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Colonialⁱ

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We – Michele Lobo, an Australian of Anglo-Indian heritage from Kolkata, India and June Rubis, a Bidayuh-Filipino woman raised in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo - attune and relearn from more-than-human worlds threatened by climate change.

Michele Lobo – Tidal worlds

Perhaps I could bluff it, drive it away, as I had read of British tiger hunters doing. I waved my arms and shouted, "Go away!" (We're British here.)¹

In reflecting on her terrifying encounter with a crocodile at Kakadu National Park, Val Plumwood adds a touch of humour – she survived but failed to perform the masculinity of the British colonial hero whose commands echoed in distant animal kingdoms of Asia and Africa. Stories of “dangerous and powerful beasts,” in particular, the Royal Bengal Tiger circulated on the tea estate in Tezpur (Assam, India) owned by Jardine Henderson, a multinational British firm where my father served as an engineer in the post-independence period². He narrated stories of the ‘man-eater’ who used stealth to attack vulnerable tea plantation workers and children who slept under the stars on hot humid nights. There were celebrations when the ferocious animals were killed by chivalrous British managers on hunting expeditions, once a princely Indian sport. These expressions of triumph over ‘wild’ animals materialised through trophies such as tiger heads and pelts that adorned the walls of bungalows as well as the officers’ clubhouse. I have memories of looking through our family photo album – a dead tiger encircled by British tea-estate managers, *shikaris* (often Indigenous trackers), Indian officers, plantation workers and children (fig. 1).

Today the Royal Bengal Tiger faces extinction as it roams the UNESCO heritage-listed Sundarbans (named after the Sundari tree), the world’s largest mangrove forest in the Gangetic delta of India and Bangladesh. The dwindling number (4000 tigers) is attributed to the destruction of the mangrove habitat by climate change and sea level rise traceable to the colonial period.³ Revisiting Sundarbans as a mature-aged Australian woman who grew up in nearby Kolkata, West Bengal, I was alerted to the invisibility of the tiger when local tourists boarding motorboats along tidal creeks (ghat) asked, “Bagh dekhecho?” (Bengali for ‘Did you see a tiger?’). There were facial expressions of disappointment when I replied - the money and time spent travelling by bus from Kolkata and staying overnight at Gosaba town seemed futile. The tiger had not been sighted for 3 months but tourists strained their eyes hoping to see the animal through the wintry fog (fig. 2).

¹ Plumwood, “Prey to a crocodile.”

² Sramek, “Face him like a Briton,” 659.

³ Mukul, “Combined effects of climate change.”



Figure 1. Family Photos: Tea Gardens, Tezpur, Assam, India.



Figure 2. A signboard at Sudhanyakali Mangrove Park, Sundarbans showing dates when tigers were sighted © Michele Lobo

“Welcome to the only Mangrove Tigerland in the Globe,” an enormous signboard strategically erected along the muddy shore beckons tourists and heightens their expectations. The 24 varieties of halophytes or saltwater plant species at the Sudhanyakali Mangrove Park as well as fiddler crabs and turtles (River Terrapin or *Batagur baska*) described as ‘small citizens’ at the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary are easily overlooked. As a diasporic woman of Anglo-Indian Christian heritage, however, I take care to read the signboards and feel the worlds of these ‘small citizens’ that inhabit the intertidal zone. It

seems I slow down, a privilege enjoyed by affluent western tourists who explore mangrove worlds while living in cottages in the Sundarban Tiger Camp. Perhaps I cringe - I am so far from my family 'home' in the shadow zones of inner Kolkata with its pot-holed roads, winding lanes, piles of garbage, dilapidated buildings, creaking trams and hooting auto-rickshaws! This is a city where generations of the hybrid Anglo-Indian community followed a western lifestyle and yearned to inhabit the luminous zones of colonial whiteness. As minorities who lived in shadow places of the city and employees trusted by British '*burra sahibs*' (managers), Anglo-Indians moved in and out of this luminous zone. They were less aware of the symbolic and material violence of extractive capitalism that transformed deltaic Bengal or "*desh*" into a countryside with mushrooming jute mills, paper mills, match factories, residential compounds, railway networks, river jetties, bridges, docks and warehouses. Looking back, I can now see the effluents that contaminated the muddy waters of the River Hooghly, the billowing smoke from the tall chimneys stacks and smell the pervading acidic smell that produced toxic atmospheres exacerbating anthropogenic induced climate change at the Kankinara Jute Mill where my father worked.

Relearning and attuning to a postcolonial "home" in deltaic Bengal emerged through encounters in Larrakia saltwater country in Darwin. Rather than be consumed by the subtleties, surprise and brutality of settler colonialism and institutional racism in this shadow zone, Indigenous peoples, refugees and asylum seekers whose bodies were rendered hypervisible or completely invisible taught me to attune to multispecies tidal worlds in a new country. In the midst of displacement, dispossession, genocide, and dystopic futures that centre extinction and ecocide, their embodied intimacies of generosity, love as well as responsibility opens our minds and bodies to decolonial possibilities for planetary co-belonging.

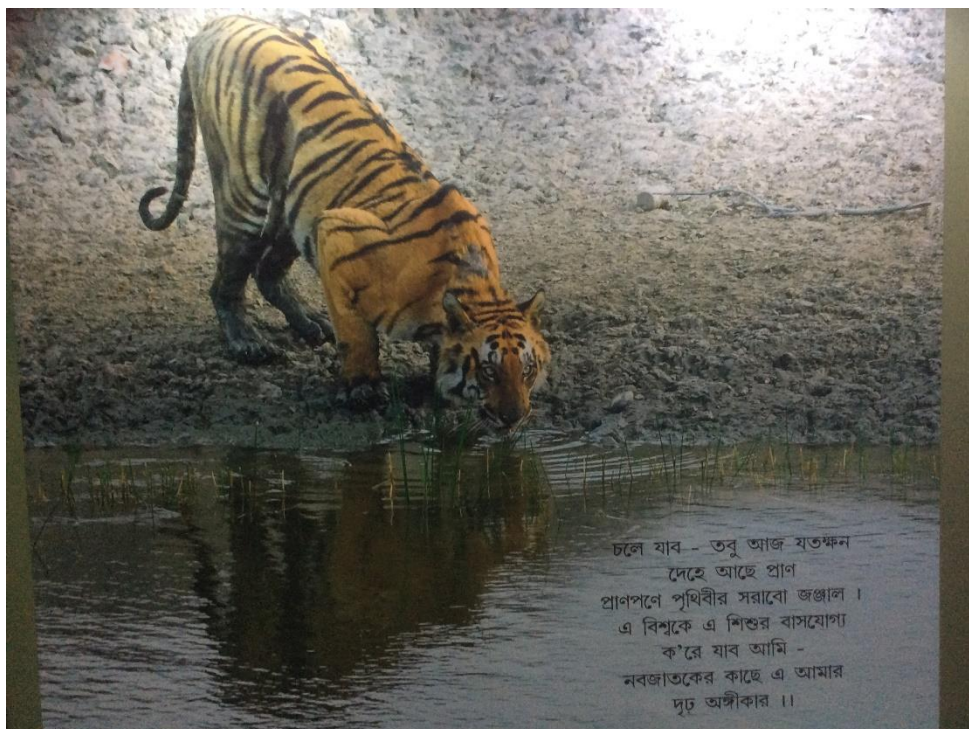


Figure 3. Sundarbans Tiger Reserve © Michele Lobo

In imbricated tidal zones on the Indian Ocean edge "broken" by the force of colonial whiteness, it is possible to attune to the story of co-belonging by listening to the call of animals who unsettle possessive white settler love for the planet that has contributed to the advent of the Anthropocene. Perhaps Sukanto Bhattacharya, Bengali poet and playwright

who lived in colonial India and died at the age of 21 years, heard the Royal Bengal tiger when he made a promise to the newborn that as long as there is life in his body, he will do his best to make the earth liveable for all species (see Figure 3 for poem).

June Rubis – Casting shadows over a beloved name

It is the early 1980s, I am about six years old, and am with my father at the Sarawak Museum, in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. We had taken a tour around various glassy-eyed native wildlife that had been shot, bagged and stuffed by white colonials and now presented to us, as rather dusty museum exhibits. We are standing in front of a dead stuffed orang utan, staring at its fanged mandible forced wide open; a perpetual snarl for the ages.

I read the plate out loud, “orang utan,” and asked rather loudly, startling nearby visitors, “but where is its *real name*?”

For many familiar with the Indo-Malay region, it is often assumed that “orang utan” is a term that locals use to know and name the great ape. It is after all derived from the Malay words, orang (for person), and -utan (or hutan) for forests, or “person of the forests.” In the scientific and conservation world, the Bornean orang utan comes into being as *Pongo pygmaeus* – from the Latin *pongo* (an anthropoid ape) and *pygmaeus* (short or reduced stature), or as more commonly known as the orang utan (fig. 4).

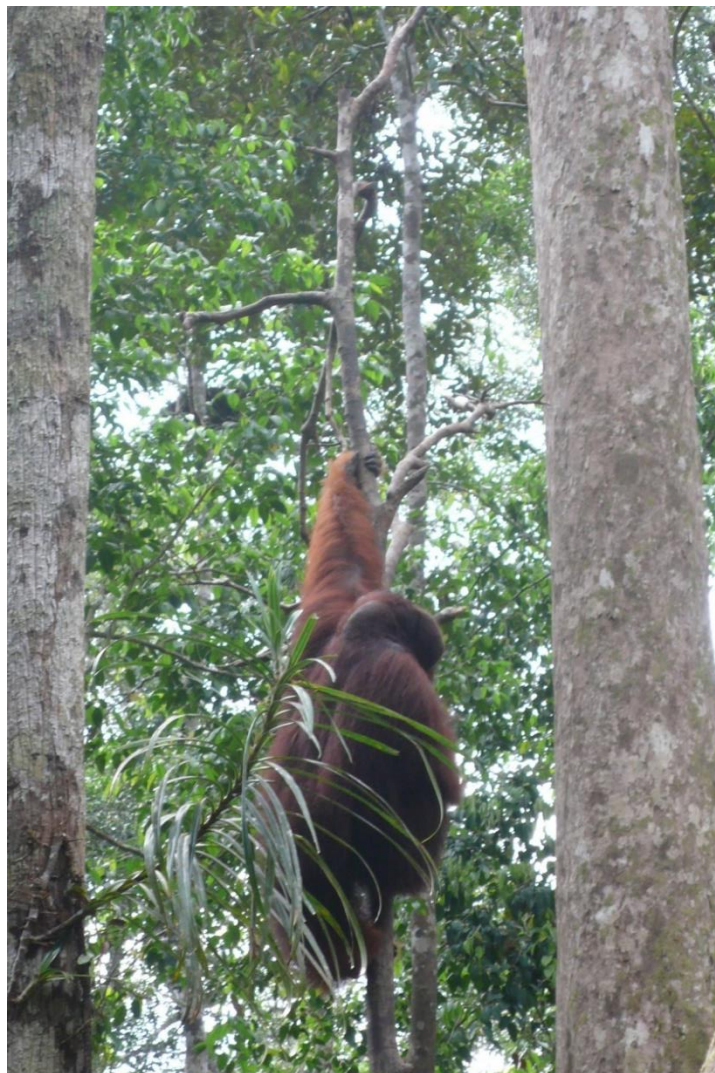


Figure 4. An adult male orang utan in Borneo © June Rubis

My father didn't answer my question then, and perhaps had puzzled over why the English had called the animal, orang utan. To the various Bidayuh communities, of which my father belongs to, the animal is called the mawas. The Iban communities in Batang Ai, Sarawak (whom I would work with several decades later) had their own names to identify, acknowledge and relate to these beings – the Ibans collectively called them, the maias.

I was born and raised in Kuching, Sarawak, currently about an hour's drive from my father's village. My thinking of (de)colonial spaces emerges from and tries to incorporate the seemingly contradictory spaces between my dual heritage (Bidayuh and Filipino) upbringing in Sarawak, the resulting experiences that had shaped me, my work life as a conservation biologist and finally my re-entry to a euro-western postgraduate education that helped me theorise my misgivings, frustrations and eventual resignation from the conservation sector. Growing up in Sarawak meant reading colonial memoirs, re-published in the late 20th century and sold to local bookstores to tourists keen to learn about the colonial imaginary (often patronizing or dismissive) of the native and the maias or mawas. When I started reading academic literature on my father's people, the Bidayuh, it further created a sense of cognitive dissonance of what I knew growing up and being exposed to my father's cultural traditions and stories, to what seemed to be the authoritative voice on how to be a proper native, or who was playing native in Southeast Asia, as argued by Western academics. Particularly in conservation literature, rural native people of Borneo are often written off as "unruly," and represent a constant threat to nature and wildlife, and thus have to be managed in different ways. As well, to live in expressed ideas of "being native" in Sarawak especially in the 1980s and 1990s was seen to be in contrast with "modernity," and to resist development. This was particularly marked by the rising of several rural native communities in Sarawak at that time, to protest against state-sanctioned logging in their native customary lands. Doing my PhD therefore gave me an opportunity to address my many questions since childhood.

I recently wrote about how the orang utan is not an Indigenous name,⁴ and pointed out to the lack of literary record of the Malay-speaking peoples using the term "orang utan" or one of its variants to refer to the ape before the middle of the 19th century.⁵ In fact, the first recorded Malay⁶ use of a term resembling "orang utan" to describe the ape identifies the word as a Western term⁷ (fig. 4). The Hikayat Abdullah, a major literary work written in the 1840s by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, a Malaccan-born munshi⁸ of Singapore, recounts that "the Ruler of Sambas sent Mr Raffles a present of two apes of the kind which the English call orang utan."⁹ The description of the 'orang utan' meaning 'person of the forest' suggests a vision of a creature living in constant harmony in the wilderness, away from the other "orang" (humans) that represent a shadowy external and disruptive force. This is evident in the diaries of Alfred Russel Wallace and William Hornaday who travelled to Sarawak during the colonial era and described their hunting exploits in killing maias in the name of science and conservation, with the help of local guides.

⁴ Rubis, "orang utan."

⁵ Cribb, Gilbert and Tiffin, *Wild man from Borneo*.

⁶ Malay was adopted as the lingua franca of the region, and communication in the Malay language between the English and the Malays, especially after British colonization of the partial Indo-Malaya region, became important.

⁷ Cribb, Gilbert and Tiffin, *Wild man from Borneo*.

⁸ Persian word originally used for 'writer' or 'secretary.'

⁹ Cribb, Gilbert and Tiffin, *Wild man from Borneo*, 12.



Figure 5. Earliest Western drawing of the orang utan by Tulp, in the year 1641. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolaes_Tulp_1641_3de_capvt_lvi_satyr.JPG

In *Decolonizing Nature*, Adams describes how colonial ideologies “cast a long shadow in thinking about conservation, and in many instances, they have been built into the structure of established institutions.”¹⁰ This long shadow persists as I begin my academic journey as an “early career researcher” - blurring boundaries of the personal to demonstrate the hybridity of reflection and methodological approaches. However, in doing so, it makes me, and hopefully others, reflect what futures and co-belongings we could rebuild together. The process of moving out of the shadows would never be comfortable.

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¹⁰ Adams and Mulligan, *Decolonising Nature*, 17.

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ⁱ Lobo, Michele and June Rubis. "Colonial." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

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