Fungible geographies? [Book Review]

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Let me begin with two positionality statements to contextualize both my praise and criticism of Aihwa Ong’s ‘Fungible Life’. First, I am a self-identifying geographer scrutinizing a self-identifying anthropologist’s book. Consequently, it is the insights, methods, approaches, and data that would remain opaque in my own disciplinary perspective that draw my curiosity. The inverse, the blind spots and weaknesses that a geographically informed approach would have allayed interests me too. Would researching the same site from a more geographical imagination have yielded different results? Second, when regarding the—often exaggerated and over- polemicized— theoretical debates in human geography (van Meeteren, 2016: 7–25; van Meeteren et al., 2016a), I might be identified as ‘coming from the wrong side of the tracks’ by some of the people reading this review. As a critical realist, I tout theorizing in a stratified ontology, which is in tension with some interpretations of the assemblage-type theorizing advocated in Fungible Life (Brenner et al., 2011). Despite being a heartfelt proponent of engaged pluralism and convinced that different ways of seeing improve our understanding of the world (van Meeteren et al., 2016b), I read Fungible Life bracing for some cognitive dissonance. My positionality compels me to read this book with the curiosity of an apprentice but not without preconceived reservations. The ‘global assemblage approach’ (Collier and Ong, 2005) that underpins Fungible Life (p. xiii, 7) has a particular conception of the global. Within this approach, global is not a geographical scale, but global phenomena denote objects that have become so independent from their origin, universalized, that they have become ‘abstractable, mobile, and dynamic, moving across and reconstituting “society,” “culture,” and “economy”’ (Collier and Ong, 2005: 4). These global phenomena are subsequently ‘articulated in specific situations—or territorialized in assemblages—[ . . . where . . . ] they define new material, collective, and discursive relationships’ (ibid). The main global phenomenon featured in Fungible Life is ‘Euro-American cosmopolitan science’¹ (p. xiii) and its expression in biomedical science clusters such as Singapore’s Biopolis, which constitutes the books’ primary empirical entry point. A science cluster such as Biopolis is a familiar figure for economic geographers. It invokes the high-tech fantasy (Massey et al., 1992) of highly paid scientists, pharmaceutical companies, university institutes, and governments, all seeking to be the prime recipients of the proceeds from a new

¹ Casting Euro-American cosmopolitanism simultane- ously as a geographically specific and a global phe- nomenon is a cause of cognitive dissonance to me. How can something be both specific to Europe and (North?) America—already a sweeping geographical statement in itself—and universal? Interpreting Collier and Ong (2005: 10), I conclude that the adjective ‘Euro-American’ refers to the geographical origin of an object rather than its current geographical referent. Extending this propositional logic implies that cosmo- politan Singapore could theoretically be more ‘Euro- American’ than large parts of contemporary Europe or the United States.
round of capitalist expansion. The assemblage approach focuses on how this political-economic strategy conjoins with different contingencies that combined produce structural effects that cannot be reduced to the underlying political-economic strategy. It is in identifying and recognizing these unexpected ‘overflows’ in which Fungible Life excels. The most important of these overflows is that the interaction of Biopolis and the latest wave of racialized biomedical science produces new Asian identities that travel further than the mere biomedical register.

The notions of ‘Asian’ and ‘traveling’ bring us to the geographical. Indeed, Fungible Life is bustling with geographies, albeit they are not always systematically investigated. The backdrop geography that drives the book is that of emerging Asian markets of segmented medicine based on shared genetic traits associated with specific ethnic groups. Emerging market geographies, and the potential values they yield, are the product of social construction by interested parties (Lee, 2006). In Biopolis, market-making revolves around biomarkers and ethnicity claims. The narrative harnessing Biopolis itself invokes another important geography that reflects the strategic coupling (Yeung, 2009) between the interests of the Singaporean state apparatus, transnational capitalist firms, and ambitious universities that attract talent and ‘world class scientists’ from all over the world. Together they want Singapore to function as a ‘spigot’ (p. 191) that geographically spreads best practices and knowledge across the wider Asia-Pacific region. If there is money to be made by producing ‘Asian’ biomedicine, it better be in Biopolis. This aspiration intermingles with the bifurcated geography of ‘world class talent’ (Ch. 5) that juxtaposes highly remunerated United States or European-educated grant-amasming scientists with ‘Asian domestic’ (e.g. Chinese educated) labor. While the former flock to Biopolis for ‘block grants’ (p. 149); ‘less bureaucratized internal review boards’ (p. 144); or aiming to circumvent ‘the threat of being disrupted by animal liberators’ (p. 60); the latter seem to feel that the Singapore scholarship program ‘is mainly interested in recruiting labor for labs, not in encouraging creativity in science’ (p. 126), but Biopolis is only a stopover to career enhancement in the United States anyway (p. 131). In addition, there is the geography of the ‘global university’ that feels compelled to have campuses all over the world, a lucrative business. Ong stresses how we nevertheless have to regard Biopolis as more than just a profit machine. Biopolis interfaces with the health geography of the whole Asian macroregion where rapid urbanization in tropical conditions prompts all kinds of health risks. These risks pile on top of the demography of Singapore’s aging population and the geopolitics surrounding Euro-American pharmaceutical companies’ (undesirable) ‘ownership’ of distinctive Asian genetic knowledge. The biomedical science cluster produces new notions of ‘Asianness’ that are argued to mobilize and construct (groups of) people in new ways as they are described with a common biomarker. This emphasis on ‘Asianness’ reflects how all the different geographies figuring in Fungible Life are routinely cast on a metageographic (Lewis and Wigen, 1997) canvas of ‘Eurocentric’ versus ‘Asia-centric’. Unfortunately, this master frame overshadows the subtler interesting geographical tensions explored above. This invocation of the master frame appears the consequence of a desire to reflect the respondents’ views, whose geographical imagination seems to be constrained by their professional and transnational backgrounds. Although qualified by the author’s reflexivity on the tensions of the frame’s systematic application, the master frame contributes inadvertently to the reification, rather than the questioning, of the socially constructed dichotomy between Eurocentrism and Asiacentrism.

Another weakness surrounding the invoked geographical narratives concerns their capacity to travel: Are they as fungible as the fungible genomics underpinning these geographies’ production? Fungible Life builds on a relatively narrow empirical scope: It is an ethnography of Biopolis combined with a much smaller exploratory study of a similar institution in China. Based on this limited empirical material, however, the book makes claims about the effects of the
identities constructed in Biopolis on, for instance, regional biopolitics, geopolitical tensions between Asian countries, and identity formation and epidemic prevention across the Asian macroregion. But we do not learn what happens once the geographies produced in Biopolis start traveling in the wild. How do the produced biomedical identities affect patients, politics, customs officers, ordinary medical training, nursing, and all other categories of people and social activity who are part of the evoked geographies but whose voices are absent from the book? Much of the larger scale inferences on the effects of Biopolis are based on theoretical assumptions, rather than empirical evidence. For instance, the ease with which a self-organizing mechanism is invoked to unproblematically jump scales from the cell to the body to the laboratory to the Biopolis cluster to global ethical debates (pp. 138–139) is unwarranted by the book’s empirical scope. Assuming such isomorphism of causal mechanisms on so many different scales risks skating over the potential obstacles to ‘jumping’ and under-plays the idiosyncratic nature of assemblages across different time-space contexts. Jumping scale is not just a question of self-organization: Each change will draw new actors in the assemblage that could radically change the outcome. Furthermore, such scaling up is likely to yield contradictions. The book, however, does not reflect much on that possibility. As Gibson-Graham (2002) point out: the global is local and can never be reduced to an out-side impinging on a place. Biopolis doubles as producer of the global that it appropriates. Thus, the global Asianness produced in Biopolis might be contested in large parts of the Asian continent, including the vast swaths of Asia outside the China–Singapore belt that is the primary focus of Fungible Life. Moreover, in the bid to redefine ‘Asianness’, Biopolis will likely change what is ‘global’. We can, for instance, plausibly assume that Biopolis’ innovations in genomic research will be rapidly diffused across other continents the moment it translates into a profitable business proposition. Therefore, insisting on the East-West metageographical canvas hides what are in my perspective, the most interesting insights from Fungible Life: the more complicated geographies it brings into being through its detailed ethnography.

References


