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Manifesto of the Durian: Smell and Area Studies

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Abstract

This paper is a manifesto of the durian. The durian creates a fellowship, which differentiates Southeast Asian people and their Others. The pungent odor and mushy taste delimit a form of topological belonging. The smell and the taste bring the experience of eating durian into an ontological world. From remote corners of Indonesia to the highland region of mainland Southeast Asia, the infrastructures, practices and experiences of smelling and eating durian are constitutive of a Southeast Asia, which is at once similar and very different from the one known to conventional area studies. This durian topology leads me to argue that multispecies turn in STS is an important embodied and tactile complement to the critique to area studies.

Keywords

multispecies; area studies; Southeast Asia; durian; topology

Introduction

The taste and smell of no other fruit is as controversial and detested as that of the durian. The Oxford English dictionary defines the durian as "The oval or globular fruit of Durio zibethinus, family Sterculiaceæ, a tree of the Indian Archipelago; it has a hard prickly rind and luscious cream-coloured pulp, of a strong civet odour, but agreeable taste; also the tree itself" (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). Commonly found in Southeast Asia, the fruit is a delicacy for most Southeast Asians, but many others are provoked by its custard texture and horrid smell. Among other unflattering comparisons, people who hate durian have compared its smell to "rotten eggs," "bad cheese," and "animal's poo." Even so many Southeast Asians take great pleasure in eating durian, which they describe as the "king of fruit." Just as a king holds authority over a territory, plants can also indelibly mark a territory. Such a simple and common understanding of the connection between plants, taste, and geography is exhibited, for instance, in the association of dates with the Middle East and kiwis with New Zealand.

Commodity geographies are often juxtaposed with tastes and ways of eating or drinking. Thus, the concept of Geographical Indicator (GI) has been proposed to legally bind a commodity or a product to its place of origin, such as a certain type of wine to a particular region located in California or France. A wine expert can pinpoint the origin of a bottle of wine by smelling and tasting it blindly. Taste indicates geographical location, and an assemblage of materials ("terroir") unique to a region will produce a distinctive taste. For example, the specific quality of water in Yamagata Prefecture (Japan) is the main ingredient for Yamagata

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sake production. As a concept, the Geographical Indicator situates taste and quality in a specific geographical location. However, if we turn the concept on its head, it becomes obvious that taste is not confined to any specific location since sensorial capacities for tasting and smelling are also lodged in our bodies. When bodies wander across a vast geographical space, taste is therefore no longer situated in a region. Instead, taste and smell follow the movement of bodies. This turns area into an embodied and affective space.

In the introduction to this special edition, Casper Bruun Jensen and I reflect on some problems with much existing area studies scholarship as they are seen from science and technology studies. While the dominant critiques of area in terms of geopolitics are obviously relevant, there has not been much interrogation of the concept of "area" *itself*. The continuous reliance of area studies work on a certain level of geographical location—country, region, planet—has shown us that the current work on area studies has always started from "somewhere." With inspiration from the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1987] 2007), we propose to circumvent this geographical trap by conceptualizing area as a polyphonic structure. This brief engagement seeks to explore one form of area complexity that stems from the entanglement of human's sensorial capacity and durian.

In recent years, there have been many studies showing how multispecies relationships constitute complex assemblages (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Some are symbiotic relationships such as mushrooms and their tree hosts (Tsing 2015). Others exist in a monstruous relation such as when jellyfish consumes small fish and destroy fisheries (Swanson et al. 2017). Some plants are parasitic to the soil such as the palm oil (Chao 2022). The anthropologist Sophie Chao (ibid.) has observed how palm oil trees introduced to Papua has become an invasive species, which sucks water from the soil and destroys biodiversity. Thus, palm oil plantations appear as contact zones where Anthropocene problems begin and are reproduced. Southeast Asia, especially the tropical forests in Indonesia, is replete with such contact zones with implications far beyond the region. Durian trees, which are not as ferocious as palm oil trees, create different relations to the landscape. For one thing, they grow mostly in Southeast Asia and, with the exception of a few places, like India, they seem disinclined to proliferate in other regions. When they grow, they can do so in forest gardens without direct human involvement. Only recently are they grown in plantations and tended by human.

Durian does not represent an area (as a geographical concept) but finds "voices" through an ecology of practices, in a way that brings to life the polyphonies between people and fruits. The multispecies human-durian relation shapes a topology that can be likened to a "geo-body" (Winichakul 1997). Area no longer refers to a fixed territory but to the geo-body that emerges from material itineraries and entanglements (Jensen 2021) as well as practical assemblage centered upon the durian.

"Manifesto of the Durian" tells a story of how durian hails, captures, and relates to people through their odor and taste, sharing affects and shaping embodied sensorial experiences of durian eating. Some people reject the call, others embrace it. True, durian is unlike a map. It is less rigid and powerful. But it is a material that does a mapping. Unlike a map which imposes a form on landscape and sociality, durian makes a statement calling people to participate in the embodied experience. Embrace the smell or listen to the sound of the fruit, then you are part of the durian world. Reject the smell, then you will find yourself outside of that

world. In a sense, this essay traces the topology of the senses, in particular the smell. It is not a concrete mapping of the smell, but how the smell enlivens your imagination about a place called an area. But while durian indeed has different varieties, they matter less than the sensorial affect produced by its taste and smell.

Durian as an Ambiguous Commodity

The history of human relations with durian goes back to the colonial time. Although no one is certain where the word "durian" came from and was first applied to the fruit, it would seem most logically to refer to the appearance of the fruit. In Malay language, *duri* means spike or thorn, so *durian* refers to "something with spikes or thorns." However, instead of emphasizing the appearance, the earliest and most popular scientific name of the fruit, *Durio zibethinus* (civet cat durian) (Goloubinoff and Hoshi 2004), points to an unclear connection between the fruit and the Indian civet cat *Viverra zibetha*. *Durio zibethinus* is now the most widely cultivated species (Brown 1997, 2). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the oldest document mentioning durian (durion) is from 1588 (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). Since these early times, smell has been a defining part of the agency ascribed to the fruit. A document dated to 1727 written by A. Hamilton says, "the durean is another excellent fruit, but offensive to some peoples noses (sic.), for it smells very like human excrements, but when once tasted the smell vanishes" (quoted in ibid.). Alejandro R. Roces's note mentions how the fruit "has a repulsive smell strong enough to knock a carabao out" (1949, 81). Clearly, durian has asserted an agentive relation with people long before, for the same reason, it was banned from modern buildings and public transportation.

Market logic does not always apply to the life of durian. Unlike matsutake mushroom, a rare and expensive commodity (Tsing 2015), durian does not follow the logic of peripheral capitalism. Matsutake emerges as a resource from the periphery of capitalist production and becomes a commodity through the practice of foraging in the forests. In contrast, durian trees grow in wild gardens, but are also planted in the plantation. From the beginning of its lifecycle, the durian thus occupies an ambiguous position in the capitalist logic, and the ambiguity continues along the supply chain. At the end of the chain, the ambiguity remains. It can be seen in the discrepancy between the expensive price tag at supermarkets and the absence of the fruit at fine restaurants. Apparently, there is a disjuncture between the fruit as an expensive commodity and what rich restaurant-goers expect to find on their dining tables. Very different from matsutake in this regard, the elevated price does not turn durian into an elite delicacy. The former climbs up the hierarchy of taste and value, the latter remains shunned despite also being beloved.

One part of the life of the durian happens in the periphery of capitalism; another part emerges from a capital-intensive labor and production system. Wild durian trees sprout anywhere they like and need no special treatments. When they mature, the fruits just drop from the trees. Upon hearing the sound, people will rush to collect the falling durians, and this kind of spontaneous foraging often turns into brawl or leads to disputes when the durians land in a neighboring garden. Similar to the scenes described by Anna Tsing when matsutake picking becomes a dangerous business, hunting fallen fruits at a wild durian garden can lead to bloody violence.

In addition to wild durian trees, there are also plantations that do not follow the logic of peripheral capitalism but can be described with the concept of "modular capitalism," which relies on "social discipline under the regimented and simplified module and rhythm of the plantation" (Tsing et al. 2019, 189). Durian plantations seek to control the production cycle of the tree. A durian tree will produce fruits after eight years of age. The older the tree, the more fruit it yields. In average, a 20-year-old tree yields around 200 durian fruits. This happens one or two times in a year, usually before the rainy season. Durian trees in a plantation receive standardized treatment such as the use of fertilizer, the arrangement of distance between the trees, and the application of pesticide. But the most important module of treatment is during the post-harvest stage. To extend the life cycle of the fruits, vacuum packaging combined with cold storage facility are crucial to prevent the harvests from deteriorating and to enable long distance shipping. These are the indispensable modules of durian plantation, and their capitalistic dimensions are obvious since only few durian farmers can invest in the required equipment and technologies. This modular capitalism allows durian plantations to proliferate across Southeast Asian region and facilitates exchanges as when, for instance, Thailand's durian Monthong trees are cultivated at durian plantations in Indonesia. But as noted, the modular capitalism of the durian has not extended across the planet. Durian plantations are found mostly in Southeast Asia and the market for frozen durians rarely reaches groceries in Europe and the US. In Japan or Korea, though, durians are available at ordinary supermarkets, despite their exorbitant prices.

Like sushi in the case of Japan, the story of durian and of Southeast Asia is intimately related. As noted, the tree only grows in the region, where at least 30 species have been found (Brown 1997). Different types have different sizes, tastes, and colors. A country can make claims to special types of durian, for example, durian Monthong from Thailand, durian Medan from Indonesia, and durian Musang King from Malaysia. But only durian connoisseurs can tell the difference; for most people, durian is just durian. There are nevertheless varying personal preferences. Some people like dry durian meat, others prefer softer and mushy ones. The being of the durian—a dry one, a mushy one—testifies to the ontological plurality of the fruit. It is not only the physical difference that matters but the relation of the difference of material characteristics with taste.

The presence of durian in Southeast Asia can be described as a multiverse of itineraries and circumstances. YouTube videos and signs posted in hotels and public transportation show a complex ecology of practices connected by a network of rules, which aims to keep control over embodied and personalized experience of smell and taste. This major ecology of practice is reciprocal. On the one side, the rules transform durian into a detested kind of food, banned from public spaces. On the other side, the network of customers who dislike the smell of the fruit force the rules to emerge. The iconic instance of durian agency appeared when it was blamed for contributing to a plane accident in Medan in Northern Sumatra a few decades ago. In other circumstances, of course, durian has a reputation as very desirable food to be consumed. For example, Asian YouTubers often counter derogatory statements about the odor and the taste of durian with expressions of love for the durian, which, for many Southeast Asians, is indeed the "king of fruit."

Despite the restrictions and a poor public image, durian remains very expensive. I once saw a pack of durian at a local supermarket in Japan with a price tag of almost $100 USD, much higher than the price of a tasty Pad Thai or even a very nice sushi plate in a Tokyo restaurant. In Indonesian supermarkets, a pack of locally

grown durian can also cost 20 USD, which is more than imported kiwis from New Zealand. At street vendors the price is usually lower, but nonetheless expensive compared to other fruits, imported or not.

Eating Durian as Embodied Experience

Through the history of modernity, thinking and reason have been privileged over embodied experience. Reason and logic are considered more civilized than emotion and feeling, and human activities that exercise these faculties have been deemed more important than bodily activities such as eating, smelling, or breathing (Mol 2021). Thus, practices of eating and drinking, which maintain regular bodily functions, are placed lower in a hierarchy of practice, lower than cultured activities like reading literature. As Annemarie Mol argues (ibid.), we need to think beyond the asymmetrical structure between thinking/reason and being/doing. In other words, we must avoid "erasing the difference" by assigning the higher order of practices as the only acceptable practice. Mol raises this important point in relation to the anthropologist Tim Ingold's discussions of being in the environment. According to Ingold, existing in the environment involves the extension of the human body to reach out and feel the surroundings. On the other hand, Mol emphasizes the importance of bringing the outside environment back into the folds of body. For Mol, therefore, being depends as much on eating and smelling—which is a matter of moving selected parts of the surroundings into the body, as it depends on perceiving and feeling the surroundings. In so doing, Mol reclaims the mundane practices that have long been considered as having the status lower than thinking and contemplating.

What relates people to durian is the practical experience of eating. Since the durian must be properly ripe for consumption, this requires knowledge and experience. If the fruit is too young, the meat will be dry and hard with a bland taste. But when it gets overripe, the meat becomes mushy and begins to taste like ammoniac. Thus, the ability to choose a fruit that is just right determines the whole eating experience. But this ability cannot be exercised if you buy packaged durian fruits at the grocery stores or supermarkets. No proper knowledge is required, since the decision about what constitutes the right fruit has been made for you in advance.

During the durian season, people open temporary roadside durian kiosks. The favorite locations are near gardens where wild durian trees grow. Varying size fruits are piled at the stalls, more than 30 durians during a good season, and perhaps just a few during a bad one. Costumers turn up with no advance plan to buy the durians. Driving along the road, they simply notice the durian piles, feel tempted, and decide to make a quick stop at the kiosks. Obviously, it is impossible to spot a good durian from a car passing by at 40 or 60 km/hour. Therefore, pure luck as well as practical knowledge about the fruit are necessary to make the durian acquisition an enjoyable one.

In Indonesia, roadside durian kiosks are places to find good quality durians at reasonable prices. The fruits sold at the kiosks are fresh since they have ripened naturally on the trees (*matang pohon*) and just dropped to the ground during the night or a few days before. At these stalls, the price of good quality durians is typically about half of what the same ones would cost at a supermarket. As noted, supermarket buying requires no prior knowledge. Costumers just pick packages of prepared durians on the table or frozen fruits

stored in the refrigerator. The price is calculated by weight and the number of fruits in a package will vary depending on size. There is no guarantee that a higher price will reflect a better quality. In contrast, quality goes hand in hand with the price at the roadside kiosks. The price is negotiable among buyers and sellers, but the negotiation is based on the quality of the fruits. In other words, the ability to judge a good fruit comes before the price. Therefore, the practice in this node of the supply chain is entirely different. While at the supermarket the practice is standardized and the costumers are expected to play a minimal role, at the roadside kiosks they have a central role in the transaction, which draws on their knowledge of a good durian.

The art of bargaining, a sharp nose, and sensitive ears are important factors in performing a successful negotiation at the durian kiosk. The art of bargaining requires basic knowledge of the price range within the location. For example, the price range in a place near a city in Java will be higher than the price range in highland villages or places outside of Java. A buyer needs an estimation of the lowest ceiling of the price of a good durian, since offering a price below the ceiling will be considered improper and may lead to a quarrel. Language is also an important factor in the art of bargaining. The ability to speak local languages or dialects will be beneficial, not only in terms of price but also to choose the desired fruit.

At the durian kiosk, the practice of negotiation includes verbal exchange but also a non-linguistic semiotic exchange (Kohn 2013). Excreting a unique odor is the sign that a durian fruit has reached consumable maturity. Young durian produces no strong odor. This is the famous odor that can "knock a carabao out" and which offends many people. The ability of the nose to detect and recognize this pungent odor is indispensable to set the boundary between a durian lover and hater, and to begin the art of bargaining. Buyers who make a stop at a roadside durian kiosk will encounter piles of the thorny fruits, which they will need to carefully rummage to find good quality durians. They will check the size: one that is too small will yield small fruit and possibly thin meat, but one that is too large may turn out to have empty rooms inside. This step requires a sharp nose and sensitive hearing. When picking up a fruit, the buyer will bring the bottom end of the fruit (the end with no remaining branch of the tree) closer to the nose and smell through the crack on the durian skin. To confirm the smell, the buyer will juggle the fruit or tap it several times with a machete to listen for an indication of emptiness. A good quality durian will produce strong smell and a solid inside, with no sound of moving fruits. Durian without smell is a sign that the fruit has not yet matured properly. However, sometimes the buyer has no adequate sensory capacities to detect the odor or the sound. In that case, the buyer must rely on the judgment of the seller.

Once the buyer and the seller have reached an agreement over the quality of a durian fruit, the bargaining over the price commences. Often the bargaining starts with the seller offering a price, which the buyer will counter based on his or her knowledge of the local price of durian. In addition to the maturity stage, the bargain will also consider the size of the fruit. The combination of the odor (maturity), the speculated inner space, and the size of the fruit are indicators that render economic value to the chosen durian. The odor, the sound, and the size become the material semiotic signs that the durian offers to situate the fruit in the consumption domain and take part in the value chain. The complexity of practices in selecting the fruits and in bargaining for the price have missed from the relation between supermarket's durian and their buyers.

Odor/smell, sound/auditory, and size/visual are modes of relationship that bring the environments to the body and at the same time constitute the worlding of the durian. These practices destabilize the certainty of capitalist logic in the worlding of the durian when the market value of the durian are not determined by standardized value but, rather, by the relation of the consumers (buyers) with the affordances offered by the fruit. Therefore, the odor, the sound, and the form of the durian limit durian topologies and set the worlding of the durian apart from other emergent worldings of human-nonhuman relations.

Conclusion: Eating, Topology, and Entangled Area

In the introduction to this special edition, Casper Bruun Jensen and I suggest that critiques of area studies often find it difficult to avoid the trap of spatial formation. Those critiques need to engage with a fundamental problem that renders area studies problematic in the first place. The "solution" offered by elevating the discussion to the meta-theoretical level does not address the problem of why area studies need a retooling of its perspective and method. The problem emerges in particular because there has been no attempt to criticize the concept of "area." On the other hand, the effort to bring area studies into a critical engagement with other disciplines demonstrates the inability of area studies work to reflect on its conceptual limitation. This is why we seek with these engagements to bring STS into a critical dialogue with area studies. The purpose is to find room for engagement that enables us to respond to the critique of area studies without declining the right of area studies to exist.

Along with the other contributions to, "Manifesto of the Durian" offer illustration of some of the critical avenues that can open when STS engages with area studies. The necessary starting point of the engagement is to question the concept of area as a spatial configuration. Instead of returning to the area as a place, we work against the limitation of the concept to resort to the materialities that entangle the space into temporary, ambiguous, and fleeting constructs. Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2007) introduce the concept of rhizomatic entanglement to talk about spatial unrolling and, at the same time, they work against the modern attempt to attach a fixed identity to rhizomatic entanglements. Here, I have drawn on these ideas to connect durian with sensorial capacities of eating practices, the geographical spread of the trees, and the political economy of the fruit. Thus, I have suggested in this engagement that the rhizomatic entanglement forms a topology of area studies, an understanding of an area less as a geographical container but as a web of practical connections of bodies, more-than-humans, technologies, and capital.

Mol (2021, 6) warns us that eating practice is partial, taking place in restaurants, kitchens, living rooms, cafes, backyards, food stalls (*warung*), and school canteens. But it also consists of diverse practices of cutting foods, tasting, smelling, chewing, swallowing, and drinking. The locations, eating practices, and consumed materials form partial connections, and together with political economy they constitute the topologies of eating. To illustrate the flexibility of the topology, I explored sites and practices connected to the life of the durian, from roadside kiosks and supermarkets to durian plantations. I also included digital sites such as YouTube® videos. Sensorial involvement through smell marks the topology connecting one durian to other durians, one consumption site to other sites, and one commodity chain to other chains, marking an entangled area of the durian.

This brief exploration has also brought attention to the ambiguous material practices of capitalism as illustrated in the double processes of peripheral and modular capitalism. Durian trees grown in wild gardens exist in the peripheral capitalistic network, and limited application of agricultural technology precludes the durians from reaching the end of supply chains in global cities. On the other hand, durian plantation employs modular capitalism standards—for example, a cold storage—to allow the harvest to reach markets beyond Southeast Asia. The practices of eating durian also illustrate the difference in human-fruit relations. As in roadside durian kiosks, the site of peripheral capitalism presents an ethnographic scene where durian invites humans through smell, sound, and size. Humans should recognize these "affordances" to take part in the exchange. Those who can relate to the durian will be part of the durian world, whereas those who cannot are left out of the world. "Manifesto of Durian" tells a story about how the durian incorporates itself into the critique of area studies by creating polyphonic topologies of human-nonhuman relation to reclaim area from its geographical limitation.

"Manifesto of the Durian" seeks to reposition STS in a critical engagement with the ontology of area in area studies. It does not take the durian to represent the area by illustrating that the durian is Southeast Asia. Instead, this essay resorted to the durian as an agent that produces "areas" (plural) through the fruit's capacity to relate with humans. Through this distinctive form of non-human agency, areas emerge as topologies, partly shaped by capitalist and modular logic and partly by situated practices of human-nonhuman entanglement. In answering the critique, I hope that future and speculative area studies should emerge from rhizomatic and topological networks. An example of rhizomatic area studies is the worlding of the durian.

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