

Conclusion

Assembling the Frontier

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The frontier is always already empty. – Anna Tsing

Rethinking imperial formations as polities of dislocation and deferral which cut through the nation-state by delimiting interior frontiers as well as exterior ones is one step in reordering our attention. – Ann Stoler

This volume responds to the contemporary reimagining of margins and state edges as resource-rich, unexploited ‘wastelands’ targeted for development schemes for economic integration and control in and beyond Asia. As contributions to this volume attest, these spaces constitute particular kinds of edges where, to follow Anna Tsing, the expansive natures of extraction and production come into their own together with the apparently contradictory logics of containment and securitization (Tsing, 2005). These are zones where sedimented histories of marginality (Moore, 2005), relations of distance and remoteness, and diverse forms of materiality come together with new politics and techniques of sovereignty and capital.

The making of Bangladesh’s climate frontier through anticipatory ruination, the grafting of new livelihoods on a former Soviet frontier in Tajikistan, the histories of frontier erasure in Vietnam, and the many other cases in this volume illustrate the diversity of past and present frontier making in Asia and the enormous effects that these processes have on people and environment. These chapters show that resource frontiers are things in the process of becoming: assembled by a diverse

array of human and non-human actors, organic and inorganic substances, technical and natural materials, and intangible elements. Moreover, they illustrate the value of approaching frontiers as assemblages: spaces where the complex causes and consequences of territorial transformation must be charted and demonstrated, not assumed.

Frontier assemblages in Asia and beyond are wildly heterogenous in form, purpose, and shape. Yet, the case studies in this volume show that despite different political regimes (neoliberal/capitalist, socialist, post-socialist) and their attendant economic infrastructures there are striking similarities in the ways resources are assembled for extraction and land assembled for management in these sensitive spaces. In our attempt to uncover similarities across different Asian frontiers, several themes, or drivers of frontierization, tie together the various case studies across the region. For example, several chapters show how the discourse of climate and environmental change have become an explicit or implicit force and rationality for new rounds of assembling resource frontiers. In the case of Bangladesh, Kasia Paprocki shows how coastal landscapes are reshaped into climate frontiers through development planning and notions of resilience and adaptation. In a similar manner, Zachery Anderson charts the Indonesian government's attempt to develop a 'green economy' in its outer islands to mitigate climate change by incorporating programs of sustainable agriculture and carbon sequestration projects. These projects, driven by strong frontier imaginaries, will open up the region for a new round of resource extraction through biofuel production. Carbon mitigation and climate change also appear as central themes in the chapter by Gökçe Günel, who shows how the United Arab Emirates explores the subsurface of old oil wells as a new imaginative frontier for carbon storage. Similarly to Anderson and Paprocki, Günel's exploration shows that imaginations of the climate affected future are themselves strong forces of frontier making, allowing the conceptualization of certain spaces as open for frontierization as a hedge against and/or an experimental site for managing future catastrophe.

Jumping to the arid and rolling dunes in Inner Mongolia, Jerry Zee emphasizes how the climate/environmental crisis of dust affecting major Chinese metropolises are triggering frontier making, or remaking, responses from Beijing through major programs of environmental governance. These programs rework the dusty frontier regions into forest landscapes for future resource extraction and social, economic, ecological, and technical experimentation. This kind of landscape governance, which applies the discourses of environmental sustainability in the making of new frontiers, is further in evidence along China's coasts. Here, as Young Rae Choi shows, large-scale land reclamation projects are reframed as ecologically sustainable practices, despite previous assessments to the

contrary. Choi argues that these transformations of oceans into land constitute a form of frontierization – making coastal reclamations investable and legitimate test sites for the ‘eco’ agenda of the Chinese state. Choi and Zee thus both chart processes that articulate with Paprocki, Anderson, and Günel’s mapping of climate frontiers. Yet the concerns that drive these transformations are not future catastrophe, but present-day anxieties about atmosphere, population, and investment.

Choi’s chapter brings forward another overlapping theme that runs through the book: that of massive infrastructure construction and its role in creating resource frontiers and opening up marginal lands for various forms of extraction and control. Here, the use of infrastructure serves as a means of at once making and settling frontier space. Duncan McDuie-Ra similarly shows how the ‘disturbed’ and marginal frontier city of Imphal in northeast India is being ‘civilized’ by the central state through the construction of economic infrastructure and investments in a frontier health industry – an attempt to reclaim the unruly frontier back into the fold of the Indian state. However, as argued by McDuie-Ra, such civilizing processes produce unanticipated effects, which paradoxically reorient Imphal even further towards Southeast Asia and outside the imagination of a sovereign ‘India’ thus underlining the open-endedness of frontier assemblages. Further, in his chapter on massive-scale mining and urban megaprojects in western China, Max D. Woodworth depicts how spatial transformation and infrastructure projects in frontier space often take ‘gigantic’ forms as spectacular symbols of development and accumulation. Each of these chapters signals the centrality of infrastructure in frontier space, but also foregrounds a point made in much of the new literature on infrastructure: that infrastructure projects are situated, situational, and open to multiple valences, affects, and interpretations (see Von Schnitzler, 2016; Anand, 2017).

Yet another recurring theme that runs through these chapters is that of frontier temporalities – the binding or disjunctures of past and present frontiers. A vivid example of such temporal alignments of past and present frontiers is offered by Townsend Middleton in his analysis of quinine production in northeast India under British colonial rule. Middleton traces how this medical resource frontier collapsed and was later reborn and reassembled on the debris of colonial projects. This reassembly is driven at once by a refusal to give up on certain benefits of the older frontier assemblage and by new imaginaries of untapped resources and wealth that speak to the new political and economic realities. In his analysis of frontier making and unmaking in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan, Igor Rubinov similarly shows how local residents rework frontier ruins into new assemblages after the collapse of the Soviet state and subsequent abandonment of its large-scale infrastructure

development projects on the Pamir resource frontier. Histories of frontier making and ruination are also a recurrent theme in Heather Anne Swanson's chapter on the Japanese salmon frontier on the island of Hokkaido. Here, she shows the intricate entanglements of politics, economy and biology in frontier making. Moreover, she illustrates how the Japanese government attempts to breathe life into the ruins of past frontier projects and activate a new round of resource extraction on the salmon frontier. Like the previous chapters, Christian Lentz engages the temporalities of frontier making. As he points out, the rubble of old frontiers may be central in the construction of new frontier assemblages. But it also may be actively occluded, buried, and swept under the rug of nationalist narratives of territory. Through the case of Vietnam's Black River region, he highlights how such frontier erasures became important instruments in Vietnamese state building efforts and infrastructure development/modernization. In all of these cases, frontier assemblies are shown to be contingent and conjunctural. But the things that they assemble have strange lives that live on. Sometimes, these are legacies that are actively engaged in new frontier and post-frontier projects. Sometimes they are ghosts that haunt new frontiers even as they provide the grounds for their making.

Beyond these resonances, contributions to this volume show the value of thinking of frontiers not as self-evident 'things' but rather as assemblages. Resource frontiers are emergent, dynamic, and conjunctural phenomena that fluctuate with the vagaries of politics, markets, and ecologies across time and scale. Through a shared analytic of frontier assemblages, we have traced these emergences – charting the framings and imaginations of space and territory and the historical contingencies that facilitate the transformation of margins into frontiers. Frontier assemblages encompass the specific ecologies of resource frontiers, the forms of capital that underwrite extraction, the specific practices of resource exploitation, and the materiality and ruination of projects unfolding within them. As Li reminds us 'assemblage links directly to a practice, to assemble' and thus indicates the agencies involved in the shaping of connections holding 'heterogeneous elements' together (Li, 2007a: 264).

We see frontier assemblages as an analytic that provides different ways to understand frontier dynamics in the contemporary moment. In pairing these terms, we invoke a specific, if open-ended, understanding that frames both a theoretical and methodological approach to understanding resource frontiers. These are sites that at once dramatize and clarify the asymmetries of power and the consequent inequalities and exclusions around resource extraction and production. Our interest in thinking the frontier in this way stems from our collective observation of

contemporary territorial transformation across Asia. Yet, we suggest, the kinds of assemblages charted in this book resonate beyond Asia as well. As the explosion of literature on resource frontiers across the globe suggests, we are in a new moment of frontier making. Many of those transformations are framed openly through the language of frontiers. Others mobilize strategies and tactics that map to what we here call frontierization. These emergent frontiers are but the current iteration of a longer historical process: the incorporation of marginal spaces under rubrics of capital, security, and territorial rule. By broadening our understanding of resource frontiers, we suggest that these spaces hold the key to understanding this critical territorial shift.

The dynamics of frontierization are intimately linked with imaginations of these spaces as remote. In other words, resource frontiers are zones in which distance, strangeness, and edginess work to open up conditions of possibility. These conditions are sedimented in the very landscape – built on the ruins of long historical projects of anxious rule. As argued by Tsing, these spaces are relationally produced as ‘out of the way’ through the dynamics of centre and periphery, legibility and illegibility, and law and lawlessness (Tsing, 1993). In other words, the remoteness of frontiers is socially produced alongside of and through tensions and anxieties about these spaces and the recursive interventions, and their regular failures, that such anxieties herald (Dunn and Cons, 2014). Ardener notes that remote areas are full of the ruins of intervention. ‘Remote areas cry out for development, but they are continuous victims of visions of development ... Remote areas offer images of unbridled pessimism or utopian optimism, of change and decay, in their memorials’ (Ardener, 2012: 529). In other words, remoteness is an invitation to projects of incorporation, development, integration, and possibility. At the same time, it is a marker of the failure of such projects. Resource frontiers are heterotopic in Michel Foucault’s sense of the term: representations of utopian possibility and reflections of an optimistic future. These ‘other spaces’ are set apart from the rest of society as zones in which different relations of power, and hence different forms of government rationality, can be imagined and implemented. As contributors to this volume show, resource frontiers are often idealized visions of modernity and laboratories of new social ecological orders (Foucault, 1986). At the same time, they are markers of the ruins of progress. Like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, their histories often read as ‘one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [their] feet’ (Benjamin, 1968: 257). Yet, like all ruined frontiers, they present themselves as open for new reappropriations and frontierizations – the markers of ruination offer new possibilities and transformative openings.

Beyond progress and ruination, the notion of remoteness is critical to the dynamics of frontier assemblages because it further facilitates a range of intrusions that rely on the trope of distance and remove. What happens at the edges is specifically outside of the bounds of normal intervention. Yet this is not necessarily exceptionality in Agamben's sense of the term (1998). Rather, remoteness facilitates a framing of frontiers as abnormal – spaces imagined as at a remove from state power in ways that necessitate and legitimate a range of actions that skirt the boundaries of law and social norms. In other words, the relations of remoteness are predicated not on an active sovereign decision, but rather on its impossibility – a recognition that state power only partially penetrates and manages these areas or that the interests of the 'state' are only one of a range of competing projects within frontier space. Frontiers often present outsiders with an 'institutional vacuum' of possibilities (Kopytoff, 1999: 33). As Derek Hall notes, the capability to govern frontier spaces is shared among multiple actors, both state and non-state, resulting in an internally fragmented approach to governance that highlight the anxieties surrounding the extraction of valuable resources. States can seldom persuasively claim to be the sole source of law and government in frontier spaces, and projects seeking to incorporate these spaces into sovereign and territorial folds must be resigned to sharing authority with other actors (Hall, 2013: 52). As Danilo Geiger reminds us in many of these marginal spaces, 'colonial regimes never established full administrative control, and thus left their post-colonial successor governments a legacy of still open frontiers' (Geiger, 2008: 93). Frontiers are thus zones characterized by competing normative orders and modes of regulation, producing spaces for resistance, dissonance and manoeuvring (Barney, 2009: 152).

In sum, understanding resource frontiers as frontier assemblages opens up a mode of engagement that highlights the dynamics of frontierization: the ways that frontier spaces are framed and made into sites and zones of production and extraction. We believe that there is significant analytical advantage in thinking the political, economic, social, and material complexity of resource frontiers from this vantage point. Frontier assemblage moves beyond a narrow political economy and instead foregrounds the often surprising collisions of history, ecology, economy, politics, geography, and imagination that come together in frontier space. Attending to these dynamics opens up new analytic, and perhaps political possibilities in emergent frontiers in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Tajikistan, the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and beyond.