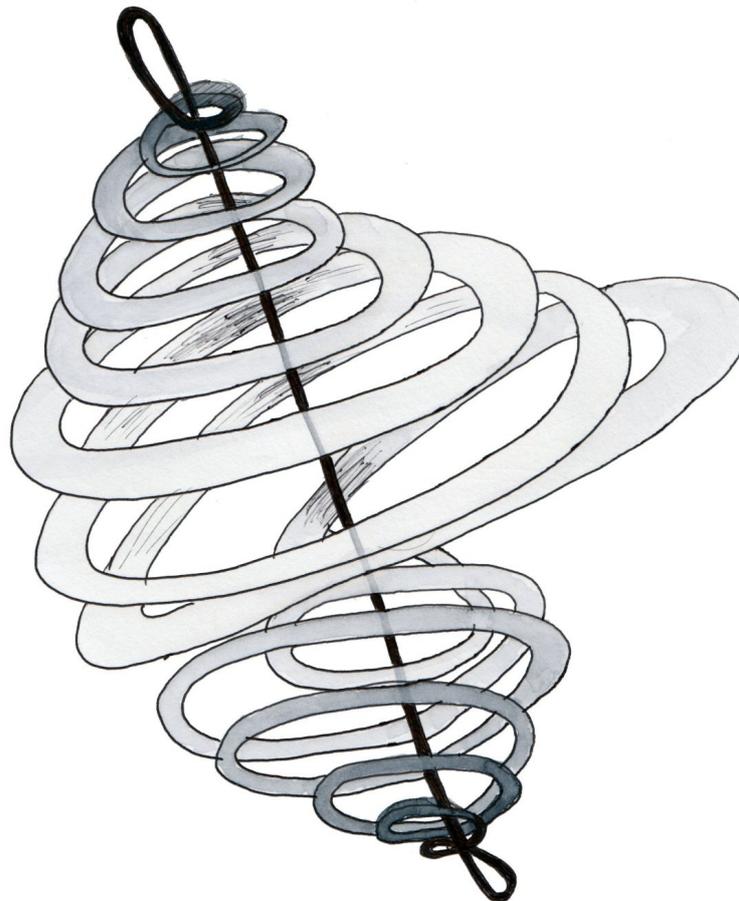


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60 Years of Migration and 17,790 Kilometers Away

Artists Daniel Lie and Juliana Dos Santos talk about Daniel's search for their ancestry in Indonesia, the country of origin of their artist grandparents who migrated to Brazil in the 1960s, to reflect on the South-to-South relationship between both latitudes and the diasporic bond between them.



Daniel Lie, *Spings*, 2020. For the text "Caminho com Ong" in volume 2 of the *Toko Buku Liong* project.

Juliana dos Santos: Our first artistic connection came from our grandmothers. You had a piece of work honoring your grandmother, Lindi, and I had one honoring mine, Dita. In that moment, the desire to know our ancestors throbbed in us. For me, that desire stemmed from an existential question: where do we come from, and where do we go from there? I remember how we spent a day imagining the world through our histories, with an incessant desire of capturing our possible origins: mine, Afro-diasporic and yours, Asian-diasporic. We drew a triple A (Asia, Africa, America), trying to trace our family trees through a map. It was like trying to sail

through a sea embedded with our micro-histories. A nebulous and confusing task. In my case, said micro-history revealed itself as impossible due to the targeted erasure of Black history in Brazil; in your case, it was a far-away possibility because of the physical distance with your relatives in Indonesia. I remember listening to you trying to figure out why your grandparents decided to move to Brazil. I have been able to witness the challenges of this quest for your ancestors through your efforts during the last few years. Since then, you have been showing me another South, a South I wasn't able to imagine, until now. Up until this point, the only information of Indonesia I had came from a stereotyped perspective of "exotic" travel brochures and "ethnic" tourist shows.

You started your arrival in Yogyakarta by dancing. How did the choice of immersing yourself in this context using language other than visual come?

Daniel Lie: I had to think of strategies to recover my Indonesian roots, undernourished due to 60 years of migration and 17,790 kilometers of distance. In Brazil, there was no significant Indonesian diaspora with whom to share memories, in contrast to the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese communities in the country. My migration is from Southeast Asia, which is a radically different experience than that of the other Asian diasporas in Brazil.

I understood that I needed to start using my body instead of the word in order for me to access deeper, and more subjective spaces.

How do I activate the ancestral memory of my heritage? While I studied Bahasa Indonesia, the country's lingua franca, I had to access the power of a specific silence. In order to do this, the processes focused on the word also required a certain bargaining to enlarge my perception of space. Living here has been a process of rebirth, I needed to re-learn how to talk (the language), walk (riding a motorcycle), and relate (new social codes) to develop a new form of accessing my body.



Archive photograph of the Lie family. Daniel Lie's grandparents: Lie Djoen Liem and Ong King Nio and their children newly arrived to Vale do Anhangabaú, São Paulo, Brazil, 1959. Image courtesy of the artist

Dance was a specific process of study that has already ended. Over the span of seven months, I studied the dances of three different ethnicities present in Indonesia through mimesis: I observed carefully to repeat the movements. The choreographies I learned contain an enormous sequence of movements imbued with symbols whose meanings I cannot decode entirely. But I know that they are secular dances that function as a form of communication. This was a fundamental process: now I have a stronger sense of home in Yogyakarta than in São Paulo. I have connected to a different South through the body, expanding time and perception.

JS: From a historical point of view, how close is Indonesia to Brazil? Have you identified common ground?

DL: My mother was born in Pernabuco, Brazil, and my father in Java, Indonesia; they both have a latitude in common. They also share a history of colonial invasion at the hands of the Dutch; in the seventeenth century

both regions were used for the benefit of this state. Here is where both regions converge: the tropics are invaded and dominated by the North. The crucial difference between them is the actual implementation. In the case of Brazil, the colonial machinery was public; it was conformed by the Portuguese Empire's efforts and gains. Indonesia, on the other hand, was part of the Dutch East India Company until 1945—a private colonial machine, so the State did not suffer from private losses. Another shared history was the U.S. intervention in 1956 when the CIA established a dictatorial military regime as part of its ongoing battle between communism and capitalism. This resulted in a genocide that specifically targeted Communists and people of Chinese descent, with more than one and a half million deaths starting that very year. What we call American imperialism is nothing but an actualization of colonization. Colonial trauma is a common factor among these two Souths.

JS: What you just told me leads me to think of how the processes of colonization left perverse traces in our social structures, forged out of centuries of oppression. In the case of Brazil and the Americas, for example, the purposeful extermination of indigenous populations and the subsequent treatment of enslaved people from Africa—colonial legacies that we can still feel in today's power structure. There is an ongoing genocide of indigenous and Black people. In this manner, I think that we still live in a Global South that follows the paradigms of the Global North. How do you experience these issues from this other South?



Common latitude between Pernambuco (BR) and Java (IND) marked by the green line. Image of the project of the work *Entre a Maldição e a Benção* made for the Yogyakarta Biennial 2017.

DL: I always had to be wary of viewing issues here through a different perspective than that in Brazil, nonetheless, it is impossible not to draw parallelisms. The violence that both countries cause towards the groups and ethnicities that protect the forests is incredibly cruel. Nowadays, I also see internal neocolonial structures operating in Brazil as well as Indonesia through an accelerated process of consumption and capitalism. Deforestation in Brazil is due to the soy industry; in Indonesia, deforestation happens for palm oil. I recognize that there are commonalities, but they are incomparable. We cannot generalize the Global South; we must be wary of their specific complexities.

JS: You got there through the need to understand your ancestry. How has this process of identification been for you?

DL: Through searching for my ancestors' stories, I found my own story and the processes of understanding lead to an existential scale of understanding.

After my participation in the 2017 Yogyakarta Biennial—the first time I came to Indonesia—I felt the formation of various connections accessible through a bodily memory. To better understand this context's complexities, I needed more time. Many mysteries related to my migrant family revealed themselves through coming here: for example, we learned that my grandparents created one of Indonesia's most widely read comics, *Wiro Anak Rimba Indonesia* (which ex-president of the United States Barack Obama allegedly read while he grew up here). I also felt it necessary in that time to know myself in relation to where I come from, but due to our ethnic isolation, there were very little access points for that information in Brazil.

This year, in 2020, I began the project *Toku Buku Liong* with curator Adelina Luft and the Cemeti Institute for Arts and Society, named after the publishing house and bookstore that my grandparents had in the 1950's. I was able to know the complexities of the region's politics and identity through this microscopic view of my biography.



Daniel Lie, *Reverberação/Gaung/Reverb*, 2020. Installation for the third volume of the *Toko Buku Llong* project, Cemeti Institute for Arts and Society, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2020.

After living here for over a year, developing an incredibly detailed project on my family's immigration and organizing our emotional archive, a mystery still remains: why the hell move to Brazil? According to my grandparents, it was for their children's future. I understand that this answer is related to a need to survive, but for me it does not contain enough details to solve the mystery. They did not move to places where there were other Indonesian diasporas.

From my experience, after going to Indonesia for the first time in 2017, and upon my return in 2019, I found the resources to understand the subjectivity and Brazilian way of being, perhaps even Western, from another perspective. In a certain way, a strange, foreign dimension was painfully confirmed, despite being born in Brazil. The same that allowed me to recognize that my understanding of certain things was different. For example, one of the obvious differences I feel is that silence here in Indonesia is not the opposite of noise. Silence has matter and it is also communication, something that the verbiage of most parts of the American continent cannot handle.

**How can we have another
point of reference in life
besides the norms of the
Global North, besides the
Western and Eurocentric
points of view? A factor that is
profoundly tied to
southeastern Brazil, and I dare
I say, expands to the whole
country and even all of Latin
America?**

Today I understand my diasporic movement as a tool to find my ancestral culture. When my family moved to Brazil, they went through a process of impoverishment: financial, affective, and cultural. There were no communities sharing their cultural experience, and so they had to acculturate to survive: learn the language, the customs, and, in many cases, engaging in a process of self-erasure. This was profoundly traumatic. I came here to treat these traumas that I inherited.

JS: I felt as if you opened a time portal by discovering your grandparents' comics. It was as if it were possible to insert yourself into these stories and understand them through this legacy, through the character of Wiro. What else stemmed from this process?





Wiro Anak Rimba
Indonesia, Issue 2 by
Toko Buku Liong, 1950s.

DL: Wiro came into my life in homeopathic doses. I was also able to understand my grandparents'—Ong King Nio and Lie Djoen Liem—legacy. Comics fascinated me since childhood, and when I was a teenager, my father told me that they created these works in their native city of Semarang. This was already impressive, but I had no idea just how big they would be. I thought it was something small, independent. At 29, at the end of my first trip to Indonesia, I came to understand its magnitude through a magazine article on the comic's impact in Indonesian society. Not even my father, aunts, or uncles knew. After returning to the island—this time to stay—I found a complete copy. I understood then that there was a

direct influence from the West, as the story is similar to that of Tarzan and Mowgli, but adapted to Indonesian culture in the 1950's. It was a shock; a great part of the story consists of conflicts, battles, and deaths that I read as patriarchal and imperialist attitudes. In the fourth volume of *Toko Buku Liong*, we delve into these themes. Back then, comics were as influential as social media is today. Wiro could have been used as an ideological weapon to shape the image of a newly independent Indonesia. In the process of creation of a new national identity, they purposefully excluded those of Chinese descent, like my family. It is ironic to think that the work that my ancestors created also reproduced the ideology that excluded them. The comic was re-edited twice in two different decades, without my grandparents' consent, and became more popular each time, but their names were omitted in each instance.

It has been incredible to come to know people for whom this comic was a cornerstone for their childhoods. After working as an artist for years, I discovered that my grandparents were known artists themselves! This meeting with Wiro has many layers; my project *Toko Buku Liong* revolves around this complex political, intimate, and familiar encounter.



Daniel Lie, *Wiro e o oceano de 1.500.000 almas*, 2020. Illustration for the text "Tio Wiro" in volume 4 of the *Toko Buku Liong* project.

Our work in said exhibition consisted in organizing an affective archive through an intimate point of view. My grandmother was never credited as an author; one of my goals was to publicly fix this mistake. Nonetheless, I could not gloss over our history: it is not about heroes and villains—good versus evil—it goes beyond this binary that is so prevalent in comics.

My goals as an art practitioner changed through this experience: I can see that my grandparents created a work of art that had a life of its own and was part of something greater. My challenge is to make something that one day will also have a life of its own, and its creation will be a contribution to this world, this very contribution being a rupture in the fog produced by heterosexual, patriarchal cisgenderism that insists on blinding us from the possibilities of a deeper relationship with existence.

JS: How do beings that exist in the other-than-human factor into this experience? Your artistic practice has been a search to understand the processes of life and death. Can you speak more to that?

DL: When we die we become part of a group of beings that I recognize as other-than-human. I was able to feel within myself a connection with many processes that I was experiencing over here, like the rituals that stem from cults dedicated to death entities. I had to change the way that I communicated with the dead after the death of my aunt (the eldest of my Indonesian family) and my maternal grandmother (who died at 100). My aunt died during this project's process of memory transcription and recollection, and this was an incredible loss, as we lost a living memory. The death of these two women has pushed me to accessing them through subtle ways. Many fascinating and mysterious events happened when they died. A being that does not have human form came to light in the moment of profound emotion due to their death; I understand this as a manifestation of subtlety.

When their bodies disintegrate, they expand in the world, in the same manner that all of our mothers and ancestors have disintegrated. The rock can be my ancestor as well as my great-grandmother.

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Text translated from Spanish to English by Isabel Ruiz.