

TAPJA Special Issue:

## **Place in Motion: New Ethnographies of Locality in the Asia-Pacific**

### Introduction

#### **Finding ‘the field’: conceptualising locality in a mobile world**

Place is usually considered as the backdrop for motion – the ‘where’ that people move to or from. Yet contemporary processes of migration and circulation of cultures are producing increasingly porous and even mobile places. Mobility has given us new ways of perceiving distance (Trouillot 2001, p. 129) – in time, space, society and culture – through what Trouillot calls a ‘fragmented globality’. How can we think of a world of ‘fragmented globality’ as a welcoming one? This volume explores this question, describing aspects of this ‘fragmented globality’ by tracing the varied forms taken by locality across the Asia-Pacific region. Contributions find ‘the field’ by attending to both the historical antecedents of places found in the present and contemporary continuities of locality with past forms, as well as the global, technical mediations that underpin new forms of place.

The relationship between anthropology, place and locality as a sense of ‘place-ness’ has always been one of mutual constitution (Appadurai, 1996, p. 178). This relationship is now being brought into question by the increasing mobility of cultures and peoples. Global flows of people, objects, concepts and resources have transformed the world and the way we see it and have provoked change in the populations involved. Population mobility has resulted in a blurring of long-recognised concepts of identity and boundary that produced anthropology’s convenient fictions of isolated localities with spatially distinct cultures (Trouillot, 2003, p 123). Conceptions of globalisation often depict the effects of changing spatialisations of markets for capital, labour and consumer goods as inherently disruptive of connections between culture and place. In a global age, anthropologists have found that their concepts of place and locality, and their ethnographic descriptions of relations between them, are troubled by theorisations emerging from other disciplines – sociology, cultural studies and geography – and, more recently, from within anthropology itself. At the turn of the millennium, anthropologists are seeing ‘(t)he crisis of representation in the previous two decades...replaced by a crisis of place, the challenge of literary theory superseded by that of geography’. (Lim 2004, p. 22). Intensified mobility is apparently throwing ‘into disarray pre-existing anthropological assumptions about culture, ethnicity and territoriality, in particular, the notion of a stable relationship between people and place’ (Ward 2003, p. 80). This crisis has been brought about because locality, once the taken-for-granted backdrop of ethnographic fieldwork, most now be maintained and reproduced in increasingly

expanding and fragmenting networks of social relations arising from new forms and intensifications of mobility. In this context, locality itself has become a problem for fieldworkers, as social fields and networks widen and fragment.

In this increasingly mobile world, the 'loss of place' has become an issue of popular concern. Michael Taussig's (2004, p. 165) recent discussion of popular anxieties over changing forms of place point us toward the ways that, with increasing global mobility, nostalgic myths now circulate around the kinds of places some of us think we have lost. Anthropologists have long understood places as boundary projects, projects producing sites of intersection as well as difference and distinction. And identity politics have been understood as the 'politics of place'. But, when populations are set in motion, our respondents' popular understandings of boundaries, the places they make and identities they constitute are challenged and changed by mobility. At the level of the state and national identities, however, popular worries about globalisation and its influxes of migrants and economic restructurings are underpinned, in part, by the transformations of familiar forms of place. These transformations challenge taken-for-granted distinctions between 'home' and 'elsewhere', making differences much less easy to name now than perhaps we once thought (Trouillot 2001, p. 131). In media and popular culture, anthropologists can see the places of 'the past' mis-remembered and then blurred by mobility in the present. Against this mis-remembering, anthropologists can also see new boundaries and borders emerging, creating new spaces and, within them, new places – refugee camps, asylum detention centres, markets for illegal labour and a plethora of sites of non-citizenship – which are locations with cartographic co-ordinates, but no particular sense of locality. New ethnographies of mobility are documenting how these new forms of place resist to attempts to imbue them with locality, build social relations, and inscribe a distinctive cultural presence on the landscapes within them.

Perhaps it is because place in its popular conceptions tends to be homologous with ideas of boundedness, homogeneity and exclusion that new ethnographies of more 'traditional' kinds of locality are also vital. Much less commonly do we see place represented as always having been a container for pluralism, trade, exchange and creativity. Yet putting the world in motion also produces these creative and novel forms of place, even as others are lost. These new and dynamic forms of place are particularly accessible to anthropological inquiry. Changing forms of place have been described in recent edited collections from Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) and Setha Low and Denise-Lawrence Zúñiga (2003). More so than sociologists, demographers, geographers or political scientists, these works indicate that anthropologists can powerfully alter theorisations of the lived experiences of place as places themselves change, both in terms of the transformations of physical landscapes and peoples perceptions of and affiliations with them.

While recent critical writing on place in anthropology has described ‘traditional’ notions of place as a series of ethnographic technologies to ‘sedentarise the subjects’ of our writing, a more generous reading would recognise these ‘traditional’ ideas as enabling fictions, constructed to hold still the moving pictures of ethnographic data in order to record them. Much like our academic forbears, we will likely find that putting everything in motion will blur our understandings of the constitutive histories of particular forms of locality. The essays collected in this volume thus build on traditional disciplinary approaches to demonstrate that anthropology has much to offer in untangling fragmented globalities, while simultaneously challenging some of the totalising assumptions that often appear to be at work behind notions of ‘global processes’ and ‘transnational flows’. The challenge they take up, as Lim (2004, p. 22) puts it, is to provide accounts of how a ‘locality’, ‘place’ or ‘cosmology’ is produced and reproduced via the articulations of overlapping systems of meaning and networks of relations. Each of our contributors here finds ‘the field’ by exploring the implications for place-making of the different forms of mobility – of landscapes, people, information and technology – that produce the elements of fragmented globality.

### **New conceptualisations of place and locality**

New ways of living in the world require new conceptualisations to describe them, and anthropology is joining other disciplines in creating these. Mandaville (1999, p. 653) argues that ‘people are actually holding on to notions of territory and place – increasingly complex yet high tangible senses of “here” and “there” – but also understanding the nature and, in particular, the boundaries of territory (as well as their socio-political relationships within and across these boundaries) somewhat differently’. Trouillot (2001, p. 133) contends anthropology must attend to the ways people resolve the tensions between acting locally and, increasingly, thinking of themselves globally. Contemporary ethnographers are thus producing visions of globalisation as experiences of plural processes that are both heterogenising and homogenising in relation to particular places. Suggesting a way ethnographic work might engage with these new ways of living the world, Ward (2003, p. 83) demonstrates place as ‘constituted, experienced and relational’, building on the insights of geographer Doreen Massey. Other recent ethnographic approaches follow on from the work of Arjun Appadurai, who offers us a new lens through which to reconsider both place and locality, retheorising locality in a spatially extended mode (1995, 1996). In this issue, contributors show how both these theorisations offer useful ways of approaching the problematics presented by mobile places, mobile populations, and globalised localities.

Massey’s (1993, 1994) theorisation of ‘extraverted place’ builds on debates in her human geography, building on a conception of place as space imbued with meaning; ‘a humanised portion of geographic space, constituted by and constitutive of social relations and cultural production’

(Duncan 2000, p. 282). In everyday lived experience, place is a bounded setting, necessary but not sufficient for the constitution of social relations and identities and the production of culture. In the popular geographical sense, locality is a place or a region at the sub-national scale. Locality indicates something more than a map area – a set of social relations and cultural processes tied to a material landscape. Localities are constituted through networks of social relations and these networks can be seen at different scales – local, national, international, regional. Massey argues that localities are always provisional and contested. Locality, for Massey, is a quality of place that emerges through co-presence – from our face-to-face encounters. She describes place and locality as being one and the same – an articulated ‘moment’ in networks of social relations and understandings, one based on a situation of co-presence (1993, p. 66). She resists ideas of cultural history as producing locality. She cautions that the specificities of the new forms of locality are derived not from a community’s mythical internal roots or isolation – ‘tradition’ – but from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found in the relations between specific places. Place is itself a product of social relations, expressions of identity, and the practice of culture. Questions of place and identity must therefore be approached with attention to power relations; globalisation is ‘also about power in relation *to* the flows and the movement (Massey 1994, p. 149). Places can be usefully reconceptualised as processes - rather than bounded entities - and as always linked by people to other places while being continually reproduced across difference and similarity, thus producing distinctive subjectivities.

Ward argues that anthropology must work to disrupt the popular and generic sense of place as ‘immutable’, because it can hinder the analysis of new forms of culture and cultural interaction. The potential pitfall of conceptualising place and locality in more abstract terms of process and flux is, of course, that we may fail to capture the rich heterogeneities of lived experience, and the materialities and meanings of daily life. However, exponents of Massey’s geographical theory are producing sensitive and richly textured accounts of place that are consonant with ethnographic approaches. In one such account, Karen Till argues that places continue to be fundamental to social and cultural action because place draws the past into imagined futures:

(P)laces are never merely backdrops for action, nor are they texts from which the past can be easily read. Always in the process of becoming, places are fluid mosaics and moments of memory and metaphor, scene and experience, dream and matter that create and mediate social spaces and temporalities. Through place-making, people mark social spaces as haunted – thresholds through which they can return to the past, make contact with loss and desire, contain unwanted presences, even confront lingering injustices (Till 2004, p. 75).

From an ethnographic viewpoint, this wonderfully evocative description offers us a sophisticated view of subjectivity as linked to place and affect. Such an account also appears in the work of

Arjun Appadurai, who theorises locality not as place itself (as Massey does), but as a phenomenological quality emergent from local projects of place-making.

Appadurai's version of locality is consonant with an anthropological tradition which has described locality as a precarious project (Meyer & Geschire, 1999). For Appadurai, locality is a variable quality constituted by a sense of social immediacy, technologies of interaction, and the relativity of contexts (1995, p. 204). Appadurai calls projects of place-making that exhibit locality 'neighbourhoods' – situated communities characterised by their spatial or virtual actuality and their potential for reproduction. Neighbourhoods express locality in terms of agency, sociality and reproducibility. Locality is both virtual, in that it is co-constitutive of a distinctive subjectivity, and actual – hard and regular work is also required to maintain its materiality. In terms of subjectivity, locality is the 'sense of place' carried within the person and partly constitutive of their self-understanding. This 'sense of place' cannot be erased by time or distance, but can be profoundly stretched and transformed. Simultaneously, locality is a quality produced through the material and social work of maintaining neighbourhood infrastructure and social relations. Locality emerges as the series of attachments and commitments that characterise, simultaneously, local subjectivities, and situated communities defined by their spatial or virtual actuality and potential for reproduction.

Neighbourhoods, in Appadurai's terms, exhibit locality in forms that can be both 'traditional', or 'place-based', 'virtual', or based in communications technologies, or some combination of both. This theorisation offers us a concept of locality which does not situate places and virtual neighbourhoods as opposites; both must similarly generate and receive flows of information and value and be produced from, against, and in relation to extra-local contexts. Appadurai (1995, p. 216) also offers us a third term, translocality which describes forms of locality produced in neighbourhoods that combine both place-based and circulating populations.

Translocalities belong to specific topographic sites, but are simultaneously un-grounded or 'virtual,' existing in extension along complex nodes and pathways. If we approach the classic place-based village of ethnographic inquiry as a potential translocality, we shift the focus of analysis from the existing neighbourhood infrastructure, economy, and apparent livelihood strategies of the people present in a community to the network of absent members and flows of information and value in which they are embedded. The term 'trans' marks the way in which Appadurai envisions locality as having entered a new phase with contemporary technologies of travel and communication. Translocality is one part of a new relation he envisions between people, place and community. This relation is also shaped by new desires, aspirations, and imaginative possibilities opened up through travel, urban life and media, and participation in virtual or imagined communities of sentiment (Appadurai 1996, p. 8). In Appadurai's terms, much of the popular

disquiet about the loss or fragmentation of place is actually apprehension about change and the challenges posed by these new forms of locality.

Anthropologists, by resisting the urge to mistake place for locality and thus misrecognise geography as equivalent to sociality in ethnographic description, can describe the new forms taken on by place and locality in their continuities with the past. This is precisely the task of the contributors to this volume. The participants each describe different ways that forms of locality have adapted and extended through a variety of colonial and contemporary displacements and movements.

### **Contributions to rethinking place in motion**

Against visions of the loss of place, or its reinvigoration as the site of exclusion, the authors in this collection return to the way in which popular conceptions of place have symbolic or metonymic qualities that fuse events, attitudes and affect into an apparently coherent whole – a ‘here’ or a ‘there’. Their contributions show how places are constructed both in the material and the imaginative sense. Each essay suggests different ways in which place making is as much about meaning – an inherently cultural activity – as it is about economy, an equally meaning-suffused realm. They illustrate how concepts of place are reworked into new forms, helping us to understand diversity and difference, the ways in which boundaries are inherently open and porous, and the ways in which places have always been interlinked and interdependent - both for those who lead spatially circumscribed lives and for those who are highly mobile. The ethnographic descriptions contained in the essays allow us to conceptualise places as sites of travelling as much as dwelling, suggesting how places themselves may travel, being much more than their topographic locations or material aspects. By ‘finding the field’ in local conceptions and practices of place, these essays begin from the insight that social knowledge has always been ‘framed and vested’ in particular landscapes (Fox 1997, p. 1). While High and Pannell explore more ‘traditional’ landscapes in new ways, the papers by Smith, McKay and Taylor examine various forms of ‘extended’ locality, focussing on the histories and economies underlying Appadurai’s ‘trans’. Hjorth and McKay then follow social knowledge into the new, virtual landscapes of localities mediated by technologies – text messages, mobile phones and the internet.

Place continues to have ‘more than material’ aspects, and the essays by Pannell, High and Smith all describe different forms of spiritual engagement with landscapes. In East Timor, Pannell analyses colonial processes of emplacement and displacement, both historical and contemporary, in terms of the mobility and inertia of both physical objects and intangible beings. While colonial regimes move local people around the landscape, the locality-producing activities of *tei* - the spirits of the landscape – displace the impacts of both Portuguese and Indonesian colonisations.

Following Appadurai (1996), Pannell shows us how space and time are socialised and localised through the sacred. This theme of sacred space is also explored through High's discussion of the *puutaa* territory cult of the southern Lao village of Doon Khiaw. High examines the rituals of the territory cult as a key means of producing locality in an island community conscious of its increasing links with the wider world. Through her ethnography of ritual practice, she shows how the *puutaa* spirit protects not only current village residents, but kin working in both neighbouring provinces and countries and emigrants in Australia and America, and marking Doon Khiaw's 'sense of place' as one simultaneously local and travelling. Smith likewise examines affective ties as an aspect of places themselves in his analysis of emplacement in contemporary Aboriginal Australia, describing attachments to place based on ancestral and 'spiritual' ties.

Taylor's exploration of the trading economy of the Cham in Vietnam is also based on an understanding of place 'in process', and constituted through histories of movement which give particular settlements distinctive singularities. Rejecting the popular Vietnamese understanding of the Cham as geographically and culturally marginalised, Taylor finds that the mobile livelihoods currently pursued by Cham traders exhibit continuities with their histories of movement. By becoming translocal agents, the Cham are shaping the emerging capitalist spatial economy of the Mekong delta and their translocal economic agency, in turn, reshapes the village sites in which they dwell. McKay's research on the extension of Filipino localities into Hong Kong through temporary migration similarly focuses on the economic ties that bind home and away. Remittances of money, material goods, emergency aid and constant electronic communication allow migrants in Hong Kong to continue their participation in household and community economics at home.

Both of these cases illustrate how, when people move, locality can be transformed so that apparently distant or foreign places emerge as parts of local territorial imaginations and vice versa. Taylor examines this in Vietnam, while McKay's essay explores this transformation in a Philippine translocal village. In Smith's case study, the forced removals of Aboriginal people from Cape York have created a local territorial imagination for now distant-from-country 'diaspora people'. Jim Clifford (2001, p. 447) offers us a vision of 'a spectrum of attachments to land and place – articulated, old and new traditions of indigenous dwelling and travelling'. Smith gives us a powerful account of how the colonial encapsulation of local populations produced new forms of mobility and transformed understandings of locality through the creation of 'wounded attachments' to country. Places are 'home' because the foundations of identity are vested in their sacred topography, thus the loss of locality with mobility is compensated for by a turn to new forms of 'place-based' identity that (mistakenly) assume a stable essence of place. **Smith returns to Appadurai (1996), to argue that locality involves complex assemblages of affect, social practices**

and ties across locations. The novel and disjunct forms of connection between people and place he documents are a key aspect of indigenous modernities.

The historical aspects of these essays, particularly those of Pannell and Smith, illustrate the ways in which human mobility has always moved the conceptualisation of territory, evoked multiple temporalities and causes us to continually rethink our scales of analysis. This attention to historicity cautions us against seeing new global forms of mobility as a radical overturning of past paradigms, suggesting instead that we are seeing the opening of a new epoch marked by the intensification of these processes (Appadurai 1996; Low and Zuniga 2003; Trouillot 2003). Against this, we can also see that new, technologically mediated forms of place will continue to require innovative theories and methods of inquiry, posing on-going challenges to anthropology's traditional ways of working and modelling relations (Ong and Collier 2005). Both McKay and Hjorth examine the role of communications technology in bringing about the creation of new or extended forms of locality, rather than 'fracturing' place. Hjorth's essay on technologically-mediated co-presence explores the ways that mobile phones are used to 'micro-coordinate' face-to-face contact and intimacy in urban East Asia. Mobile phones are recruited into the production of forms of locality that, while novel, borrow from and reinscribe much older technologies and ideas of place and social relations, reinforcing culturally conventional forms of locality and identity. The forms of locality she describes are emerging ones that emphasize personal creativity, expression and consumer identities among more affluent youth in the developed economies of East Asia. These new forms of locality may as yet be out of reach for parts of working class Asia, but represent the kinds of technologically mediated social relations to which, for instance, McKay's Filipino migrant respondents or Taylor's Cham traders, may eventually aspire. McKay's essay, in contrast, looks at more prosaic uses of technology in mediating everyday life in an extended form of locality. McKay examines the distinctive set of practices that sustain the economic and affective dimensions of locality for a community composed of female migrants in Hong Kong and households at home in the Philippines. In a community of circular migrants, virtual efforts at place-making overlap, intertwine, and are layered on top of place-based, face-to-face localities. Instead of the annihilation of place by space that might be expected with globalisation, McKay documents adaptations, reterritorialisations and a multiplied sense of simultaneous place-times, which are constitutive of and constituted through a distinctively mobile form of translocal subjectivity. McKay concludes that, to understand changing forms of place – to put place in motion – we need to understand the reformulations of locality, multiple subjections and mobile subjectivities that are inherent in mobility.

All these contributions illustrate different ways in which locality remains an open project in its changing forms and thus a rich site for ethnographic descriptions and new theorizations of global



change. They trace continuities with the past and locate hope for the future alongside the mobility they describe in the present. In doing so, these authors describe two vital challenges for contemporary ethnographic research. Firstly, they each suggest different approaches through which anthropology may continue to attend to the importance of locality with research that is place-based, without being place-bound. Secondly, they begin to describe and theorise the changing forms of subjectivity arising from the diverse forms of mobility which characterise our global or late modern liberal era. By putting place ‘in motion’ and finding the field in new forms, they draw anthropology into a closer engagement with the diversity of mobilities and subjectivities that lie behind the totality of experience in our ‘fragmented globality.’

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