Animation, Animism … Dukun Dukun & DNA

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Around eight years ago I lived in a quarter of Singapore which alongside welcoming weekend congregations of migrant workers, also hosted a multitude of migrant objects; electronics, cardboard, timber, and tin. Each night, as the traffic quieted, the quarter transformed and a subsistence-army of nocturnal foragers, trolleyed discarded items to recycling pickup-points in exchange for a few Singapore dollars. I noticed that timber was not yet integrated into this “nocturnal ecology” and began to venture out at night collecting planks and discarded furniture.

Figure 6.1 depicts a 1930s teak bed from a karang guni, junk store in this same neighborhood that has been my partner in an ongoing exploration of historic, material, genetic, and poetic stories of trees, wood and people in Southeast Asia. However, in order to explain how this partnership came about, I need to foreground some art historical and material-led concerns, as it was these that drew me to at all try to trace teak from this one bed to a possible regional plantation-source, via DNA tracking technology.

One prevailing pursuit has been to physically work-through the material, labor and spirit of the mid-twentieth century Malayan Modern Woodcut; a movement through which migrant artists of the Chinese left inscribed dreams of permanent-residence in Nanyang. Another impetus was to critically-engage Singapore’s economic success-story, famously predicated upon the island-city’s entrepôt processing of regional “cheap nature,” from rubber to palm-oil. As recently as 1977, Singapore’s seventh largest export was processed-timber from regional forests. I wanted to find a way to bring these two, macro and micro practices together; to rework the micro-gestures of the Malayan Woodcut in a macro-ecological context of “cuttings of wood” (meaning regional deforestation).

Questions about how and from where timber migrated to Singapore led me into conversations with plant biologists and later geneticists. In the spirit of the Malayan woodblock, I originally imagined I’d be carving stories of migration into my

* The Migrant Ecologies Project embraces concerned explorers, curious collectors, daughters of woodcutters, miners of memories and art by nature. The research in this essay and that of Shannon Lee Castleman’s which follows, was carried out under the auspices of this artist’s collective.


PHOTOGRAPH BY SHANNON LEE CASTLEMAN.