*eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics*

# 'Malaysia' Resurveyed: From Representation and Separation to Alternative Tropical Futurities

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## Abstract

This essay, in the form of a literary survey, revisits the idea of "Malaysia" by examining how the interlinked practices of representation and separation have been fundamental to the reification of tropicality in the region once known as the Malay Archipelago: contemporary maritime Southeast Asia. It suggests how the two contradictory facets of colonial-era tropicality as envisioned in British Malaya (i.e., a fecund wasteland and inescapable degradation) have become embedded in the logic of governance in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore. The persistent effects of this discourse in the present are discussed in terms of the challenges facing mobilisation over issues of climate change and ecology (particularly since these discussions are limited by the borders of nation-states). In addressing both historical concerns and tropical futurity, this essay calls for a "decolonial ecology" to address present Anthropogenic challenges and to imagine other tropical futures through novel forms of representation.

**Keywords**: Malay Archipelago, Malaysia, Singapore, tropicality, postcolonialism, climate change, decolonial ecology, tropical futurity

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## Introduction

This essay is a literary re-survey in two parts: the first historical and the other future-oriented. The first part examines how the idea of "Malaysia" betrays its ecological roots, stretching beyond the present-day borders of the modern Malaysian nation-state. It is also a space where the contradictions between immutable tropical degradation and high-modernist technical futurity have emerged in Malaysia and Singapore, produced through the intertwined practices of representation and separation. *Representations*, understood in their cultural and political senses, are key to enacting discursive and material *separations*—between nation-states, humans, and non-humans, as well as individuals and society. In the second part, I explore how the debilitating effects of the resultant alienation from underlying regional climates and ecologies can be re-politicised to imagine new tropical futures, whether through acts of "decolonial ecology" or novel counter-representations. In the spirit of Lundberg, Vasques Vital, and Das's call for a new tropical imaginary that can "address how climate change is also changing the tropics itself, climatically, culturally, through neo-colonial practices" (2021, p. 22), this essay moves beyond national discourses of separation to chart a landscape of representational alternatives.

## Representation and Separation

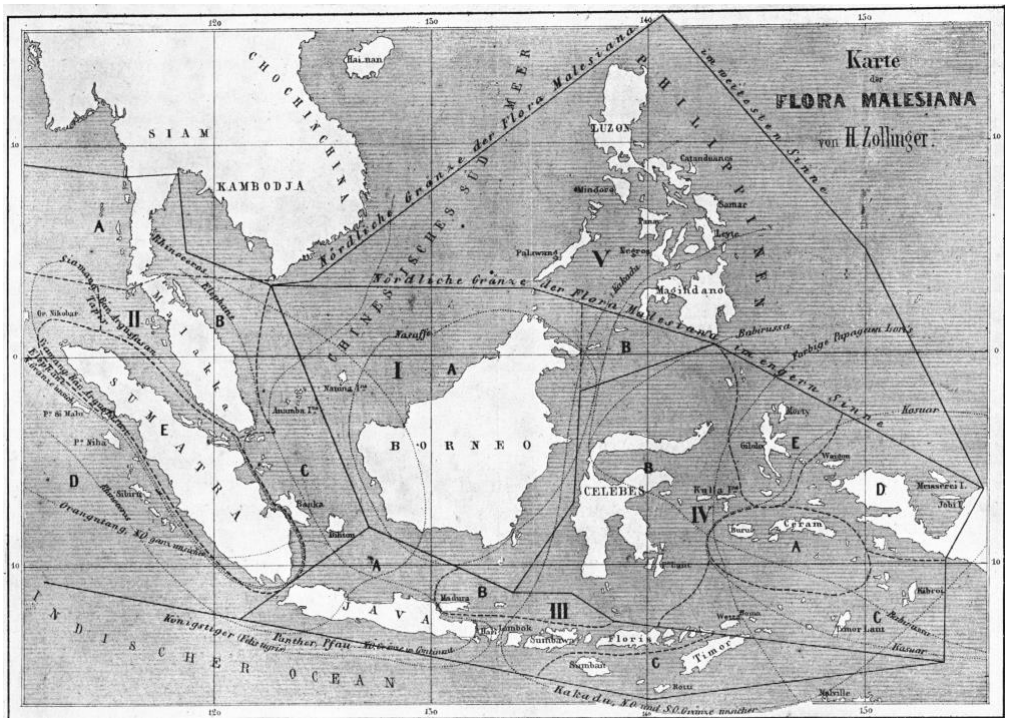
> Political boundaries rarely coincide with those that are biologically natural. (Poore, 1964, p. 45)

In 1964, *Malaysia: A Survey,* edited by Wang Gungwu of the University of Malaya (UM), was published. His introduction emphasises the newly established Federation of Malaysia's novelty and boldness, angled towards a sense of futurity rather than being bound by a complex past. As Wang (1964) relates, Malaysia was not predicated upon a shared history or "racial" identity, but rather, was a purely political identity built upon democratic ideals. The federated nation-state also played the crucial function of *naturalising* a political destiny for the previously separate peoples of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo (Sabah), who were now reconstituted as fellow citizens.[1] Nationalism's affective power is most obvious in its capacity for naturalisation, where the novelty of the nation is masked through climatic and ecological allusions. The term "*tanah ayer*", which previously merely designated a geographical unit of land and water, acquired its affective significance in time for the emergence of a Malay nationalist imaginary in the twentieth century, further fuelled through a bourgeoning literary culture (Milner, 1995). But the nation's conceptualisation as "Tanah Melayu" (lit. "Malay Land") was not the only imaginary at play. For southbound writers from China, sojourning in the littoral world of Nanyang (lit. the "South Sea") or Malaya, an autonomous idea of the south emerged, laying the

[1] The "Brunei revolt" led to that state's withdrawal from plans to join the federation (Ngoei, 2019).

groundwork for imagining "Malaya" as a new homeland. A new idiom was coined by Xu Zhimo to capture the experience of his Singaporean sojourn—he focused on its insoluble richness, fixating on the overbearing humidity of the air that "would not dissolve or dissipate with changing weather patterns or the turning of the seasons" (Bernards, 2016, p. 39). Such acts of imagination were crucial to the emergent nation: before borders came into being, a territory first had to be *represented.*

**Figure 1.** ***Zollinger's nineteenth-century map of a botanical "Malaysia"***




Reproduced from Lam (1937).

Less obvious, however, were the ecological roots embodied in the etymology of the term "Malaysia" itself. In 1857, the botanist Heinrich Zollinger conceptualised "Malaysia"—a name which he apparently obtained from French geographers—as a broad floral zone straddling eastern Sumatra to the western part of New Guinea (H.J. Lam, 1937). Zollinger's botanical Malaysia readily lent itself to other uses, such as the census-takers who used it "to describe immigrants into Malaya from the neighbouring islands of the Malay archipelago" (Wang, 1964, p. 15), and it eventually became the name of the new federation. Western scientific practices, carried out in their tropical colonies, were thus not neutral, but lent themselves to biopolitical considerations, further codified in spaces of colonial knowledge such as the Straits Philosophical Society. This legacy persisted in Wang's edited collection *Malaysia: A Survey,* which marked significant historical continuity with the elite practices of scholarly production, rather than breaking with them. This volume made the new country legible by taming, classifying, describing, and drawing the plurality of political and ecological

relationships across the Sunda Shelf, perpetuating a colonial vision even after formal postcolonial independence.

Tellingly, the opening section, "Natural and Human Structure", stylistically echoes the oft-parodied naturalist's trope of detailing geographical, floral, faunal, and population facts. Robert Ho's chapter, "The Environment", takes pride of place, systematically discussing monsoonal seasons,[2] rainfall patterns, and other geographical concerns. Specialists on flora, fauna, and population then take their stately turns, establishing a discursive link between the nation-state and its biogeography. Geography had, by now, been established as a crucial discipline for decolonisation (Boyd & Clayton, 2019) and—crucially for a territory that had to cultivate citizens from a previously divided plural society—even promised solutions to its underlying interracial tensions. The geographer Charles Fisher, once staff captain at the Headquarters of Malaya Command during the Second World War, insisted that only the acceptance of a *shared geographical setting* could overcome "extremists and pernicious Western half-truth[s]"—if not, "neither political arithmetic, political economy nor political science" would be of much use at fostering mutual tolerance among its diverse peoples (quoted in Boyd & Clayton, 2019, p. 234). Notably, Ho, who worked extensively on institutionalising geography (Shamsul, 1973; Bowd & Clayton, 2019), explicitly downplayed the influence of climate on development by centring human agency and the possibility of emancipatory futures.

> Environmental determinism, […] contributes very little at the moment to an appraisal of those human motives, actions and developments which are involved in the Malaysian Federation, […] (R. Ho, 1964, p. 25)

The old myths of the tropics were confidently dispelled: the image of a verdant wasteland awaiting enclosure was replaced by a sober declaration that it was "generally recognised that the soils of the Tropics are less fertile than those of arid or of temperate regions" (1964, p. 40).[3] What this gives rise to is an insistence on the success story of agency, demonstrated by "how successfully environmental difficulties have so far been surmounted" (1964, p. 43). Following Ho's chapter, M.E.D. Poore solemnly foresaw a future "landscape of agricultural land, orchards and plantations", and decimated rainforests, demanding the "urgent need for a national land use survey to decide what is the proper use for the various categories of land in the new

[2] While the Malaysian climate may be read as being "essentially non-seasonal…interrupted by neither periodical drought nor cold" (Poore, 1964, p. 45), seasonality is marked by patterns of rainfall rather than temperature or diurnal variation. Overall, the alternating patterns of monsoons, interspersed by two inter-monsoon periods, govern Malaysian seasonality (Sani,1998, pp. 64-65). There is also Anthropogenic seasonality to contend with—perhaps most infamously the "haze season", which is reified as natural and inevitable (Varkkey et al., 2025).

[3] See Juo and Franzluebbers (2003) on the lack of fertility of tropical soils. In the postwar period, Pierre Gourou had called attention to how the "fertility and wealth of the tropics had been wildly exaggerated" (Bowd & Clayton, 2019, p. 211).

Federation" (Poore, 1964, p. 54). Even if these visions dispensed with the illusory fecundity that animated their intellectual predecessors, the emergent image was still that of a tropical land rich in scientific and economic value, to be made ripe for productivity through good government.

Thus, *Malaysia: A Survey* was informed by the discourse of tropicality, characterised by an "over-profusion of splendour and hostility" that carved the world into imagined geographies of the temperate and the tropical (Lundberg et al., 2023, p. 4).[4] Rather than a geographical and climactic reality, however, the idea of the tropics is enacted through spaces of knowledge, networks of power, and technocratic expertise, bringing forth two contrasting images: that of a space ripe for transformation, and its mirror inverse of inevitable degradation and degeneracy (Bowd & Clayton, 2019; Chang, 2016). If the former promoted a view of agency and improvement, the latter manifested in a colonial landscape of potential ruin, lazy natives, and eventually, post-independence semi-authoritarianism.

Both facets were rooted in a temperate imaginary, from which not just the rarefied epistemic values of objectivity, rationality, and coolness emerged, but also extractive modern (read: colonial) forms of governmentality (Lundberg et al., 2023, p. 2). This point is vividly embodied in the Singaporean artist Ho Rui An's (2014) interrogation of a colonial "solar unconscious," where he takes the sweaty back of the mannequin of the anthropologist Charles Le Roux in Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum as his starting point. He charts how the teleological colonial project was built upon the denial and effacement of tropical discomfort—by reifying a *separation* between humans and their climactic conditions, a gulf between the temperate and the tropical also emerges. The comfort-driven innovations of ventilation and shade that characterised colonial architectural vernacular (Chang, 2016) would give way to the technologically driven inward retreat of post-independence modernism, prefigured by how "the problem of keeping ceremonially garbed magistrates cool in the intense tropical heat" was tackled through the "Solo-Air" ventilation system at Singapore's Supreme Court, which supplied jets of filtered air to barristers, jurors, and the chief justice (Speechley, 2020, p. 261). Whereas A.A. Geeraerts idealistically insisted in 1960 that "a Malayan form of architecture will have to take into account the climate and possibly the way of life of the people" (quoted in Lai & Ang, 2018, p. 478), the subjugation of tropical conditions mediated local political imaginaries and decision-making. Reflecting on the architecture of Malaya's Houses of Parliament in Kuala Lumpur which opened in 1959, Ivor Shipley remarked upon the inevitability of a temperate imaginary: "the whole structure was conceived as an air-conditioned complex. It couldn't really work without air-conditioning" (quoted in Lai & Ang, 2018, p. 223). Despite architectural appeals to

[4] Pioneering scholars in this field include David Arnold and Dan Clayton, and—at a stretch—it is possible to also include Aimé Césaire within this genealogy (see Clayton, 2021).

a democratic ethos, elite representatives governed in temperature-controlled isolation from their equatorial conditions.

The unifying political aspirations that made the assembly of this new parliament possible did not last. The Federation had only formed in 1963, but by 1965 Malaysia and Singapore separated and were reified as two separate nation-states and, by extension, distinct politico-ecological units. As Tan Yu Kai writes, "representations of and relationalities with nature on either side are truly divergent, yet they are [still] emergent from the same system of [colonial] logic" (2023, p. 301). Malaya and the distant Bornean states remained imagined as a single, albeit bifurcated, ecological reality; while Singapore was constructed as a self-sustaining ecosystem, laying claim to various "endemic" species (p. 293). This political separation effected ecological fragmentation, further represented and reified through scholarship, media images, and myths of separate national ecologies. It followed in the wake of earlier representations and separations that fragmented ecologies along political lines, such as the division of the peninsula's contiguous forests between different administrative jurisdictions, in line with the demands of the forestry industry, thus laying the basis for Malaysia's federal–state structure (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005). This was in turn preceded by the 1824 treaty between the Dutch and British, which severed migratory, ecological, and cultural links between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. The roots of coloniality ran deep.

The two post-Separation developmental states took Robert Ho's agentic reading of equatorial life to its logical extreme: by extrapolating from internal thermal control to positioning national concerns outside ecology altogether. Two examples from the early 1970s suggest how deeply an ideology of abstraction and alienation permeated official discourse. In the *Klang Valley Regional Planning and Development Study*, the Malaysian state envisioned planning as a spatial representation of its transformative New Economic Policy, which aimed to achieve national socioeconomic transformation by transforming the flood-prone waterscape in which Kuala Lumpur was embedded into an abstract space for development. Here, ecological relationalities were reduced to mere environmental factors to be managed (Shankland Cox & Associates, 1973). Across the border, S. Rajaratnam, Singapore's long-serving minister for foreign affairs, saw the city-state as no longer needing a physical hinterland at all. It was instead to be refashioned as a "Global City": "a new form of human organisation and settlement" (Rajaratnam, 1972, p. 3), where "the problem of hinterland becomes unimportant because for a Global City the world is its hinterland" (p. 8). Material concerns about water and food security are not broached: for all intents and purposes the country is depicted as surviving without them. These new tropical imaginations were rooted in the possibility of escaping material limitations altogether—a triumphant vision that has not come to pass.

Yet the spectre of ecological determinism continued to haunt the political imaginary. The high modernist dream of place without ecology only masked an underlying fear of tropical ruin which drove two fearful post-Separation prime ministers. Seeking to improve their subject populations by means of their respective authoritarian states, Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew envisioned the need to overcome tropical degradation.

In Mahathir's Malaysia, the continued need for Malay primacy and an orderly society, respectively, were justified by unconducive ecological conditions which were to be resolved through technocratic control. Even if the academic community had scorned his social Darwinist proclivities and suggestions of natural inferiority, they proved resilient enough in the wave of ethnonationalism that eventually brought him to power. In Dr Mahathir's (1970) mythology, particularly the ominously titled chapter "The Influence of Heredity and Environment on the Malay Race", the peasantry was handicapped not just by the disadvantage of genetic descent, but also favourable tropical conditions [*sic*], which rendered it ill-suited in competition with the immigrant Chinese, tested by the harsh conditions and disasters of imperial China. This was not very different from the stance of the Reverend Runciman in 1915—speaking to the Straits Philosophical Society, he argued that the equitable tropics meant that "the Malay…cannot be expected to learn the patient perseverance of a European peasant" (2023, p. 122), although adding the caveat that the improvement of the "tropical peoples" was possible via appropriate "moral and religious influence" (2023, p. 122). A medical doctor by profession, Mahathir regarded the entrenchment of Malay political and economic power as key to racial survival, narrating a "Malay dilemma" in terms of anxiety rather than racial supremacy.[5] Even though such theses, which centre around heredity and environment, have been disproven (see for example Alatas, 1977), Mahathir's socioeconomic imaginary lives on.

Meanwhile, Lee Kuan Yew sought total control of Singapore's tightly policed environment, "natural" or otherwise. Indeed, Lee's personal approach to governance involved an "obsessive" concern with "the temperature of the environment", to the point that he named the air-conditioner as the millennium's greatest invention, believing that,

> …advanced civilisations have flourished in the cooler climates.… civilisation in the tropical zones need no longer lag behind [because air-conditioning was available]. (quoted in George, 2000, p. 14)

With its leftist political opposition shuttered—and hence no real opposition left in Singapore—Lee's ruling party aggressively sought to tame nature itself, resulting in

[5] One only needs to recall the grim statistics of Malay population decline that the scholar Ungku Aziz had once presented (Harper, 1999, p. 232-33) to understand such anxiety.

the creation of a "garden city" which symbolically represented the success of technocratic authority (Barnard, 2014). Thus, Cherian George uses the trope of an air-conditioned society as a metaphor for the banality of Singaporean authoritarianism, "a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control…at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability" (2000, p. 15). Calibration and comfort underpin governance, rather than dogma or outright repression.

In both cases, another separation emerges, this time between the political and technical. In the process, democratic de-empowerment coexists with ecological abstraction and alienation. The contradiction between abstract national spaces made possible through human endeavour and a continued belief in an inescapable environmental determinism suggests a dark reading: a political ecology where temperate—in its sense of being cool, calculated, and rational—political leaders can easily lose control to their restive populations and unruly nature. Such an ecology requires decisive taming and control. It has left the landscapes within Malaysia's borders haunted by pollution, forest and maritime ecosystems fragmented, and ecological relationalities severed. The "Malaysia" that parliamentarians preside over today is much narrower, both politically and ecologically, a botanical imaginary replaced by the nation-state. Singapore's own divided ecology, isolated from the mainland, is reduced to a "curated nature" characterised by "orderly facsimiles of non-human life that do not disrupt the structured aesthetics of modern life" (Tan, 2023, p. 291). And as the spectre of climate change-induced ruin dominates, tropicality manifests again in the prospect of the temperate zones being invaded by the extreme climate of the tropics (Bowd & Clayton, 2019, p. 301; Clayton, 2021). The air-conditioner becomes a loaded signifier—attached to individual residential units, it makes the dream of the temperate briefly available to the privileged, if atomized, masses in the Anthropocene (Bowd & Clayton, 2019, p. 302).[6] Such are just some effects of the intertwined practices of representation and separation.

## Towards Other Ecological Futures?

> [T]he Malaysian environmental movement failed to develop into a massive one…I am disappointed with Malaysian society's superficial commitment to the environment.…most people—even those with green sympathies—have not gone beyond cutting down on the

[6] Incidentally, under Mahathir's pursuit of high economic growth, Malaysia emerged as the world's largest producer of air-conditioners. The production of these units, as well as other electronics, were driven by the relocation of Japanese manufacturing operations to Southeast Asia in a bid to lower production costs and improve competitiveness (Hafiz, 2025).

> use of plastic bags and planting trees. (Singh, 2024, p. 201)

Gurmit K.S. Singh maps himself onto the nation in his own terms in *Memoirs of a Malaysian Eco-Activist* (2017). As one of the pioneering "eco-activists" of the 1970s, and co-founder of the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia (EPSM) and the Centre for Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia (CETDEM), his memoirs become a personal accounting exercise of his successes, failures, and indomitable belief in activism. A narrative of individualised idealism and action emerges, even if weighed down by pessimism about societal change under the ruling government's repression.[7] Singh's valorisation of conservation amidst rapid development and degradation leads him to link "concerns over the governance of the nation and the management of its natural resources" (2024, p. 190). Although he does not quite consider the environment as a human right, he still,

> …believe[s] that every Malaysian must speak up openly and without fear on any issue, whether affecting the environment or human rights. The authorities have no justification to suppress such views or debates […despite having] tried to prohibit honest discussion at every step. (p. 199)

What emerges through his memoir are two myths. The first is the close linkage between good resource management (to which ecology has been reduced) and national progress. To be an environmentalist is thus to exercise *responsible* citizenship—i.e., "looking beyond nature conservation; it involves tackling the root causes of [Malaysian] environmental problems such as corruption, inefficiency, and [a] lack of disclosure" (p. 200). The second is that of the apathetic Malaysian, even as he (paradoxically) outlines the emergence and vibrancy of grassroots ecological movements in the post-independence period. Read this way, environmentalism is partly coded as a concern with good governance within the nation-state.

Following Singh's lead when he inserts himself into his memoirs of activism, I, likewise, insert myself into this analysis of his ecological imaginary. Taking up his myths sequentially, I first engage with his understanding of resources, and then show how his view of apathy emerges from this stance. In Singh's memoir, resources are only abstractions—they are the result of emptying out actants (for example, water) of their relationalities and constructing them in purely functional or economic terms (Linton, 2010). Ideas of resource use have since become central to good government, even forming the basis of the Cold War-era regional planning approaches exported as the

[7] For a discussion of repression in the postcolonial period under the ruling Barisan Nasional government, and its attempts to co-opt civil society, see for example Rodan (2018).

model par excellence of liberal democratic government (Schmidt, 2017). In fighting for good resource use, Singh's argument not only reifies national boundaries, but also an abstract understanding of ecological realities. Consequently, we can argue that sustainable and equitable development becomes a proxy for democratisation. It "allows us to measure how well human rights—i.e., seen primarily in terms of our dignity, respect, and freedom from fear and hunger—have been achieved. It also illustrates how democracy evolves" (Thum & Tham, 2024).

However, what also emerges is a slippage from defending the environment for its own sake to neoliberal *governance* premised upon consensus, compromise, and the influence of private interests (Brown, 2017). Indeed, the EPSM was imagined not only "as a national-level group to campaign for [better] environmental quality, and as a watchdog over the Malaysian government's actions", but also,

> …to identify problems that could be resolved through active participation from both the government and the private sector, in order to develop a healthy public sphere for environmental engagement. (Singh, 2024, p. 190)

In his narrative, civil society participation is privileged as the locus of ecological mobilisation (broadly referring to engagement on climate change, conservation, environment, etc.), following which dialogue with private and public actors takes place. But this comes at the expense of mass democratic empowerment and simply strengthens existing power dynamics. After all, the newly formed Malaysian state, even as it quashed democratic norms, historically collaborated with civil society on environmental matters—so long as these actors remained apolitical (Cooke & Hezri, 2017; Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005). The roots of coloniality remained uncontested and continue to structure Malaysia's approach to the Anthropogenic crisis, even if "the inability of the colonial frame to solve the challenge of environmental crisis" has been recognised (Lundberg et al., 2023).

There is no space for mass mobilisation here in Singh's narrative; rather, there are only mythical apathetic Malaysians. Yet such apathy is constructed: as Alia (2019) argues, it emerges through the political disempowerment of the public in areas such as ecological governance. I spoke with several Malaysian ecological actors—an artist, an environmental journalist, a biodiversity conservationist, and advocates for the climate and environmental, social, and governance adoption—and sensed how they generally coded their work as being nonpartisan (Tham, 2024). Rather than embracing the label of activism, they preferred to see themselves as acting in a professional capacity, or as advocates at best. The only research participant who described himself as an activist emphasised how his work was done out of *necessity*, rather than framing his actions as a matter of personal choice. This raises the question of who shoulders

the burden of *responsibility* for managing local ecological crises (the market, state, or Global North?). Singh's passage seems to lay a significant burden upon the individual, while accounting for his tireless—yet undeniably important and inspiring—contributions. Indeed, the act of life-writing is simultaneously one of demonstrating *accountability:* accounting practices and a literary consciousness were interlinked discursive technologies of the self, which in turn represented responsibility, whether moral or fiscal, personal or political (Soll, 2021, p. 291). Ecological action is thus positioned outside the sphere of politics and made a matter of personal choice. Here, ecological mobilisation enables a space for civil society members to become political actors, even while avoiding overt resistance and perhaps even deeper underlying systems and structures.

In writing this essay, I have paid significant attention to local narratives and potential actions—yet I cannot see further than the borders. The Malaysian nation-state circumscribes the outermost limit of my imagination: my knowledge of regional ecological mobilisation ends at the Tebrau Strait, also known as the Straits of Johor, that sits between Malaysia and Singapore. I can appreciate the problems caused by accounting for carbon according to countries in the abstract—for example, how Singapore's role in facilitating the global oil trade is "invisiblised because very little of the oil refined is actually used on the island itself", despite its significant role as a port and refinery (Jesuthasan, 2019)—but have no framework on *how* to act. If civil society is privileged as a core area of domestic ecological mobilisation, there are no cross-border mechanisms for action. Consider how the institutional split of the erstwhile Malayan Nature Society into the Malaysian Nature Society and the Nature Society (Singapore) was one casualty of the 1965 separation (George, 2000), and in the process, ecological mobilisation has been limited to domestic contexts. Anything further would, naturally, be construed as foreign interference.

Such are the effects of representation-and-separation in the ecological region once broadly known as Malaya and now Malaysia. Taken to their limits, the nation-state demarcates the maximum scope of action, while the contradictions of colonial tropicality (i.e., its concern with resource maximisation and eventual ruin) continue structuring authoritarian governance in the equatorial context. Resources are liable to degrade, get contaminated, or be extracted irresponsibly by feckless citizens—consequently, they require the professional technical management of the state and the market. Even the afterlives of colonial tropicality's debunked discourse of fecundity provides the grounds for postcolonial exploitation. For instance, by crying foul about the unjust underdevelopment wrought by colonisation, the Malaysian authorities have avoided taking responsibility for their own exploitations (Tan, 2023). Adroitly engaging in diplomatic efforts (e.g., climate negotiations), Malaysia avoids being subject to stronger mitigation measures despite its outsized role in generating emissions (Hezri,

2016). The irony, of course, is that Malaysia is caught in the unfolding effects of climate change, particularly pronounced in the tropics, which even now give rise to a,

> …critical zone of cascading tipping points, the site where the full scale and scope of climate change and its associated challenges and deathly consequences are becoming materially manifest. (Lundberg et al., 2021, p. 3).

The political problem of the ecological crisis is given putative technical solutions, lofty and humdrum alike, such as adherence to sustainable development goals, anti-plastic straw campaigns, and the much-critiqued "River of Life" clean-up project. The creation of a carbon market is figured in terms of nationalistic pride and good economics, structured in line with market logic (De Oliveira et al., 2024; Lovell & MacKenzie, 2011). Local climate change responses to drought, floods, and rising sea levels are framed not just as threats, but also financial opportunities (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2019). The logic of capitalism supplies neoliberal solutions to the problems which it caused in the first place (Mitchell, 2011).

Thus, the first task of the humanities is to decolonise tropical ecologies, in cognisance of climate change's realities and informed by epistemic approaches such as tropical materialism (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022) and queer ecology (Benitez et al. 2024). This effort might take the form of what Aurore Chaillou et al. describe as "decolonial ecology", i.e., by recognising "culture and colour, rather than simply addressing environmental issues through technical environmental management" (quoted in Lundberg et al., 2023, p. 14). It must also be a project of undoing the complex ways in which tropical conditions have been intertwined with the question of race—and race, of course, has been fundamental to the construction of Malaysian capitalism (Choong, 2024). Counter-representations of (post)colonial tropicality constitute the grounds upon which its legacy can be contested. Ecological relations and socio-political justice must jointly be centred as the objects of politics, an increasingly urgent task as the atmosphere accommodates a greater concentration of carbon, the basic elements of land and water mixing with increasingly devastating effects. In doing so, we might undo the centrality of the nation-state as the basic unit of action, to formulate broader opportunities for mobilisation going beyond not just the separations of 1965, but perhaps even 1824, and earlier.

It is easy to say that we must exercise agency within a system structured by the persistent logic of colonial tropicality, and how being physically positioned in the geographical tropics offers opportunities to craft new understandings of the ecological crisis in a local idiom, born from the nexus of oscillating monsoons, global trade, and a fragmented archipelagic terrain. It is easy to infer that if climate science was a

colonial innovation, climate solutions require a decolonial intervention.[8] Yet this is easier said than done. To speculate workable alternatives in the present, perhaps we can start by representing other futures that break from the contradictions of colonial tropicality, and engage in the emerging imaginaries of decolonial tropicality. If futurity is performative, then it is necessary to establish parameters for imagining temporally distant conditions, while enacting steps towards their achievement in the present (Oomen et al., 2021).

### *Tropical Futurisms*

To conclude, I briefly survey future imaginaries from the past, to the present, and then to the speculative future. We do not have to look too far to chart imaginations of alternative futures: several local texts have already attempted this task, even if the exact steps to towards achieving them are not quite clear yet. This is only a short survey—and surveys, in practice, are always provisional.

One example which collapsed the human/non-human binary was imagined all the way back in the past, by Wang Gungwu with whom we began this Malaysian (re)survey. In a poem written during his student days in Singapore. Wang's persona implores their addressee to "[s]eek a new beginning" in a mythic "Tigerland", one shorn of violence and where "[t]he lane trees are green and the jungles don't carry a gun" (Wang, 1950, p. 1). Merging the literary and the political, and alluding to overcoming the violence that characterised the Malayan Emergency,[9] his poem sought to usher in a sense of ecological harmony.

> There the music slows the flying birds;
> There the Hajis sermon their herds.

In the socialist realist roman-a-clef, *The Mighty Wave* by He Jin—the pen name of the revolutionary Lim Kim Chuan—the leftist sociopolitical movements of 1950s' Singapore come to the fore, representing the tropics very differently from the dominant image of Anglophone (post)colonial ruin and pristine rainforests. He Jin's narrative hewed closer to the Marxist goal of overturning capitalist alienation, which had severed humans from their material relationships (Foster, 2000). The identities of some of his

[8] The scientific study of the climate emerged as a trans-colonial endeavour, one whose pioneers began to realise that the study of weather patterns was impossible through individualised, localised efforts (Amrith, 2020). The *mawsim* captured the imagination of British scientists in India, for whom understanding its patterns was an existential question. Their research would draw on data from remote outposts, and also led to the identification of the oscillations causing the La Nina and El Nino phenomena. In a sense, climate is a performative science—it has to be represented through boundary work, specialised tools and discourses, and a shared epistemic community.

[9] The Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), an undeclared war, was primarily waged between British colonial forces and the underground Communist Party of Malaya (Harper, 1999). Rather than just a counterinsurgency operation, however, it was simultaneously a project of rural reorganisation, through which restive subjects were made legible through the construction of highly surveilled and structured "New Villages". This process necessitated the erasure of the inhabitants' former jungle settlements and the disruption of their ecological imaginaries (Liew, 2020).

characters are intertwined with the dynamics of labour and their ecologies, from the "vast expanse of rubber plantations…countless pits of tin mines…[and] hot springs of the equator" (Lim 2011, pp. 234). It is the lived conditions of the tropics, rather than any mythical image, in which his student revolutionaries labour and draw their material sustenance from, and which fuels the revolution-to-come.

If decolonisation, as Tuck and Yang (2012) have reminded us, is also a question of land, then to address colonial inequalities is to undo their material inequalities. Here, the technology of the map can lend itself to uses other than the interests of state and capital. A remarkable counterpoint to the Zollinger's botanical map shown at the beginning of this essay, with its cadastral and topographical descendants continuing from colonial to contemporary cartographies of Malaysia, is an effort at centring human and more-than-human interactions spatially by the Indigenous Temuan artist Shaq Koyok. His digital counter-cartographic practice overlays cultural and ecological Orang Asli knowledge and identities onto a map of the Malay Peninsula (Shaq & Soon, 2021). This subversive cartography emphasises the artifice of the discursive practices which performed the colonised tropics into being. In doing so, Shaq echoes how the emancipatory mapping practices of Indigenous communities from elsewhere around the planet challenge state authority (Özden-Schilling, 2023).

**Figure 2.** ***Shaq Koyok's contemporary map of Indigenous heritage in Peninsular Malaysia***

A literary method of decentring colonial tropicality can be experienced in Shawn Hoo's provocative poem-manifesto, "Postscript: Torn Pages from The Discovery of the Florids", which he reads as "a trope of mistranslation:…[t]he same signifier for decadence is the one for degeneration" (Hoo, 2023, p. 42). His "florids" are articulated as "a kind of nature poetics with urban characteristics. In between 'flora' and 'lurid'", functioning as "[a] poetics of future history" (p. 43), they are the grounds upon which novel ecological imaginaries can be constructed. Natural history is substituted for informed speculation about the future, revelling in the messy inseparability of nature and culture. Where *Malaysia: A Survey* sought to tame, classify, describe, and draw a new country into being, Hoo's "Postscript" de-privileges established epistemological authority, and suggests that we consider degradation, urbanisation, and exploitation as constituent factors of the new, haunted landscapes across maritime Southeast Asia.

To undo the colonial act of surveying is to reverse the logic of separation: it demands new forms of representation, to consider the possibility of other tropical futures.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank friends, colleagues, and academic mentors for shaping this essay (however tangentially, inadvertently, or unknowingly). In alphabetical order, they are: Agnes S.K. Yeow, Ann Ang, Bilqis Hijjas of Rimbun Dahan, Bonnibel Rambatan, Brandon K. Liew, Caleb Goh, Charles Brophy, Choong Pui Yee, Dennis Ong, Fong Min Hun, Helena Varkkey, Hong Lysa, Jonathan Yong Tienxhi, Jueling Hu, Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil, Khoo Gaik Cheng, Khoo Salma Nasution, Koo Hui Ru, Philip Koh, Shawn Hoo, Tan Yu Kai, Thum Ping Tjin, Vandana Saxena, and Vilashini Somiah. I am also indebted to my *Second Link* co-editors Daryl Lim Wei Jie, Hamid Roslan, and Melizarani Selva, the late Professor K.J. Ratnam, and Associate Professor Anita Lundberg's advice and comments.

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