

# ‘I don't do theory, I do concept-work?’

An interview with Aihwa Ong

BY NINA TRIGE ANDERSEN<sup>1</sup>

---

## ABSTRACT

*‘I don't do theory, I do concept-work’. An interview with Aihwa Ong.*

Reflecting on her work from the days under tutelage of 1970s Marxist scholars in Malaysia and the US through late 20th century meditations on citizenship and transnationality to exploring biomedical practices in contemporary Southeast Asia, socio-cultural anthropologist Aihwa Ong met with faculty and students at the University of Copenhagen during the first week of May, 2014. In this interview – that includes cropped moments from collective dialogue sessions held at the University of Copenhagen, hosted by the Coordination for Gender Studies – Aihwa Ong discusses the anthropology of emerging global situations, the blind spots of imperial nostalgia, and how being global is about living with uncertainty in the past-present and present-future.

## KEYWORDS

*Anthropology, global assemblages, emerging global situations, concept-work, Asia, biosciences.*

Professor Ong's work investigates the shaping of diverse global situations emerging in the Asia Pacific Rim. Her current work explores science practices that shape a distinctive style of biomedical culture in Biopolis, Singapore, that has implications for Asia at large. Throughout her career, her fieldwork research has shifted among sites in Southeast Asia, China and California. Born in the Straits Chinese community of Penang, Malaysia, and college-educated in New York (Columbia University, PhD. 1982), Aihwa Ong has continuously tracked East-West flows and interconnections that shape particular configurations: female Muslim workers in runaway factories in 1970s Malaysia (Ong 1987), Cambodian refugees and U.S. citizenship in 1990s San Francisco (Ong 2003), flexible citizenship maneuvers among Chinese migrants to the Bay Area in 1990s (Ong 1999), new professionals in foreign companies in Shanghai at the turn of the century (Ong 2006a), and the making of bioscience, risk, and hope in Singapore in the past decade (Chen & Ong 2010).

After a week of dialogue sessions and lectures at the University of Copenhagen, Aihwa Ong – the anthropologist behind concepts such as “global assemblages” – was interviewed about her contributions to the study of contemporary life in-between the East and the West.

Nina Trige Andersen (NTA): *What comes to your mind in relation to the theme of this volume of Women, Gender & Research: gendering global assemblages?*

Aihwa Ong (AO): Stephen J. Collier and I came up with the concept of “global assemblage” because we were dissatisfied with older typologies such as ‘Economy,’ ‘Society,’ ‘Culture,’ and even ‘Gender’ as stable units of analysis in the social sciences. In order to capture the dynamism and flux of the contemporary world, we need a different concept to frame “the problem-space” of inquiry and problem-solving that takes into account combinations of disparate global and situated elements. Of course, in coming up with this concept, we are greatly indebted to Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, among other European thinkers.

The subtitle of our book, *Global Assemblages* (Collier & Ong 2005) is “technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems”. We suggest that the situated interaction of these components not only crystallizes conditions of possibility that put at stake the human, but also shapes solutions to problems of life and living in that particular context.<sup>2</sup> So as a concept, global assemblage is about how to frame your space of inquiry to take into account the entanglement of global forms such as rationalities and technologies with situated political and ethical interests. Indeed, depending on your particular inquiry, gender ethics can be understood through the

lens of global assemblage, in that ethnic of gender difference, equality, hierarchy, feminisms of different kinds must be investigated in terms of their interrelations with global forces and situated politics. The advantage of a global assemblage frame is that gender politics are not understood in a sociopolitical vacuum, but analyzed as emerging and changing within a particular emerging global situation. For that reason, to study gender politics solely through the framework of “gender theories” would discount the multiplicity of interacting factors (both external and internal) that infuse the politics and practice of gender and sexuality.

There is a glimmer of this approach in my earlier investigation into situated global politics:

In the postcolonial world, the intersections of the past and the present, the local and the global, define the axes for exploring the negotiation and reworking of gender” and “(...) the ways in which gender in identities are produced, contested, and transformed have far-reaching implications for our understanding of domination and resistance, and cultural life at large (Ong & Peletz 1995: 1, 13)

NTA: *Do you still pay analytical attention to gender in your own work?*

AO: Only when investigated through the concept of assemblage. As mentioned above, ‘gender’ as a single lens through which to view a complex, ever-changing world may be distorting. Instead I look at the globalized situations through which gender issues or relations may be constituted.

In *Neoliberalism as Exception*, there are two chapters on specific feminist interventions in very particular global situations. One piece is on Muslim feminists in Malaysia who struggle to address gender inequality in Islam, and yet to remain virtuous Mus-

lims (or as “Sisters in Islam”). So while they seek to improve gender norms and practices in Malaysia, their approach is not guided by Western feminist models, but by situated conditions of what is at stake in being modern, female, and ethical (Ong 2006). There is a final chapter (Ong 2006a) on the gender effects of Western (including a Danish) corporations in Shanghai where I argue that Chinese women gain more from working with foreigners in social terms and opportunities to leave China, whereas Chinese men often resent working under what they see as corporate racial domination and seek to escape it as soon as they can.

I have also explored assemblages as empirical objects, for example NGOs (non-governmental organizations) as transnational vehicles that are so popular among feminists in Europe. However, in two articles, I again illuminate the sociopolitical limits of what you may call “gender/NGO assemblages” in bringing about changes in gender relations based on Western feminist models. I describe how NGOs in Southeast Asia seek to protect the “bio-welfare” of female migrant workers in “a bio-cartography” shaped by their transnational labor circuits (Ong 2006b). In other words, where legal-political changes based on human rights are not possible, NGO activists emphasize the cultural ethics of protecting vulnerable female workers in overseas employment. Again, in a more recent article (Ong 2011), I argue that in order for “gender justice” to be an effective intervention in Southeast Asia, it must be articulated as a political value that is attuned to the situated ethics of particular communities or nations in order to gain social legitimacy.

*NTA: Your studies have engaged very different empirical objects, from Malay factory women through Cambodian refugees in the Bay area to researchers at biomedical labs in Singapore; would you, though, say that there*

*is a recurring feature of your research interests?*  
 AO: It’s about maybe two things. One is, when I first arrived in New York City, I immediately became aware of how Americans viewed someone like me through particular sociopolitical and cultural frames. In the academy, Western categories project their assumptions about foreigners, including people who are Asian, female, etc.

Because, perhaps, of such unavoidable processes of “Othering” from the vantage point of Euro-American domination, I have spent most of my career troubling such hegemonic categories, saying you’re not quite right, you’re not quite getting it. It’s beyond challenging the stereotyping, it’s about troubling, about demanding a more complex, contingent understanding of peoples, living conditions, and pressing issues in Asia.

The second thing I’ve tried to do has been to actively disrupt overarching theories that view other places as particular steps in or instantiations of Western trajectories of liberal democratic modernization. Other environments may be partially shaped by global forms (rationalities, capital, knowledge, technology), but situated human interests, ethics, and actions shape rather distinctive global contexts. To put it another way, it’s all about how the global articulates the local, or more accurately, the situated. These are precisely not local situations, these are emerging global situations; analytically they are not local anymore. “Local” references the perspectival, but as a social scientist, I am investigating social patterning at a higher level. When anthropologists talk about “local knowledge”, it seems to suggest something disarticulated from the global, as sealed off. Global assemblage instead identifies the active combination and recombination of situated and global forms in the formation of globalized milieus.

*NTA: One of your points in relation to the production of, or the practices of, biomedical*

*science, is that on the one hand scientists and technologies flow globally, and in-between East and West: Western scientists are employed at labs in the East, Eastern scientists are educated in the West, Western states or companies asks for biomedical services from biomedical hubs in the East, etc. On the other hand, you say, there are some differences in the ways in which biomedical and biotechnological science play out in the East and West. But if scientists and technologies flow globally, how do these differences then emerge, from what do they emerge?*

AO: When international science practices take place in, let’s say Singapore, it attains a certain style that reflects situated political and ethical concerns regarding life and living conditions in the tropics and Asia more broadly. That style is shaped by the community of scientists, who are there, and who have concerns about, for instance, mapping genetic defects among some of the largest populations in the world. They are also concerned about solving health problems and defending against deadly diseases and bio-threats in the region that can menace the world. There is the tendency of making biomedical categories out of officially designated racial or ethnic categories. Official categories of ethnic differences come to be aligned with variations in the genetic data. That means that the ethnic heuristic is an assembling device for organizing DNA data and for identifying biomarkers that facilitate the development of new drugs. Today, we say that we are in a globalized world shaped by the migration of global technologies and practices. But the adoption of global forms in a particular site does not in itself eradicate situated interests. So there’s an interaction between the global and the situated – that is creating the possibilities for novel solutions. That’s a very important point. This interaction crystallizes conditions of possibility for situated strategies of problem-solving.

## BORDERCROSSING AND TIME-SPACE FORMATIONS

NTA: *To return to something you said earlier, about troubling the categories – you’ve phrased it earlier this week as being obsessed with unsettling Western perceptions – and you’ve stated in another interview, that you are “skeptical about the universalizing claims of the postcolonial approach”.<sup>3</sup> Could you elaborate on that?*

AO: For me, postcolonial theory is in many ways a sexing up of structural Marxism through a dose of Gramsci, but recasting it within the recent past of Western colonial domination of the world. The universalizing figure of the subaltern is highly problematic, as it can refer to anyone of what-ever class in the “indigenous” population who is or may be subjected to some form of ‘post-colonial’ domination. There is an insistence on the continuation of Euro-American modes of colonial power over formerly colonized places which have transitioned to globalized independent nations. I find this binary framework overly deterministic and sweeping, and quite unable to capture the unevenness, and heterogeneity, of experiences of globality in the so-called “global South”. You just can’t boil many contemporary practices of oppression, injustice, and domination in non-Western countries down to the enduring effects of structural colonialism. I view postcolonial theory as an example of universalizing binary theory of domination and subjugation, oppressor and oppressed that aspires to describe in broad brushstrokes the global condition today.

NTA: *I guess many of the scholars within this field of studies would be surprised by the critique of their framework as being binary, as I suppose they’d rather think of themselves as operating beyond binarism?*

AO: Postcolonial theory is profoundly and systematically binary in its approach. And

really, it has been a long time since the era of colonialism, and there is the need to recognize the transformation of inherited oppressive systems in contemporary independent countries. Some argue there is a continuation of postcolonial structures, racial and gendered hierarchies traceable to colonial times. But as socio-cultural anthropologists, our task would be to analyze how their forms, norms, and meanings have changed over generations of complex entanglements with nation-building or wars or global integration. I do not deny the linger or residual effects of the recent past, but surely the postcolonial lens does not capture the multiple sources and practices of contemporary problem, such as the endemic violence against women in the midst of extensive urban migration and urban growth.

One may detect a kind of nostalgia in post-colonial critique whereby imperial forms are constantly invoked or made salient to contemporary issues. The continual resurrection of former colonial powers as evil oppressors creates blind spots when it comes to understanding how contemporary ideas and practices recombine older forms of oppression in new configurations of power.

It's an imperial nostalgia that seems to suggest a kind of yearning among people who are supposed to be anti-colonialist, a longing for an earlier form of political-cultural configuration such as the Empire. For some scholars, there may be a seductive appeal in making metropolitan countries still relevant to global affairs in contemporary times, without diving too deeply into actually existing, reconfigured globalized contexts outside the North Atlantic zone.

Another important point is that for many people in Asian countries, the colonial period has faded away. They are resolutely concerned about the future, about being global, about competing to be globally significant and to change global futures.

*NTA: When I was preparing these questions, I was trying to think about what would be the answers, for instance about the recurring fields of interests that shape your different research projects, and what came to my mind was, for instance the time-space transformations.*

*AO: Okay, yes, that's good. A theme that runs through is a theme of bordercrossing. I have always been interested in things moving, straddling borders, things that flow and crosscut and produce new political spaces. We cannot use old categories to describe these emerging situations. Anthropologists try to track these circulations that shape contemporary spaces of intervention or problem solving that put at stake what it means to be human. What does it mean to be contemporary? I'm interested in our attempt to control the future. In pre-modern times, we relied more exclusively on religion or mythology. But the contemporary is about calculating what Jane Guyer calls "the near future" or the temporal zone of calculability. We are always living in an uncomfortable situation of past-present and present-future, constantly trying to design the future; calculate it, control it, with all our modern technologies. We try not to rely on mythologies alone.*

Technology is inspired by but transcends mythology in that it seeks to calculate the future. Foucault (2007) mentions that biopolitics is a space of intervention, about finding a way to live with uncertainty by governing through time. Science is a method to govern the future.

The past, however, conditions our experience of the present. I mean this in the sense that we are haunted by the past, our fragmented histories, our selective memories. We are not cut off from the past. We live among the ghosts of a past world. So we're caught in this kind of between and betwixt dilemma. And because the present is haunted by the past, the present also requires us to plan, to design a livable future.

## THE BRICOLEUR

NTA: *Besides Foucault, from where do you draw inspiration, theoretically or in terms of methodology or object of study?*

AO: It depends on what project I’m doing. Many anthropologists, myself included, are interested in Foucault’s analytics for its reconceptualization of the exercise of power in an everyday, grounded fashion. In particular Foucault’s relational concept of power directs anthropologists to explore how the play of strategies, everyday maneuvers and tactics, shapes a fluid field of social relations. Every situation is a particular crystallization of interacting forces from near and far, and of the play of everyday strategies in shifting arenas.

For my study of bioscience in Asia – a major science practice today is the role of biostatistics, computational technologies that track patterns of normality and risk – and here, Ian Hacking has been influential.<sup>4</sup> In my analysis of biomedical practice in Singapore, computational biology enrolls ethnic categories to make biomedical collectivities. Ian Hacking argues<sup>5</sup> that mathematics in modern times has been used to make up people by measuring and calculating patterns of population. So I’m very influenced by his view on the law of big numbers and its role in creating new collectivities. Furthermore, Donna Haraway’s (1990) observation of how contemporary technoscience produces hybrid objects and hybrid bodies has been really insightful as well.

NTA: *During one of the dialogue sessions this week, the anthropologist Ayo Wahlberg suggested a reading of your work as a kind of “assemblage ethnography” and then asked you, if that method might have a tendency to transform the chaos and confusion of daily life into something more neat; questioning if assemblage ethnography is capable of accounting for the ruptures and messiness that also shapes the object of anthropology, or what he*

*called “human existence”. Could you elaborate on your thoughts about this question?<sup>6</sup>*

AO: Clearly anthropology is not just about being human, about human life, but about conditions for human life. And with the assemblage, we’re talking about migratory global forms, and how they become productive in a particular situation. In sociology, we used to say, for instance, the Danish nation-state is our fixed unit of analysis, or in anthropology we used to say: Indian culture is our stable frame of inquiry. I would call these clunky 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts.

I view anthropologists as cartographers – in fact Deleuze called Foucault a cartographer – looking at how mobile contemporary practices configure new spaces of human action. Collier<sup>7</sup> picked up the term topology, to describe the strategic mappings of power in a space of intervention. So, regarding your criticism of the neatness, suggesting a somewhat schematic approach: We’re actually talking about how lines of flight or practices of reterritorialization shape new spaces that are somewhat contingent and not determined in advance.

Anthropology is about grasping emerging contexts that challenge life, really, more than about people. Assemblage as an analytical concept is not about a fixed modality, it is a reconfiguration of social, political, ethical and technological circumstances.

I’m a single person with a particular and oblique angle of analysis, and there are no holistic ambitions about what I do. So if it seems schematic, or neat, it could be because there are many things I leave off because I can’t muck into everything, and I do not attempt at a rounded picture. I don’t have what Donna Haraway calls “a God’s eye-view”, so I don’t find sweeping theories useful. Instead, as a social analyst, I center in on what I think are irreducible interacting elements that shape contemporary globalized problems of life and living. I don’t come up with theories. I do con-

cept-work. Global assemblage is about how you configure your project, your space of inquiry in pretty situated and specific terms. Therefore, any attempts at some kinds of totalizing explanation is God's work. By comparison, I am just a bricoleur fashioning concepts from things lying around me.

Nina Trige Andersen is a trained journalist and holds an MA in History from University of Roskilde, Denmark. Her work focuses on (relations between) Northern Europe and East- and South-east Asia, with particular attention to transnational themes such as labor market, migration, biotechnology and global kinship-making, rural-urban transformations, colonial history, and political economy. She writes for daily papers, magazines and journals, and has previously interviewed Aihwa Ong for the Danish daily paper *Information*.<sup>8</sup> Nina Trige Andersen is the author of 'Profession: Filippiner – Kvinder på arbejde i Danmark gennem fire årtier' [Profession: Filipina – Women at work in Denmark through four decades], *Tiderne Skifter*, 2013 (English version forthcoming)

## NOTES

1. Co-edited with Aihwa Ong
2. For new discussions of the concept of assemblages, see for instance "The Carpenter and the Bricoleur. A Conversation with Saskia Sassen and Aihwa Ong", in Acuto, Michele & Curtis, Simon (eds.) (2013): *Reassembling International Theory. Assemblage Thinking and International Relations*, Palgrave Pivot (ebook)
3. Sinha, Viineeta: In Conversation with Aihwa Ong, *ISA E-Bulletin*, no. 16, July 2010
4. See for instance an anthology to which both Aihwa Ong and Ian Hacking have contributed: Lock, Margaret & Farquhar, Judith (eds.) (2007): *Beyond the Body Proper. Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*, Duke University Press, Durham and London
5. Hacking, Ian (1990): *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge University Press
6. The part of Ayo Wahlbergs critical reading of Aihwa Ongs work, that the question in this interview refers to, is quoted below:  
Ayo Wahlberg: "There is, I think, a special style of

ethnography, that your work plays an important part in developing. We could call it 'assemblage ethnography', characterized by at least three things: First of all, assemblage ethnography addresses anthropological problems, and this is an important point, because ethnography these days is by no means monopolized by anthropology; ethnographic methods are used in many disciplines. So, part of addressing anthropological problems is an insistence on keeping human life, human existence, in focus, centered. Secondly, like its objects, assemblage ethnography is mobile. With all due reference to Marcus' notion of multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995), I'm not so interested in the multisitedness, but rather the tracking. A tracking that underpins assemblage ethnography – the task of the ethnographer is to track something. In other words: If you want to get your head around an assemblage, you have to follow. And what you follow, becomes a part of the analytical task. Figuring out what it is that is moving in this assemblage. It could be people, things, technologies, concepts, controversies. The third component is, that assemblage ethnographers are cartographers of configurations; assemblage ethnography reveals a certain partiality on the part of the cartographer. It is not so much about life worlds, meaning universes, or subjective experiences, as in classic anthropology of lived experience, but about assemblages, configurations, complexes, milieus, dispositifs, or the like. Life worlds are certainly part of them, but they are not the primary object of the assemblage ethnographer. So there's a shift in object, I would say, which has to do with the notion of problematization of human existence, which, in turn, involves, for instance, the knowledge practices surrounding human existence or human vitality. So where I'd like to raise a question for Aihwa is: seeing that a configuration is somehow something 'neat', something that has its form, boundaries maybe, even if these are constantly negotiated – we are trying somehow to get our heads around something that has a form – this task of mapping will certainly come at a cost. Where is the messiness of everyday life that we know from classic anthropology of lived experience? Where is the chaos, the confusion and the 'muddling through' of daily life? How does assemblage ethnography account for such gaps and breaks, the messiness contra neatness?" Dialogue sessions held at University of Copenhagen, May 6, 2014.

7. See for instance: Collier, Stephen: Topologies of Power. Foucault's Analysis of Political Government beyond 'Governmentality', in *Theory*,

*Culture & Society*, November 2009 vol. 26 no. 6, p. 78-108

8. Andersen, Nina Trige (18. maj 2013): “Asien tager globalt føregreb på bioteknologien”, Dagbladet Information

## LITERATURE

- Ananya, Roy & Aihwa Ong (eds.) (2011): *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments or the Art of Being Global*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden and Oxford.
- Chen, Nancy & Aihwa Ong (eds.) (2010): *Asian Biotech: Ethics and Communities of Fate*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Collier, Stephen J. & Aihwa Ong (2005): *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden and Oxford.
- Foucault, Michel (2007): *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*. Trans. G. Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Hacking, Ian (1990): *The Taming of Chance (Ideas in Context)*. University of Cambridge Press.
- Hacking, Ian (2006): Making Up People, in: *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28 No. 16-17: 13-26.
- Haraway, Donna (1990): *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. Routledge, New York.
- Marcus, George E. (1995): Ethnography in/of

the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography, in: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 24, p. 95-117.

- Ong, Aihwa (1987): *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*, State University of New York Press.
- Ong, Aihwa (1999): *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Ong, Aihwa (2003): *Buddha Is Hiding. Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, University of California Press.
- Ong, Aihwa (2006): Sisterly Solidarity: Feminist Virtue under ‘Moderate Islam’, in: Ong, Aihwa: *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p. 31-52. Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Ong, Aihwa (2006a): Reengineering the ‘Chinese Soul’ in Shanghai, in: Ong, Aihwa: *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p. 219-239. Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Ong, Aihwa (2006b): A Bio-cartography: Maids, Neoslavery, and NGOs, in: Ong, Aihwa: *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p.195-217. Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Ong, Aihwa (2011): Gender Justice In Southeast Asia: Situated Ethics, NGOs, and Bio-welfare, in: *HAWWA – Journal of women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 9, p. 26-48.
- Ong, Aihwa & Peletz, Michael G. (eds.) (1995): *Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.