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# (De)colonizing nature in Bukit Brown: a struggle over national identity and citizenship in Singapore

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# **(De)colonizing Nature in Bukit Brown**

## **A Struggle over National Identity and Citizenship in Singapore**

Siennah Yang  
April 2018

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography

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Adviser, Professor Joseph Nevins

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### Abstract

As part of the settlement of Singapore, Chinese immigrants established Bukit Brown as a cemetery to bury their dead in 1872. Bukit Brown was turned into a municipal cemetery in 1922 and was closed in 1973 due to the lack of space for additional burials. The cemetery and its environmental aesthetic embody Chinese sacred beliefs of the afterlife and nature. However, for the majority of Singaporeans today, Bukit Brown is perceived as a space of unruliness and disorder. With the advent of an independent Singapore, spaces such as that of Bukit Brown became increasingly undesirable in the eyes of a modernizing state, first and foremost because they embodied inefficient uses of space and, to a lesser extent, an un-manicured “nature.” At the same time, Bukit Brown was too “Chinese,” a space filled with colonial memories and histories of Chinese immigrants that is antithetical to a multiracial Singapore. This unacceptable state of affairs necessitated the active erasure of the cemetery’s diasporic significance and, ultimately, its destruction in the name of national interest and progress as defined by the People’s Action Party (PAP). The destruction of Bukit Brown was not uncontested, however. To the contrary, a movement arose to preserve Bukit Brown—in the name of both “nature” and those buried in the cemetery—one that greatly raised its profile, nationally and internationally, and, in the process, “decolonized” the state’s hegemonic understandings of nature. The movement opened up a new appreciation of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of nature, and reimagined different socionatural relations that can constitute the political. Using an urban political ecology framework that examines seriously the dynamic linkages between politics and nature, this thesis argues that the struggle over Bukit Brown demonstrates the historical-geographical processes that intertwine competing notions of “nature” in the making of national identity and citizenship in Singapore.

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### **Introduction: Reading Bukit Brown**

Located at the center of Singapore, the 160-hectare Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery (BBMC) is home to 100,000 graves of Chinese immigrants. With the addition of 100,000 graves in three surrounding cemeteries of the greater Bukit Brown area, the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery forms one of the largest cemetery complex of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore (Chong 2014, 161).<sup>1</sup> It is also the cemetery where “other cemeteries come to die” when the government decided to exhume other cemeteries to make space for development (Our New Eyes, 2017). It served as a cemetery from 1872 to 1973— first as a Chinese cemetery from 1872-1919, then as a municipal cemetery from 1922-1973. It was closed in 1973 by the government to stop additional burials due to the lack of space, and it was abandoned ever since. Additionally, Bukit Brown is a rich forest habitat and an important ecological refuge site for endangered tropical wildlife and plant species that otherwise cannot survive elsewhere due to the lack of forests and other similar habitats in Singapore (Ho 2015). However, in 2011, The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) announced plans to destroy a part of Bukit Brown to build an eight-lane road that will cut across the cemetery to relieve traffic congestion (Chong 2014, 161).<sup>2</sup> The URA also announced that the whole cemetery will be slated in the next 30-40 years for housing projects, which will necessitate massive grave exhumations and the destruction of its forest habitat (Chong 2014, 161).

In the midst of Singapore’s rapid urban development schemes, Bukit Brown’s destruction is certainly not an uncommon story. Most of Singapore’s cemeteries are either destroyed or planned to be exhumed in the near future for development projects.

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<sup>1</sup> Bukit Brown refers to a larger area that comprises four cemeteries and a forest area: The Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery (the case study of this thesis) and three other Chinese clan cemeteries.

<sup>2</sup> The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development of the Singapore government.

The dead are either cremated or transported to other countries for burial (Tan and Yeoh 1995, 191). Because cemeteries are not valued significantly in Singapore, Bukit Brown is an intangible and marginalized site from the everyday urban fabric. It is a neglected site of unruly vines, fallen trees, and dilapidated tombstones that are covered in moss and overgrown roots (Figure 1). In fact, it is popularly cited in the top 10 most haunted places of Singapore. As one City Lab article describes:

Bukit Brown is a distinctly un-Singaporean space...overgrown tombs and large swathes of lush and unkempt land play host to groups of macaque monkeys, colorful African tulip trees, close to 100 bird species (some endangered), and other mammals, including the Large Flying Fox, a rare and enormous bat that was likely the inspiration for vampire movies... A far cry from the tidy roads, malls, and condos of Singapore proper (Kirk 2012).

The destruction of sites such as Bukit Brown is seen as necessary to develop a cosmopolitan, modern, and livable city-state. In an island of 278 square miles with an ever-increasing population of 5.6 million people, spaces of the dead make way for the spaces of the living. Furthermore, its unruly nature presents a stark juxtaposition to the rest of the cityscape where nature is highly managed and engineered to fit Singapore's global city image. Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP), the authoritarian single-party government of Singapore, has made a serious commitment to green the urban landscape under its "City in a Garden" vision. For a global city that has no access to a hinterland, a desirable landscape— with neat tree-lined roads, manicured gardens, and clean parks— is an essential indicator of Singapore's high quality of life to attract multinational corporations to invest and establish offices for Singapore's economic development. Because Singapore has a short

historical trajectory and a multicultural citizenry with no common ethnic heritage, economic progress becomes a unifying vision for Singapore's national identity. When the neat landscape is in itself a branding device of the PAP to develop Singapore's global city image, Bukit Brown becomes a conceptual opposite to the "City in a Garden" vision—a landscape that is not relevant to the national identity of Singapore.

Additionally, Bukit Brown is, in some sense, "too Chinese" for the multiracial Singapore. Currently a peripheral and neglected space for many Singaporeans, Bukit Brown was once a central and sacred space that anchored Chinese immigrants' sense of affinity in Singapore during the colonial period. The material arrangement and symbolic representations of nature in Bukit Brown, from grave orientation to carvings and paintings of floral patterns and animals, are infused with Chinese immigrants' feng shui principles, which believe that specific socionatural arrangements facilitate the flow of an invisible and sacred energy, *qi*, that harmonizes people's relationship with the surrounding environment (Field 2009). For the Chinese, nature was more than passive as it was central to their immigrant identity. Nature had sacred powers to grant Chinese immigrants with prosperity and protection. Because of its sacred significance, Bukit Brown played a central role in producing Chinese immigrants' sense of belonging in Singapore. However, in contemporary Singapore, sacredness does not have political significance in the formation of national identity. In a multiracial nation, certain ethnic landscapes are seen as a threat to a unified Singaporean citizenry. As Hong and Huang (2008) states, "the multiethnic complexion of the immigrant population required "selective amnesia" in order to create a nation *tabula rasa*, thus allowing the PAP government to exorcize the "ancestral ghosts" of different ethnic groups for universally accessible myths such as multiculturalism..." (quoted in Chong 2014, 170).



With so many landscapes experiencing ongoing and repeated processes of creative destruction, the destruction of Bukit Brown unexpectedly sparked heated public response. Activists (known as Brownies) began to guide educational tours, to discover lost tombs for descendants, and to conduct research to raise public awareness of Bukit Brown. The Brownies rallied public support of both Chinese and non-Chinese Singaporeans through cyberactivism and successfully nominated Bukit Brown as a World Monument site to gain international attention (Chong and Lim 2014, 40).<sup>3</sup> The Brownies opened up new ways to understand the place of nature in Singapore's national identity and citizenship through a reinterpretation of Bukit Brown's marginality.

In the spirit of Spivak (2010)'s quote, "death as text," this thesis aims to read Bukit Brown as a text to examine the multiple socionatural relations that it embodies (Spivak 2010, 235). I do not fixate Bukit Brown in its state of difference and marginality; rather, I am interested in the processes that produce and remake the cemetery—how the PAP negotiates and decolonizes Bukit Brown's historical legacies through processes of nationalizing nature, citizenship, and national identity, and how Brownies' struggle over Bukit Brown reflects a sort of counter-nationalization that contests and redefines those processes. This thesis thus asks, how and why Bukit Brown came to be and how and why was it destroyed? What do its making, the struggle to preserve it, and its ultimate destruction say about the relationship between "nature," national identity, and citizenship in contemporary Singapore? I argue that the struggle over Bukit Brown demonstrates the historical-geographical processes that intertwine competing notions of "nature" in the making of national identity and citizenship in

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<sup>3</sup> World Monument Watch is a global program that is launched by the World Monument Fund, a New York non-profit that started in 1995 to identify imperiled cultural heritage sites and direct financial and technical support for their preservation. Other sites such as Notre-Dame-de-Lorette in France, civil right sites in Alabama, and the Great Wall in China are part of this list. More information, please visit: <https://www.wmf.org/>

Singapore. In thinking seriously about the role of nature, this thesis aims to complicate essentialist ideas that see nature as passive and apolitical and to recognize nature's role in broadening how the political is constituted.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In exploring these questions, my thesis uses research on Bukit Brown, as well as theories of urban political ecology, socionature, state, national identity, and citizenship. Most of the literature that focus on the relationship between nature, national identity, and citizenship in Singapore do not usually center on burial grounds. They often focus on the PAP's "City in a Garden" branding (see Gulsrud and Ooi (2015), Velegrinis and Weller (2007), Clifford (2015), and Comaroff and Ong (2013)) or on the politics of nature conservation in Singapore (see Neo (2007), Hobson (2005), and Geh and Sharp (2008)). However, there is a small and emerging body of literature, especially after the government's announcement in 2011, that illuminates how notions of national identity, citizenship, and nature are contested and reimaged in the struggle over Bukit Brown.

Several authors examine the relationship between citizenship and Chinese burial grounds. Yeoh (1991) and Tan and Yeoh (1995) provide a historical analysis to show how the Chinese could no longer maintain a separate discourse on the sacredness of burial grounds with changing notions of citizenship in Singapore's transition from a colony to a nation-state. Several other authors examine the ways that Brownies contest the bureaucratic imaginations of a pacifying citizenry and redefine the meaning and status of Bukit Brown in Singapore through various strategies such as guided walks (Leow and Lim 2017), research (Liew and Pang 2014), counter-mapping (Liew and Pang 2015), and cyberactivism (Huang 2014 and Luger 2016).

Furthermore, Terence Chong's (2014) article, as well as a co-authored article, Terence Chong and Chua Ai Lin (2014), illustrate how Brownies reconstruct Bukit

Brown as an “authentic” national space to challenge the notion of a “good life” that is very much embedded in the state’s national-identity making project of Singapore. While I draw on the important insights from these literature, discussions of nature are often peripheral or non-existent in their analysis of Bukit Brown. My thesis centers on the politics of nature of Bukit Brown because nature is importantly constituted in the making of national identity and citizenship in Singapore.

In order to examine relationships between nature, national identity, and citizenship, this thesis uses an urban political ecology framework to analyze Bukit Brown. In “Urban Political Ecology: Politicizing the Production of Urban Natures,” Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (2006) argue that urban political ecology (UPE) reveals how urban landscapes are constituted by both socio-political and ecological processes (Heynen et al. 2006, 2). Under the UPE framework, urban is not a spatial category, but an analytical one; not a stagnant entity, but a constantly changing process. UPE also recognizes the hybrid status of “socionature.” As Erik Swyngedouw (1999) defines in his essay, “Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890–1930,” socionature meshes the social and nature (Swyngedouw 1999, 445). Socionature is an inseparable entity that embodies multiplicities of historical-geographical processes, actors, and power relations.

Furthermore, the production of socionature is integrally linked to the formation of national identity. Just as socionatural processes are fluid and changing, national identity is also a construct that is constantly produced and materially grounded through historical-geographical processes (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 2). As Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh (2003) show in *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of “Nation,”* landscapes play an important role “in the (re)construction of ‘nation’ and, relatedly, ‘national identity’” because they provide an immediate sense of belonging

(Kong and Yeoh 2003, 2). Under Singapore's politically authoritarian context, the single-party leadership of the PAP has a lot of power in defining and shaping Singapore's national identity. It is important to clarify that the state is not a monolithic and abstract entity that is autonomous from the material realm of society. Rather, Timothy Mitchell (1991)'s "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics" shows that analysis of the state should look at the state's "structural effect," the practices, techniques, and visible material and discursive forms of the everyday, and the whole range of organizations, processes, and actors that make a state structure appear to exist (Mitchell 1991, 94). Landscapes are powerful mediums for the state to assert its ideologies about Singapore's national identity. Drawing on Gramsci (1973)'s understanding of "ideological hegemony," Kong and Yeoh show that landscapes "naturalize" ideological constructions of the nation by making them seem to be common sense (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 11). Thus, the various socionatural processes that produce Singapore's landscapes are deeply ideological.

Under the UPE framework, Bukit Brown is marginalized from Singapore's everyday fabric not because of its inherent qualities as a burial ground, as it once was a central space that grounded the identity of Chinese immigrants. Rather, Bukit Brown's neglect is produced through the historical-geographical processes of Singapore's urbanization that symbolically cast Bukit Brown as, what Roy (2016) terms as, the "constitutive outside" to the desires of contemporary Singapore (Roy 2016, 815). Moreover, the socionatural relations of an urban landscape exist not just within the local scale. They are bound up in "broader processes of urban development" (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014, 19). Urbanization is produced through global socionatural processes that are often infused with the logic of neoliberal capitalist accumulation. Singapore's

pursuit to become a global city with a high quality of life and a vibrant service and financial economy is integrally linked to the destruction of Bukit Brown.

Furthermore, landscapes are not just passively created. The production of landscapes, both in their material processes and symbolic representations, is integral to the production of citizenship. Foucault's concept of governmentality sheds light on this dynamic. In Jake Kosek's (2006) *Understories*, he explains that governmentality illuminates the different ways to conceptualize relations between nature, the state, and the subject, or in this case, the citizen. Paraphrasing Foucault, Kosek states that, "governmentality is an analytic concerned with the technologies of governance that are attentive to both coercion and domination of populations and individuals, as well as the process and practices through which they come into being and through which they come to conduct their own conduct" (Kosek 2006, 24). The state does not just rule over landscapes or over people. To assert its legitimacy, the PAP, through various instruments and tactics, governs the "relations between [people] and things" (Kosek 2006, 70). Governmental power is exercised through the enforced ensemble of nature, state, and citizen that enables people to internalize the state's ideologies about how nature ought to look like in Singapore. Landscapes materialize the state's hegemonic ideologies about nature and nation that are seen as commonsensical for the collective good for the nation. The concept of governmentality illuminates the intertwined processes in which the Singaporean citizenry is produced through the PAP's practices of shaping and managing nature.

The entanglements between nature, state, citizenship, and national identity in Bukit Brown are not ahistorical products of modernity. The nationalization of the PAP involves a process of decolonizing relations of governance between nature, Chinese immigrants, and Singapore's colonial identity under the British colonial authority. As

Kaplan and Kelly (2001), in *Represented communities: Fiji and World Decolonization* clarify, decolonization needs to be understood not as a “continuation of colonial-era communal conflicts,” but as the constant “renegotiation of systems of representation” (Kaplan and Kelly 2001, 25). Whether the PAP enacts processes of erasure or reframing to renegotiate Singapore’s colonial legacies, they are crucial in the formation citizenship and national identity, and thereby, important in the making of Bukit Brown.

However, the state is not the only entity that renegotiates the representations and socionatural relations of urban landscapes. As Brenda Yeoh (1996) describes in *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, landscape is not just a “palimpsest reflecting the impress of asymmetrical power relations,” but also a “terrain of discipline and resistance” that can be shaped and reshaped through different groups of people (Yeoh 1996, 10). The dominant characterization of Bukit Brown as a useless and unruly space can be challenged with other socionatural meanings and relations that shed light on different quotidian understandings of national identity. The processes of redefining relations between national identity and nature, however, do not simply exist within state-society relationships of domination and dependence. They involve the “insertion of collusion, conflict, and collision” with individuals and collective groups across different scales that “engage in negotiation, dialogue and counter-strategies” (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 11). Such an understanding of power relations recognizes the urban as a process of becoming, where Singaporeans can creatively remake the role of nature in the formation of Singapore’s national identity and reimagine the possibilities of citizenship.

### **Research Methods**

Herein I examine and collect both primary and secondary resources that I have collected in order to contextualize Bukit Brown cemetery’s colonial history and to understand the wider socionatural and political processes that contributed to the

cemetery's destruction and the surge of public reaction and cyberactivism post-2011. Because I did not physically visit the site, I did not have the opportunities to conduct ethnographic studies and interviews in Bukit Brown. My research relies on the available primary resources that are posted and circulated by Brownies online in social media groups, Facebook pages, and websites. For instance, I examine online posts, pictures, maps, short videos, and blog entries to search for narratives and histories of Bukit Brown. I also analyze position papers that are published and written by established non-profits such as Singapore Heritage Society and Nature Society of Singapore. I pay close attention to the maps that Brownies and non-profit groups have produced to gain insight into the different ways in which various groups imagine and understand nature in Bukit Brown. Additionally, I also look at local and international news coverages that came about after Bukit Brown was nominated as a World Monument site. Finally, I draw on many journal articles that are written by Singapore academics who are actively involved in the advocacy, research, and documentation process of Bukit Brown.

To contextualize Bukit Brown's activism historically, I look at the British colonial government's burial documents to discern its various discourses about Chinese burial grounds. I also examine the PAP's planning documents, promotional materials, and speeches to discern how nature is represented in state discourses under the "City in a Garden" vision. I use these primary resources, additionally to the theoretical works that I read, in order to have a fuller sense of the richness and complexity of the Bukit Brown cemetery in relation to the broader socio-ecological context of Singapore.

## **Chapter Outline**

There are multiple layers of complexities about Bukit Brown that I address in the subsequent chapters as I answer my thesis questions: how and why did Bukit Brown come to be, and how and why was it destroyed? What do its making, the struggle to

preserve it, and its ultimate destruction say about the relations between “nature,” national identity, and citizenship in contemporary Singapore? Chapter 2 and 3 address the colonial history of Bukit Brown. Chapter 4 and 5 address the destruction of Bukit Brown and Brownies activism under the PAP. While these chapters are organized temporally, they are very much intertwined in the realities of Bukit Brown.

Bukit Brown’s urban invisibility and intangibility to many Singaporeans today have not always been the case. Chapter 2 examines Bukit Brown’s ownership under the Chinese clan association, the Ong clan, from 1872 to 1919 before it became a municipal cemetery. Chapter 2 argues that the sacredness of nature in Bukit Brown was central to the formation of Chinese identity in colonial Singapore. Under the Ong clan, the Chinese immigrants were able to shape the socionatural landscape of Bukit Brown in strict accordance with feng shui principles. Having the ability to transform a foreign land with feng shui beliefs was especially important because the Chinese immigrants believed that good feng shui in burial grounds had real implications on the prosperity and fortune of living descendants. Chapter 2 shows the various ways that beliefs about nature infused the making of Bukit Brown as a sacred Chinese space, and how they contributed to Chinese immigrants’ stronger place-based attachments to Singapore.

As Bukit Brown became a municipal cemetery that was subjected to colonial burial regulations in 1922, Chinese immigrants lost full control over the sacred socionatural configurations of Bukit Brown. Chapter 3 analyzes the contestation and negotiation between Chinese immigrants and the municipal authorities over Bukit Brown’s burial regulations. I assert that the contestations over Bukit Brown’s burial regulations reflect the negotiability of socionatural understandings that constitute the formation of Chinese immigrant identity and municipal authorities’ view of Singapore’s port city status during the colonial period. The Ong clan was unsatisfied with the burial



regulations because they did not take feng shui beliefs into consideration. However, the colonial municipal authorities claimed that the socionatural configurations of Bukit Brown reflected qualities of disorderliness, insanitation, and inefficiency that were intrinsic and pervasive in Chinese immigrant spaces. Burial spaces needed to be regulated to transform Singapore's landscape with enlightenment sensibilities over nature to make Singapore an attractive port city. Despite colonial authorities' implementation of burial regulations, Chapter 3 shows the various discourses that Chinese clan members used to negotiate with the colonial authorities to modify some burial regulations in respect to feng shui beliefs due to the preeminent role that Chinese clan associations still had in colonial Singapore. Even though Bukit Brown was a popular burial ground, it was closed in 1973. Chapter 3 ends with a brief analysis of Bukit Brown's marginalization and neglect from 1973-2011 when Singapore became an independent country.

Chapter 4 turns to examine Bukit Brown's destruction in 2011. I contend that the destruction of Bukit Brown was an integral part of the PAP's process of decolonization that works to nationalize nature, citizenship and national identity of Singapore. The formation of Singapore's national identity as a global city involves a massive project to clear many existing spaces from the colonial era to transform its landscape under the "City in a Garden" vision. Under the discourse of land scarcity, the PAP asserts that Singapore requires a strong "gardener" to efficiently plan Singapore's land-use and to ensure the collective wellbeing of the nation. Chapter 4 shows the ways in which the PAP's preference for manicured nature casts Bukit Brown's nature as unruly and inefficient. Because of the association of Bukit Brown's nature with negative qualities of the Chinese in colonial memories, the PAP thinks the space is "too Chinese," a relic of the past that does not fit in the multiracial framework of Singaporean citizenship.

Chapter 4 shows the active erasure of Bukit Brown in the PAP's discourses and representations of nature, which produces its invisibility and legitimizes its destruction.

Despite Singapore's authoritarian political context, the PAP's decision to develop an eight-lane road in Bukit Brown is met with strong resistance and reaction from both local and international communities. Chapter 5 argues that the making of Bukit Brown as a nationally and internationally recognized space is a process of decolonizing the PAP that redefines and reimagines the relations between national identity, citizenship, and nature in Singapore. In this context, decolonization refers to the Brownies' efforts of contesting the hegemonic and singular understanding of nature in Singapore. I show the various ways that Brownies redefine the meanings and stigmatizations of the nature in Bukit Brown and counter its temporal and spatial erasure in dominant discourse. Brownies' successful nomination of Bukit Brown as a World Monument site and their ability to gather an organic multicultural constituency for Bukit Brown demonstrate ways that they redefine the limits and scalar dimensions of citizenship and national identity in Singapore. Chapter 5 ends by examining how the Brownies creatively adopt the language of the PAP to enable conversation with the state, and by discussing the limits and possibilities of activism in Singapore.

Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion on the importance of theorizing from the perspective of a burial ground. The struggle over Bukit Brown reveals a process of decolonizing the binary frameworks that constitute understandings of national identity and citizenship. The chapter ends with an exploration of the possibilities to pay attention to the agency of nonhumans as a way of deconstructing and destabilizing the terms of modernity that structure understandings of national identity, citizenship, and nature in Singapore.

## **Chapter 2: The Making of Bukit Brown as Chinese Space of Burial and Nature**

The making of Bukit Brown as a Chinese cemetery played a crucial role in the early formation of Chinese identity in colonial Singapore. As more Chinese immigrants settled in Singapore, burial grounds provided a sense of rootedness and belonging for Chinese diasporic immigrants. Burial grounds allowed Chinese immigrants to form place-based attachments in Singapore through their corporeal and symbolic claim on Singapore's land. In particular, Chinese immigrants asserted their claim over Bukit Brown by transforming the site with feng shui beliefs that determined the sacred and optimal socionatural configuration of a landscape. Feng shui principles assert that burial spaces are not separable or alienated from spaces of living—the preservation of good feng shui in burial grounds informs the fortune and prosperity of living descendants. This chapter argues that Bukit Brown was central to the formation of Chinese identity in colonial Singapore due to the sacredness of nature in the cemetery.

Before Bukit Brown became a cemetery, it was a plantation property of George Henry Brown from 1840-1872, a British ship owner and trader who came to Singapore after living in Calcutta and Penang. He named his plantation property as Mount Pleasant, and the surrounding area came to be known as “Brown's Hill.” It was translated locally as “Bukit Brown” because Bukit means hill in Malay. During his residence, Brown's family tried to plant several crops, such as nutmeg and coffee that were popular crops during Singapore's colonial period, but failed (Huang 2014, 22). One of Brown's staff, G. M. Dare who lived with Brown's mother and sisters, recorded his observations of the environment of Bukit Brown:

The jungle round is full of wild animals; pig, deer, tigers, and many snakes... There is a small stream at the foot of our hill, and we are constantly finding tiger tracks there. One evening, when I was fishing, I

heard a rustle and a lapping sound, and just caught sight of Master Stripes in the lallang<sup>4</sup> on the opposite side: my heart was in my mouth, 'as I dared not move for fear of attracting his attention; but as soon as he made off, I bolted for dear life up the hill (Braddell, Brooke, and Makepeace 1873).

G M Dare's observation of Bukit Brown's forest habitat was unexpectedly rare in Singapore colonial's landscape. The coming of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, the founder of Singapore, marked the start of a steady onslaught of Singapore's vegetation cover. The colonial government initiated massive deforestation efforts to create land for gambier and pepper production for trading purposes. Because of intensive agricultural efforts, only ~7 percent of Singapore's original forest remained by 1883 (Barnard and Heng 2014, 282). However, Bukit Brown stayed largely intact as a primary forest in the hilly central part of Singapore during Brown's residence because gambier, pepper, and other agricultural products did not grow well in steep hillsides (O'Dempsey 2014, 22). After Brown sold his property and left Singapore for Penang, the lack of agricultural activity or colonial intervention in Bukit Brown's landscape made it an appropriate piece of land for the Chinese immigrants to create a burial ground.

Bukit Brown was a freehold property that eventually became a clan Chinese cemetery from 1872 to 1919. The area was bought by three Ong clansmen, Ong Ewe Hai, Ong Kew Ho and Ong Chong Chew on May 18, 1872 and was subsequently owned by a Chinese clan association, Seh Ong Kongsu (Xie 2011). The Seh Ong Kongsu, or the Ong clan, was an association of Chinese immigrants who identified with the surname Ong and who are connected by shared blood and narrow territorial and dialect ties (Kuah 2006, 56). Chinese clan associations, such as the Ong clan, were important social

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<sup>4</sup> Lallang is a type of long coarse grass that is native to many subtropical and tropical areas.

organizations that provided myriad forms of support for “socially dislocated” Chinese immigrants “who had moved from a village milieu in one country to an urban one in another” (Kuah 2006, 56). The Ong clan bought Bukit Brown so that members could use the land as a self-sufficient village for dwelling, agricultural, and burial purposes (Xie 2011). As the Chinese population grew in Singapore, Bukit Brown became primarily a burial space for Ong clan members.

The demand for burial spaces in Bukit Brown reflects the huge influx of Chinese immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese immigrants, among other immigrant populations from other areas in Asia, came to Singapore to search for economic opportunities. Sir Stamford Raffles generated a lot of business and trading opportunities after he established the island as a free-trade colonial port in 1819. Initially, Chinese immigrants perceived Singapore as a port city only for temporary sojourn, as most of them hoped to return to China when they had made enough money (Lee 2016, 92). They did not want to be buried in Singapore, a place where they did not have much attachment to the land or the people. The bodies of Chinese immigrants who died in Singapore were often sent back to home villages in China (Lee 2016, 96). The physical fixity of bodies in burial landscapes of a foreign land suggested a powerful sense of belonging and intimacy that was not translatable to the transient experiences of early Chinese immigrants in Singapore.

As more Chinese immigrants settled and formed social networks, however, many of them decided to bury their dead in Singapore in clan-based cemeteries. There was an increase of Chinese burial grounds in mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Bukit Brown became the biggest clan-based Chinese burial ground in Singapore. Most Chinese immigrants buried their dead in clan-based burial grounds because Chinese clan associations could function with little interference from the state as an *imperium in*

*imperio*, a semi-autonomous state (Kuah 2006, 55). Their semi-independence from the colonial state allowed clan leaders to determine specific burial designs that pertained to the cultural norms and traditions of the clan.

The formation of clan-based burial grounds was a result not only of the efforts of strong clan associations, as in the case of Bukit Brown, but also of the institutionalization of pluralism under the colonial urban planning scheme. The colonial state institutionalized pluralism in the colonial urban landscape by separating ethnic groups in different spaces to prevent potential inter-ethnic conflicts. The colonial state perceived that ethnic communities in Singapore were so different that sharing the same living and burial spaces among ethnic communities would inevitably create racial conflict. Quoting Furnivall (1948), Goh (2008) explains that the colonial institutionalization of pluralism was a “‘medley of peoples’ that ‘mix but do not combine,’ meeting ‘only in the market-place’ and ‘living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit’” (Goh 2008, 236). The phenomenon of a population that “mix but do not combine” was not simply an outcome of organic cultural differences, but was produced through the colonial state’s explicit reinforcement of racial categories to construct an image of a harmonious port city to attract traders and businessmen (Goh 2008, 236). While the colonial government was not involved in the initial construction of ethnically separated burial grounds—as they were started mostly by clan associations—the institutionalization of pluralism in colonial urban planning reinforced their spatial difference and seclusion.

For the colonial state, constructing a harmonious city-state through separate ethnic spaces to attract European traders was important for Singapore’s colonial port city identity; for the Chinese immigrants, having access to a clan-based burial ground was important to create a sense of belonging as recently settled citizens in Singapore.

Burial grounds confer a unique “a sense of fixity or permanence to identities that are more fluid or ambivalent in life” (Balkan 2015, 120). Clan-based cemeteries allowed Chinese immigrants to assert control over the meaning and use of a foreign landscape, which allowed them to retain a Chinese identity in Singapore. As Yeoh (1991) describes, for Chinese immigrants, “a place of repose after death was highly important [because] one of their worst fears was that they “might die overseas, leaving their spirits wandering around without sacrifices”” (Yeoh 1991, 302). Burial in clan-based burial grounds allowed Chinese immigrants to reconcile their attachments to their Chinese roots and their nascent sense of belonging and position in the Singapore society.

### **Feng Shui Beliefs in Chinese Burial Grounds**

Clan associations facilitated the practice of feng shui beliefs in the making of Bukit Brown as a Chinese burial landscape. Feng shui, literally translated as wind and water, is a Chinese belief and practice system that assumes a sacred and pervasive vital energy, “qi,” that harmonizes the relationship between people and the surrounding environment (Field 2009).<sup>5</sup> Following feng shui principles was important for the Chinese immigrants not only to provide a proper burial space for their ancestors and to fulfill their filial piety, but also to gain a sense of belonging and attachment in Singapore. For one, Chinese immigrants believed that the sacred socionatural relations within a burial ground had agentic powers to affect the wellbeing of living descendants. For instance, maintaining and constructing a good burial site—one that was configured with feng shui principles—granted living descendants with prosperity and protection. The socionatural arrangement of Bukit Brown was important to the colonial Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> The most authoritative source and first mention of feng shui” is in *Zangshu*, or *The Book of Burial* in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The belief and practice system of feng shui generated from considerations of burial, which reflects how central burials have been in the formation of Chinese’s socionatural understanding and imagination of the world.

identity not only as an assertion of Chinese cultural beliefs, but also as a reassurance of Chinese people's wellbeing as they sought to settle and make a living in Singapore.

Under Chinese feng shui beliefs, it is clear that sacred beliefs about nature and cultural burial practices were deeply entangled in the making of Bukit Brown, and extendedly, in the making of colonial Chinese citizenship in Singapore. As Heynen et al. (2006) states, "social beings necessarily produce natures as the outcome of socio-physical processes that are themselves constituted through myriad relations of political power and express a variety of cultural meanings" (Heynen et al. 2006, 7). Because of the sacred relationship between spaces of dead and spaces of living, Bukit Brown reflects the ways in which Chinese conceptions of nature played into the formation of their colonial identity.

Feng shui beliefs about the sacredness of specific socionatural arrangements were deeply infused in the construction of Bukit Brown. Erik Swyngedouw (1999)'s socionatural interpretation of the three elements of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad is useful to understand the myriad ways that feng shui's sacred beliefs about nature are incorporated in Bukit Brown: the representations and discourses of nature, the symbolisms and imaginaries on nature, and the socionatural material conditions and processes (Swyngedouw 1999, 447). The clan leaders' conception of how Bukit Brown could best reflect feng shui principles of socionatural arrangements, the different sacred symbolisms of nature that contribute to grave designs, and people's physical engagement with Bukit Brown's sacred socionatural landscape through ritual practices, represent the conceived, lived and perceived forms of socionature, respectively, that all contribute to the making of Bukit Brown's landscape.

Feng shui beliefs were important in Ong clansman's initial conceptualization of Bukit Brown as a propitious burial ground location. Ong clan leaders' decision to make Bukit Brown a Chinese burial ground redefined and internalized the ecological



characteristics with sacred feng shui beliefs about nature. For instance, Bukit Brown's elevated hilly landscape was an important characteristic because the Ong clansman believed that it was important to surround the buried with a beautiful open view to facilitate a positive flow of qi. The ensemble of small hills also resembled the back of a dragon, which is an auspicious symbol in Chinese culture (Field 2009). Additionally, the running water streams by Bukit Brown were also favorable because feng shui believes that qi "rides the wind and scatters," and is retained for its good effects when it encounters water (Field 2009). The realms of the living and the dead were not separate under the principles of feng shui, as they were united under one system where the burial ground is seen as the 'yin' habitation that matches the 'yang' habitation of living spaces (Yeoh 1991, 310). Thus, choosing a burial site with topographical and landscape characteristics that matched strong feng shui principles was important for the wellbeing of the dead and the prosperity of the living.

Despite the intimate and sacred connections between spaces of living and the dead in the feng shui tradition, Chinese burial grounds were chosen in spaces outside of living areas. Chinese immigrants believed that a burial ground was not a passive space; rather, it inhabited an active spirit world with elements and forces that were unknown and invisible to humans. Chinese immigrants did not want to build houses and neighborhoods within burial spaces because they didn't want to disturb the sacred topographies of the burial spaces (McKenzie 2011, 60). They believed that minimizing human disturbance in burial spaces was an important expression of respect towards ancestral spirits. Thus, the socionatural separation between living and burial spaces does not reflect the marginalization of burial spaces in the Chinese immigrants' imagination; rather, it reflects the importance of burial grounds' supernatural and sacred dynamics in the lives of Chinese immigrants.

Furthermore, important symbolisms within feng shui belief guided the material design and arrangement of graves, enhancing the cosmic harmony of Bukit Brown's landscape (Figure 2). The shape of graves alludes to symbolisms of birth. Graves were "cut" into a hill to form a womb-shaped brick wall with an earth mound in the center that points to the imagery of pregnancy. The dead were laid to rest within graves structured in the same shape that they began life, reinforcing the feng shui belief that life never ends with death, but continues in a different form in the metaphysical realm (McKenzie 2011, 64). The earth mound reinforced feng shui's preference for hills, as it retained and facilitated an unobstructed flow of positive qi to the dead. The graves were situated within the meandering paths that wandered through the hills of the landscape, which prevented the malign influences of qi that were present in flat and monotonous landscapes with bold and straight lines (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 53).

The various grave elements in Bukit Brown also show different representations of socionature that are important in Chinese feng shui belief (Figure 2). Grave elements, such as stone statues, carvings, and tiles were not simply placed for decorative purposes as they embodied sacred powers and specific auspicious meanings that allowed cosmic currents to flow freely (McKenzie 2011, 72). They were placed around graves to enhance what was "lacking" in the feng shui of Bukit Brown's landscape. For instance, pairs of lion statues placed on either side of graves are common motifs in Bukit Brown. Lion statues were seen as protectors of demons or negative energy because of their "yang" energy (McKenzie 2011, 71). Many graves lined their floors and walls with flower motif tiles. Flowers were believed to bring peace to enhance a site's good feng shui. The careful socionatural considerations in the proper design of graves in Bukit Brown reflect Chinese immigrants' act of filial piety and their respect towards the sacredness of the burial site.

Moreover, ritual practices in Bukit Brown were important to help descendants decipher and realize the sacred socionatural processes that are constituted in Bukit Brown's material conditions and design. Descendants' engagements with ancestor graves and with the broader burial landscape in ritual practices reminded them of the reciprocal and inseparable connections between the living and the dead. As Engseng Ho (2006) states, "tomb-stone abroad acknowledge the shift in allegiance – from origins to destinations...while they are endpoints for migrants, are beginning for their descendants, marking the truth of their presence in a land" (quoted in Balkan 2015, 124). Through ancestral rituals, descendants interpreted and internalized the sacred socionatural meanings of Bukit Brown, which reinforced their membership and identity within a diasporic Chinese community in Singapore.

For instance, Qing Ming Festival, which occurs on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the spring equinox, is an opportunity for families to visit burial grounds and pay respect to the deceased. Qing Ming, translated as clear and bright, happens 15 days after the spring equinox indicated in the Chinese lunar calendar.<sup>6</sup> In feng shui belief, it is the most auspicious day of the year to visit ancestor graves because the environment is most prosperous and the air is freshest on this day. Such seasonal and temporal considerations of the environment in feng shui belief, however, are not reflective in the tropical climate of Singapore with relatively uniform warm temperatures and high humidity all year round. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants conducted ancestral ritual practices during Qing Ming to pay ancestral respect and to reassure their prosperity, peace, and protection in the year to come. For instance, descendants swept the grave for optimal flow of qi and provided offerings of food, drinks, and incense (Chong and Lin 2014,

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<sup>6</sup> "Qing Ming" is initially one of the 24 solar terms in the Chinese lunar calendar. Solar terms reflect climatic changes during the year to guide agricultural production.

32).<sup>7</sup> Descendants threw colorful paper on the earth mound and burned paper offerings to bless both the diseased and the living. Engagement with the tomb through ritual activities was a fulfillment of filial piety and a reminder of descendants' roots and familial lineage and stories in Singapore.

The Bukit Brown cemetery was an important site to anchor the Chinese diasporic identity. The reconfiguration of Bukit Brown's nature, especially through specific beliefs about feng shui, was a clear marker of Chinese identity in colonial Singapore. Bukit Brown reveals Chinese clan associations' early independence to transform a foreign landscape with sacred socionatural imaginations that enabled Chinese immigrants to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Singapore. Bukit Brown also shows how Chinese' membership to clan associations enabled them to collectively practice and express a systematic set of values, attitudes, and norms within a network of support. In particular, the sacred and inseparable connections between burial spaces and spaces of the living under feng shui belief reflect deep entanglements between nature and the formation of a Chinese identity in colonial Singapore.

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<sup>7</sup> Graves were designed with ample space in front of the tomb stone so that descendants could conduct ritual practices and place offerings. There is also space on top of the tomb stone to place an altar for incense and other objects.

### **Chapter 3: Colonial Contestations over Bukit Brown's Burial Landscape**

In 1919, colonial authorities purchased the Bukit Brown Chinese Cemetery and turned it into a public municipal Chinese cemetery — as the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery (BBMC). With the influx of Chinese immigrants and the rapid shortage of Chinese burial grounds in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the municipal authorities opened Bukit Brown's clan exclusivity to give non-clan Chinese immigrants more access to burial plots. Bukit Brown was subsequently subjected to the burial regulations of the municipal authorities. The Ong clan, however, was not in favor of the burial regulations because they disregarded feng shui principles and intruded upon the sacred socionatural configuration of Bukit Brown, which was integral to Chinese immigrants' identities and modes of being in Singapore. Burial regulations not only implemented changes to Bukit Brown's material landscape through specific requirements of grave size, layout, and distribution, but also asserted and reinforced colonial socionatural understandings that reflected European ideals in landscape planning. As the Singapore Free Press describes on August 15, 1997, the contestation between the colonial authorities and the Chinese communities over the disposal of the dead was “the most vital question that can occupy the attention of any populous community” (quoted in Yeoh 1991, 287). The focus of this chapter is not necessarily on the politics of burial regulations, but more so on the politics of nature that was embedded in the contestation of burial regulations. I assert that the contestations over Bukit Brown's burial regulations reflect the negotiability of socionatural understandings that constituted the formation of Chinese immigrant identity and the municipal authorities' view of Singapore's port city status during the colonial period.

The colonial authorities transformed Bukit Brown into a municipal cemetery to confront the massive shortage of burial grounds in Singapore. As Singapore's port city

reputation increased in the region, more Chinese immigrants came to Singapore to escape China's impoverish conditions and to seek for better wellbeing. Because many Chinese immigrants asked family members in China to settle in Singapore for the long term, there was a rapidly growing demand for Chinese burial grounds. While there were vacant burial spaces in existing burial grounds, most of them were reserved for members of religious groups and ethnic clans. The colonial authorities chose Bukit Brown as a municipal Chinese cemetery to provide greater access to burial plots for non-clan affiliated Chinese immigrants. In certain respects, the transfer of control from the Ong clan to the colonial authorities transformed Bukit Brown into a more inclusive cemetery especially for non-clan affiliated Chinese immigrants (Chong 2014, 164). Yet, Bukit Brown's "inclusivity" was accompanied by the creation of a set of burial regulations that subjected the burial landscape to the rationale of the colonial authority.

The colonial state's increased power over landscape planning stemmed from the establishment of a Municipal Commission in Singapore. Before 1887, the British colonial government formed various committees on an ad hoc basis to handle municipal matters in Singapore (Yeoh 1996, 28). However, Singapore's growing population and worsening sanitary conditions rendered the previous government structure inadequate. The British colonial government decided to create a fully-fledged and popularly elected Municipal Commission to assert greater control in Singapore. The creation of a Municipal Commission not only fulfilled the demand for a more sophisticated political machinery to run the city, but also satisfied the desires of the resident European populations to have more control over local affairs in Singapore (Yeoh 1996, 28). One of its initiatives was to assert greater control over Singapore's landscape planning. As Yeoh indicates, the colonial government "was the chief social architect responsible for shaping the urban built environment of colonial Singapore" (Yeoh 1996, 30). The

municipal authorities' greater control allowed them to express colonial interests, ideologies, and power through landscape planning in Singapore.

As the municipal authorities asserted greater control over Singapore's urban landscape, they also introduced ordinances to regulate Chinese burial grounds. They introduced the "1887 Ordinance to Regulate the Use of Burial and Burning Grounds Outside the Limits of Municipalities," or the 1887 Burial Bill, that enabled them to license, regulate and inspect burial grounds (Lee 2016, 94). The municipal authorities deemed that greater management and regulations over Chinese burial matters were especially pertinent because the Chinese immigrants were the largest population in Singapore. Without strong regulations, the municipal authorities feared that burials would get out of control given their high numbers. Under the bill, Chinese customs could only be tolerated within reasonable limits as long as they did not affect public health concerns or colonial urban planning interests (Yeoh 1991, 291). Colonial burial regulations were part of the larger colonial urban planning scheme to reorder Singapore's landscape to reflect European spatial ideals; yet, the regulations heavily contested the Chinese's sacred socionatural understandings that were constitutive of the initial formation of Bukit Brown's burial landscape.

When burial regulations were introduced to Bukit Brown, the Ong clan members did not respond well because they saw the state's increasing control as an attack on their ritual practices. Clan leaders wanted to reclaim exclusivity of the burial ground for Ong clan members because clan ownership over burial ground was a crucial means for members to stabilize their position and identity and find their sense of belonging in Singapore. They were also concerned that burial ordinances would negatively affect the feng shui of Bukit Brown. These bylaws were especially unpopular for wealthier

Chinese immigrants, such as the Ong clan leaders, who could afford individualized feng shui consultation for a proper burial design and location.

After many fruitless negotiations with the Ong clan, the colonial authorities used the Land Acquisition Act to assert their land ownership over Bukit Brown (Chong 2014, 165). Under the act, the municipal authorities purchased Bukit Brown in 1919 from the Ong clan and reopened it as a municipal cemetery with a set of burial bylaws on January 1, 1922. Underlying the conflict between the Ong clan and the municipal authorities over Bukit Brown's ownership and burial regulations were their contested views on how socionature was constituted in the formation of Chinese immigrant identity verses the British view of a colonial identity in Singapore.

### **Colonial Authorities' Views on Chinese Burial Grounds**

The implementation and legitimization of burial regulations depended on the production of colonial discourses and meanings over the socionatural landscape of Bukit Brown. Colonial power was exercised through the ideological and conceptual domination over the kinds of socionatural landscape that were preferred in the British urban planning scheme—landscapes that followed Enlightenment ideals of sanitation and order. Under the influence of Enlightenment principles, “nature” was perceived and understood through scientific and utilitarian perspectives. The logic of scientific rationalism, coupled with the quest for spatial legibility and order, necessitated the colonial construction and implementation of burial regulations, and the stigmatization of Chinese burial practices.

In order to justify colonial socionatural understandings about burial landscapes, municipal authorities framed feng shui principles as incompatible to the colonial visions of a port city landscape. Colonial power was exercised through the construction and imposition of categories, and the simultaneous denial of the existence and value of



alternative categories in order to dictate how landscapes ought to be perceived and structured. In Bukit Brown's case, colonial desires for orderly and sanitized landscapes conversely framed feng shui beliefs as superstitious and irrational that contributed to the insanitary, disorderly, and inefficient qualities of Bukit Brown. Furthermore, colonial discourses about Bukit Brown's socionature were deeply intertwined with colonial racial representations of the Chinese, which "produced and essentialized arbitrary categories" (Kosek 2006, 22). Disorderly and insanitary landscapes were seen as problematic expressions of Chinese immigrants' customs. The creation of binary categories—sanitary versus insanitary, order versus disorder, efficiency versus inefficiency—reinforced, what Foucault calls, the colonial state's "pastoral power" that sought to reform Chinese immigrants' health and habits through material changes in the landscape that would conform to colonial socionatural categories (Yeoh 1996, 11). The following section examines the ways in which the colonial state expressed racialized discourses about Chinese burial grounds to justify the socionatural understandings that pertained to Singapore's colonial identity as a port city.

The colonial authorities attributed Chinese burial grounds as the major contributor to land scarcity in Singapore. The colonial government viewed Chinese burial grounds as a major "Chinese problem" that disrupted the utilitarian ethos of spatial management. As J. A. Harvey, the acting Commissioner of Lands in 1949 (and later the head of the 1952 Burials Committee) said, "Chinese public burial grounds [were] the most wasteful and in that sense it is more a Chinese problem" (Tan and Yeoh 1995, 189). Chinese burial grounds were singled out as a major space-waster among other ethnic burial grounds. Municipal authorities showed that Muslim cemeteries had burial plots of 40 square feet on average, yet Chinese burial plots needed to occupy 200 square feet on average because Chinese immigrants needed space to perform ancestral

rituals in front of the graves (Tan and Yeoh 1995, 188). In Bukit Brown, wealthy Chinese immigrants occupied even larger burial plots with specific feng shui considerations to express their social status in Singapore. Furthermore, Chinese communities located burial grounds in many prime locations that were suitable for commercial and residential development. Colonial authorities were anxious that Chinese burial grounds took up space for development because much of the other land in Singapore were swamp lands that were not ideal to develop housing for other populations in Singapore (Yeoh 1991, 287). The colonial authorities thought that it was unreasonable and nonsensical that the Chinese communities would put graves on good land and live closer to low-lying swampy land. While the colonial state justified its increasing regulation over Chinese burial grounds for overall development schemes, it was also stemmed from colonial fears that the Chinese population would use up optimal land that could be used to build good houses for European colonial settlers. Colonial concerns over Singapore's image-ability as a port city to attract European interests and businesses played into colonial authorities' dismay over Chinese burial grounds.

Furthermore, the colonial authorities asserted greater control over burial matters because they were concerned that Chinese burial practices presented major sanitation problems to the Singapore society at large. Under the influences of western sanitary reform in the late 19th century, the municipal authorities in Singapore established a Sanitation Board to regulate all burial matters because it was concerned that Chinese burial practices did not follow public health protocols (Lee 2016, 94). For instance, Bukit Brown was seen as a prime breeding place for mosquito infestation because it had close proximity to water and tremendous undergrowth (Tan and Yeoh 1995, 188). Local authorities feared that improper burial practices polluted the springs at the base of the hills with organic matter and generated diseases in the neighborhood (Yeoh 1991, 287).

The perception of Bukit Brown as a disease-ridden place was also accompanied with the racialization and stigmatization of the Chinese population during the colonial period.

For instance, the colonial authorities associated their miasmatic theory of burial grounds—attributing the cause of epidemics to the pestilential emanations that arose from graves—with existing colonial discourses about the “physical and moral miasma of all things Chinese” across Singapore’s landscape (Kong and Yeoh 1994, 19).

Additional to Chinese burial grounds, other distinctively Chinese landscapes such as Chinatown were also seen as nurseries of “‘dangerous infectious diseases’... filthy and pestilential, [images] conjoined with moral decay” (Kong and Yeoh 1994, 19). Colonial authorities believed that Chinese spaces were conducive to disease infection and to the lower morale of the population. The colonial state associated the insanitary and disease-ridden qualities of the Bukit Brown’s landscape as inherent characteristics of Chinese identity, which justified greater colonial regulation over the landscapes of Chinese burial grounds.

The colonial state also blamed Chinese burial practices for the disorder of Bukit Brown. The scattered distribution of graves across the hills of Bukit Brown—many of them sited by feng shui practitioners—contrasted the grid-structure of many English cemeteries that the colonial authorities desired (Lee 2016, 91). Chinese burial grounds were also seen as liable sites of lallang fires that would pose a great danger to surrounding neighborhoods. Lallang fires were not uncommon in the dry seasons of tropical climates, yet the colonial state often blamed the practices of burial rituals, such as throwing joss sticks or burning sacrificial paper, as the main cause of fires in burial grounds (Tan and Yeoh 1995, 188). The colonial authorities claimed that Chinese burial practices fostered greater disorder and unruliness that affected the wellbeing of others,

which legitimated the colonial authorities' rationale to introduce burial regulations and to create more order in Chinese burial grounds.

### **Negotiations over Bukit Brown's Burial Bylaws**

Despite strong colonial discourses about Chinese burial grounds, the Ong clan were able to negotiate with the municipal authorities to revise the burial bylaws so that they take into consideration feng shui's sacred socionatural beliefs. As Yeoh (1996) argues, "Chinese immigrants were not passive, ignorant and irrational subjects whose obstructionist habits were the manifestations of a lack of civilization" as they were often characterized by the colonial authorities (Yeoh 1996, 14). The colonial urban landscape was not solely determined by the ideological intents of the colonial authorities despite their hegemonic power in Singapore. Through strategic discourses and quotidian actions, Chinese immigrants had the agency and capability to also assert different symbolic meanings and visions about nature that countered and complicated the colonial state's representations of nature to reproduce Bukit Brown's burial landscape.

After the colonial authorities established Bukit Brown's bylaws on January 1, 1922 and opened the cemetery for municipal use, Bukit Brown was not utilized as much as the colonial authorities had anticipated. Despite the shortage of Chinese burial spaces, Bukit Brown was not a popular burial ground for Chinese immigrants. In fact, the first burial only happened 3 months after Bukit Brown's opening as a municipal cemetery (Yeoh 1991, 307). Bukit Brown's bylaws limited the practice of feng shui principles in Chinese immigrants' burial processes. Clan leaders expressed that the grave plots were too small for burial rituals to be conducted, were laid out in neat, geometrical rows, and were allocated consecutively without considerations of feng shui principles (Yeoh 1991, 308-309). The colonial logic behind burial regulations did not make sense to Chinese immigrants' sacred socionatural relationships with Bukit Brown.

The Chinese immigrants used discourses of Bukit Brown's sacredness to justify their burial interests. Given the sacred connection between spaces of living and dead, clan leaders insisted that ancestral graves were sacred and inviolable—any form of physical interference with the graves could result in the reversal of family fortunes (Yeoh 1991, 298). Ancestral worship rituals and sepulchral veneration would be incomplete if the freedom to select burial sites in accordance to feng shui principles were curtailed by regulations. Because of the incompatible socionatural understandings between the colonial government and the Chinese immigrants about Bukit Brown, it was challenging for the municipal authorities to enforce strict regulations over feng shui practices and to restructure burial landscapes in accordance to British spatial logics.

Even though the colonial state saw feng shui considerations as superstitious and irrational, Bukit Brown's bylaws were ultimately adjusted in August 1922 to take into account Chinese immigrants' concerns. For instance, under the new bylaws of Bukit Brown, burial plots were increased to 20 x 10 feet in the general section and to 10 x 5 feet in the pauper's division with a space for a path after six rows of graves to accommodate burial ritual needs (Yeoh 1991, 309). Burial plots were adjusted to the east and south directions to reflect feng shui's principles on grave orientation. The Chinese community, especially the wealthy Chinese immigrants, subsequently respected the burial bylaws about appropriate grave size and layout despite previous grand grave designs. After burial bylaws were adjusted through negotiations between municipal authorities and Ong clan leaders, more Chinese immigrants were willing to bury their dead in the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery. By 1929, Bukit Brown had 40 percent of officially registered Chinese burials within municipal limits (Yeoh 1991, 309). The revised burial bylaws reflect the ways that Chinese immigrants were able to assert their claims without completely rejecting or subverting colonial ownership over the burial

ground, and how “socationature” and “colonial identity” were fluid and changing notions that were constantly renegotiated and redefined in relation to each other.

The rewriting of burial regulations represents a negotiation of conflicting socationatural understandings that were differently constituted in the Chinese immigrants and municipal authorities’ understandings of Singapore’s colonial identity. It reflects how Chinese clan leaders drew on coherent discourses and ideologies to legitimize their socationatural relationships with Bukit Brown and expanded their stakes in Singapore’s urban landscape planning without overtly challenging or subverting the larger symbolic material order of the municipal authorities. The goal of this chapter is not simply to juxtapose the different socationatural understandings between the Chinese immigrants and the municipal authorities or to extrapolate upon the specific discursive and material strategies that either party used to assert their claims over Bukit Brown. Rather, this chapter shows, through the case study of Bukit Brown, how processes of negotiation and redefinition that take place over the socationatural arrangement of urban landscapes were integrally connected to the formation of colonial identity in Singapore.

Even though Bukit Brown was an important burial ground in the colonial period in Singapore, it was closed in 1973 by the government for additional burials due to the lack of space. Bukit Brown’s closure signified its gradual marginalization in Singapore. Aside from descendants, tomb sweepers, occasional horseback riders and joggers—it has not been a site that is well known to the Singaporean public. Once a central and sacred place that gave Chinese immigrants a sense of belonging in colonial Singapore, it has become a peripheral space with overgrown creepers, fallen trees, dilapidated tombstones that is secluded within a forest in the middle of Singapore.

While my central thesis question focuses Bukit Brown’s destruction in contemporary Singapore, Chapter 2 and 3 provide important and unneglectable

information of Bukit Brown's colonial history that deeply informs the myriad logics and ideologies that are entangled in the politics of socionature, national identity, and citizenship of Singapore today. Singapore's sense of national identity after 1965 was not a post-1965 creation; rather, the formation of post-colonial national identity was heavily derived from its colonial representations, discourses, and communities. As Kaplan and Kelly (2001) explain, decolonization was not a historical break, but "an entry, with considerable baggage, into a new world order with its own delimiting determinations for civil and political practices, its own rigid protocols for delimiting the scope and realm of collected political will" (Kaplan and Kelly 2001, 5). The colonial history of Singapore that is analyzed in the context of Bukit Brown in chapter 2 and 3 is not simply a backdrop for chapter 4 and 5, in which Singapore's present discourses and material landscapes have been formed. Chapter 2 and 3 inform the myriad ways in which Singapore today erases, negotiates, interprets, and restructures landscapes, memories, plans, and discourses from its past. The historical context is especially important in order to make sense of how and why Bukit Brown became a largely marginalized and invisible site—that is later on destroyed—from its symbolic and sacred status in Chinese immigrants' colonial lives, and how it reflects changing spatial and scalar understandings about socionature, national identity, and citizenship in Singapore.

#### **Chapter 4: Nationalizing Identity, Citizenship, and Nature Under the PAP**

In September 2011, the PAP's Land Transport Authority (LTA) announced plans to destroy a part of Bukit Brown for the construction of an eight-lane road. The entire cemetery will be destroyed for housing projects in the next 30 to 40 years (LTA 2011). Under the new notions of national identity and citizenship that came about since Singapore's independence in 1965, the PAP has been able to justify its vision over Singapore's urban planning to construct a global city identity. To decolonize Singapore from its colonial past, the PAP initiates a massive campaign to clear unruly landscapes such as Bukit Brown for development. To assert its power, the PAP presents a new form of coloniality that, as Goh (2015) describes, projects its "own modern imaginary of the good life" on how nature ought to look like in Singapore (Goh 2015, 215). Furthermore, in order to construct a unified and harmonious citizenry that follows its visions, the PAP reinforces an official policy of multiracialism with administrative categories of "Chinese," "Malay," "Indian," and "Other" that are each subjected to political judgements over acceptable or unacceptable expressions of ethnic identity (George 2011, 173). The Chinese population assumes the status of a citizen, no longer having sufficient political power to influence land-use plans under the PAP. Ethnic landscapes such as Bukit Brown are deemed as "too Chinese," needing to be erased for the "collective good" of the nation. I contend that the destruction of Bukit Brown is an integral part of the PAP's decolonization of Singapore that worked to nationalize nature, citizenship, and national identity, and is legitimized through the coloniality of the PAP that asserts hegemonic control over the meaning of nature in Singapore.

The new notion of citizenship enables the PAP to exert centralized control over the socionatural meaning and arrangement of Singapore's landscape. Landscape, both as "state nature" and also a space for other forms of state nature, is important to materialize



the state's power and to provide an immediate sense of national unity. As Whitehead (2007) shows, under increasing power of the state, "state nature" is brought to existence in the stories and plans of the state, as ecological emblems to represent political communities, territorial maps, material landscapes, and resources (Whitehead 2007, 2). The PAP's greater power over land-use decisions is reflected in the transition of Bukit Brown's municipal leadership. Municipal control over Bukit Brown transitioned from the colonial Sanitation Board to the PAP's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), the national urban planning authority that determines the short and long-term land-use plans of Singapore. The colonial Sanitation Board had influence over Bukit Brown's landscape through burial regulations, yet it did not have as much as power as the URA to determine whether Bukit Brown needs to be destroyed for Singapore's long-term development plans.

The PAP's legitimized role over Bukit Brown's future stems from its discourses of pragmatism and land scarcity. The PAP asserts its control not only through land-use planning, but also through specific discursive framings about the landscape. The PAP's self-declared authoritarian pragmatism is a popularized belief about the nation's ongoing conditions of resource vulnerability and land scarcity that require strict management and control (Tan 2012, 72). In a city-state of diverse immigrants that do not have a shared historical narrative and a common ethnicity, the crisis-prone image of land scarcity becomes an important national myth of the PAP to generate a sense of national unity. The characterization of Singapore as a small island needs to be understood more so a geographical imagination of the state to carry out its "pragmatic solutions" than an objective measurement of its size. Under the discourse of land scarcity, the PAP legitimates its one-party leadership because it claims that Singapore is too small for two balanced political parties to work well (Savage 2004, 221).

Additionally, through its authoritarian pragmatism, the PAP frames itself as a depoliticized administrative state that only accepts rational and utilitarian solutions, and rejects “wasteful ideological demands... the unrealistic expectations of the inexperienced, the quixotic ramblings of the irresponsible” (Tan 2012, 72-73). As Lee Kuan Yew asserted, “We are not enamoured with any ideology” (quoted in Tan 2012, 73). In a Gramscian sense, the PAP’s assertion of the absence of ideology is in itself an ideological move to make the PAP’s discourses and decisions about the socionatural arrangement of the everyday landscape seem commonsensical. The depoliticization of the PAP is reflected in the colonality of the state that asserts a hegemonic understanding over nature, and in the understanding that “a good life plugged into the global economy could be achieved through the state’s suspension of politics” (Goh 2015, 220). The PAP’s power is exercised and legitimized through, what Foucault terms as, the governmentalization of the state. Governmentality emphasizes that power exists within relations. Power is not simply hierarchical, top-down or coercive. It is manifested through people’s internalization of PAP’s logic of pragmatism and land scarcity as necessary frameworks for the collective wellbeing of Singapore.

Notions of pragmatism and land scarcity are embedded in the PAP’s discourses over Bukit Brown’s destruction. The PAP’s plan to destroy Bukit Brown is not so much about its particular views on cemeteries, but about what it considers as a useful and efficient space. The PAP argues that cemeteries are an impractical waste of space when “the living are already squeezed into ever smaller pigeon holes” – cremation is the only viable long-term solution for the dead (Heng 2018). Claims to preserve Bukit Brown and other cemeteries alike are seen as “sentimental” and not pragmatic, a “selfish disregard for national interests by the discourse of land scarcity” (Goh 2001, 13). As the spokesperson for the Ministry of National Development claims, the government needs

to make difficult trade-off decisions and “prioritise the use of our land for various needs such as housing, green spaces, utilities, transportation, ports and airports and amenities to support the functions of a nation... The bulk of Bukit Brown Cemetery will only be developed in the longer term” (Han 2015). Thus, the Chinese immigrants’ sacred meanings of Bukit Brown are replaced with dominant perceptions of unruliness under the PAP’s discourses of land scarcity and pragmatism.

For the PAP, strict land-use planning is particularly important because it is closely linked to Singapore’s formation as a global city. When Singapore lost access to a hinterland after its separation with Malaysia in 1965, Singapore branded itself as a post-industrial global city to attract multinational corporations to invest, establish offices, and do business in Singapore. As such, the PAP aimed to globalize “its economy, its population, and its culture to make the nation relevant to the needs of the rest of the world” (Kliver and Weber 2003, 371). To decolonize from its historical ties with Malaysia and become a global city, Singapore needed to differentiate itself from other Southeast Asian countries that were also focused on economic survival. Thus, from the onset, Singapore’s urban economic development has been accompanied with a fully-fledged effort to clean and green the landscape, as encapsulated under the PAP’s “City in a Garden” vision, previously the “Garden City” vision.<sup>8</sup> As Lee Kuan Yew famously remarked, “I searched for some dramatic way to distinguish ourselves from other Third World Countries...I settled for a clean and green Singapore” (Clifford 2015, 69).<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> The Garden City vision emphasizes on the functional cleaning and greening of Singapore’s landscape such as removing litter, repairing dilapidated trees, and planting trees for Singapore’s initial urban development. The “City in a Garden” vision became an official city brand of the state that aims to further integrate greenery in the built environment. It emphasizes on lifestyle and recreational greening strategies to create a strong island-wide network of recreational spaces, skyrise greenery, park connectors, tourist themed parks, and gardens (Gulrsud and Ooi 2015, 83).

<sup>9</sup> The growing belief that incorporating nature within urban planning of cities is an important indicator of a good quality of life is echoed, though different ways, in the Garden City or City Beautiful Movements in the US, as described in Lewis Mumford (1961)’s *The City of History* and Ebenezer Howard (2002)’s *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Barnard and Heng 2014, 287).

vision has led a remarkable expansion of Singapore's green cover to nearly 50 percent since its independence when 98 percent of Singapore's original natural habitat areas were destroyed in the colonial period (Velegrinis and Weller 2007, 30). The vision is important to transform Singapore into a southeast Asia oasis for international tourists, investors, and corporations with "first world" standards of urban green aesthetics.

### **Bukit Brown Versus City in a Garden**

The discursive creation of the "City in a Garden" vision allows Singapore to remap its prospects by refusing the apparent limitations of its physical size, yet it also necessitates a massive clearing of what the PAP considers as "unruly" nature. The "City in a Garden" vision does not embody an edenic conception of nature, but an engineered conception of nature that is suited for economic development goals. Greenery under the vision has been described as "a manicured parkland green" (Geh and Sharp 2008, 183) and a "bikini-waxed" greenery" (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 7). Forms of nature under the vision, such as skyrise gardens and tree-lined streetscapes, are not planned to exist in prolonged stability. They are enwrapped in the creative destruction process of Singapore's neoliberal urbanization, part of a garden landscape that is constantly changing and morphing to suit greater development needs. As David Harvey states, "capitalist development must negotiate a knife-edge between preserving the value of past commitments made at a particular place and time, or devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation" (Harvey 1985, 156). The creation of the City in a Garden necessitates a constant process of clearing to create, what Koolhaas (1995) terms, a "tabula rasa" (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 4). The unruly nature of Bukit Brown becomes part of the processes of clearing that are embedded in the neoliberal logic of the "City in a Garden" vision. It needs to make way so that there is land to construct manicured forms of nature that are better suited in Singapore's pursuit to become a global city.

The process of clearing under the “City in a Garden” vision is seen as a precondition not only to transform the landscape for economic, environmental, and aesthetic concerns, but also to define Singapore’s political culture that maintains the authoritarian status of the state. For Singapore, the PAP is crucial in constructing Singapore’s sense of national identity because Singapore does not have a common ethnic heritage for an organic sense of unity (Ortmann 2009, 29). For a state that hinges on metaphors of crisis and land scarcity to unify a sense of national identity, the consequential socionatural materiality of the “City in a Garden” vision is important to express the state’s ideological hegemonic ideas. Landscape extends the PAP’s work both as a “means and an ethic of social control, as well as a planning method for containerizing ‘civic’ populations” (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 3). The socionatural relations of the landscape are part of an assemblage of metonymic practices that indicate whether the state is functioning (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 8). The landscape becomes a channel for the state to convince Singapore citizens to trust that the PAP, as Singapore’s gardener, is capable to govern the nation. It is also important for the PAP to show foreign investors that Singapore is a stable place to do business and that the PAP can effectively manage the place and get things done. The high-maintenance of Singapore’s landscape is more than a display of orderly nature, as it embodies Singapore’s political culture that seeks to tame and pacify both nature and its people under the authoritarian management of the PAP.

On the other hand, the unruly socionatural arrangement of Bukit Brown is seen as a threat to the capability of state power and to the political stability of Singapore. The PAP’s “City in a Garden” vision, by associating modernity’s promises of convenience and progress with images of engineered or manicured nature, discursively frames unruly nature as its ontological other. The presence of weeds and other unruly forms of nature

becomes an “insurgency” to the ideological hegemony of the PAP (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 11). Underlying the “City in a Garden” vision is the PAP’s fear and anxiety for the physical recolonization of weeds and un-manicured nature in Singapore. In a city-state where the placement and arrangement of every tree and plant are based on conscious design and decision-making of the PAP, the unruly and uncontrollable qualities of Bukit Brown conversely demonstrate the incapability of the PAP. Whereas manicured forms of nature are related with a stable and pacified citizenry, untamed forms of nature are associated with possible unrests and instability. Thus, Bukit Brown, as an emblematic landscape of unruliness, is subjected to destruction in order to sustain the PAP’s conceptual dominance over how nature ought to look like and to be managed.

Moreover, Bukit Brown is not favored because its colonial history presents a threat to the harmonious society that the PAP seeks to construct within its “City in a Garden” vision. The colonial authorities’ characterization of Bukit Brown as a site that fostered the inherent disorderliness, insanitation, and irrationalism of Chinese immigrants and clan associations—as elaborated in Chapter 3—impregnates the imagination of the PAP. As S. Rajaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore from 1980-1985, describes, the remembering of migrant histories would incite racial conflicts in contemporary Singapore (Chong 2014, 168). Even though Chinese clan associations do not have much political power in contemporary Singapore, their physical traces—such as the material remnants of Bukit Brown—are perceived as sites that can potentially subvert the power of the state. The coloniality of the PAP manifests in its attempt to erase landscapes that are associated with Chinese clan associations. These stigmatizations and memories of the Chinese population are seen as threats towards racial harmony and the coherence of Singapore’s national narrative. For the PAP, Singapore’s past needs to be reinterpreted, reconstructed, or destroyed to fit the nation’s

vision of the future – a harmonious multiracial society can only come about with a state-induced tabula rasa. Thus, the destruction Bukit Brown is an active process to forget the memories of Chinese clan associations that linger with the material unruly presence of Bukit Brown in order to maintain a harmonious city-state.

### **Erasure of Bukit Brown in Heritage and Nature Conservation Efforts**

As Singapore recognizes the importance to preserve its tropical heritage to foster a greater sense of place-based national identity for both its citizens and for the interests of foreigners, acts of clearing reveal the active erasure of histories that go into the PAP's heritage and nature conservation efforts. Constructing a landscape that evokes a stronger sense of identity and heritage is crucial to develop Singapore's global city image as foreigners are increasingly seeking differentiated experiences and not mass tourism experiences. It is also important because questions of heritage and nature conservation are increasingly emphasized in the UN, as evident with the creation of UNESCO. Singapore's public commitment to the concerns of the UN is important for its global city identity as it increases Singapore's international recognition and affirmation. As historian Prasenjit Dura (1996) states, "what is novel about modern nationalism is not political self-consciousness, but the world system of nation-states" (quoted in Kaplan and Kelly 2001, 9).

While Bukit Brown, as one of the earliest and largest burial grounds in Singapore, represents a rich site of heritage, it does not fit into the PAP's conception of heritage due to the state's association of Bukit Brown's unruly landscape with its colonial history. For the PAP, heritage needs to follow the neat image of "City in a Garden vision" and the framework of multiracialism. The PAP's idea of heritage is manifested through a "reconstructed tropicity of landscaping" that creates representations of culture and ethnicity in the greening process of Singapore's urban

development (Geh and Sharp 2008, 183). For instance, the PAP favors the use of plants that represents certain aspects of “Chinese” culture or evokes a sense of “Asian-ness” that does not show any bias towards a particular ethnic tradition. The vision is epitomized in the Chinese Garden of the Gardens by the Bay, a horticultural theme park. In the Chinese Garden, Chinese culture is represented through manicured and careful arrangements of rocks and plants, which fits the neat image of the “City in a Garden” vision (Lim 2014, 443). Bukit Brown, thus, is not considered as an appropriate “Chinese” heritage that should be preserved—its destruction represents the PAP’s selective amnesia in producing Singapore’s global city image.

Additionally, clearing also shows the process of erasure that goes into the definitions of what sites are “natural” enough in nature conservation policies. The PAP recognizes that sites such as forests and nature reserves offer a “safe haven” and “a stable reference point” from the constant metamorphosis of Singapore’s landscape (Geh and Sharp 2008, 188). While Bukit Brown inhabits rich biodiversity (see NSS 2011) as a tropical forest habitat, the PAP does not consider its socionatural characteristics as important enough to be preserved. Only selected sites are protected as nature reserves because nature conservation can only “play Cinderella when ranked alongside” pressing development concerns in Singapore’s larger urban development scheme (Geh and Sharp 2008, 187). For the PAP, Bukit Brown’s colonial history and identity as a burial ground do not fit into its nature conservation discourses. Bukit Brown is neglected under the PAP’s “City in a Garden” vision and its gestural commitment to nature conservation.

Representations of nature in the PAP’s planning documents and publications demonstrate the state’s active process of erasing Bukit Brown from discourses about Singapore’s urban development. Representations of nature in official planning documents are important forms of knowledge production that determine conceptions of



what is natural or not in Singapore. For instance, in the URA Concept Plans, which are long-term land-use and transportation plans that are revised every two years since 1971, Bukit Brown is zoned as a residential area. It is incorporated in Singapore's novena residential district with the same color scheme (URA 2018). In the URA's Master Plans, which are statutory land-use plans that translate the long-term goals in the Concept Plans to detailed plans, Bukit Brown is marked as a Chinese cemetery, with a different color than the adjacent Central Catchment Reserve. While the categorization of Bukit Brown in the Master Plans is not incorrect, the PAP's spatial representation disregards the ecological characteristics of Bukit Brown. For instance, the adjacent Central Catchment Area—including surrounding golf courses—are marked with green. Even in Google maps, Bukit Brown is marked as a white barren space, while the Central Catchment Area is marked as a green open space. Additionally, Bukit Brown is also not part of the National Parks Board (NParks)'s list of nature areas in Singapore, as well as Singapore's "National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity," a report written by the NParks and submitted to the Convention on Biodiversity that is organized by the UN Environmental Programme.<sup>10</sup> The erasure of Bukit Brown from these documents indicates that representations of nature in urban planning discourses are deeply ideological, reflecting what PAP considers as "nature" that is worth protecting or not.

Bukit Brown's destruction reveals that the formation of citizenship and national identity is a socionatural process that is deeply intertwined with the material arrangements and symbolic representations of nature. The clearing of Bukit Brown

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<sup>10</sup> The Convention on Biodiversity aims to develop national strategies for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. The UN Environmental Programme recognized the need for an international commitment to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. The Convention was first opened for signatures at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and Singapore signed it on March 10, 1993. See more: [www.unenvironment.org](http://www.unenvironment.org)

reveals that the PAP's decolonization of Singapore entails an active erasure of certain colonial histories and memories that are entangled in Bukit Brown's unruly landscape. As Kosek states, "forgetting is not just an absence of memory but an active process. We are not merely what we remember, but also what we forget" (Kosek 2006, 60). To assert its hegemonic position, the PAP also presents a form of coloniality that claims a singular understanding of nature that expresses and formulates Singapore's global city identity and ensures a harmonious citizenry. The production of Singapore's modernity is accompanied with the PAP's colonization of imagination over how nature ought to be, which veils the ideological and power-laden processes that are enwrapped in the decision to destroy Bukit Brown.

## **Chapter 5: The Struggle to Reclaim and Reimagine Bukit Brown**

The PAP's plan for Bukit Brown's destruction did not go uncontested. The announcement of the road construction plan sparked a lot of local and international attention. A growing group of Bukit Brown activists, the Brownies, has been conducting research, raising awareness, and advocating for the preservation of Bukit Brown.

Brownies have opened new ways to re-conceptualize Bukit Brown from a Chinese space that is associated with perceptions of disorder and marginality, into a nationally and internationally recognized space through practices of worlding. Goh (2015) defines worlding as "agency-driven processes that have learnt to negotiate state-determined representations, not necessarily dismissing them, but engaging with them more critically in order to expose the contradictions that are embedded" (Goh 2015, 177). Brownies do not simply contest the PAP. Through their worlding practices, they illuminate and produce other socionatural understandings of Bukit Brown. The practices of worlding enable Brownies to decolonize the ideological hegemony of the PAP over Bukit Brown and to assert the legitimacy of alternative discourses and relations. Thus, the making of Bukit Brown as a nationally and internationally recognized space through processes of worlding decolonizes the PAP's hegemonic understandings of nature and redefines the relations between national identity, citizenship, and nature in Singapore.

### **Announcing the Road Construction Plan**

Two months after the Land Transport Authority announced road construction plans in Bukit Brown, the Singapore Heritage Society, a heritage conservation non-profit, organized a symposium in November 2011 to talk about alternatives to the LTA's construction plan. The symposium gathered non-profits, activists, academics, and professionals with expertise in urban planning, heritage conservation and environmental issues (Leow and Lim 2017, 110). They formed a group called Community for Bukit

Brown and scheduled a meeting with several government agencies, Urban Redevelopment Authority, National Parks Board, and Land Transport Authority on Feb 20, 2011 to discuss Bukit Brown's future. However, the meeting was unexpectedly rescheduled to the evening of March 19, 2012. On the morning of March 19, 2012, the LTA finalized the alignment of the new road and announced the list of graves that would be exhumed before construction (Figure 3). Contrary to the expectations of the Community of Bukit Brown, the meeting was not a discussion space but more so a briefing by various government agencies in regards to the road development plan. The government agencies did not ask for input or suggestions, and they did not plan to conduct further engagement with the public. The decision was finalized.

The government's sudden change of plans and unwillingness to engage with the public sparked great reaction and response from the Community of Bukit Brown.<sup>11</sup> Seven representatives requested a moratorium on all development until there was further discussion about potential alternatives. The representatives made clear that they were not necessarily against development, but against the top-down process of the government's planning (Leow and Lim 2017, 111). The moratorium unexpectedly gained prominence in mainstream media and gathered public reaction and interest. The community's initial quiet outreach to the government became a full-blown public debate that contested the underlying principles of Singapore's urban development.

### **Worlding Bukit Brown**

This chapter uses the concept of worlding to examine the Brownies' efforts in Bukit Brown. Goh (2015) states that worlding enables Brownies "to dwell and be at

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<sup>11</sup> The Community of Bukit Brown consists of non-profits such as Nature Society (Singapore) and Singapore Heritage Society that are established non-profits in Singapore; Asia Paranormal Investigators that seeks to advance research of Bukit Brown; All Things Bukit Brown, the largest civil society group on Bukit Brown that aims to rally broader support; SOS Bukit Brown that mobilizes the art community to advocate for Bukit Brown, Green Corridor and Green Drinks, which are environmental non-profits in Singapore (Leow and Lim 2017, 111).

home and with the complexity of the world. It is unequivocally democratic, in the tradition of Arendt, where effective individual political agency is founded on participatory citizenship in the making of collective identity” (Goh 2015, iii). Goh’s description of worlding’s democratic ethos takes on a different meaning than how it is usually understood in non-authoritarian contexts. Activism cannot appear to be overtly political because of Singapore’s authoritarian state. As Cherian George (2011) describes, civil groups “find ways to protect their interests without being seen as challenging the government’s dominance; to act politically while seem apolitical” (George, 2011, 140). Brownies seek creative ways such as tours, documentation projects, production of maps, and data research to decolonize the state’s conception of Bukit Brown’s nature and to promote the value of preserving the site. While these activities might not seem as deliberate activism, they are creative ways for Brownies to provide a new language to talk about Bukit Brown. It is no longer simply a Chinese space as it raises bigger issues of “heritage, habitat, history”—the motto of All Things Bukit Brown— that are important questions to rethink Singapore’s national identity. As Chong states, “Bukit Brown has become a test case for many ordinary Singaporeans as to how much the government is willing to compromise on its urban and housing plans over heritage spaces” (Chong 2014, 178). Through reframing Bukit Brown as an important site that is pertinent not only to the Chinese population, but also to the rest of the nation and to the world, Brownies gather a diverse constituency to redefine the terms of the PAP, and the scalar dimensions of citizenship and national identity.

Cyberspace becomes an important platform to reach greater public awareness for Bukit Brown. Given the politically authoritarian context of Singapore, cyberspace provides a medium where activists can negotiate the boundaries of political acceptability

and manifest different socionatural understandings of Bukit Brown.<sup>12</sup> Cyberspace, what Castells (1999) calls as a form of space of flow, is able to reframe individual or “Chinese” practices in Bukit Brown as shared collective concerns (Castells 1999, 294). Groups that were part of the original Community of Bukit Brown created Bukit Brown websites as structured platforms to educate the public, as well as Facebook pages, social media groups and blogs to engender online discussions and to circulate photos, documents, maps, videos, and research about people’s findings and reflections of Bukit Brown (Huang 2014, 25). Because these cyberspaces engage with Bukit Brown in various topics of interests, Brownies organically gather a multicultural constituency. The lack of territorial contiguity in spaces of flows creates a creative cacophony of myriad values and opinions from people across different places to imagine other possible socionatural relations in Bukit Brown.

Cyberspace reframes the Chinese narratives of Bukit Brown’s graves as shared collective histories of the Singapore citizenry. After the government’s announcement, cyberspace has been used as an important platform to link living descendants to missing ancestral graves before the government’s exhumation. While grave discoveries seem to solely be a Chinese concern, postings of graves online represent an important bottom-up process of remembering to capture the histories that are erased in the PAP’s narrative. Additionally, cyberspace also facilitates the transformation of Bukit Brown from a neglected space to an important educational space. Postings on cyberspace rally people to attend guided tours on various themes in Bukit Brown. For instance, a lot of Bukit Brown tours are designed to tell stories of the prominent pioneers that were buried in

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<sup>12</sup> Political engagements of the public are under great scrutiny from the PAP, especially when they deal with topics that might contest the authority of the state. For instance, Singapore institutionalized OB Markers (out of bound markers) to delimit what topics are permissible for public discussion and to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable political discourses (George, 2011, 39).

Bukit Brown. Many of the pioneers' names, such as Tan Boon Lay, are used to name Singapore streets and neighborhoods. Pioneer tours enable "the worlding of heritage and history" through greater audience appreciation of Bukit Brown's connection with the larger national fabric and history of Singapore, rehistoricizing the once neglected burial landscape (Chong 2014, 173). The tours are well attended by Chinese and non-Chinese Singaporeans and foreigners. Through these activities, Brownies reveal the ways that Bukit Brown is a relevant space to Singapore's national identity.

Furthermore, the Brownies' practices of worlding Bukit Brown into an unneglectable national space have catalyzed the organization of Bukit Brown's NDP (Nation's Deceased Pioneers) that mirror the state's NDP (National Day Parade) during Singapore's independence day. The Brownies' intentionally use the same acronym to show that there are other possible ways to celebrate Singapore's national identity. The ritualization of the Nation's Deceased Pioneers celebration represents the momentum and support that Brownies have gathered through cyberspace. The Brownies' NDP is a celebration of Singapore's national day with a series of activities in Bukit Brown. The contrast between the two NDPs is a stark one. The state's National Day Parade is a million-dollar national spectacle that puts on a show of military personnel, technological equipment, and nationally significant narratives, such as performances of each dominant ethnic group (Kong and Yeoh 1997, 215). The landscape of the ritual itself becomes an important symbol in the PAP's narrative of Singapore's global city identity. Because the spectacle of NDP is characterized by "a high degree of display and theatricality...part of its enchantment derives from the terrain on which it is staged" (Kong and Yeoh 1997, 216). The state's NDP is staged at Marina Bay, which is located at the same place as the Gardens by the Bay. Beyond the NDP stage, the NDP audience overlooks a reclaimed piece of land with a spectacular display of manicured nature, symbolizing the

epitomized materialization of the “City in a Garden” vision and implicitly suggesting the necessity of clearing to create Singapore’s spectacle as a global city.

On the other hand, the Brownies’ appropriation of National Day Parade’s acronym into its own national day celebration—the Nation’s Deceased Pioneers—is no small feat. The diverse attendance of Nation’s Deceased Pioneers reflects the effectiveness of Brownies’ efforts to gather a multicultural constituency for Bukit Brown. It also shows that Bukit Brown’s symbolic value is legitimized in the making of Singapore’s national identity. Celebrating Nation’s Deceased Pioneers in Bukit Brown presents a strong contrast to the highly-maintained image of the state’s NDP. Just as the landscape of Marina Bay is an unneglectable symbol of the National Day Parade, the Bukit Brown’s landscape also serves an important purpose in the Nation’s Deceased Pioneers celebration. Attendees’ willingness to trek Bukit Brown’s forest during national day shows that there are other possibilities to celebrate Singapore that differs from the state’s “City in a Garden” vision. Bukit Brown can be considered a site of what Foucault (1984) terms as a “heterotopia,” or of difference, that exists in relation with other sites to “suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that it happens to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 1984, 3). Central to Foucault’s analysis of heterotopias are their potentials to become radical sites of inversion of broader processes and relations. Part of the ritualization of the Nation’s Deceased Pioneers is Brownies’ reinvention of traditions that are different from the state. Brownies sing and recite the national anthem and pledge in Bukit Brown without the grandeur of the state’s NDP, conduct various tours, and hang Singapore flags in Bukit Brown. The Brownies’ appropriation of the PAP’s NDP represents an inversed mirroring of the socionatural relations that constitute the PAP’s vision. Through the ritualization of Nation’s Deceased Pioneers, Bukit Brown becomes a legitimized national space that suggests



alternative ideas of national identity and citizenship in Singapore.

These gestures of nationalizing Bukit Brown counter the PAP's rigid multiracial framework. For the state, showing public support for Bukit Brown—a burial ground of an ethnic majority—might seem unfair since it has destroyed a lot of Malay and Indian burial grounds. The state's destruction of Bukit Brown arms the PAP “with the moral authority to dismantle the sacred sites of minority groups too” in the name of progress without showing favoritism to any particular group (Chong 2014, 177). However, the shared concerns for Bukit Brown's future by both Chinese and non-Chinese decolonize Bukit Brown from the negative perceptions of the state and demonstrate that a racially diverse citizenry can come together peacefully without a rigid multiracial framework.

### **Brownies' Proposals**

Aside from organizing activities to engage the public in Bukit Brown, Brownies also conduct careful research and propose concrete alternatives to the current construction plan to open possibilities to converse with the state. For instance, a Singapore environmental non-profit, the Nature Society of Singapore's (NSS), published a Position Paper on Bukit Brown to demonstrate its ecological richness through processes of research and counter-mapping. Counter-mapping, as a strategy to contest and complicate dominant ideologies and power structures, has the potential to reshape power relations that exist in spaces (Nevins 2004, 2). For instance, the Position Paper shows a map of the different stepping stone areas around Bukit Brown that are important sites for wildlife. The map incorporates areas of ecological importance that aren't recognized by the PAP as nature reserves, showing the ecological connectivity between the stepping zones around Bukit Brown that span across PAP's zoning spaces (Figure 4). Even though Bukit Brown is not an official nature reserve, NSS shows that Bukit Brown actually has a very rich biodiversity.

NSS recognized that, in order to open up opportunities to converse with the state about alternatives to the construction plan, it needed to use pragmatic language, such as quantitative data and research in its countermaps, that was compatible with state discourses. For instance, NSS showed a map of an alternative route that would alleviate traffic of Lornie Road without cutting across Bukit Brown. NSS also proposed a non-surface freeway instead of the eight-lane road to allow for ground connectivity between the McRitchie Forest and the Bukit Brown woodlands so that plant and animal life would not be threatened even more than the narrow strip of forest fragment that is already hemmed in by Lornie Road. NSS argued that the creation of a non-surface road would not only showcase Singapore's commitment to nature conservation, but also demonstrate Singapore's engineering talent and establish a benchmark for sustainable development practices in Asia (NSS 2011, 14). NSS reframed Bukit Brown not as a deterrent to urban development, but as an opportunity for Singapore to assert its global city commitment to sustainability. While NSS' proposals were not fully considered by the PAP, the state took some of NSS' research into consideration and made slight moderations to the construction plan to minimize damage, such as greater focus on the hydrology and biodiversity in the road design (Lian and Sim 2012). By adopting the same pragmatic language as the state—using data and research to justify the possibility of alternative plans—NSS was able to reveal the contradictions of state discourses through a process of worlding that reframed Bukit Brown as an important site.

### **Bukit Brown as a World Heritage Site**

Additional to the worlding of Bukit Brown as an important national space, the Brownies also reframed Bukit Brown as a world heritage site. The local contestations over Bukit Brown's future were elevated to an international level when Brownies from All Things Bukit Brown nominated and secured Bukit Brown cemetery's position in the

World Monument Watch List in 2014 along with 67 vulnerable sites from 41 countries (Huang 2014, 35). The List was published by the New York-based World Monument Fund (WMF), an organization that is “dedicated to saving mankind’s treasured places” (Chong and Lin 2014, 40). Bukit Brown’s increasing global support is seen when international news sites such as Guardian, CNN, and BCC started to share its story.

For instance, the World Monument Fund recognizes that the histories of Chinese immigrants in Bukit Brown, by their regional links of the Chinese diaspora, represent invaluable and vulnerable heritages of global significance. The remnant tombstones and grave designs in Bukit Brown reflect the regional connectivity of Singapore’s colonial history as a port city. As the WMF website states, “Bukit Brown showcases Singapore’s origins and connections to regions beyond” (WMF 2014). Such characterizations recast a different image on Bukit Brown’s Chinese histories that is different from the PAP association of Bukit Brown’s unruly landscape with its colonial stigmatizations. Furthermore, WMF describes Bukit Brown as a rare “green oasis in the heart of a densely developed urban environment” (WMF 2014). WMF’s discourses reveal the contradictions in PAP’s nature conservation commitment that does not fully recognize the ecological value of Bukit Brown. Through the processes of worlding that reframe Bukit Brown as a world heritage site, WMF shows that Bukit Brown belongs to the world, and must be saved.

To protect Bukit Brown, the Brownies have exceeded territorially bounded notions of national identity and citizenship. By soliciting the involvement of international actors such as the WMF, what E. E. Schattschneider (1960) describes as the “audience,” the Brownies are able to increase the struggle’s scope and scale and to legitimize their claims in order to tip the balance of power (Nevins 2004, 13). Bukit Brown cemetery’s international recognition allows symbolic socionatural relations to

formulate across scales through the connectivity of cyberspace. It also validates and contextualizes Brownies' arguments with globally-shared concerns as Brownies draw upon "institutional structures and resources, and schemes of legitimation that are independent of, or impenetrable to, state authorities" (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 13). Bukit Brown's international listing also implicitly pressures the government to pay closer attention to preservation discourses and practices.

### **Limits & Possibilities of Brownies' Activism**

While Brownies have gathered a lot of local interest and international attention to Bukit Brown and have proposed concrete suggestions to modify the road construction plan, the PAP still insists that the eight-lane road is necessary to relieve traffic congestion. While the PAP has publicly declared the need for a "more open, consultative, and consensual leadership style," the case of Bukit Brown activism shows that the rhetoric of greater civic society engagement remains largely gestural (Lee 2005, 134). Brownies, in some sense, lost their battle to save Bukit Brown from development. This partly results from Bukit Brown's insignificance to most of the Singaporean public. Physically and imaginatively, Bukit Brown is not part of the everyday fabric of the living. Secluded by a thick forest, it is far from the shopping malls and neighborhood recreational parks. It is not seen as a popular space to visit except during ancestral rituals. For a citizenry that seeks for constant excitement, glamor, and change in the neoliberal promise of modernity, Bukit Brown is temporally stagnated and uninteresting. As a satirical local author characterizes what he thinks as the Singapore's mainstream views of Bukit Brown, "What do I care! It's just a cemetery, they're all dead! Right? I've got my rice bowl to think about! I've got my house to think about! I've got my car payments to think about!" (Luger 2016, 196). For the PAP, Brownies' activist work on the ground does not present a political threat because of its

unimportance in Singaporeans' everyday life. As long as the Bukit Brown cemetery is not a part of national awareness and that there is still a gap between activists and the mainstream society, the PAP will not sense any urgency to change its plans because it believes that an eight-lane road will satisfy the collective desire of the greater public.

In the political authoritarian context of Singapore, however, Brownies' efforts cannot be measured through the binary framework of winning or losing. If modernity under the PAP is a colonization of imagination, the significance of Brownies' activism is the decolonization of PAP's hegemonic presence and the imaginative work that Brownies have done to enlarge the possibilities of socionatural relations in the authoritarian political context of Singapore. As Swyngedouw (2011) states, "the politicization of the environment is predicated on...the real possibility for the inauguration of different possible public socioecological futures" (Swyngedouw 2011, 82). For instance, All Things Bukit Brown was able to influence and change the state's view on Bukit Brown's socionatural landscape as a member of the working committee on Bukit Brown under the Ministry of National Development. The working committee is a multi-agency committee that has oversight over the construction process of Bukit Brown. One of the accomplishments of the MND working group is the publication of "The Bukit Brown WayFinder" in 2017, which is a self-guided trail with narratives about 25 tombs and information on flora and fauna and the rituals that were practiced in the cemetery (SHS 2017, 3). To develop this WayFinder, the working committee placed tomb signage and route markers in the cemetery, making the site more legible and approachable to first-time visitors and tourists. The creation of the WayFinder relied a lot on Brownies' rich knowledge about Bukit Brown. The establishment of the working committee was a progress from the PAP's initial un-consultative attitude in 2012. It reflects possibilities of different state-civic society relationships and of greater

participatory-based citizenship in Singapore.

Activism for Bukit Brown reflects more than a collective concern over a cemetery, but a desire to question the premises of Singapore's urban development. This desire is shown in Brownies' attempts to decolonize the PAP ideological hegemony that casts Bukit Brown as an unruly space justified for development and to show possible socionatural understandings that can constitute Singapore's national identity and citizenship. As Swyngedouw (1999) states, the larger implication of thinking about socionature is to excavate and reconstruct the contested process of the "production of nature" (Swyngedouw 1999, 461). If the socionatural relations that have come about with Brownies' activism can remain cohesive across time, then they have the potential to "transfer elsewhere" in Singapore and beyond (Luger 2016, 197). The impact of Brownies' work lies in the continual work to decolonize hegemonic forms of knowledge, and to incorporate multiple understandings of socionature in the political realm of Singapore.

### **Conclusion: Lessons from Bukit Brown**

As part of the government's exhumation announcement on April 17, 2013, the Chinese newspapers included a poem called *A Poem for the Departed* that was written in response to the destruction of Bukit Brown. Here is a short excerpt:

altars imprison the murmurs of the nether world  
 the shadow of the steel arm gradually closes with the setting sun  
 the leaves and trees are all whispering  
 peace is made out to be alarming talk  
 in the future it will not be the blue sky which covers us  
 but the undercarriages of cars...  
 since the living do not cherish  
 why should the dead stubbornly remain? (Chen 2013).

The question that Chen raises is one that might not be questioned by most Singaporeans. In a land-scarce island where land reclamation projects will eventually no longer be ecologically possible, pragmatic and efficient use of space reigns as the dominant ethos behind the production of Singapore as a global city. Constant destruction and construction are seen as the underlying premises of urban life, where the "steel arms" are always present in Singapore's skyline, where the tower cranes are jokingly known as the national bird of Singapore. Spaces of the dead need to make way for spaces of the living. Indeed, "why should the dead stubbornly remain?"

This thesis untangles the embedded socionatural logics and processes of this question that justify the destruction of Bukit Brown as a necessary process in the making of Singapore's national identity and citizenship. I also show the various ways in which the Brownies' struggle to preserve Bukit Brown reimagines the underlying socionatural premises of this question. As Geoff Mann (2007) points out, the goal of

urban political ecology is to discern why specific discourses about nature come about, how they become the normative framework that shapes our society, and to show that they once were not the dominant narrative and way of life, and that alternative relations and conceptualizations of nature are possible (Mann 2009, 343). To unfold how the various processes are manifested in Bukit Brown, this thesis asks how and why Bukit Brown came to be and how and why it was destroyed? What do its making, the struggle to preserve it, and its ultimate destruction say about the relationship between “nature,” national identity, and citizenship in contemporary Singapore? I argue that the struggle over Bukit Brown demonstrates the historical-geographical processes that intertwine competing notions of “nature” in the making of national identity and citizenship in Singapore.

To delve into my analysis of how relations between nature, national identity, and citizenship in contemporary Singapore manifest in the destruction and struggle over Bukit Brown in chapter 4 and 5, I first examine the colonial history of Bukit Brown in chapter 2 and 3 to ground and historicize those relations. Chapter 2 reveals that Bukit Brown was once a central space for Chinese immigrants to gain a sense of belonging in Singapore. The sacredness of Bukit Brown’s nature was believed to have real implications for the wellbeing and prosperity of the living—an important sacred place that stabilized the diasporic and transient identity of living Chinese immigrants. Chapter 3 illuminates that, when Bukit Brown was turned into a municipal cemetery and was subjected under the colonial authorities’ burial regulations, it became viewed as a Chinese space of disorder and insanitation that needed to be “reformed” under enlightenment sensibilities of nature that constituted the colonial production of Singapore as an attractive port city. While Chinese immigrants were able to negotiate some burial regulations with the colonial authorities, these colonial memories became



part of the PAP's perception of Bukit Brown.

38 years after Bukit Brown's closure in 1973, Bukit Brown was decided to be destroyed for the construction of an eight-lane road in 2011. Chapter 4 shows the ways in which its destruction is crucial for the PAP to decolonize Singapore, and to nationalize nature, citizenship and national identity in order to construct a global city image under the "City in a Garden" vision. Yet, the PAP's decolonization of Singapore was contradictorily also a "colonial enterprise" that fosters "an authorized narrative of selective amnesia" (Goh 2015, 224). Clearing Bukit Brown is both a precondition to creating a highly maintained City in a Garden landscape, and an active erasure of the disdained associations between Chinese immigrants' stigmatized past and the unruly nature that do not align with the multiracial framework of Singapore's citizenry. The coloniality of the PAP is produced through the propagation of a singular understanding of nature. However, as Chapter 5 illuminates, the PAP's ideas of what constitutes the making of a global city do not go uncontested. While the PAP's construction plan still continues, the implications of Brownies' activist efforts are their worlding practices that have begun to decolonize the hegemonic ideologies of national identity, citizenship, and nature of the PAP. Brownies' efforts expand people's imaginative capacities and open dialogical space with the state to redefine and reimagine the scalar dimensions and possibilities of those terms.

Through Bukit Brown, this thesis calls for a critical reexamination of the relations and processes within spaces that are considered as peripheral in the urban imagination. The processes of worlding Bukit Brown illuminate that ideas of what constitutes as "periphery" and "central" —space of dead versus space of living, unruly versus manicured nature—are problematic categories that are produced through power-laden processes. To understand the making of national identity and citizenship in

Singapore through the perspective of Bukit Brown is not to accept the perception of its peripheral qualities, but rather, to approach it from the very “un-decidability” of its constitution. As Mouffe (2000) explains, the notion of a “constitutive outside” [is]... a content which, by showing the radical un-decidability of the tension of its constitution, makes its very positivity a function of the symbol of something exceeding it...

antagonism is irreducible to a simple process of dialectical reversal: the “them” is not the constitutive opposite of a concrete “us,” but the symbol of what makes any “us” impossible” (quoted in Roy 2016, 821). The recognition that “them” is a symbol of what makes any “us” impossible, that Bukit Brown’s nature represents not a dialect opposite of engineered and manicured forms of nature, but the very instability of the PAP’s “City in a Garden” vision, calls for a serious reconsideration of the underlying socionatural premises of Singapore’s national identity and citizenship.

Bukit Brown reveals that, despite the PAP’s dominant assertions of how nature ought to look like in Singapore, the socionatural relations that are produced through the “City in a Garden” vision are in fact very vulnerable and fragile. The ideological hegemony of the PAP reflects a colonization of nature’s meaning—the construction of a singular understanding of “Nature” that suits the national identity of Singapore. The PAP’s attempt to homogenize nature’s role and meaning in Singapore is, as Swyngedouw (2011) describes, “the gesture par excellence of de-politicization, of placing Nature outside the political, that is outside the field of public dispute” (Swyngedouw 2011, 73). Yet, nature is not simply a passive and apolitical creation. The PAP’s City in a Garden landscape can only be sustained with the presence of a gardener’s vision, a strong bureaucratic organization, a pacified citizenry, or a cooperating environment. One socio-environmental and political change or crisis can threaten the existence of nature under the PAP’s vision. The unruly nature of Bukit

Brown represents a site of anxiety for the PAP, as it is an ecological state that Singapore's landscape can become if it is not highly maintained. As Comaroff and Ong (2013) describe, "in the mind of its people, as well as its state planners and technocrats, the city remains a jungle *ad esse*. The multivalent natural threat never goes away, never sleeps, and is never evicted. Urbanism is only borrowed, held by force as floodwaters are restrained by a dike" (Comaroff and Ong 2013, 5-6). The vulnerability of the "City in a Garden" vision sheds light to the impossibility of a concrete "us." The Brownies' attempts to decolonize Bukit Brown from the state's singular imagination of "Nature" have begun to destabilize concrete binary frameworks of us and them, and to reimagine how nature can be differently constituted in the political realm of Singapore.

In this conclusion, I explore different conceptual possibilities that can magnify and extend Brownies' efforts to decolonize Bukit Brown and to continue the work to reimagine relations between nature, national identity, and citizenship in Singapore and beyond. For one, the practice of decolonizing Bukit Brown is to always consider the heterogeneity and multiplicity of nature, and the infinite possibilities of socionatural relations that can constitute the political. I call upon Bruno Latour's conception of "multinaturalism" as a possible interpretive framework to re-theorize Singapore's national identity. Latour's "multinaturalism" is a call for political ecologists to expand the possibilities of socionatural assemblage to once excluded entities. Multinaturalism is a contrast to the PAP's non-dialogic form of multiculturalism that defines the framework for a harmonious citizenry.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as Jackson clarifies, multinaturalism is "not an assertion that nature is fundamentally other to culture," but rather a "multifaceted relational account of embodied becoming" that contest the idea of

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<sup>13</sup> The term multiculturalism here refers to the PAP's official policy of multiracialism. Both terms are used interchangeably in PAP's discourses about citizenship.

mononaturalism, or a singular understanding of nature, that stands as a counterpart to multiculturalism (Jackson 2014, 83). Using the framework of multinaturalism as an imaginary exercise to reexamine Singapore's current state opens possibilities for different thoughts and ways of becoming and relating with others to coexist, which presents a lens to destabilize and reconsider the hegemonic status of the socionatural relations that constitute Singapore's national identity and citizenship.

Recognition of nature's heterogeneity in rethinking the political, however, inevitably leads to disagreement and conflict. As Swyngedouw (2011) states, maintaining a "managerial and consensual administration" to avoid conflict deprives certain socionatural relations from their full participation in the political realm of Singapore, and propagates processes that actively want to erase those relations from political discourse and public memory (Swyngedouw 2011, 77). The conflict-prone nature of multinaturalism goes against the PAP's desire to maintain racial harmony within Singapore's multiracial framework. However, Brownies demonstrate that there are creative ways to go about the acts of politicizing nature to negotiate the political boundaries of Singapore's multiracial framework and to incorporate the framework of multinaturalism in reshaping Singapore's socio-political order. Reimagining citizenship is to engage in everyday processes of destabilizing binaries between existing perceptions of peripheral versus central spaces and to incorporate socionatural relations that are once erased from the public imaginary to constitute the political across rigid multiracial categories and scalar limitations.

Furthermore, I posit that incorporating a posthumanist view in UPE that recognizes the agency of nature in the framework of multinaturalism can further the project of decolonizing nature in the making of national identity and citizenship. As Sundberg (2011) explains, a posthumanist view in political ecology refuses to treat

nonhuman nature as the thing over which humans struggle, and instead builds on and enacts a relational approach that views all bodies, human and nonhuman alike, as participants in constituting the world (Sundberg 2011, 322). It recognizes that nonhumans are not passive human creations or ontologically given constructs. Nonhumans and humans are mutually constituted within networks and assemblages that enable them to collectively stabilize or destabilize a particular socio-political order (Sundberg 2011, 321). Incorporating a posthumanist framework in the worlding of Bukit Brown enables the production of unexpected relations and assemblages between nonhumans and humans to decolonize hegemonic understandings about nature within the political realm.

The project of decolonizing nature under a posthumanist framework entails a collective willingness to recognize the presence and existence of what is incomprehensible and uncontrollable by humans. Decolonizing nature is always an ongoing process of forming and producing socionatural relations, and of acknowledging and elevating the ways in which nonhumans are already shaping the political. As Sundberg (2014) suggests, “to enact decolonizing practices,” it is important to understand that “decolonization is something to be aspired to and enacted rather than a state of being that may be claimed (Sundberg 2014, 39). In the aspiration for decolonization, there needs to be a serious submission to the presence of the unknowable that is beyond human’s conception of time and space. As Kosek (2006) describes, nature “is a stubborn yet unstable social and material form that doggedly reminds us that it is not entirely of our own making. Knowledge of natures is always partial, always a rough translation” (Kosek 2006, 285). Decolonization necessitates a “temporal humility” to the forces that are beyond us, that which are unreachable and uncontrollable (quoted in Jackson 2014, 78). An understanding of decolonization as a

total embrace to the omnipresence of uncertainty goes against the desire of the PAP to meticulously control nature and its citizenry. However, the acknowledgment of nonhuman nature's agency is a crucial practice to increase democratic political processes of forming national identity and citizenship. As Swyngedouw (2011) states, "politicization of the environment is predicated upon the recognition of the indeterminacy of nature, the constitutive split of the people, the unconditional democratic demand of political equality, and the real possibility for the inauguration of different possible public socioecological futures that express the democratic presumptions of freedom and equality" (Swyngedouw 2011, 82). Beyond concerns over national identity and citizenship, having a posthumanist approach is a call for a pluralist democracy that embodies epistemological and ontological humility, that acknowledges the interdependence of human and nonhuman existence and the importance of healthy contestation, and that demands the need for ongoing processes of decolonizing nature and its representations while recognizing the impossibility of any perfect implementation and resolution.

I propose that paying attention to nonhuman's sense of geologic time is an important practice to acknowledge the unknowable. The practices of worlding Bukit Brown reveal that humans are inherently planetary beings subjected to the changes that occur in the earth's geologic time. Spivak (2008) states that the idea of planetary "asks us to think ourselves subjects of larger ecological forces rather than simply global agents on nonhuman matter...to remember that if we live a hundred years, even a devastated planet lives a billion, without us" (quoted in Jackson 2014, 78). The destruction of Bukit Brown eliminated the unruly nature of Bukit Brown for the next decades or less. However, such fixations for progress are incomparable in the grand timeline for our planet. In the long-term, the road and public housing developments will be destroyed,

and nature will spring up again from the interstitial spaces and soils of Bukit Brown. Adopting Ugo Bardi (2014)'s analysis of mines, humans will see the disappearance of the very concept of roads or houses in future centuries (Bardi 2014, 241). Recognizing that humans ultimately cannot control nonhuman nature because it belongs to a geologic sense of time contests the sense of necessity that accompanies development plans in the discourses of land scarcity or pragmatism in Singapore, and opens up other possible and unexpected socionatural relations that can constitute the political.

In the introduction chapter, I propose that Bukit Brown needs to be read as a text to understand and reimagine the making of Singapore's national identity and citizenship. Theorizing from the standpoint of Bukit Brown reveals how colonial histories underwrite Singapore's contemporary politics, how landscapes both veil and contest hegemonic ideologies, and how socionatural relations constitute understandings of the political. Bukit Brown is not to be read merely as a case study. Bukit Brown is an important framework to conceptualize and enact practices of decolonizing nature from any hegemonic assertions. For humans, death represents the ultimate submission to nonhuman's sense of time and space, to that which is beyond human control and comprehension. To die is to surrender any insistence for monolithic or anthropocentric views about the world. Thinking seriously about mortality is an important exercise to open up imaginations of the possible socionatural relations that can constitute the political. As Scranton states, "If we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die" (Scranton 2013). Decolonizing nature in Bukit Brown, thus, calls for a critical destabilization of binary frameworks and a total embrace of heterogeneity and multiplicity that entail a serious and humble attitude toward nature, and humans' eventual submission to nature's immensity upon death.

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## Appendix



Figure 1: Picture of the Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery. Source: Nicole Yaw '18.



Figure 2: Example of a Chinese grave. 1. Womb-shaped tomb. 2. Earth mound. 3. Lion statue as protector of the grave 4. Flower-patterned tiles that space in front of the grave for ritual practices. 5. Where the altar and incense are placed. Source: Nicole Yaw '18.



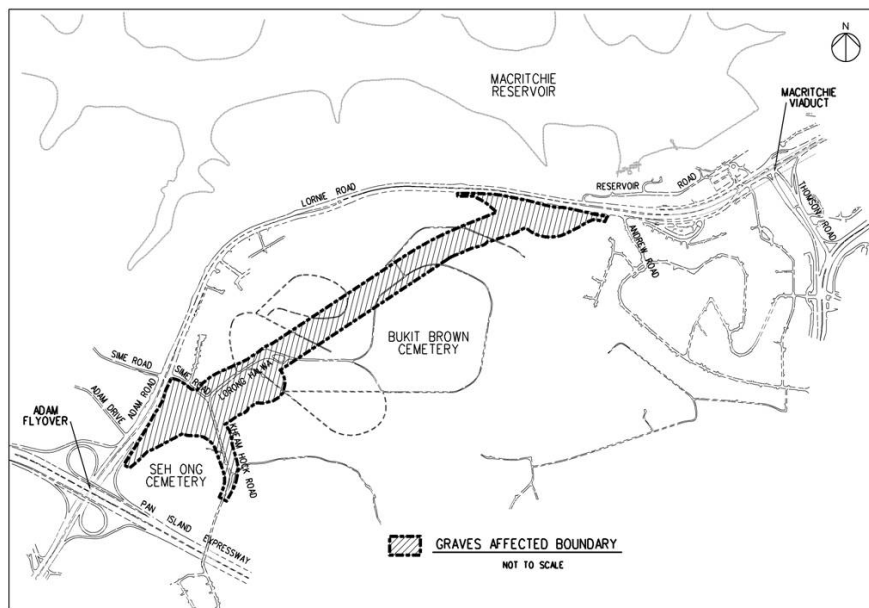


Figure 3: This map indicates the area of graves that will be exhumed for the LTA's development plan. It outlines the shape of the eight-lane road that will run across Bukit Brown. Source: [www.lta.gov.sg](http://www.lta.gov.sg)



Figure 4: Map showing the ecological stepping stones around Bukit Brown. Source: Nature Society of Singapore Position Paper, 2011.