense. [05:07]



[05:32]

I: It reminds me of, I don't know what to make of it, I think it points to this idea of human dependency to object signifiers. Because a train on the tracks, it really shows us there is a certainty to a passage, right? There is a kind of a promised destination in that sense.

I: I'm taking it in a more spiritual way, that we are grasping all these necessary suggestions which are in the form of steel and tracks, or even in the most benign just sort of jungle markings. But when it comes to the intangible, I think that is where we become more suspicious of things. Or rather we become so, maybe afraid, I don't know, intimidated by things that are less given. Maybe the Singapore experience has pronounced that.

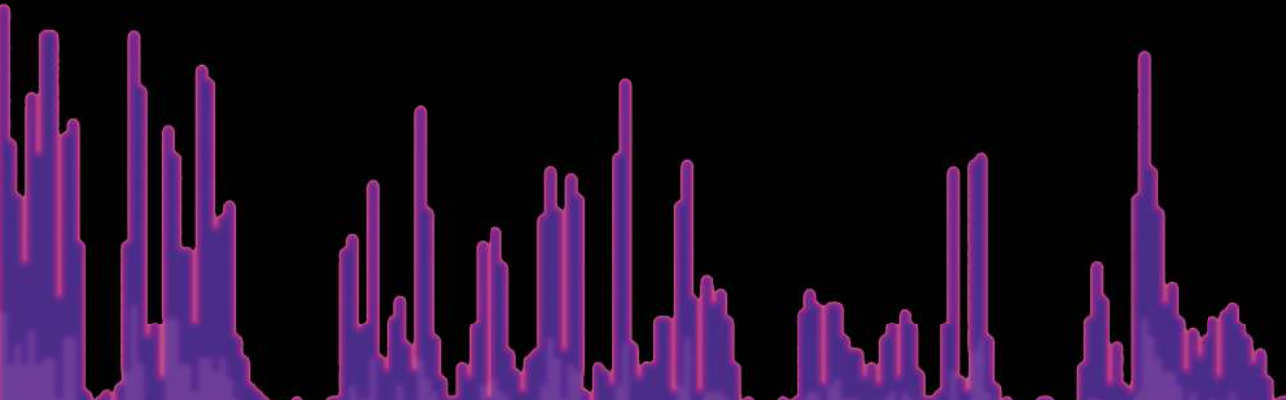
[06:30]



[07:06]

I: I think that idea that we are so reliant, on these systems which have been etched across our beings in Singapore, somehow. It is very interesting to me.

[07:19]

A purple waveform graphic, resembling an audio spectrogram or a stylized sound wave, spans the width of the page at the bottom. It features numerous vertical spikes of varying heights, creating a textured, rhythmic pattern against the black background.

[07:35]

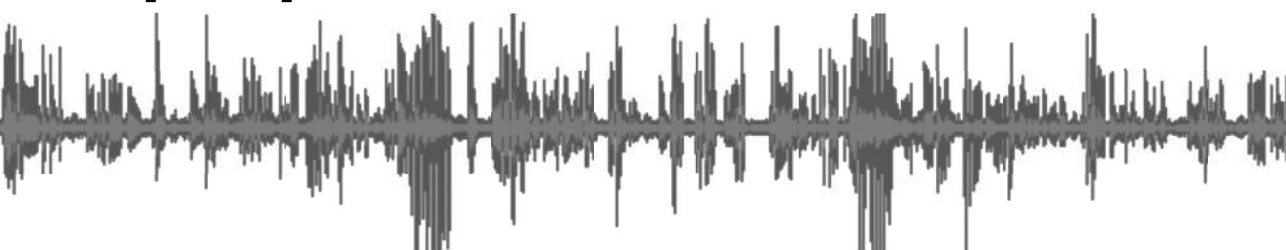
I: Tomorrow we are going to start on a new month called Dhul Hijjah. Which is essentially meaning to travel, to migrate actually. This idea of migration, right? Hajj is this idea of migration, it is not necessarily physical, but it is also a spiritual migration.

[07:51]

[07:53]

I: To me this is all aligning together because this June on the 19th of June I will be part of that season. And it is like is this going back? And there seems to be nothing wrong with going back because I keep thinking what I am doing is reclaiming parts of my history right? I'm meeting with friends from high school, from College years and I'm meeting my professor from NTU. It's like you are going to attend to things you have set aside and to me that is the future. So, it is almost like a future nostalgia.

[08:23]



[08:29]

I: But for this current trip it does feel like a pilgrimage. And pilgrimage is funny because later we are going to read the poem, and one of the words is circumambulation, right? There is no end and beginning in that kind of circle.

[08:43]

[08:44]

I: The circularity of future, so to me maybe the idea of future does not even exist. Because it feels like the future is now.

[08:51]



[09:05]

[WALKING PAST A CONSTRUCTION SITE]

[09:10]

[09:13]

I: But hey we are walking past a graveyard also.

JM: Oh yeah?

I: Not in that sense, but if you think about it Singapore is just building things on top of all these dreamings of someone else's habitat and memories and I think every construction in Singapore is a deathbed of something else. And it's not just once I'm pretty sure there are so many layers of it.

[09:39]



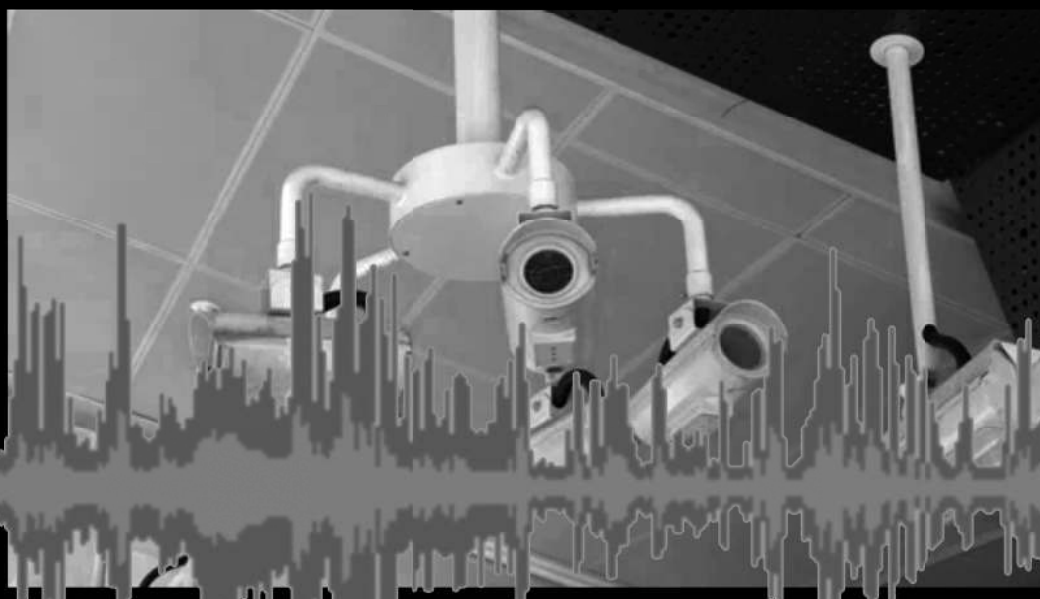
[09:53] I: Now I become shy, the civilised human beings. You wanna?

JM: Stop there?

I: Yeah, I think we better not come here. We better go there. Because I saw the ten CCTVs. This is very – You see how the body becomes very reflexive of this?

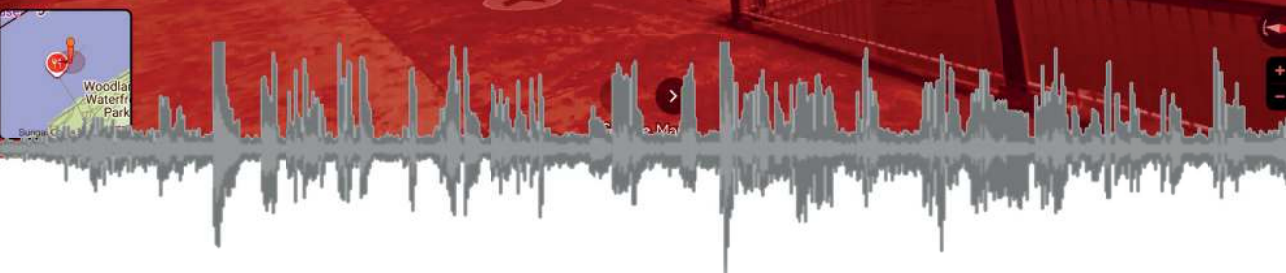
JM: Yeah.

I: Because MRTs are known to be very surveilled.
[10:12]



[WOODLANDS WATERFRONT PARK,
OVERLOOKING THE CAUSEWAY TO
MALAYSIA]

[10:30]



I: Final stop. Where are we? I don't know the exact name of this. Probably it's like a pier right? But essentially, we are within the Woodlands Waterfront park. And we are overlooking Johor Bahru. Johor Bahru is actually just a very tiny strip. The Southern most strip of Johor which is the bigger region.

And if you look to the left, you would see what I would call the spines of two separated lovers.

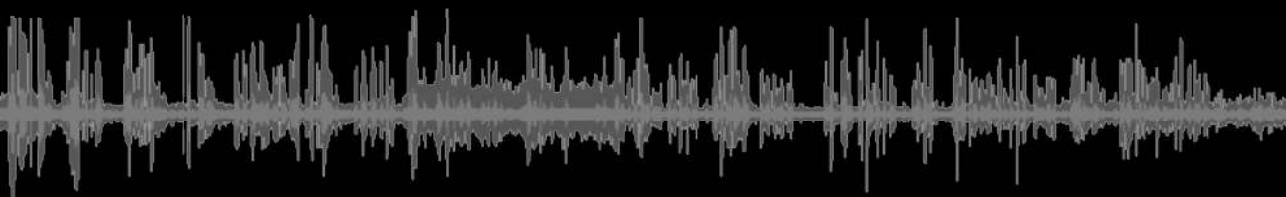
[11:05]

[11:14]

I: I think it is funny when you said stillness right? I think a lot of people's future, relies on this idea of robustness. Active energy. Things over pouring, but I think future for me, or maybe the kind of future I imagine is one filled with tranquillity.

I think I experienced that particularly here, two years ago. And that was at the break of dusk, and it was so tranquil. I think at that time only like less than five of us were here. And it was darker, by the time I reached here it was maybe twenty minutes from now. And the lights were filling. At that point we couldn't cross border. And there were some boats. So what really hit me is there was a boat comes quite close to the international water and they were waving at a guy over here. And these were the track workers who had not managed to cross back but their family is still there.

[12:07]



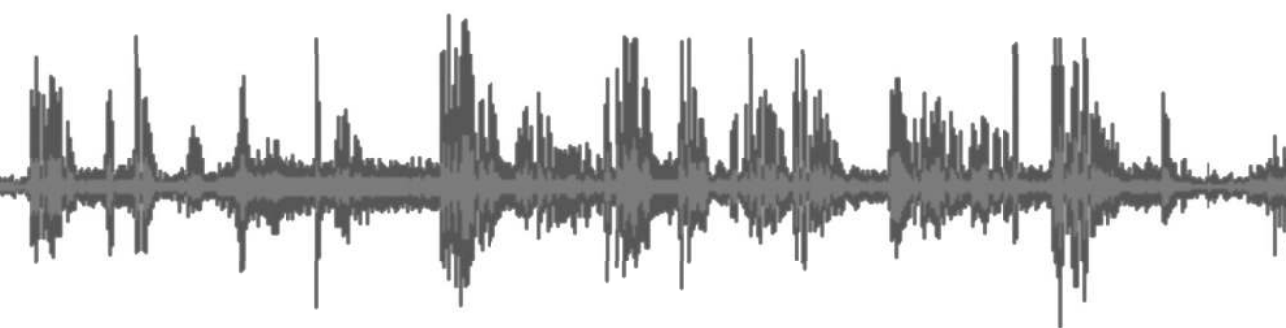
[12:25]

I: Singapore's future will always be towards hyper Urbanisation.

JM: Why do you think that is such a likely outcome?

I: Because the people within her are going to be the same kind of people. Generational muscle memory of the country is going to be the same, the reflexes are going to be the same. The way we intervene. The way we respond. The way we kind of retract. Is going to be the same, at least for a few generations.

[12:58]



[13:09]

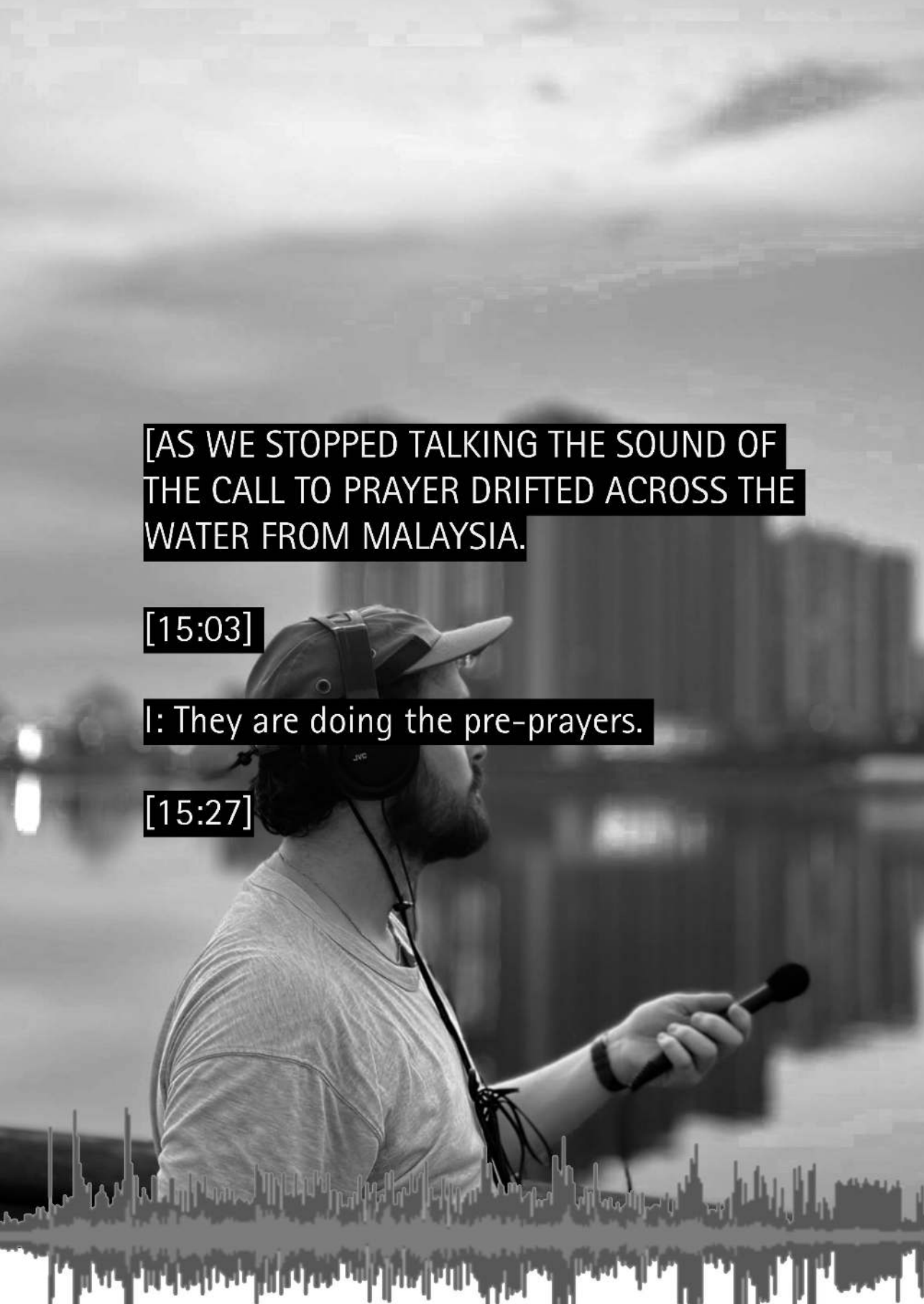
JM: What would need to happen for the future you are hoping for, this one of tranquillity, what would need to happen for it to come into being?

I: Death. But as we realise it, it doesn't right? Even they disturb you, even in death.

No but maybe I think death in a lot of sense. Not just death in the sense, I think there is a lot of death which in a sense I want it to rebirth, different ways of living. Death in terms of the way we run systems. Death in terms of the way we perceive ways of life. I think what we need is that kind of rebirthing of new methods.

[13:55]





[AS WE STOPPED TALKING THE SOUND OF
THE CALL TO PRAYER DRIFTED ACROSS THE
WATER FROM MALAYSIA.]

[15:03]

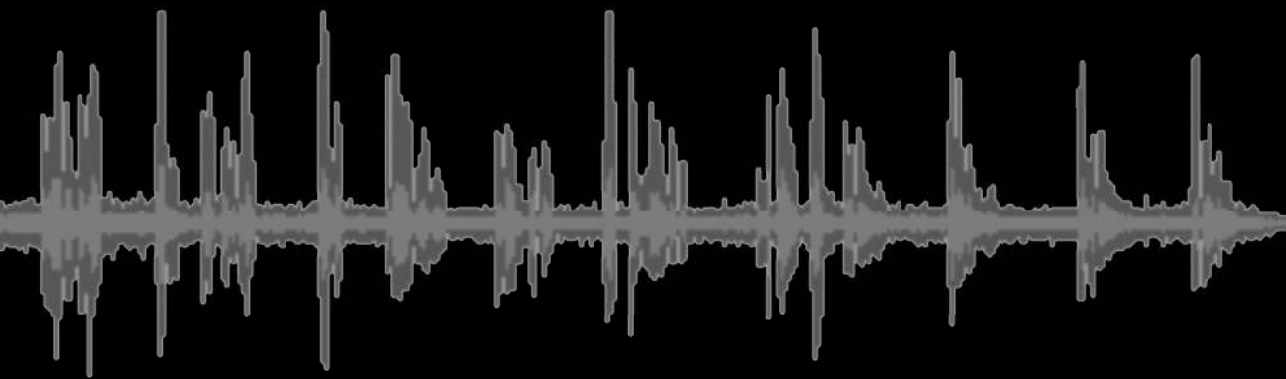
I: They are doing the pre-prayers.

[15:27]

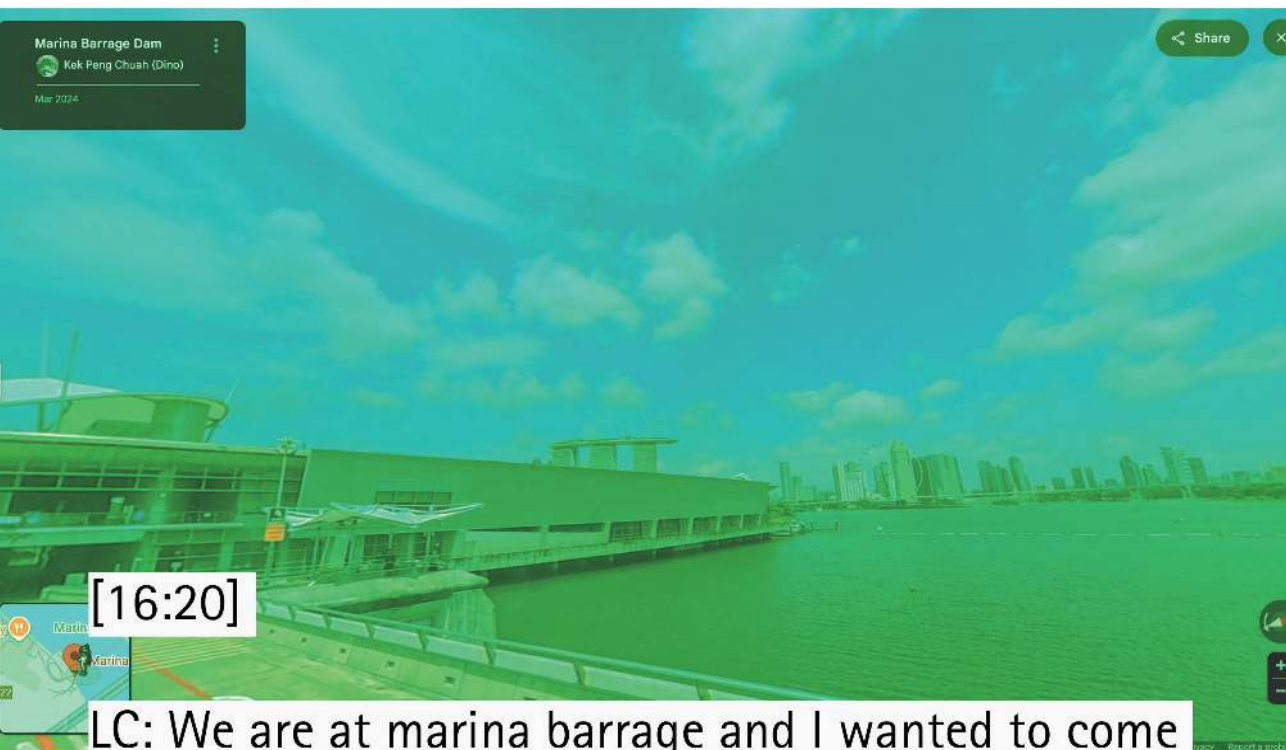
[15:32]

I: An imagined future
Rests on the feet of the earth,
grounded as a way of nadi, channels
in the body]
tree's rooted, wrapped in sarong batik
Zikir [prayer through repeated recitation]
lost in a dance, remembrance
In trance, kaki membumu. [Feet
grounded]

[15:58]



[Marina Barrage, is a park on the tip of Marina Bay. Marina Bay is a reclaimed piece of land containing Singapore's most famous tourist attractions gardens by the bay]



[16:20]
LC: We are at marina barrage and I wanted to come here because it's in what is considered the heart of Singapore which is Marina Bay, but it is far removed enough for me to be able to see the open sky, to see the sea, which is not very common in Singapore because we have a lot of skyscrapers. So, it is a place that allows me to slow down and reflect on the past, the present, and the future.

[16:54]



[17:01]

LC: The Singapore that is presented is very different from how I experience Singapore. National day is the country's biggest spectacle. It's where everyone comes together and everyone kind of forgets everything else. Suddenly, Singapore seems to be problem-less. But no, it doesn't become problem-less for me.

[17:32]

[linger by The Cranberries plays on a man's Speaker as he cycles past.]



[18:02]

JM: So, you said it presents one kind of Singapore not the Singapore you experience. What is the Singapore you experience?

LC: What is the Singapore I experience?
It feels a lot more organic, it feels warmer, but I think that is because we acknowledge or we embrace imperfections, whereas the Singapore which is presented outwardly is portrayed as very perfect.
That is the biggest disconnect I feel.

[18:34]



[18:54]

LC: Hmm, what do I? A Singapore that is authentic, citizens that think for themselves. What I mean by that is because we are, we are a society that has very strict ideals in a sense and most people follow and work towards that ideal life. Yeah. So, I would want to imagine a Singapore where we are freer to think about and decide how we want to live our lives.

[19:31]



[We are walking by some large columns which appear to be holding up the multi storey carpark which is below the park]



[19:39]

Google Maps

Image capture: Dec 2017 Images may be subject to copyright Netherlands Terms Privacy Report a problem

LC: Woah I don't know what's going on.

JM: There is something here?

LC: Yeah. Look. Ahh – look at it, it's very loud.

JM: [unintelligible]

LC: No, it's louder like argh – there is a sharp sound up here but – it gets lower here, but it's louder here. Somewhere here. Ahh – okay, I think so. [laughing] I think you should turn it down. It's pretty loud.

[20:27]

[20:47]

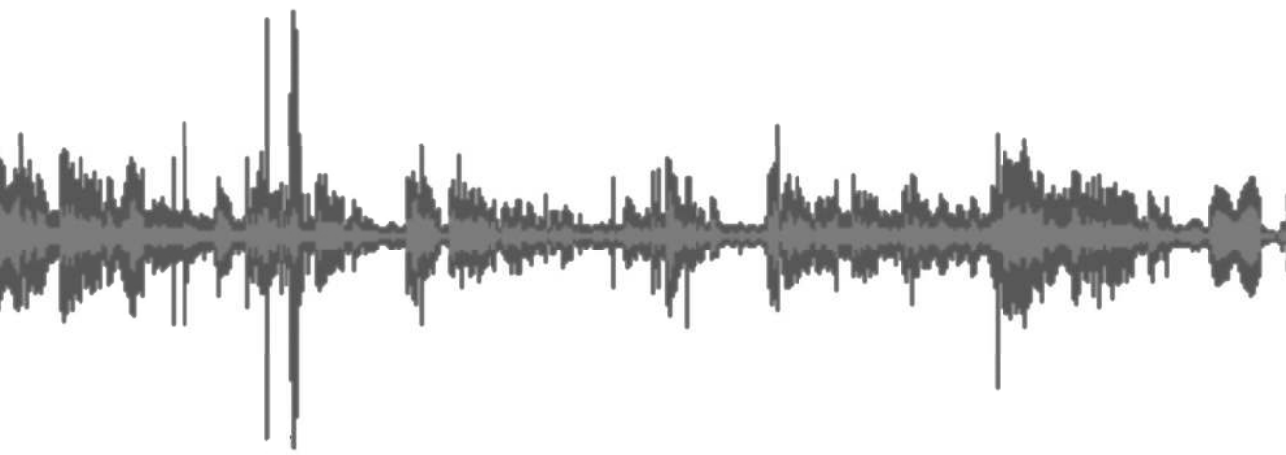
LC: Do you know what the marina barrage is?

JM: Nope.

LC: So, there is a lot of water tanks here because this is where they hold the water, they recycle and treat the water, so it might be because that is here, because the treatment is below here. But interesting because usually I come here to have some quiet time, but it is oh my god so loud here.

[21:11]





[21:36]

LC: Hmm most likely. I feel like since you talked about AI, I feel like it will continue to infiltrate all parts of our lives. We will continue to destroy more of our environment to build new things, that is a constant.

Yeah, but to me that is the most likely future. I feel like automation will be very common in the future in the sense I feel like it will be so normalised that we will lose our humanity.

[22:24]

[22:42]

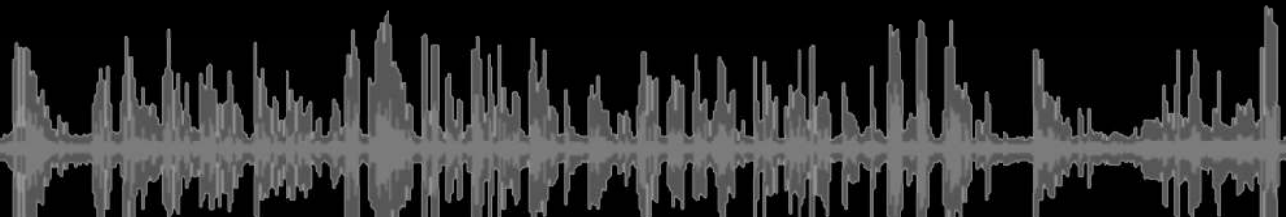
LC: the future I imagine will happen? Mostly because I am in activist circles where there is a lot more courage to speak up for what is wrong what is right. What is best for our future. So in that sense I am hopeful, but I can't stop thinking about this, that there are two scenarios, similar to how I see things. There's the community part and the national agenda, I guess.

So, I am more hopeful when I think about the community and what will develop but if I think about the national agenda, I think it will still be the same trajectory of more building more destroying nature, yeah. Yeah, more control over citizens... Okay good it's pretty quiet here.

JM: We've reached the quiet.

LC: [laughing] yeah.

[23:46]



[23:54]

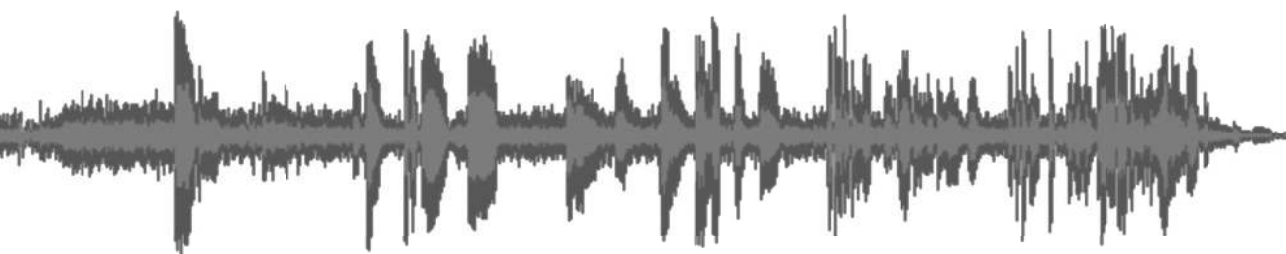
JM: We often talk about the future, and we say what does the future look like. So, I wanted to ask people, in the future you hope for, what does it sound like?

LC: It would sound like this...[holds the electromagnetic microphone up to a bin which has a solar panel on top.] I want it to sound like this

JM: like beep beep beep?

LC: No, it is just a very low bzzz, okay not low, as in it is soft, the important part is it is soft and a constant humming, compared to what we heard downstairs I think that is a lot more common in Singapore.

[24:40]



[23:54]

LC: I think I will be reminded of the buzzing next time I come here.

JM: Oh I'm sorry I hope it hasn't changed...

LC: No all good - actually that's like how I see Singapore, what you see and what you don't see. So...

I think I'm glad I saw what I don't usually see.

JM: What do you mean by that what you see and what you don't see?

LC: Because I come here thinking that I'm away from the tech and all the noise and all the crowd, and all the busyness, but actually there is a lot of activity below - yeah.

[25:37]





[25:44]

So yeah, I think that is what a lot of Singapore is like, they conceal a lot of things then make it seem nice for you to experience.

[25:55]



[26:44]

An imagined future,
Is mapped across archipelagos
And new nations without borders
Crossings and hijrah [Migration]
Where one circumambulates
In intentional daze
Between data and dreams
Falling awake and never asleep
And finally –an imagined future.

[26:44]

[WAN]

[26:45]

[We hear the boat engine revving as I take the trip over to Ubin Island where I will meet my interlocutor Wan. Wan's parents grew up on Ubin Island, which was for many years the home of the indigenous Orang Pulau. [Island people] He now offers heritage tours of the Island. The only way to reach Ubin Island is via very loud bum boat from Changi point ferry terminal.]

[27:47]

[UBIN ISLAND]



[27:50]

[On this day, I am joining a group of university students who are members of a Malay society. They tell me that the trip is an opportunity to reconnect with Malay heritage. Before Wan's heritage tour begins they set up a Capteh tournament. Capteh is a game where you kick a shuttlecock back and forth across a net. I am recruited onto a team and promptly lose. I retreated to the tree line and began to record as the game unfolded, and rain began to fall.

[29:17]



[29:21]

W: Ohh wow okay, that's so interesting as soon as it has to load something new, as soon as you enter an app it will just be loud and then when it has to load an image it just gets louder, yes, it is peaking so that is interesting.

JM: Cool, are you happy or would you like to walk around and see if you can find anything on Ubin?

W: There is a high chance you won't.

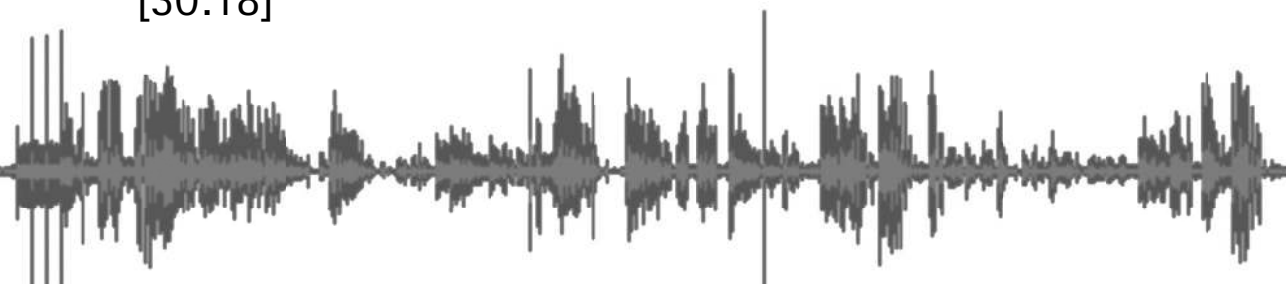
JM: Also I will send you the raw files so you can kind of see, maybe we come across something unexpected.

W: Hopefully, something electronic and not supernatural.

JM: I did walk between two Muslim grave sites in Kampong glam and we heard something underneath the road between them, but we think it was an underground cable.

[laughing]

[30:18]

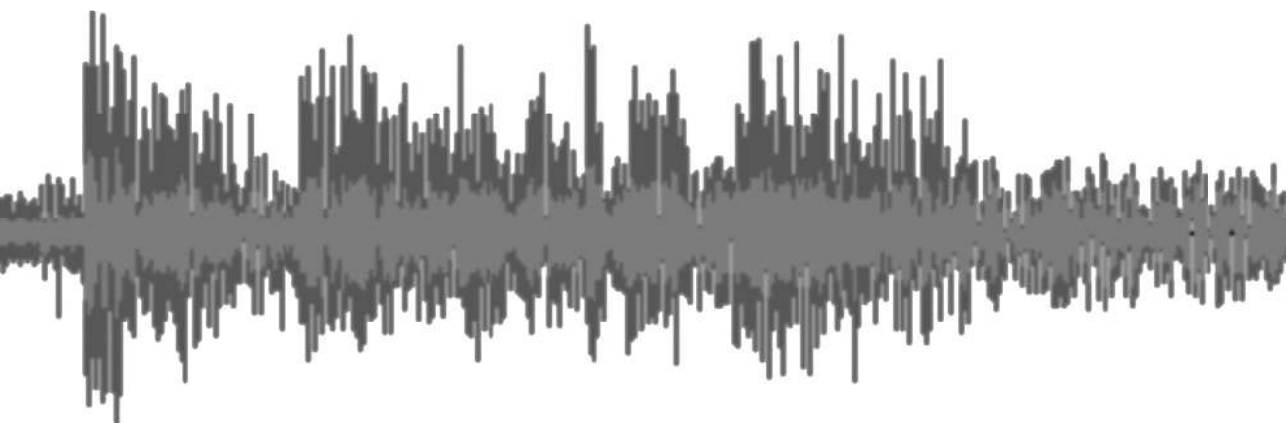


[30:42]

W: Well right now we are on Pulau Ubin specifically at the point of this recording we are in Kampong Sungai Durian, but I want to bring you down to this hut right now called Kelichap hut because over there is where my first, my first memory of Pulau Ubin was formed, in that area.

[30:59]





[31:15]

W: Well, strangely enough when I think about Ubin I think about my past first and the things that I am doing now in the present in terms of my advocacy, in terms of bringing people down on the tours so that they are able to learn this undocumented side of Pulau Ubin especially for the Orang Pulau community.

[31:32]



[31:43]

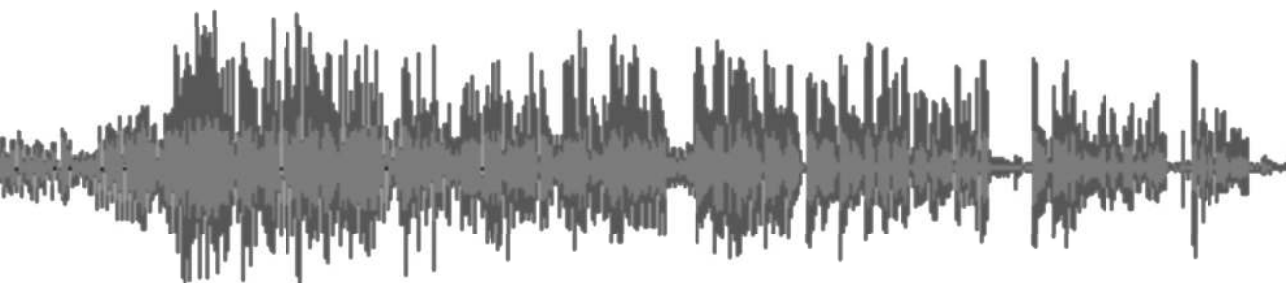
W: Whatever happens in life it is always important for us as Malays to remember our roots because we did not grow up in skyscrapers we have always grown up in nature and there is such importance for us to be together with nature.

[31:58]

[32:06]

W: I think in general in Singapore we have progressed quite a lot, we have modernised to the extent that we tend to forget our humble roots as a kampong, as village, as villagers all around the island. So for all of these islands, when all of the Orang Pulau and Orang Laut communities when they were told to resettle in another sense their culture has been uprooted from those islands.

[32:33]



[32:43]

W: I wish the future of where we are right now is the same as we've heard in the past but I do wish to tweak that a little bit to say that for it to remain the same that would mean that we are having to be fine with the fact that our Kampongs are not really given that much recognition we have to be fine with Kampongs being seen or labelled as disease ridden haphazardous [sic] slums.

So these are labels I am not comfortable with moving forward to the future because there has always been an apparent need for narratives to always describe our Kampongs as a third world feature and they say for Singapore to achieve this status as a first world country we need to get rid of all these features that remind us of our past.

[33:30]





[33:33]

[ABANDONED KAMPONG HOUSE, UBIN]

W: My impossible future is the descendants of Ubin, they return back. When the government actually does something, and they invite the descendants to come back, to allow us to return to our grandparent's houses, you allow us to rebuild those houses, and you allow us to stay. Yeah, so my argument is instead of a learned heritage, we need to take certain steps to turn that learned heritage into a lived one.

[33:58]

[34:05]

W: I think moving forward even if we develop our AI - so far based on what I could glimpse of this the involvement of the Orang Pulau is still quite important in terms of how do we document our history, how we document our heritage because when it comes to talking about the community, talking about the culture, we are poorly documented.

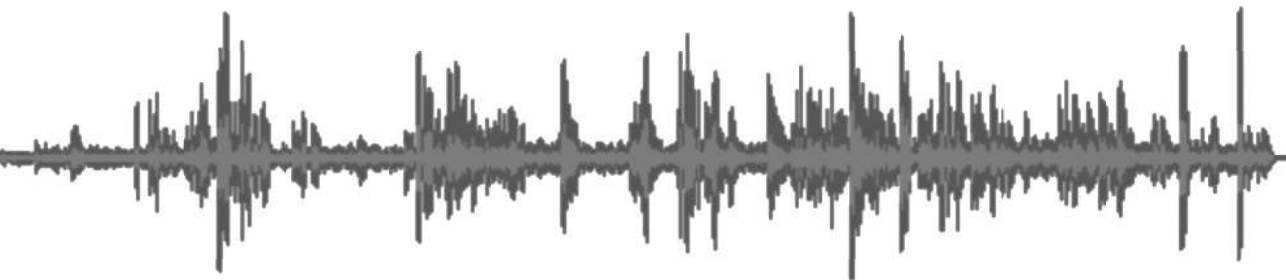
[34:27]



[34:40]

JM: Thank you so much. Yeah, that is everything, I think. Thank you, this is the third time we have met and my second time on Ubin with you and I think it is always, I think moving. At the end of the tour last time, you took us to where the Mosque used to stand, and you did the Azan and you said it was the first time in 20 years that it had been heard on this Island and it was very moving, so thank you for sharing.

[35:10]





[35:11]

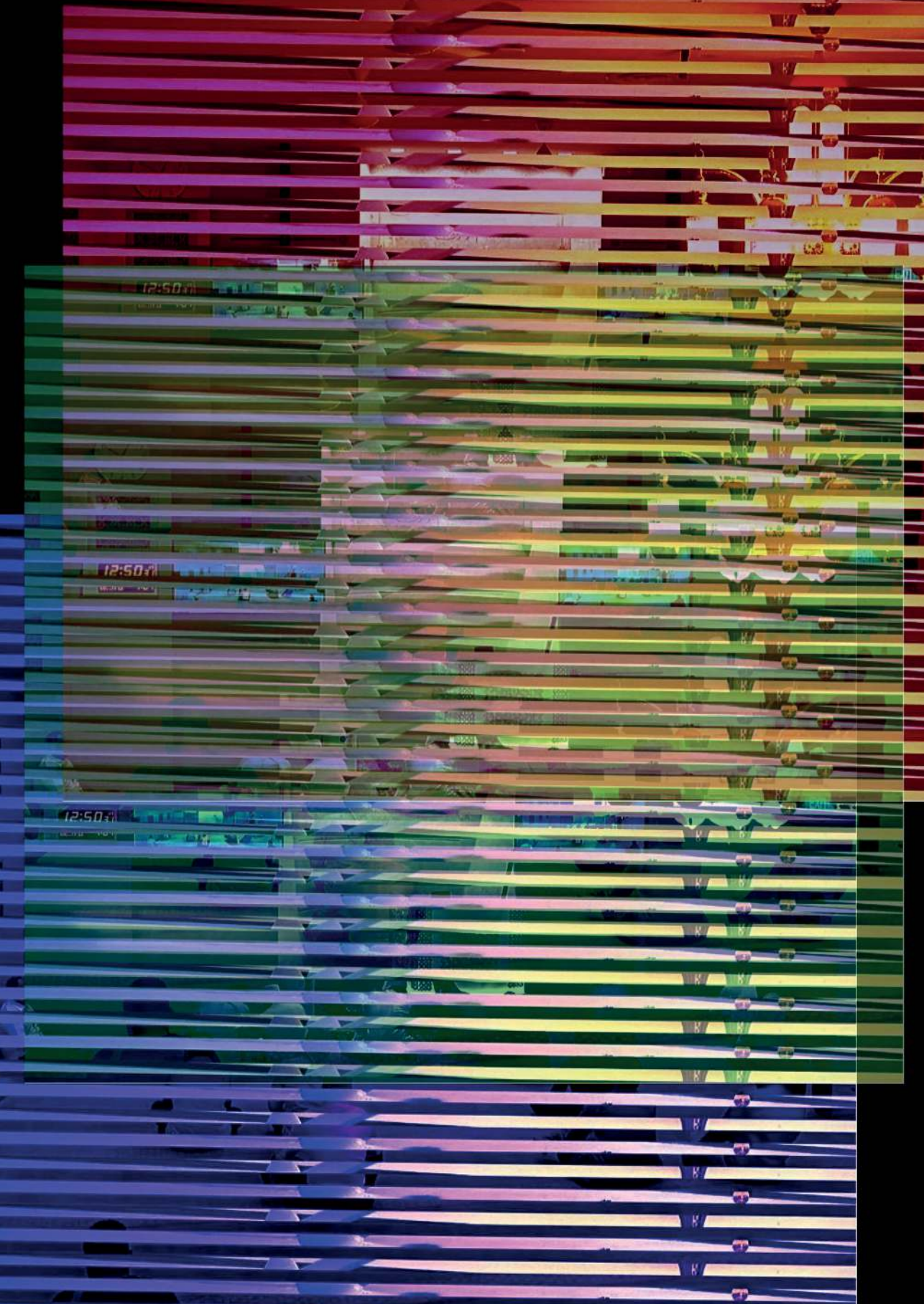
[Wan's tour ended at a path by the water, where the Indian Ocean and South China Sea mingle. As I joined the congregation around him, I heard waves washing across the beach. By the path was a clearing in the trees. There, peeking from the leaf litter, were the posts of Muslim graves, some tied with yellow cloth. Wan pointed to the spot where the island's mosque had once stood.

Stood in the absence of a mosque, we watched Wan perform the call to prayer for a community that no longer existed. As he finished the Azan, he began to cry.

In this transduced version, Wan's call to prayer is slowly drowned out by the sound of electromagnetism which overwhelms all other sound, even drowning out the forest. As it fades, we hear the tail end of the Azan.

How long before the electrical sounds overwhelm Ubin like they have in the rest of Singapore?]

[38:30 – End]



THE FUTURE, AN INTERLUDE: PART 3, MELANCHOLIC FUTURES

The alternative futures that my interlocutors imagined whilst ‘hearing’ AI were melancholic in mood. Iskandar spoke of death as the path to his ideal Singapore, LC reflected on the inevitability of the government agenda, and Wan described his imagined future as impossible. The presence of the foreclosed futures, where one imagined future is so prominent that it makes other possibilities inconceivable, is undeniable. Yet, the incontestable future which this thesis has described remain haunted by the paths not taken. Each of my interlocutors harked back to a Singapore of community, of connection, and of tranquillity. Even in the face of technological hegemony, their minds drifted to a future past, even though it seemed distant.

However, I have some trepidation about viewing these futures as hopeful. By describing them as hopeful runs the risk of presenting them as problem-less and perfect. Listening to this chapter with my colleague Sidd he commented, “what do we do with these impossible futures?” He reflected, particularly on Iskandar’s use of the term *kismet* which he argued connoted an accepted state of the present and future. *Kismet* is the Turkic term for predestination in Islam, and therefore, connotes that events are part of a larger plan defined by Allah. However, whilst the power of predestination exists within Islamic faith, it is paired with individual free will. Whilst things are indeed fated, individuals are still impelled to act. Perhaps, acting on the future in the face of Singapore’s forcefully asserted foreclosed futures, can only be accessed through imagining alternatives.

Taking this perspective as a starting point, the idealised pasts described by my participants might be seen as myths, as they draw on perhaps idealised histories, to make the present intelligible. As afro-futurist scholar Yusuf Nuruddin argues “myths are instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves” (Nuruddin 2006, 130). Wan’s descriptions of Ubin past where community can be reached by simply shouting out of a window, are therefore, ways of reflecting and acknowledging the current state of alienated affairs.

Yusuf Nuruddin explores this idea through the Islamic futurist poem “Beyond” by the grandfather of rap Jalaluddin Nuruddin⁹³. Jalaluddin Nuruddin’s poem predicts the end of the world. The air on the surface of the earth has become so toxic that the few remaining survivors move to the centre of the earth. The survivors are split into two groups, the Jinn, who represent Muslim African Americans in the story, and the leading elite. The jinn, accepting their fate, argue that they should repent for their sins to Allah and return to the surface. The elites in their hubris instead defy Allah again, creating an Artificial Intelligence to save them. The AI fails and the elites not only die but are condemned (Nuruddin 2006). The poem is bleak, the only hope of salvation in the story is to accept death, like Iskandar suggested.

However, through this bleakness Nuruddin argues that afro-Islamic futurism creates “Urban myths [that] give philosophical meaning to the quotidian facts of domination and exploitation” (Nuruddin 2006, 130). Therefore, when LC discusses community as a counter-future to the individualistic Singaporean mainstream we should not see this as a literal depiction of the community as a perfect alternative. As she puts it, in fact, in her eyes a community-oriented Singapore would embrace imperfection. Instead, the appeal to community, or to tranquillity, or even to the past, reflects the absence of these things in contemporary Singapore.

These future imaginaries are also opportunities to reflect on how temporality works in Singapore. For example, Iskandar describes Singapore’s future as being based on, ‘robustness’, ‘active energy’, and ‘things overpouring.’ Likewise, LC associates the loud abrasive electrical sounds of the hydroelectric dam with Singapore’s temporality. In both cases, these observations reflect on their sense of Singapore’s frenetic energy, a product of the imperative to constantly expand and become more productive (Rosa 2016). Collins argues that this kind of constant activity breeds presentism “a state of perpetual change is the same as perpetual stasis” (Collins 2008, 3). This is something both LC and Iskandar reflect upon, mentioning the buzz of constant activity in Singapore which can feel overwhelming.

Making such observations about temporality Parikka (2018) argues, allow us to understand the way power works. In so doing she argues “instead of simply accepting the notion of a cancellation of the future, the can-

93 As far as I can tell, Yusuf and Jalaluddin are not related.

cellation quickly shifts into a tactical multiplication” (Parikka 2018, 55). By holding up a mirror to Singaporean temporality, my interlocutors are able to create the possibility of alternatives. As Inayatullah argues when discussing utopian ideas “This future is certainly not probable, but it is still possible. And while it is a dream for now, is there really any choice” (Inayatullah 2005, 1199). Whilst Singapore is likely to continue being a busy metropolis, full of constant activity, simply imagining otherwise undermines that foreclosed future.

Throughout this thesis, I have pointed to the foreclosed nature of Singaporean futures. AI as it is frequently presented as objective in Singapore. Often the appearance of this objectivity is achieved by distancing people from the affective processes that produce AI outputs. This distancing makes AI outputs seem incontestable. These systems are powerful, and their epistemology holds sway in the processes of the Singaporean state. Consequently, AI frequently now intervenes in the interactions between state and citizens. AI has significant sway over the construction of the present and the future. However, as we have seen, when AI is engaged with intimately, through annotation, or by transduced listening, its fallibility can be exposed. The melancholic futures which my interlocutors described in these moments of encounter, demonstrate that while the future is contingent it also contains multitudes.