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In Conversation with Professor Aihwa Ong 21 May 2010, Singapore

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Interviewed by

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Vineeta Sinha (VS): So you went to the United States to study English and the fine arts. Why did you switch to anthropology? What attracted you to anthropology?

Aihwa Ong (AO): When I first arrived at Barnard College in New York City, situated across the street from Columbia University, the place was taken over by students demonstrating against the “secret” bombings in Cambodia. Nevertheless, in the midst of this war, I found myself, in a day-to-day sense, having to explain who I was. After many months of sharing a dorm room, my roommate still described me simply as an “Asian.” Then I took an Anthropology 101 class where a graduate student demonstrated the art of stone tool making, and something clicked in my head. Anthropology seemed to me to be a field that combines the study of art, techniques, and language in cross-cultural contexts. It was an easy switch from English and the fine arts to anthropology. Two expatriate scholars – Clive Kessler and Joan Vincent – took me under their wing. At that time, there was very limited knowledge about Southeast Asia.

VS: Do you think things are different today in an American context as far as the lack of awareness about the specificity of Southeast Asian experiences is concerned?

AO: In the 1970s, the Southeast Asian field focused on indigenous political systems, a perspective shaped by Stanley Tambiah and Benedict Anderson. At Cornell, the Southeast Asian program was focused on the challenges facing newly independent countries in the region. In anthropology, that interest was channeled into peasant and development studies. Clifford and Hildred Geertz and other anthropologists undertook a series of researches on social change in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War, combined with the draft, and fears about the spread of communism, made Southeast Asia a looming political reality on campus. Anthropology professors at Columbia cancelled classes, conducted teach-ins on the war, and otherwise mobilized protests against U.S. policy in mainland Southeast Asia. Graduate students mainly taught themselves, meeting in coffee shops and living rooms. The anti-war protests were a searing experience, and I was dissuaded from acquiring American citizenship for a long time. In my book, *Buddha is Hiding* (2003), I mention how the invasion of mainland Southeast Asia many years later inspired my research among Cambodian refugees in the Bay Area.

VS: How do you think anthropology has changed in the U.S. from the time that you

were a graduate student? It is a very big question.

AO: It is a very big question, and my perspective is necessarily partial. When I was doing research among factory women in Malaysia, observations on the ground made me modify and question the structural Marxian approach that had dominated my training. I imported Foucault's ideas about surveillance as a tool of control and subjectification to the study of politics on the shop floor and in wider society. I was interested in how the Malay factory women began to think about who they were, their new identity, what kind of Malay Muslim model of womanhood was appropriate for working class women. By pulling together political economics and Foucauldian insights, I aimed for a dynamic conceptualization of power, without predetermining the outcomes of their different struggles.

To put it rather simply, anthropology since the early 1980s has splintered into different orientations. Foucauldian analytics of power and subject-making directed attention to an investigation of the different ways the modern *anthropos* is constituted. For some of us, the Foucauldian turn expanded the anthropological inquiry into spheres of contemporary life – welfare, finance, science, etcetera – that are shaped by situated interactions of rational forms, political and cultural practices. This orientation shifts anthropology from a focus on culture as the unit of analysis and directs ethnographic attention on to the play of power, heterogeneity and contingency in shaping contemporary human milieus.

The collapse of modernization and Marxian meta-theories also sparked a retreat into narrow culturalist pursuits. Anthropological flirtations with cultural texts centered on discourse, subjectivity, and contested meanings, but sometimes neglected ethnographic research on the social conditions that form the context of human action. For some anthropologists, the “text” took precedence over the field. The politics of representation and issues that affect all fields of human knowledge, for a short while came to have a somewhat paralyzing effect on empirical research.

VS: That is the turn in anthropology inspired by Marcus and Clifford, the emphasis on textual production and discourse analysis, and the idea that the text now becomes paramount even in fieldwork accounts.

AO: Clifford and Marcus invoked the crucial element of reflexivity in research and representation, and the recognition that the negotiation of meaning always takes place in a field of power. But for many anthropologists, rhetorical strategies, and problems of ethnographic authority took center stage. In my view, anthropology as a mode of inquiry goes beyond issues of ethnographic representation, to include the analysis of a variety of information (from archives, the library, other disciplines, newspapers, the media, political documents, etc.) that should be part of any study.

My own approach to these challenges is to look at practices. The focus is not people, but social and institutional practices that are largely observable in the public realm. In *Global Assemblages* (2005), Stephen J. Collier and I call for a kind of mid-range

theorizing where you “stay close to practice,” that is, you abstract your claims from observable practices that seem constitutive of emerging situations. By following practices (individual and collective, informal and formal, scripted and spontaneous), we avoid intruding too much into people’s lives – or respect the limits they imposed on our observations – and also avoid some of the pitfalls of projecting our own models of what should happen. By staying close to “the hard surfaces” of everyday life, citing Geertz, we aim for a tighter grip on unfolding realities.

VS: I asked the question about change in anthropology because I wanted to hear your views on some of the other debates that were current in the 1980s and 1990s like debates about what it means to be a native anthropologist or what it means to be a feminist anthropologist, and about reflexive anthropology, etcetera. I mean all of these things sort of converged in the 1990s. What impact did they have on somebody like you coming from Malaysia and being embedded in American academia? How did you position yourself vis-à-vis the debates, for example, on native anthropology given the idea that the identity of the researcher is crucial to the research process?

AO: I don’t see myself as a native anthropologist because I would like to think that as an anthropologist I can also be a little bit detached from my own ethnicity or gender or nationality when it comes to conducting research and making truth claims about a particular research situation. I am not sure what you mean by native; are you talking about racial or political origin or particularistic ties? I have spent large stretches of my life in at least three places (Malaysia where I was born, New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area) and I have conducted research in Southeast Asia, China, and California where my being a “native” of some kind is always fraught with ambiguity. It seems more correct to say that as someone who embodies both particularistic and universal ties, I am a cosmopolitan with roots in many places.

But for a while, it was hot in anthropology to label oneself as a “native” or a “feminist” in an era when identity politics was roiling American campuses. The Free Speech Movement, multiculturalism, feminism, the so-called Vietnam war, and influx of immigrants from all over the world both challenged and enriched debates about the social and spiritual content of citizenship. As a consequence, affirmative action programs tried to rectify the historical abuses and sufferings inflicted on Native Americans (a very special category), African Americans, and other minorities. The political culture became more prepared to incorporate diverse voices, histories, and perspectives that had not been truly represented or respected on American campuses. As Donna Haraway observes, there is not a God’s eye view of social realities, only partial perspectives.

But you are interested in the kind of “native anthropology” produced by foreigners outside the U.S. That issue was vividly posed by postcolonial theory, and for a while it gave so-called diaspora scholars a special status. I think postcolonial studies became influential because it seemed to promise the recuperation of a progressive tradition that we had in Marxism but was lost in the 1980s. Postcolonial theory seems to challenge the “Empire” by fashioning a more savvy “native” perspective on diverse modes of

exploitation than can be found in structural Marxism. The postcolonial field opened up an academic space for interdisciplinary exchanges and seemed to reduce some of the opacity of non-Western countries for students on American campuses. I am, however, skeptical about the universalizing claims of the postcolonial approach. It is a question whether postcolonial theory has greatly improved our understanding of the vast and complex realities of emerging India, and other non-Western regions that fell under the academic postcolonial spell.

VS: Why do you say that?

AO: I am no scholar of India but the continual mining of the colonial seems overdetermined, both as a real-world reference and as an analytic focused on a singular logic of postcolonial globalization. For the vast majority of Asians, the colonial period was just a tiny moment in their modern history. People are very future-oriented and focused on the remaking of the contemporary world in their own interests; their reference is resolutely global, not the colonial or its residues. Second, postcolonial theory invests in a special category of agents of social change. The colonial experience was only one source of many entangled forms of oppression, injustice, and corruption, and a plethora of actors have actively shaped the orientation of new nations. Obviously, there are significantly different situations emerging in the developing world that cannot be reduced to variants of a single logic.

VS: So in your view, what alternative modes of engagement can there be with non-European scholars or research from the perspective of Western scholars?

AO: It would be empirically incorrect to assume that a so-called native or postcolonial scholar has not also been formed through Western intellectual and cultural traditions. It would be disingenuous for non-Caucasian scholars (U.S.- or foreign-born) in the Anglophone academic world to claim to be purely “native” in intellectual formation. The Saidian framework does not do justice to the complexity, heterogeneity, and fluidity of power relations that variously configure fields of knowledge and “real” world contexts. We need to shift from the West versus the Rest map of scholarship and engage in debates about what kinds of situated analytical perspectives and questions can be illuminating of the radically interconnected world in which we all live.

It does not help that scholars of Western history, politics, and cultures – as dominant players in the Western academy – have not tried hard enough to break out of their comfortable positions. By having the developing world represented through the homogenizing gaze of postcolonial scholars based in Western academic institutions, there has been little inclination for serious engagement with scholars located in non-Western countries.

Nevertheless, anthropologists and researchers in Asia are extremely well-positioned to take on the Western academies. There is the great need to undertake serious research from different vantage points and at multiple scales, and for us to understand the great

transformation going on in this part of the world. In my view, the future vitality of many social science disciplines depends on excellent research conducted outside Western metropolitan countries, especially the kind of inquiries that investigate how “the global” in its many versions (capitalism, science, technology, etc.) is being reinvented in emerging regions.

VS: Could you please say something about how your works on Malaysia and China have been received in American academia and through what frameworks?

AO: I rarely read reviews of my works, but I have had some feedback from other sources. As I’ve mentioned, my book on factory women interrogated the notions of class consciousness by bringing other dimensions of race, gender and religion than those predicted by Marxian theory. The reception of that book is twofold. First, people were demanding a new kind of ethnography on runaway factories in developing countries and the variable social effects of what later came to be called globalization. The second interest was in the idea that spirit possession can be ignited by industrial discipline, that is, a culturally specific way of responding to industrial oppression. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (1987) provides a new angle for looking at the uncertain and complex outcomes of industrialization for labor and gender politics in the developing world. A second edition of the book, with a new introduction and some new pictures, is coming out this fall.

In the mid-1980s, a colleague challenged me to “do something on Orientalism.” I chose to investigate orientalization, with a small “o,” as everyday practices that both mock and subvert hegemonic discourses of Orientalism. Drawing on observations in Hong Kong and California, I note that elite Chinese immigrants employed self-orientalizing representation in order to circumvent discriminations and gain acceptance in the host society. More broadly, *Flexible Citizenship* (1999) refers to a set of discursive and non-discursive practices for navigating a shifting global environment, especially the transnational strategies that take advantage of investment opportunities and political refuge in different sites. Some scholars in Hong Kong were not pleased because they resent what they see as a broad brush approach to ethnic Chinese as overly instrumental subjects. But flexible citizenship is not meant to be a characterization of all Chinese. Hong Kong managers just happened to be my examples for explicating a set of transnational maneuvers that can also be found among other groups of migrants who try to get green cards in the West while maintaining a foothold in growing markets. Indeed, one can say that the book is fundamentally not about ethnic Chinese, but about a form of flexible transnational practice that has come about as well-heeled migrants confront both the opportunities and challenges of different countries as ideal sites for either or both economic and cultural accumulation.

In the U.S. and Europe, the book has been well received for a variety of reasons. Perhaps it has to do with my breaking free of structural frameworks and to study the mobile, strategic practices of migratory capital-bearing actors. I had been influenced by David Harvey’s concept of flexible accumulation but felt that flexible strategies of

accumulation were not limited to corporate institutions. All kinds of migrants have become highly mobile and are flexibly tapping into a variety of markets for investment and sites of political refuge. Students are attracted to my practice-centered approach as a new way of conducting multi-sited ethnographic research. By following the strategies of some elite migrants, the study specifies how people navigate shifting geopolitical and economic spaces in search of both wealth and security, and in the process come to manipulate the immigration systems of different countries. Europeans are extremely interested in the concept of flexibility in the practice of citizenship, in an analytical approach that unpacks the idea of citizenship as a bundle of elements and practices that have become influenced by free-flowing global capital.

One of my colleagues doesn't like the term flexible citizenship because for her, citizenship is an already fixed political-legal status. But others appreciate that the whole notion of citizenship is being inexorably transformed by globalized markets, the relentless flows of people across borders, and the premium put on human capital. This work has led me to further formulate a theory of how citizenship has become unraveled as some features of belonging become associated with the neoliberal focus on skills and entrepreneurialism.

Singapore is of course a great example of a situation whereby skilled expatriates are in some ways preferable to regular formal citizens because a critical mass of talented people is needed to sustain the growth of a knowledge economy. The entrepreneurial nature of the Singapore state has permitted a loosening of some criteria and obligations of citizenship to be influenced by neoliberal elements. But while male citizens in Singapore continue to serve the army – a critical component of citizenship – expatriates enjoy citizenship-like privileges and benefits. Thus, the opportunities and rights that one used to associate with political citizenship is now extended to highly mobile skilled workers, largely because of the neoliberal drive of the government to be globally competitive. This pro-expatriates policy puts pressure on citizens to adopt the new norms of self-improvement and self-entrepreneurship. In other words, neo-liberal criteria come to articulate citizenship without necessarily dismantling the legal aspects. This development also means that Singapore citizens are as free as anyone else to take their human capital elsewhere where they can expect higher returns for their skills. So the links of the citizens to the nation states are becoming attenuated by market conditions that foster the circulation of human capital regardless of national borders or the migrants' original citizenship (see *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 2006).

VS: These are exciting ideas. How are they received in American academia?

AO: I have been contacted by people in disciplines ranging from architecture to social work who say that my work brings something new to their fields. My approach explores how, outside of universalizing modernization or Marxian theories, researchers can develop an analytical approach for studying the emergence of particular yet globalized situations. Instead of assuming that there is a singular causality or mechanism that instantiates uniform conditions in vastly different sites, the assemblage angle allows us

to track the specific interactions of global and situated elements that are constitutive of a space of emergence. Different logics are at play – say tradition, or ethics and technology – that do not necessarily become undone or displaced in the mix. Globalized contexts of possibility, heterogeneity, and problematization are both distinctively situated and globally connected.

VS: So given that, what do you see as the value that anthropology brings to the understanding of the contemporary world? Given that anthropology is embedded in all these stereotypes and given its connection with a tribal world, pre-modern world, what could, would anthropology bring to the table?

AO: I remember a dismissive statement by Anthony Giddens about anthropologists studying dead people in dead societies. My rebuttal would be that in a globalized world, all pure cultures are dead but peoples from dismantled old worlds are very much alive, living in very complex globalized environments. It is our job to come up with concepts that are adequate for studying different milieus and how highly variable conditions of possibility put at stake what it means to be human.

The contemporary is always a complex mix of the old and the new and a variety of things interacting with one another in shaping our contemporary milieus. A key aspect of this perspective is that we are always dealing with emerging situations that we are not yet sure are going to stabilize into enduring structures and institutions. This means we try to stay close to unfolding events and be alert to contingency, without making extravagant claims about structures and epochs. I think anthropologists are trying to do something very difficult which is basically to stay as close to practices as possible and investigate how people in very different milieus are confronted by different conditions of possibility for shaping desires, hopes and dreams.

Instead of hegemonic claims about the uniform effects of globalization, anthropology can contribute more situated and precise analyses of the predicaments of contemporary human life and living. I try for instance to analyze the neoliberal not as form of totalizing state (government or social condition), but as a migratory technology that can be taken up in very different political contexts such as China (*Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*, 2008). An anthropology of the contemporary seeks to investigate a particular milieu that is situated yet international, particular yet globalized, and subject to uncertainty.

VS: So in that context, how do you locate your current research on bioethics and anthropology of science? Do you see this emphasis as following on from your view on what anthropology needs to do in the present?

AO: Anthropology is really the study of how cultures and knowledges define what it means to be human in a particular context. This means that in a globalized world, anthropologists and scientists are also involved in shaping truth claims about the human in different domains of human action. From the early years of the discipline,

anthropologists have looked to culture, poetry, agricultural techniques, or religious practices for an understanding of how human beings shaped their own cultural universe and sense of being human. The life sciences is a very contemporary technology that is rapidly changing the way we see ourselves as globalized but situated human beings. So for me, it is very exciting (and also scary) to investigate how biomedical research and development are redefining human values and what being human means.

VS: How did you come to this interest from your earlier work?

AO: My definition of mobile global forms, for example, neoliberal logic, foreshadows an interest in scientific technologies that promise to redefine, in different places, what we can become. I have been coming to Singapore every year for the last decade and I observed the emergence of the Biopolis complex. California, of course, has many biotech institutions, but somehow biomedical initiatives did not attract me as a research project until I saw this very explicit attempt by Singapore. I have a sense that some aspect of what it means to be Asian, of Asian-ness, is being redefined in the course of life science research and drug discovery.

VS: Is this new for anthropology or are there any previous works on this?

AO: Well, a number of important books on biotechnology and bioethics have been done. One thinks of Sheila Jasanoff, Donna Haraway, Margaret Lock, Emily Martin, and many others in the fields of medical anthropology and medical sociology. I draw inspiration from them, but my orientation takes me in a somewhat different direction.

My interest stems from the whole Foucauldian idea of biopower, governmentality, the importance of knowledge/power in constituting the human, now at the cellular level. The Biopolis-related constellation crystallizes for me a series of questions that have been posed in a different way in the U.S. In California, stem cell research has raised a lot of ethical objections about individual rights of the patient, the medical consumer, the experimental subject, and the fetus and so forth. These issues have inspired vigorous debates and public input. In Singapore and other Asian sites, it seems to me other kinds of ethical considerations are at play. I suspect that the life sciences are not the same everywhere given the different political, ethical, and scientific factors at play in any one situation.

The life sciences are loose upon the world and you know we are going to have a different kind of life sciences that's going to come out of Asia. In about ten to twenty years, the biomedical sciences that come out of China are going to have a different composition and orientation. India has some of the same reservations about biomedical research as in the West, but also great excitement about generic drugs for improving medical access among the poor.

VS: So do you see yourself staying in this field for some time or do you already have a next project that you are looking towards?

AO: Oh I don't know, I have barely begun writing. I just completed a co-edited book *Asian Biotech* (2010) but I am now in a different place than that book. My tendency is to let objects find me. I encounter something intriguing and I think, "I am going to investigate and see what this is about and where it is going." By querying contemporary life problems in action and in motion, we may discover ethical, social, and political dilemmas we haven't yet encountered.

VS: Great, we look forward to having you back here, Aihwa. Thank you very much.

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