

Norient Transcription

Jan When I first started these sailing trips, I remember I was advertising it, like I was saying we will visit these isolated communities on remote islands. And then we went to these so-called isolated communities, and we realized they are not isolated at all.

First of all, they are all connected amongst themselves but I think around 9-11 - gradually things got more and more closed. But in the past - dunno maybe 30 to 40 years ago, people would actually - the fishermen would actually bring their fish to Singapore market, to Pasir Panjang. And now they can't anymore but they're conscious that the best fish goes to Singapore, they know the prices. So actually they are very connected, very savvy.

And we, me and my students from Singapore who are supposedly so connected to the outside world, realize how totally isolated we are and we are living in this bubble of Singapore.

Yah, when you talk about how we don't see the sea I think it's also just the attitude, and, like when you talk about Indonesia and Malaysia it's always a little bit scary and outside, yah, this is kind of a nice bubble of comfort and greenery. It's also interesting how you get to Batam and Bintan. There's so much destroyed land outside. I think outside every garden, if you have a wall, it has to be balanced by an equivalent amount of destruction. Right? So, all the green and wealth and all these things here are balanced by wasteland around.

Narration In Singapore, one sometimes feels as though one is living in a landlocked country. The rhythm of daily life unfolds predictably: wake, board the MRT, go to work, pass through the mall, return home. Despite being an island nation, one small fragment of a vast archipelago, there is little sense of the sea or of the neighbouring islands that surround us. Paradoxically, Singapore is aligned with the Global North, its economic power and infrastructural polish setting it apart from the region, even as our prosperity depends deeply on the labour, land, and resources of our neighbours. It can seem as though everything to be had exists within these contained borders, and so our gaze turns inward, toward the city's bright centre, circling endlessly without ever reaching an edge...

Babar Layar (Setting Sail)

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| Kagyat ri sang kapingu, pinêngkul kinêmpit-kêmpit, dhuh sang rêtnaning bawânâ, ya ki tukang walang-ati, ya ki tukang ngênês ing tyas, ya ki tukang kudu gêring. | Startled—the warrior, whose heart was in doubt— was embraced tightly. Ah, gem of the world, Yes, this is what brings anxiety, Yes, this is what saddens the heart, Yes, this is what causes one's own suffering. |
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Precious I'm Precious, and I am a lecturer at Singapore University of Social Sciences, SUSS. I teach a course on effective communication through storytelling. But my background is actually in philosophy and Southeast Asian studies.

We're working on Yogya, he's working on walls, and I'm working actually on rivers, and what is interesting is this word in Javanese, it's *nerimâ*, which is kind of basically, *menerima*,

which is kind of- to receive, or to accept your fate. Because actually it can be a negative term. We were seeing how, for example, recently, the Sultan in Yogyakarta - they're kind of gentrifying the city. And, at the same time, they're building on this cosmological axis and displacing people who have lived within the *keraton* for many decades. What's interesting is that because they feel that they're on Sultan ground, they feel that the Sultan has the right to evict them at any time. So it's commonly seen as a kind of *nerimã*, like you know, you just accept, even though your family has been staying there for many decades - so you just leave. But I was interested in the idea because I was wondering if it was just that simple, you know that kind of concept, if it was just accepting and there is nothing more to it. But I was looking at the people who are living in Kali Code, and basically the water for them is accepting, you know, all the garbage that's being dumped into it. And there is this kind of acceptance.

Jan But wasn't there this Islamic teacher in Kali Opak?

Jan And he was actually talking about the river accepting everything. You know, all the water but also all the garbage. So they were kind of theorizing or using this metaphor for this kind of acceptance.

Jan Yah, and we kind of missed a place where we can go and be a little bit closer - she always talks about soil, she's always missing soil in Singapore, because she grew up, unlike me, in a house with a garden. And so we wanted to be somewhere where there is soil, and maybe a little bit of a view of not just other buildings.

So we found this interesting place in northeast Bintan, and it was interesting because it was kind of this resort - like basically their house, with a dried grass [roof], and a few places we could stay, surrounded by wasteland. There was a bay, and on the other side of the bay, there was a village.

So we were trying to swim in the sea, and we did, it was enjoyable and I swam a bit farther, and there was - towards me - floating - this lunchbox, even with a spoon on top I think. And it was a nice feeling, it was interesting. And there were also those black garbage bags that I was swimming in-between. I think it's always that when you try to escape into paradise that this proverbial lunch box is floating towards you.

You don't see it so much when you actually sail, but when you get to these islands, or you get these beautiful, super romantic islands of no people and you go and see the trash and it's quite amazing, it's actually very interesting, because you have trash like - bottles from Thailand, stuff from China, like all over the world. It's everywhere and you can go very far from villages and it's full of trash. Very interesting trash.

My name is Jan Mrázek. Officially I teach at a university, I also play music, I play with puppets and I like the sea, maybe because I grew up in a country which doesn't have the sea. I came first to southeast Asia in 1991, which is when I was like 18 or 19. I flew to Biak, I think. Biak is an island off what used to be in Irian Jaya and is now West Papua. It was very hard to get into Indonesia because I was considered to be from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, which did not exist at the time anymore but the news had not reached Indonesian bureaucrats yet.

Narration For many Singaporeans today, our parents and grandparents arrived from elsewhere, most often by sea. Long before modern borders were drawn, the island's indigenous communities, the Orang Laut, lived with and from the ocean, moving through its currents and travelling freely from island to island. Singapore is but one tiny cluster of 64 islands among the more than 25,000 that form the Malay Archipelago. To think of Singapore, then, is inseparable from the sea; the island's histories, migrations, and imaginaries are shaped not only beside water, but by water itself...

Wangsalan “Jarwa Tirta” (A Hymn of Water)

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| Jarwå tirtå, tirtå wijiling akåså Nyënyuwunå Mrih kasëmbadaning sëdyå, Kasëmbadaning sëdyå. | Here is a hymn of water Flowing from the heavens We pray for all intentions To be made manifest. |
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jee Okay, maybe I talk about my practice as a maker, and I would say that really kicked off with an event that altered my life, and this event was the death of my maternal grandmother.

Growing up, my grandmother and I lived together in the same home, prior to her death, my grandmother and I were practicing Chinese calligraphy together, because I was curious to learn this craft and she had learned how to write with ink and brush when she was a young child.

So my grandmother was born in 1926, in Gwóngjàu, Canton, in the south of China. She was a child refugee when she arrived in Singapore by boat. During these two years when we were practicing Chinese calligraphy together, it came about in quite an unprompted way that she started to share very deeply and in great detail her experiences from her early childhood with me. She was 10 years old when the Japanese imperial army invaded China in 1937, which triggered the outbreak of the second world war in the asia pacific. So she had to flee her home and she was actually sold away by her parents to her grandaunt, because her parents told her that she would not be able to escape together with them. There was not enough space for her because they were taking her brother along with them.

In this kind of culture where misogyny is very much prevalent in traditional Chinese family structures, they essentially chose her brother over her and they sent her away on a boat with her grandaunt to escape from the Japanese invasion. Initially, she took a boat from Gwóngjàu to Hong Kong and eventually the Japanese arrived in Hong Kong, so she was displaced once again and had to take a boat ride - this time a much longer journey - another one to Singapore - and that was a seven day journey across the sea.

She passed away in 2018, which was extremely difficult for me, because it prompted me to find ways to continue to be with her. At that point of time I was developing a dance practice, very much working with the body, and I started to engage with - I supposed what would later become a choreographic method or strategy, that I called “being danced”. And that started specifically with my grandmother, so I was inviting her to “dance me”. These were the beginnings of my practice as a dancer and also as an artist in a wider sense.

Overlaid Music: Rujit (To cut)

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| Punapa ta mirahingsun Prihatin waspa gung mijil Tuhu dhahat tanpa karya Sěngkang riněmėkan Gusti gėlung rinusak sėkarnya Sumawur gambir mėlathi | Why then, is my jewel In anguish, she sheds many tears Surely it is of no avail to break your ear-studs and to crush the flowers in your hair Scattering petals of jasmine |
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Suyatni *His father hit her, she was forced to answer, but she didn't want to answer. I felt she was quiet because she was afraid. Her father continued hitting her, she fell, and she started bleeding. Then the blood came out. They brought her to see the doctor, and found out that she has a fibroid. Oh, poor thing.*

She went to school, she was quiet, her face was pale. Because there was so much blood coming out. Her father thought she was pregnant. It's been like four months (since her period came). She fell, she was hit, and she bled. She was spilling so much blood.

She didn't want to participate during PE (Physical Education) because she was on her period. She just couldn't. She explained to her PE teacher that was on her period. He (the PE teacher) was so angry that he spit on her.

The PE teacher said, if you are upset, call your parents. She called her parents because she felt it was too much. We saw other teachers around too but they didn't know how to intervene.

I said, what about Miss Saira? She agreed that the PE teacher was known to have a bad temper.

When her parents came, the PE teacher scolded them. Her parents were afraid of him.

Narration Sayano was born in Solo, Indonesia. He worked aboard a ship as a chef, and later settled in Singapore where, with his wife, had a daughter named Suyatni. Here, Suyatni recalls the violences she experienced as a child, particularly in relation to the menstruating body.

The lower worlds are symbolically tied to water and conception, akin to the amniotic fluid that nurtures life in the womb. The naga, considered feminine in aspect, are chthonic beings dwelling in these waters, embodying creative power, fertility, and abundance. A recurring motif across the region is the belief that land emerges from water and that a communion with the waters is essential for a state's prosperity.

The last major independent kingdom of Java, the Sultanate of Mataram, is today succeeded by the courts of Yogya and Solo. It is said that these courts rose to power and flourished through an alliance with Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, the sea goddess who reigns over the Indian Ocean.

Overlaid Music: Rajaswala (referring to girls of marriageable age (already menstruating))

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| Suryå candrå ndaru kartikå samyå Amadhangi jagad råyå Wimbuh wèh martånå Sakèhing dumadi Mégå kuwung téjå wangkåwå samyå Anggregani antarikså Mawèh sukèng driyå Sakèhing dumadi | The sun, the moon, and the celestial bodies Illuminating the worlds Give and replenish life For all beings Clouds, rainbows, and rays of light Radiating through the realms Bringing pleasure To all beings |
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jee So, I was working with these two solonese dancers, Mike and Panji, who you see in the film, to kind of situate these two bodies - who I also consider water bodies, you know, human bodies, living bodies, as water bodies, in relation - or in dialogue with - this water body that is the bengawan solo. So, with this understanding of the bengawan solo as this - not just a haunted place, but this vessel that carries such spiritual significance and actually spiritual life, I think I wanted to create quite a minimal choreography that was gesturing to the river as the main actant or the main character in the film.

Sim Hoei Kiam *Yes, Khuntien, Indonesia, when I was a child. Khuntien isn't fun. The eldest brother brought his younger brothers, there were 7-8 of them, to go swimming. They were all self taught. When it was time to go home, two of them were missing. The next day, both of them resurfaced in the waters, dead. Their noses, mouths, and ears were all stuffed with mud. At that time, those Dutch soldiers, in the past Indonesia was under Dutch rule, we were a colony. There were European soldiers, they wore uniforms and held guns, taking a small boat. This small boat was going down a shallow canal, the water was mostly shallow except for the middle part which was a bit deeper. On their way back, and I think maybe they were not used to navigating in a small boat, one of them stood up and the boat lost balance and overturned. Several people went under the water. Actually, any one of them could have stood up because they were tall and the water was shallow. We were all thinking that this is a common, everyday incident but none of them emerged. Some of them tried to use some kind of hook or pole to get them out of the water. They managed to get one soldier out, but he was already dead. The next day, their bodies resurfaced in the same manner. (with their noses, mouths, ears all stuffed with mud).*

Narration This is the voice of Sim Hoei Kiam, who was born and lived in Khuntien, also known as Pontianak, a port city and the capital of west Kalimantan. She later migrated and settled in Singapore. She recalls an incident from the period of Dutch colonial rule in Indonesia, when European soldiers in uniform were travelling by a small boat along a shallow canal near her home. On their return, one of them stood up, causing the boat to lose balance and overturn. Although the water was mostly shallow, none of the soldiers resurfaced.

Efforts were made to retrieve them using hooks and poles, and one body was pulled out, already lifeless. The next day, the remaining bodies surfaced, their noses, mouths, and ears all caked with mud.

jee My name is jee. I am an artist. I work mainly with dance and expanded choreographies, I work across media as well, in film, in installation.

Yeah, Bendungan started - as you mentioned - on this residency I was on in Solo in January

2020, and I actually wanted to visit the sea. But then, the organizers of the residency said that the sea was quite far away from Solo, and why not perhaps I go and take a look at the Bengawan Solo, which I suppose a very significant body of water in the Javanese imagination.

It ended up that I was taking a walk one fine day on the banks of this river and there was no one around this particular stretch I was walking along, until this point where I was crossing this small dam that was constructed on the river, and I met this man who turned out to be one of the villagers who lived in a kampung near the dam.

We started to chat and in my rudimentary *bahasa* I just conveyed who I was, and I asked him oh, what's your name, do you live nearby, and he said that his name was Pak Jokowi. And yeah, he lived here, by the river, for many many years, his whole life. So he is a local. I became very curious. I said, I'm very interested in talking to people who live near the water. Do you mind if I came back to you tomorrow, at this same spot, at the same time, and we have a chat and if you would allow me, I would record some of our conversations. He agreed, but he also added that tomorrow at this time, it would rain. I said okay, if it rains, we would seek shelter at the kampung.

I came back the next day with this good friend of mine, Mike, and we waited for him. He didn't show. It was a sunny day, and I told Mike let's just wait a little more, and if he doesn't show up, that's fine, we'll just leave. Let's see, give it five minutes.

So we waited and within those five minutes, the sky became overcast and clouds just gathered very quickly and it started to rain very, very heavily. We ran into the village and we sought shelter in this random house, the first house that we saw. There was this guy who presumably was the person living in that house and he was just "oh, just come in."

We went in and I asked him, "Pak, do you know this person who lives here in this village, his name is Pak Jokowi." The guy was like, huh, there's no such person here, are you sure that's the right name? He asked me to describe this person and I did, and I said that oh he is like this tall, he was wearing a red shirt, describing his face.

This Pak, turns out his name was Pak Kethu, he told me that there's no such person here, and that he actually recognizes me because he saw me the day before walking along the river. He was seated on the front porch of his home.

I said, "Ah, okay, so you saw me yesterday already." He said, "Yes, and as I observing you it felt to me that there was something that was not right, and it gave me this sense that you were about to kill yourself."

I asked him to elaborate, what did he mean. He told me that there are many spirits that live here, along the river, not just the Bengawan Solo but along all rivers, and this is the belief. He added later that he had this sense that I was being followed. He then went on to tell me more stories that since that dam was constructed, people have been played tricks on by the river spirits.

Narration Across voices, memories, and cosmologies, water appears not as a backdrop but as an agent, a witness, a keeper of what has been submerged and what refuses to disappear. It gathers migrations, violences, labour, and longing; it holds grief, yet also

renewal. Its currents refuse the borders that divide land and nation, reminding us that movement, exchange, and entanglement precede and outlast the lines we draw.

If water is cyclical, what does it ask of us? What does it mean to listen to bodies of water as archives, as living presences, as kin? Perhaps the past itself moves like water, returning in altered forms. In this sense, ghosts are figures of continuity, traces that surface, recede, and surface again...