Indentured archives and speculative futures in Singapore: A conversation with artist Priyageetha Dia

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ABSTRACT
Priyageetha Dia is a Singapore-based transdisciplinary artist whose work brings together South-East Asian plantation histories, postcolonial memory, migration politics, and extractivism as it relates to both labour and data. The conversation focuses on submerged and speculative archives of indentureship in Dia’s work. Dia describes how specific strategies, such as layering archival images, embodying diasporic Tamil ritual, as well as incorporating CGI and 3D animation in her moving image installations create a counter archive of the histories and afterlives of indentureship in present-day Malaysia and Singapore.

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Across her time-based art, installations, and moving image, CGI and 3D animation works, Singapore-based artist Priyageetha Dia (b. Singapore, 1992) presents speculative counter narratives of South-East Asian plantation and indentured labour histories. Dia’s interest in creating such research-based multimedial work was sparked by her own ancestors’ voyage from South India to Malaya (present-day Malaysia). In our conversation over Zoom, Dia describes how her work animates both the material traces and the virtual contents of that colonial regime of labour to throw light on present-day extractive systems. The virtual here refers to latent forces within plantation worlds, not yet fully actualized, which may still disrupt the present to make possible different futures. Wanting to see more counter-narratives specific to the Indian diaspora in Malaysia and Singapore, Dia asks, “How can one formulate alternate visualities and thinking around plantation studies situated between South-East Asian geographies and the South Asian diaspora that is not predicated on the white habitus, the colonial, the patriarchal and the exploitative. Or more so, without replicating the grammar of violence” (Dia, Landware, 2022).

Figure 1  Priyageetha Dia, The Sea Is the Blue Memory, 2022. Image courtesy of Kochi-Biennale Foundation.
Karin Shankar [KS]: I’m delighted to be speaking with you today. I saw your work *The Sea Is the Blue Memory* at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in January of this year and I was so struck by the range of themes, materials, archives, and practices that you’re employing to think differently about the legacies of plantation labour and indentureship in Malaysia. Could you describe some of the main concerns of your art practice currently?

Priyageetha Dia [PD]: In my work, currently, I’m continuing to look into Southeast Asian histories, specific to the plantation industries in Singapore and Malaysia. I see my art practice as a way to recover and speculate on narratives of resistance. Also, my current research work delves into extractivism, where I attempt to establish conceptual linkages between historical colonial extractivism, representative of the plantation system, and contemporary phenomena of data extractivism.

Other than diasporic and migrant histories, I’m also looking at our relationship to the non-human – be it with the environment and ecologies within it, as well as an inquiry into the interface between humans, non-humans, and artificial intelligence.

In a recent exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, I presented a work titled *LAMENT H.E.A.T.* This work offers a perspective on the concept of ‘Thirdspace’ by postcolonial theorist Edward Soja, and how it relates to the plantation space, while also drawing on oral histories. The project is primarily centered on the exploration of lamentation songs, specifically the *Oppari*, a Tamil lamentation song traditionally performed by women from the marginalized social strata.

In response to the gaps in the availability of written documentation of lamentation songs in Singapore, I employed artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT, to produce new compositions. My approach involved rendering the capabilities of ChatGPT to generate an *Oppari* song in Tamil. The initial AI-generated text displayed certain inconsistencies and ‘hallucinations’, which is a characteristic of AI’s capacity for generating text. Nonetheless,
this process yielded a complete song, which required subsequent phases of refinement and augmentation.

To enhance the linguistic authenticity and vernacular nuances within the AI-generated song, I looked at it as an iterative process. This involved training the AI model by providing it with additional prompts and context, thereby facilitating the production of a song imbued with a more authentic, Tamil vernacular style.

In my engagement with AI, I contemplated the nonhuman dimension, a thematic thread I have been weaving into my artistic practice. I’m interested in the convergence of internal human memory and the cognitive processes of the machine. I had previously been looking at external archives – both written and visual material. In the process of creating LAMENT H.E.A.T, I wanted the source of knowledge to revert instead to memory – be it human or machine. Finally, I introduced a speculative facet into the work. I incorporated a drone capable of radio transmission to disseminate Oppari songs within the fictional plantation setting that I had built on Unreal Engine [a video game development tool].

The act of grieving through an Oppari involves a profound visceral experience characterized by an intense burning sensation in the pit of one’s stomach. Performers of Oppari undergo this transformative process as a prerequisite for the spontaneous rendition of these mournful songs. Within this context, I drew a parallel between the elemental concept of fire and the Oppari tradition. In the presence of the drone transmitting these songs, which symbolize an auditory connection, the rubber trees featured in the video work symbolically undergo self-immolation. In this work, the imagery of fire takes on a dual role, signifying both purification and a form of cleansing.

Early this year, I conducted a field visit with the curator of the exhibition, Syaheedah Iskandar, to meet with my aunt, who had her childhood experiences labouring on a plantation in Kuala Lumpur. During our visit, my aunt shared her recollections of life on the plantation, which included the process of latex collection, but she also talked about navigating the plantation grounds and
described the surrounding terrain, including rivers and their routes extending beyond the plantation space. She also graciously extended an invitation for us to meet her aunt, who is a distant family relation of mine. We took an hour-long journey to Batang Kali in Selangor. The landscape at the plantation site has undergone significant transformation, with the original plantation having been cleared to make way for urban housing designated for plantation workers. Paradoxically, when surveying the vista, one can discern the presence of palm oil plantations in the distance, a stark reminder of the site’s historical cultivation of rubber trees.

Each plantation estate is accompanied by infrastructures of both Tamil schools and Hindu temples, serving as a focal point for community-building within the estate. Our visit was further enriched by this surreal experience of handling the rubber tapping knife, a relic retained by my aunt’s neighbour. She recounted the labourious routine of the plantation workers, which commenced in the early hours of the morning. The daily routine involved covering an expanse of one acre, equivalent to approximately 300 rubber trees. Workers who sought to augment their income would begin their day even earlier, around 1 or 1:30 AM, aiming to cover at least two acres of land.

Figure 2  Priyageetha Dia, LAMENT H.E.A.T, 2023. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.
KS: Ritual – whether Oppari in this recent work or various everyday Tamil rituals in your moving image installation Rite of the Time Teller (2021) – seems to be a thread in your work. What does ritual mean to you?

P: Rituals, from my perspective, represent a repository of knowledge. I consistently draw upon the wisdom imparted by my maternal lineage – insights shared by both my mother and grandmother pertaining to various ritualistic practices. These familial insights are woven into the fabric of my video works. In The Sea Is the Blue Memory, the marigold flowers assume a ritualistic significance, serving as a conduit through which I pay homage to those who have perished at sea. Conversely, within The Rite of the Time Teller, the focus shifts towards the exploration of commonplace rituals, and I delve into the profound implications of bearing witness to these customary observances within the domestic sphere.

KS: …right, I noticed your attention to the gesture of various rituals too. A gesture is sort of the beginning of an act, pointing to many different futures that can perhaps reveal something new about the present. Rituals are also a kind of embodied archive… could you say more about the archives you are working with?
PD: Initially, the primary source of my archives consisted of images procured from stock photography websites, specifically featuring colonial-era depictions. My rationale for adopting this approach was rooted in a deliberate exploration of the immediacy associated with this archive, and considering the accessibility of these images through common search engines like Google. A central focus of my enquiry was to contemplate the ways in which images of indentured labourers manifest themselves visually to users in a readily accessible digital space. I was also interested in the accessibility of such materials without the constraints of institutional gatekeeping to official archives.

The images I employed were predominantly sourced from repositories such as Getty or Shutterstock. My intention behind their use was multifaceted. I was interested in both the reclamation of these images and ethical considerations surrounding image ownership. To navigate these ethical complexities, my treatment of these images primarily took the form of unique prints, deliberately rejecting the production of multiple editions, which could be perceived as exploitative.

Beyond the colonial archives, my investigation also incorporated personal documentation and possessions, a dimension that became pronounced in *The Rite of the Time Teller*. In my current works relating to plantation histories, I have distanced myself from reliance on colonial-era imagery. I have observed a trend of fetishization associated with artists working with such archival materials, often driven by the anticipation and enthusiasm of those who seek the reproduction and circulation of colonial images. In response to this, I have chosen to discontinue my engagement with these images and have shifted my focus towards the construction of speculative archives for which I create images through CGI or 3D software.

When I’m confronted with enquiries regarding the classification of this approach as an ‘archive’, I assert that the notion of an archive, as conceptualized here, represents a deliberate departure
from conventional colonial paradigms and logics governing the production and documentation of images related. This conceptualization liberates the idea of an archive from preexisting conventions and understandings, and offers an alternative and innovative framework for consideration.

KS: I want to turn to the question of the other-than-human. I’m taken by your close attention to the textures of the sea and also of the plantation. Your attention itself is like one of the protagonists of your work…what has this method of looking or sensing revealed to you?

PD: In my archival research, it became evident that the journey by sea to Malaya lacked comprehensive visual documentation. Within this historical void, I made a choice to explore the maritime domain as a speculative archival resource. The sea stands as a repository of history without discernible boundaries, both in terms of origin and culmination. The historical narratives embedded within maritime space are enigmatic and prove to be less readily accessible compared to their terrestrial counterparts.

The juxtaposition of the sea and land unveils distinctive power hierarchies and delineations. When considering the coexistence of the sea and plantation spaces as distinct ‘territories’, a central character in my work emerges – the ‘sea spirit’. This figure assumes a luminous presence, an attribute I conceptualize as a mechanism for the visibility and prominence of the protagonists I build and work with in my videos. The shininess of their exterior serves as a means to both reflect and demand attention.

KS: There is a kind of geo-poetic sense also in your enquiry. How is the landscape of the plantation informing the video game you are working on in conjunction with Landware, for instance?

PD: I adopt a non-linear approach to my creative process, facilitating the juxtaposition and accumulation of visual elements rather than adhering to a conventional narrative
structure. I am particularly attuned to the intricate power dynamics inherent in the realm of gaming. It is imperative for me to refrain from perpetuating these dynamics, especially in the context of the characters I develop navigating these built environments.

Additionally, I contemplate the concept of consent within the digital environment, a dimension I consider in relation to the non-human entities featured in my artistic compositions. Even seemingly mundane actions, such as leaping over a tree log, prompt me to reflect upon the manner in which respect can be extended to these entities during such interactions.

**KS:** You describe one of your methods as digital semiotics, could you tell us a little more about that?

**PD:** There is a great use of signs and symbols in the images that I work with. It offers me the means to investigate various modes of interaction, reinforcement, and occasional contradiction in the conveyance of my intended narratives.

One specific aspect of my research previously involved the creation of archival print works. In this context, I reproduce archived images in a bitmap format. To translate an image onto a surface through screen printing, it requires rendering the image again into a pixelated form to then transfer onto a printing mesh. This inherently involves a digital layering and re-rendering of the original image. Subsequently, I pose the question of how to integrate computer-generated imagery (CGI) representations of the plantation, as well as elements or gestures associated with the plantation, into this framework. The objective is to amalgamate these diverse elements cohesively.

For me, these methodologies serve as a means to establish a novel repository that introduces counter-narratives that challenge established conventions. It reconsiders received historical accounts and narratives from alternative vantage points through this digital image-making process.

**KS:** Thank you so much for this conversation!
Figure 4  Priyageetha Dia, Video Still, LANDWARE, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.