

Triangulating the borderless world: geographies of power in the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle

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This paper argues that the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle makes manifest the complex geographies of power that subvert efforts to read cross-border regionalization as a straightforward geographical corollary of ‘globalization’. As such, the region needs to be examined not simply as a complementary transborder assemblage of land, labour and capital, but rather as a palimpsest in which the imagined geographies of cross-border development and the economic geographies of their uneven spatial fixing on the ground are mediated by complex cultural and political geographies. We seek to unpack these by triangulating how the geographies of capital (including its uneven development and its links to the geo-economics of intra-regional competition), land (including post-colonial relations across the region, the geopolitics of land reclamation and the enclaved landscapes of tourism) and labour (including the divergent itineraries of migrant workers) overlay and complicate one another in the region. By charting these complex triangulations of space and place, we seek to problematize narratives of the Growth Triangle as an exemplary embodiment of the ‘borderless world’.

key words Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle borders geo-economics globalization uneven development

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Introduction

In the 1980s as a wave of fast capitalist development unfolded around the ‘Pacific Rim’, and as the question of globalization began to gather attention in the academy, business watchers and strategists began to talk simultaneously about the promises of regionalization. This talk varied from broad discussions of free trade areas as building blocs of market liberalization to visions of new city-regions as key nodes in a networked global economy. Conceived as an ideal embodiment of both these dynamics – of both borderless free trade and of city-region development – cross-border regional development plans began to be promoted right

around the world. However, the usage of cross-border regionalism as a motif of ‘borderless world’ discourse was particularly evident in East and Southeast Asia. It was here in the early 1990s that a whole set of cross-border regionalist development projects were launched under the geometrical slogan of ‘Growth Triangles’ (Toh and Low 1993; Thant *et al.* 1994, and, for a useful critical survey, Sum 2002). Of these, the Pearl River delta of south China was the largest, but its status as a formal cross-border region was blurred by Hong Kong and Macau’s subsequent incorporation as Special Administrative Regions of China (Breitung 2002). Instead, it has been the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle that has been the most

widely watched and cited example of supposedly 'borderless' city-region development tendencies. As Scott Macleod and Terry McGee reported:

The idea of the Growth Triangle has caught the imagination of the regional and global media, corporate communities, and those interested in the possibility of extended ASEAN cooperation. The Growth Triangle has been featured in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, as well as getting approving nods from groups of investors such as Japan's Keidanren. (Macleod and McGee 1996, 424)

Academics and corporate globalization gurus soon followed, creating an exuberant literature on the region's special significance as an illustration of how to grow and prosper in a globalizing world (e.g. Lee 1991; Ng and Wong 1991; Yeoh et al. 1992; Chia and Lee 1993; Acharya 1995; Ohmae 1995; Ho and So 1997; Kakazu 1997; Azman et al. 1998; Thambipillai 1998). Repeatedly this writing came back to the basic revelatory idea that the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle was an avatar of the 'borderless world' (Parsonage 1992). It is this much-hyped Growth Triangle (hence 'the Triangle') that we seek to examine in terms of its complex and far from borderless geographical realities (Figure 1).

The political commitment to tie together Singapore with the Malaysian state of Johor and the Riau islands (principally Batam and Bintan) of Indonesia in the triangular relationship was formally constituted in a memorandum of understanding between the three states signed in December 1994. However, the project has a longer administrative history going back at least to proposals made public by Singapore's (then) Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in December 1989 (Ahmad 1993, 93). The basic vision was for Singapore more effectively to manage the cross-border hinterlandization of its economy, providing capital and strategic direction while securing access to both Malaysian and Indonesian labour, land and water. Singapore, in short, was to supply the capital, and Johor and Riau were to provide the land and labour. As shall become clear, it was the vision of economic *complementarity* articulated in these proposals that underpinned the tall tales of anticipated cross-border regional growth. In ways that represented a contemporary simulation of Alfred Weber's (1929) simple triangular model of industrial location, the Asian Development Bank and other promotional groups scripted the Triangle as a three-way complementarity

of capital, labour and land, an 'ideal triangle' of complementarities destined for growth in the midst of borderless trade (Thant et al. 1994; Abonyi 1996, 5). Moreover, insofar as the Triangle vision was also intended in part to assuage traditional concerns about Singapore's influence in the region (Perry 1991), much stress was placed on the two-way reciprocal aspects of the complementarities, and related efforts were subsequently made to downplay Singapore's semiotic dominance in the Triangle with the abandonment of early names and acronyms such as 'the Singapore Growth Triangle' and SIJORI (Singapore–Johor–Riau) which placed Singapore first. Thus, for both economic and political reasons, economic complementarity became the dominant trope, readily rehearsed by academics as much as by policymakers. Even now, when the Triangle is no longer aggressively promoted by local governments, accounts of the region's complementarities have continued to circulate, and it is easy to find articles and policy papers addressing their relevance as a model to places as different and as far away as, for example, the Gulf of Finland (Kivikari 2001). Our goal here, by contrast, is not to take the geometry of the Triangle at face value. Instead, we draw on a set of critical theories in order to triangulate the much more geographically complex power geometries of this storied regional embodiment of the 'borderless world'.¹

The cross-border promise of *reterritorialization* and examples such as the Triangle have become a mainstay of business commentary. In this respect, it is worth noting that Kenichi Ohmae, amongst the most cited sources of 'borderless-world' hyperbole, set great store by the possibilities of cross-border city-region development. While critics have mainly focused on his tendentious claims about *The End of the Nation-State*, fewer have explored the questions raised by his book's subtitle: *The Rise of Regional Economies* (Ohmae 1995). These questions include the ways in which Ohmae's account provided a ready-made formula and set of examples of how to do successful cross-border regionalism. It is amongst these examples that one sees the Triangle profiled as a story of success: 'a natural economic zone' of the 'borderless world' alongside the Pearl River Delta, North Mexico/Southwest US and Taiwan/Fujian (Ohmae 1995, 80, 143). But what really has been won by the Triangle? How was it competing and with whom? What has driven and shaped the cross-border developments? And how can the neat and easily citable triangular geometry be

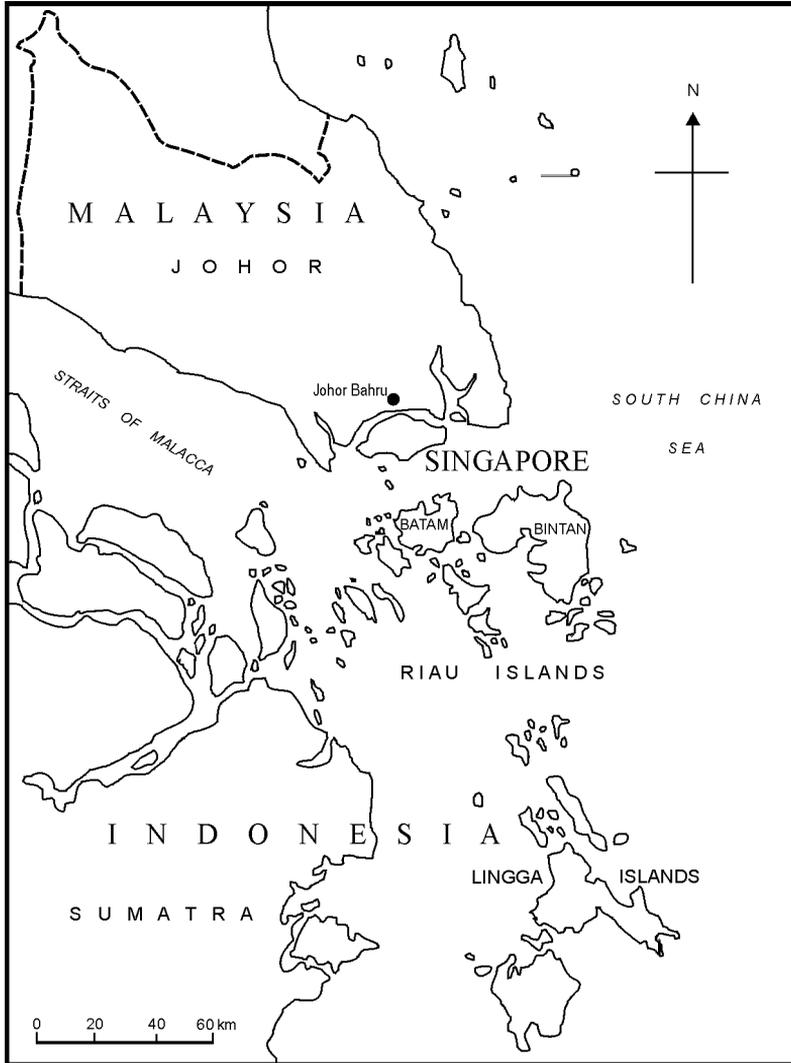


Figure 1 The location of the IMS Growth Triangle in Southeast Asia

squared with the complex circuits of power, lives and capital in the region?

At the macro scale, the development of the Triangle into a paradigmatic 'best practices' case of 'successful growth triangle development' needs to be understood in the context of decolonization, the end of the Cold War and the redevelopment of East and Southeast Asia as key sites for commodity production. More specifically, as Sum suggests with regard to the Asian Growth Triangle phenomenon more generally, we need to come to terms with the

Triangle as a strategy promoted both by regional leaders keen on 'expanding "embedded exportism"' and by global interests (including TNCs, and their representatives in ASEAN, APEC and the US government) who see 'it as having a "facilitating effect" upon "open regionalism"' (Sum 2002, 54). Sum argues that it is 'this coincidence of global, national and regional interests [that] enable[s] the "growth triangle" to be seen as a magic bullet' (Sum 2002, 65). At the more micro scale, it is important to consider where this 'bullet' hits home

and where its magic fades away (see also Kelly 2002). The Triangle, and the form of regional spatial fix it represents, needs therefore to be understood within the complex power geometries of dislocation, disempowerment, enablement and confinement that comprise the myriad human geographies of the region. These micro and macro contextual dynamics are linked to each other and the broader scale-switching dynamics of the regional spatial fix (Marston 2000; Marston and Smith 2001; cf. Brenner 2001; Newstead *et al.* 2003). We can only address the complexity of such intertwined processes in a limited way here, but, in an attempt to register at least some of the diverse dynamics condensed in this archipelago of reterritorialization, we draw on three strands of theoretical argumentation.

It is Marxist theorization in geography about spatial fixing that provides us with one strand of our analytical re-triangulation. This is supplemented by work that aims to register how uneven development in the region exceeds the neat trigonometry of land, labour and capital. For this we draw upon a political-geographical concern with the ways in which successive colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial regimes of politics and governmentality are layered territorially and create a wide range of consequences for both the geopolitical and geo-economic re-making of regional space (Sidaway 2000; Kramsch 2002; Sparke 2002a) and also on the cultural geographies of power relations to explore the ways in which the production of subjectivity, agency and political identity intertwine with and complicate the production (both semiotic and industrial) of the region. Together these analyses – of the economic geography of a regionalist spatial fix, the political geography of governmentality and the heterogeneous cultural geographies of agency and subjectivity formation – guide our re-triangulation of the Triangle. In his own problematization of 'borderless world' discourses, Ó Tuathail (1999, 140) argues that territory needs to be reconceptualized 'as a regime of practices triangulated between institutionalisation of power, materialisations of place and idealisations of "the people"'. Reworking this formula just a little, we argue that conventional geographies of the Triangle as an embodiment of the 'borderless world' need to be 're-triangulated' in terms of circuits of capital, the (post)colonial remaking of place, and the cultural geographic reworking of regional identities.

Table I Unit cost comparisons of land and labour in the Triangle in 1989

	Singapore	Johor	Batam
Land price (US\$/m ²)	4.25	4.08	2.3
Labour cost (US\$/month)			
Unskilled	350	150	90
Semi-skilled	420	220	140
Skilled	600	400	200

Source: Based on data from tables produced in *Business Times* (1991), Lee (1991), Ng and Wong (1991), Ahmad (1993), Kumar (1994), van Grunsven (1995) and Smith (1997)

Capital

The capital-centric story of the Triangle begins first and foremost with numerical analysis of variations in land and labour costs across the region. These are the numbers which proponents and commentators repeatedly used during the 1990s to map out the economic rationality of regional reterritorialization. The most commonly circulated figures were from 1989 and were generally presented along the lines of Table I.

These and equivalent data allowed authors to highlight the significance of the disparities between the high costs of Singapore, the cheaper costs of Johor and the extremely cheap costs of Batam. For example, *The Economist* noted that 'the growth triangle can hardly fail to impress' (1991, 9).

The Batam Industrial Corporation (Batamindo), 40% owned by Singaporean interests and 60% by the Salim Group is transforming the island of Batam into a floating factory, two-thirds the size of Singapore and only a 30-minute boat trip from its financial district. . . . Batamindo will supply custom-built factories on 30-year leases. The Salim group can supply unskilled but nimble-fingered workers (mostly young girls) at S\$92.50 (\$54) a month. (*The Economist* 1991, 9)

These references to 'nimble-fingered' 'young girls' need to be read against other gendered divisions of labour in the Triangle; notably the thousands of women sex workers in Batam. However, what *The Economist's* account shared with so many other assessments was a basic appeal to labour costs. All kinds of commentators remained haunted by the phantom-like objectivity of these numbers.

We mark this haunting effect of the costs disparities discourse because its has a powerful 'constitutive effect on the subsequent discursive and economic practices of actors' (Hall 2003, 71; cf. Gibson-Graham

1996). For, as Kelly has argued more widely with respect to the narration of crisis and restructuring in Southeast Asia, 'these representational strategies can be linked to discourses of political power and the construction of economic policy' (2001, 719). Only by considering the way the comparative numbers work at such registers can their connections to the economic production of the Triangle be adequately explained.

The spatial fix

The cost differentials between the three parts of the Triangle have had significant economic consequences. They have allowed Singaporean capital to escape the spatial limits and high costs of the island state by expanding to neighbouring parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. The peak of the Triangle investment hype was in the early 1990s when Singapore was booming with growth rates of 12.3 per cent in 1993 and 11.4 per cent in 1994, a time when unemployment fell to between 1.7 per cent and 2.7 per cent, skilled labour was in short supply and wages were rising (Cunningham and Debrah 1995; *Singapore Statistics* 2003a). At the same time, new productive outlets for capital in Singapore were increasingly limited by land shortages, limits on water supply systems and other basic resources. These pressures towards reterritorialization were in turn combined with the facilitating capacity of Singapore's highly developed financial sector which was able to play a key role in financing developments in Johor, Batam and enclaves of Bintan (Guinness 1992). The resulting cross-border rescaling of local production systems was also accompanied by shifts in the regional division of labour that Singapore's Economic Development Board sought: namely, the off-shoring from Singapore of *some* of the lowest skill, export-processing assembly work and the co-development and anchoring of more remunerative financing, managerial and research and development work in Singapore itself. None of these developments happened in a vacuum, of course, and when the so-called 'Asian financial crisis' hit in 1997–8 the supposedly complementary quality of these patterns became increasingly eclipsed by rising concerns about *competition* (Debrah *et al.* 2000). Unemployment levels in Singapore increased to as much as 4.6 per cent in 1999 and 5.2 per cent in 2002 (*Singapore Statistics* 2003b), the upward pressure on wages was reduced, and new locales for external expansion elsewhere in Southeast Asia

began to look cheaper for those holding US dollar-pegged Singapore dollars. In this new context, it was not surprising that the interest in the local cross-border developments diminished. Overall, this uneven temporal development pattern of decline following expansion makes manifest the links between the growth of the Triangle and the ups and downs of the Singaporean economy. At least at this very extensive level, the pattern does seem to follow the classic spatial fix thesis, with reterritorialization developing in concert with the peaking of the high growth/high costs phase of the Singaporean business cycle (Harvey 1982). However [following the empirical example of Harvey's own discussion of the reterritorialization of nineteenth-century Paris (Harvey 1995)], this bigger picture of a regional spatial fix needs to be nuanced by an acknowledgement of its uneven development on the ground.

Contrary to the image painted by *The Economist*, it was not as if all of Singapore's industry suddenly shifted to Batam's 'floating factory' at the start of the 1990s. Indeed, in 1994 one more sceptical commentator noted of the Triangle that '[a]s yet its effect on the Singaporean economy is scarcely detectable in aggregate statistics' (Rimmer 1994, 1745). The same, however, cannot be said of Johor and still less of Batam and Bintan. In these respective corners of the Triangle the impact of the developments on aggregate statistics was clearly detectable. In Johor, the state government had actively sought twinning with Singapore ever since 1988, and even before this the National Malaysian Industrial Development Authority and the Singapore Economic Development Board had cooperated on facilitating cross-border industrial relocation and tourism development projects (Guinness 1992; Parsonage 1992). Malaysian enthusiasm to engage with Singapore in this way (despite historic political tensions) was itself indicative of the potentially large amounts of Singaporean capital inflow that were possible. In 1988, as the prospect of the Triangle was being formulated, this increased dramatically by 200 per cent (Parsonage 1992, 309). With the consolidation of the official vision of the Triangle, these flows continued apace, and became part of a phenomenal period of growth for Johor which averaged GDP growth rates above 9 per cent – and manufacturing growth rates of 14 per cent – until the 1997 financial crisis. For van Grunsven, the 'main reason for this particular boom was the favorable supply and cost of labour and land in the

state compared with Singapore' (1998, 184). In Batam even more striking rates of growth were recorded during the 1990s. Again, the developments started before Goh Chok Tong's announcement of the 'Triangle of growth'. Back in 1978 the control of development in Batam was transferred to BIDA (the Batam Industrial Development Authority) under the chairmanship of B. J. Habibie (who succeeded Suharto as Indonesia's president in 1998). Habibie turned Batam into both a personal power base and a commercial-cum-national project of building an Indonesian mega-metropolis to vie with Singapore. The vision of rivalling Singapore also led to notably extravagant mega-projects, including the building of a set of massive bridges connecting the main island to the archipelago of smaller islands to the south – where even in 2003 there remained few signs of industrial or even residential development except the new road connecting the bridges.

Clearly, Batam is not even close yet to rivalling the levels of investment, population growth and urban development prized by Singapore, but the plans that Habibie did make to invest in Batam and turn it into a duty free trade zone have led to remarkably rapid industrial development (Grundy-Warr *et al.* 1999; Chang 2001). In 1990, private investment in the island reached US\$2199 million per year: by 1996 this had doubled to US\$4704 million (van Grunsven 1998; based on BIDA 1996 data). Eight industrial estates were completed during this time, amongst them the flagship project of Batamindo Industrial Park in the middle of the island that boasts as tenants a host of TNCs including AT&T, CIBA Vision, Epson, Philips, Quantum, Sumitomo, Smith Corona, Seagate, Sanyo, Shimano, Siemens, TEAC and Thomson.

These global corporations notwithstanding, the bulk of investment originated in Singapore BIDA recorded over US\$10bn of investment from Singapore-based corporations, followed by Japanese-originated investment at just over US\$42 million (BIDA 2000, 25), whilst 40 per cent of the joint venture ownership of Batamindo came from two Singapore-government linked companies (Grundy-Warr *et al.* 1999, 310). In parallel with these investments, Bintan island has experienced the transformative influx of capital from Singapore in industrial parks and high-end tourist facilities (Chang 2001; Grundy-Warr *et al.* 1999).

Therefore there have been material transformations wrought by the reterritorialization of capital

that has occurred under the label of the Triangle. However, whilst these have been made by reference to cost differentials, the phantom-like objectivity of these has had an altogether different impact at the level of strategic discourse.

The discourse of complementarity

The repeated emphasis on costs across the Triangle has effectively constituted a *discourse of complementarity*, the performance of which can be examined in terms of a wide range of analytical, geopolitical and geo-economic repercussions. Analytically, it has led to the instrumentalization of the Triangle as an example in broader discourses on cross-border regions (Rimmer 1994). More significantly, in the more normative renditions of these arguments, the Triangle has been held up both as a political 'model' and as a purified economic embodiment of the theory of comparative advantage (Kumar 1994). The discourse about cost also works to constitute what Macleod and McGee call 'a marketing scheme' (1996, 443). The hype around the region as the perfect embodiment of differential factor endowments nested around an easily accessible global hub in Singapore thus speaks to a larger set of comparisons: namely those – made within the Singapore Economic Development Board and other local business elites – that the region needs to position itself more competitively vis-à-vis other rival investment hubs in Asia. The diagramming of the Triangle, based as it is on the discourse of complementarity (Figure 2) can thus be interpreted as doing the argumentative work of promoting the

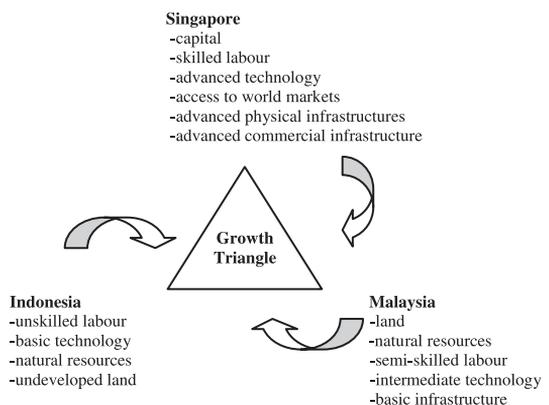


Figure 2 The Triangle of Economic Complementarity redrawn after Debrah *et al.* (2000)

Triangle against its geo-economic competitors (Sparke 2002b; Sparke and Lawson 2003) for inward investment.

Nevertheless, this broader vision of emphasizing internal collaboration for the sake of interregional competition has not banished the ghost of cross-border competition from the Triangle itself. Indeed, as Debrah *et al.* conclude, 'as South-East Asia's economy shrinks day by day, the urge to compete rather than collaborate also gets stronger' (2000, 332). Ultimately, these authors claim, cooperation and complementarity 'will give way to competition as the Triangle develops' (2000, 314).

One example of this spectre of competition within the Triangle itself relates to the development of port infrastructure, an arena of international economic competition where the imperatives of borderless world visions and calculations have a force that actually matches their imaginative scope. While Habibie's initial ambitions to build up the Batam port of Kabil as a rival to Singapore were largely abandoned in the 1990s, Malaysia's quest for 'fully developed status' by 2020 – the so-called 'Vision 2020' (Bunnell 2004) – continues to anticipate a competitive expansion into economic ground currently occupied by Singapore. Nowhere is the impact of this looming struggle more clearly evident than in the competition posed by the Johor Bahru Port of Tanjung Pelepas (PTP) to the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). In February 2002 the chairman of PTP was entirely open about this competitive agenda: 'We really want to be a trans-shipment hub to compete with Singapore. I repeat that statement: to compete with Singapore. You got my message?' (in Reme 2002a, 2). The following month, Johor Chief Minister, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman spelled out his state's intentions for readers of Singapore's *Straits Times* in the same direct terms: 'We are no longer in a complementary role to Singapore. We are competing with it' (*Straits Times* 17 March 2002). The Malaysians, so the article continued, had already 'enticed' Maersk Sealand to PTP: 'Winning over Maersk as a strategic partner and customer gave PTP an important start in its bid to build itself up as a trans-shipping hub to supplant Singapore' (*Straits Times* 17 March 2002). Moreover, further expansion at PTP was predicted: 'This growth can come only from PSA's business'. This prediction turned out to be correct as later that year the Taiwanese carrier Evergreen Marine Corporation also shifted operations from Singapore to PTP (*Utusan Malaysia* 2003). As a

Straits Times article on the port competition concluded, complementarity here had descended into a 'bare-knuckled fight' (17 March 2002). Early in 2004, these competitive aspirations were reiterated in the Malaysian media, leading Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kwan Yew to warn that competitive pressures of the form that PSA had experienced might soon widen to include Singapore's status as an air hub; in view of competition from budget airlines beginning operations from Johor Bahru's airport (*Straits Times* 10 January 2004).

Interregional comparisons

Notwithstanding the competitive imperatives that development has exacerbated within the Triangle, it is the larger spectre of interregional competition with newly cheapened (post 1998) Asian investment zones that continues to dominate. In this context, Singapore has moved forward with other geo-economic strategies for entrenching its brand of embedded exportism: most recently through a bilateral free trade deal with the US. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has thus argued that the greatest value of the US–Singapore free trade deal lies in its

powerful demonstration effect on the rest of South-East Asia. [It] will cause other countries in the region to reassess their policies, and encourage them also to open up their economies and conclude FTAs with the US. Such a web of FTAs will increase trade and investment and bind our economies and destinies more closely together. (Cited in Ong 2002, 13)

Likewise, the Singapore *Business Times* claimed that 'the FTA should help re-focus investor attention on Singapore', adding that 'With north-east Asia – and China in particular – rising, Singapore is in danger of dropping out of the radar screen' (Ming 2003, 2). In these kinds of comments and comparisons, the geo-economics of place promotion through the Triangle may appear to have been eclipsed by the demonstration effect of bilateral free trade. However, such an interpretation would miss a key feature of the free trade deal that takes us back from the economy of appearances to the material economy of export processing: certain key products made in Batam and Bintan are classified in the free trade agreement as if they were made in Singapore itself (*Straits Times* 4 February 2002). In other words, for the purposes of the bilateral deal with the US, the borderless economy of appearances has become real.

The incorporation of the Indonesian islands into the US–Singapore free trade deal may not have received much attention in the wider critical literature on recent bilateral free trade initiatives (Choudry 2002), but in literature catering to transnational business elites, the moment has not been missed. ‘Opportunity Knocks’ ran the *Far Eastern Economic Review* headline in an article that went on to highlight how the bilateral FTA effectively solidified the links between the two aspects of the capitalist development of the Triangle: the spatial-fix economics of cost-cutting investments; and the place promotional economy of appearances geared to competing for inward investment (Dhume and Saywell 2002). Thus, the *Review* underlined how material investment in Batam led to growth of wider national significance:

Batam is betting its economic future on its proximity to the prosperity and order of Singapore. Whether it succeeds has important implications for Indonesia. Though it is home to less than 0.5% of Indonesia’s population, last year Batam accounted for about 13% of Indonesia’s \$43 billion worth of non-oil exports – mainly manufactured goods. (Dhume and Saywell 2002, 21)

In a way that moves from this point to a re-articulation of the complementary economies argument, the *Review* article also adds the comment that Batam’s experience reveals ‘the growing importance of Singapore investors for Indonesia’s shattered economy’ (Dhume and Saywell 2002, 21–2). As a result of the costs savings made available by Riau export processing, it argues that, ‘Singaporean enterprises are better places to compete against regional rivals’ (2002, 22). And Dhume and Saywell even quote an Economic Development Board spokesman to the effect that the ‘Singapore-Batam-Bintan combination [is] a viable proposition for investors seeking an alternative to China’ (2002, 22). If such comments reveal the salience of the cost comparison accounting on both of the levels we have been discussing in this section, they also underline once more the direct links and material fusions that result in practice. Thus, in some sense, the bilateral free trade deal returns us to the starting comparative geography of cost disparities. But, we have not entirely turned full circle insofar as our argument has along the way introduced questions about the representation of the landscape of the Triangle and the politics of labour; themes that we take up in the next section.

Land and labour

The neat triangulation of complementarity joining Singapore’s capital with Johor and Riau’s land and labour not only licences the geo-economic landscaping of the Triangle as a place of borderless opportunity, it also overwrites and obscures a great deal of history, geopolitics and struggle. This geopolitical history is complex. Apart from the post-colonial novelty of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia – and the implications that this has for the ‘nationalisation’ of their territories and borders – there are also complex colonial and post-colonial histories of entanglement and interconnection that bear on the contemporary (sometimes neo-colonial) relations of the Triangle. When the Portuguese seized Melaka (on the west coast of peninsula Malaysia) in 1511, for example, Sultan Mahmud chose Bintan (now in Indonesia) as the new capital of a kingdom which incorporated all the territories of the current growth triangle, and beyond (Andaya and Andaya 2001). In a sense, then, the pre-national kingdom of Johor and its itinerant sultan effectively prefigured today’s supposedly post-national Triangle (Colombijn 2001). However, this kingdom itself needs to be understood in terms of the larger historical geography of the Malay archipelago. By the late nineteenth century this larger space became imaginable as such as ‘Malaysia’. Here too were commonalities that prefigure today’s talk of borderless common interests. However, slicing through this Malay space in the nineteenth century also came the colonial cartographies of imperialism. The wider competition between the Dutch and the British was mediated in the kingdom of Johor by a dynastic quarrel that ended up with one sultan ruling over Riau-Lingga and another over peninsular Johor. It was the latter sultan who ceded Singapore to the British in return for their support, and so the Dutch were left with the Riau-Lingga archipelago in a division of imperial territory that became formally fixed by the Treaty of London in 1824. Since the Second World War, other labels have appeared on the map. Indonesia replaced the Netherlands East Indies. And ultimately in 1961, Malaysia came to be used as the designation for a post-colonial state when the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tengku Abdul Rahman, sought the political unification of Malaya and Singapore and the three territories of northern Borneo under the rubric of a newly national ‘Malaysia’ (Wang 2001, 150).

This abbreviated geopolitical history only begins to scratch the surface of the diverse ways in which all three states that are party to the Triangle emerged out of protracted struggles for decolonization between the late 1940s and the 1960s (Poulgrain 1998). The realization of statehood was fraught, including the expulsion (or 'separation' as it is termed in Singapore) of Singapore from the Malaysian federation and a low level war (*Konfrontasi*) between Indonesia and Malaysia in which the legitimacy and integrity of Malaysian sovereignty was challenged by Indonesia. Today's Triangle is superimposed on top of these colonial and post-colonial connections and boundaries. As such, it is also superimposed on top of the social, cultural and ecological relations that were part of what united and divided the region historically (Wee and Chou 1997; Cleary and Goh 2000). The nineteenth-century imperial boundaries, for example, were transcended by the Chinese immigrants who first came to work on the gambir plantations of the Malay *rajahs* (Colombijn 2001). When the latter left in response to Dutch attacks, the Chinese remained working on the plantations and selling gambir – in another prefiguring of today's commercial transactions across the Straits of Singapore – to merchants in both Tanjung Pinang (Bintan) and Singapore. Early on, gambir was just used as an ingredient of the herbal remedies and mild narcotics made with the Betel nut, but as industrial production in the West expanded, so new demands for gambir in tanning and brewing turned the region into the main global source. Fortunes were made and hundreds of square kilometres in the Riau islands became gambir plantations, a colonial landscape of export-processing from which today's landscape of corporate transnationalism is not entirely discontinuous. And today, gambir appears mostly as an ornamental plant in the many parks and roadside verges that are such a distinctive feature of Singapore's notably controlled and controlling landscape.

Cultivating the landscapes of growth

Following the roots of transplanted gambir, it is also possible to trace the political complexities that extend over the old economic route-ways of colonialism. The massive project of maintaining Singapore's highly cultivated and distinctive landscape has created huge demands for fresh water and power that have in turn made the island state highly dependent on Malaysia and, increasingly, on Indonesia too. To the anthropologist

Aihwa Ong, this sets a scene in which '[b]io-politics and geo-politics collide and collude to make Singaporeans materially contented in a poverty-stricken Malay archipelago' (2003, 72). The Triangle is thus a way for Singapore to manage the collisions, making the asymmetrical development pattern into a model of embodied comparative advantage. Certainly it was Singapore's dependency that created one of the declared rationales for promoting the concept of the Triangle in the first place. In this respect, the goal was to maintain access to Malaysian water and secure key supply systems for oil and gas from Indonesia (Perry 1991; Ahmad 1993). Funded in part by the World Bank, more recent plans to source water from a huge Indonesian catchment area are as vast as they are bold. In addition to planned pipelines from Bintan, a 200 kilometre line from northern Sumatra is envisaged. Despite the ways in which these might coincide with the supposedly harmonious post-national complementarities of the Triangle's geo-economic script, these plans have been hotly contested. National tensions and the older colonial and post-colonial borders have continued to problematize the post-national re-scaling of governance. The concerns of Malaysians have caused both disruptions and transformations to the reterritorialization of the cross-border resource geography. In fact one of the main imperatives necessitating the search for new water supplies has been the concern over the supply from Johor. This was a relation established in the colonial era (Yeoh 1996) and, like other cross-border infrastructure established during the period of British rule (most notably the railway line that runs into downtown Singapore and which the Malaysian state claims as Malaysian property), continues now to be a source of recurrent cross-border friction. Indeed, one of the reasons that Singapore has developed expensive plans for desalination plants (and already established a reverse osmosis water recycling facility) is that the government wants to deprive Malaysia of a trump card in ongoing cross-border geopolitical confrontations. Meanwhile, another of Singapore's strategies for securing its growth trajectory – land reclamation – has further roiled relations with Malaysia and increased the geopolitical tensions.

Land reclamation in Singapore began in 1962 with the creation of 0.2 square kilometre of new useable land for state housing development along the east coast. Much larger areas have since been reclaimed for infrastructure projects, most notably 11.6 square

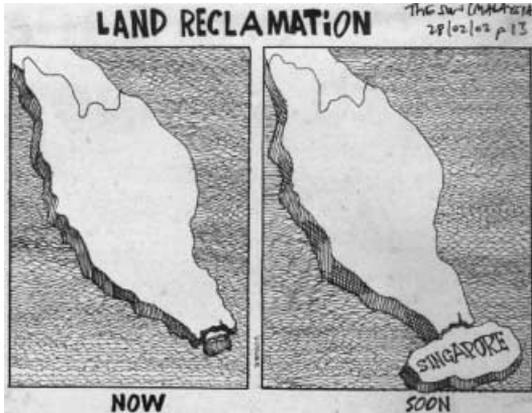


Figure 3 *The Sun* (Malaysia), 28 February 2002

kilometres for various phases of Changi International Airport and the joining of seven islands off the south-west of the island to form Jurong Island for a vast petrochemical complex. In total, reclamation projects have resulted in Singapore growing from a land area of 580 square kilometres at independence to 680 square kilometres today (Lim 2002). Since 2000, this has raised fears in Malaysia that Singapore's gains are Johor's loss. With the sand, the raw material for the land being 'reclaimed', being removed from Indonesian and Malaysian territory and waters, the geography of land reclamation seemed to make explicit a zero-sum form of one-sided growth that the cant of complementarities was supposed to transcend. Here was a triangle of growth, and it certainly involved cross-border interdependency, but the growth was all on one side. A cartoon in the Malaysian English-language daily newspaper *The Sun* captured these concerns graphically (Figure 3), but it has been in the Malay-language press that the fears have been expressed most forcefully. A front page headline in *Utusan Malaysia* in 2000 reported that lorry loads of land, rocks and sand were leaving Johor for Singapore, prompting political reaction at the Federal as well as Johor state government level (Fauziah and Mir Azri 2000). The Malaysian cabinet announced that licences for the export of sand would not be renewed as the material was needed for Malaysia's own growth through reclamation. Two years later, when the issue arose again, those shifting sand to Singapore were said to be 'selling (out) the nation (*menjual maruah negara*, literally 'selling the pride of the nation')' (Azman 2002).

Similar concerns come together with the spectres of comparison around direct economic competition. Thus *Utusan Malaysia* reports in 2002 both expressed and fuelled fears that Singapore's continued territorial growth plans threatened Johor's economic expansion. Reclamation projects around Pulau Tekong (northeast of Singapore) were reportedly resulting in a narrowing of the channel between the two countries (the Tebrau Straits) impacting upon ships' entry to Johor's eastern port at Pasir Gudang. Perhaps more significantly given the heightened container port competition discussed above, reclamation on the west side of Singapore at Tuas was claimed to have narrowed access to Tanjung Pelepas Port. An area the size of ten football pitches around Tuas had been reclaimed using Indonesian sand from Riau, thus completing the decidedly asymmetrical triangulation (Azman 2002). The Malaysian *New Straits Times* suggested that Singapore's growth plans were tantamount to economic sabotage of Johor: 'State authorities worry that the landfills have been cleverly designed to obstruct the smooth operations of Tanjung Pelepas Port, which is seen as a viable alternative to Singapore' (*New Straits Times* 5 March 2002). Malaysia's (then) Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, warned that Singaporean reclamation must not 'spill' into neighbouring Malaysian territory (Reme 2002b). Even Johor state's Chief Minister complained about '*kiasu*' ('must win') Singapore as a 'threatening neighbour' (in Baharom 2002). Such confrontational talk is reciprocated from Singapore, where at least in one plan being discussed the final solution to the dependency on Malaysian water is not just desalination, but the building of a desalination plant fuelled by nuclear power from a reactor built on yet another 'reclaimed' island (Kok 2002). The cross-border implications of this plan are clearly immense, but they do not exemplify a borderless world, transnational fall-out threats notwithstanding. Finally, it should be noted that most recently the controversy over sand shipments has itself become triangular, with the Indonesian government reportedly giving authority to its navy to shoot and sink dredging barges illegally carrying sand from Riau to Singapore (Mamat 2003).

The tensions involved in the recent retriangulations of post-colonial land development are still more painfully evident in the landscapes of labour in the Triangle. The need for brevity means we can provide just one example of the resulting contradictions:



Plate 1 Controlled development and unruly *ruli*

namely, Batam's working landscapes in which the order of the official development schemes is everywhere flouted by the so-called *rumah liah* (literally, 'wild housing') settlements that represent the uncontrolled labour inflows onto the island. In much of Batam, striking juxtapositions proliferate with smart (but very often half-empty) new housing standing right next to sprawling self-built *rumah liah* (Plate 1).

Even around the perimeters of the tightly regulated (and multiply fenced) Batamindo industrial park, there are numerous ad hoc *rumah liah* built by migrants from all over Indonesia seeking opportunities in Batam. These are being moved to make way for a reservoir and more industrial estates, and yet new settlements develop just as quickly, creating stark juxtapositions between the manicured, controlled spaces of the estates and the workers dormitories, nearby gated real estate developments (marketed to selected wealthy Indonesians and Singaporeans) and, around their edges, sprawling shanty housing, shops and services made out of corrugated iron sheets, planks and other improvised building materials.

As 'wild' and disruptive as the landscapes of labour migration may appear, we should note that they represent a form of disruption that remains for the most part within the Indonesian and, to a much lesser extent, Malaysian corners of the Triangle. Despite the fears about HIV infection and crime syndicates moving close to Singapore, the most fundamental feature of the Growth Triangle's labour geography remains – in every sense – in place: while *capital* can move relatively freely between Singapore, Johor and Riau, *labour* cannot.

The hundreds of thousands of migrants coming to Batam and Bintan to find work depress wage rates effectively, but they have little capacity to continue over the strait of Singapore to the city-state. So analytical, sociological, cultural and personal disruptions notwithstanding, *The Economist* remains in a certain sense right: the Triangle is a clever remedy for a city-state that grew from export-processing but now aims at occupying higher rungs of the international division of labour without losing its regional competitive advantage. And reterritorializations – of capital, of land and, above all, of workers' bodies – remains the key.

Conclusions

Given the complexity and specificity of both the global and the national, their interlacing suggests the existence of frontier zones – from the perspective of research and theorization, these analytic borderlands are sure to require independent theoretical and methodological specificity. (Sassen 2001, 216)

While such arguments about the theoretical and methodological specificity demanded in studying the frontier zones of the global and national have proliferated, there have been fewer examples provided of this in practice. Here we have explored the empirical specificities of regional reterritorialization exemplified by the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle. In doing so, we have sketched a complex regional geography of power relations that counterpoints the simplified trigonometry of the Triangle and contradicts the attendant arguments about its embodiment of borderless world dynamics. We have also highlighted geographies of peripherality that complicate decontextualized and ageographical accounts of world cities, city-regions and growth triangles as the simple spatial correlates of globalization (cf. Robinson 2002; Yeung and Olds 2004).

For many geographers, any mention of regionalization has seemed a welcome relief from the larger metanarrative of globalization as deterritorialization. For political geographers, it coincides with arguments about shifting scales of governance; for economic geographers, it can be read as vindication of their emphasis on post-Fordist regional production filières; and the notion that regionalization is the correlate of globalization fits a larger dialectical argument about uneven development proceeding through iterative patterns of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. What the Triangle shows,

however, is that we need to be very cautious about the way such analytical arguments are put to work on the ground. There has been shifting governance, regional networking and reterritorialization for sure in the Triangle, but it has been both over-determined and culturally and socially mediated in such a way as to represent a complete indictment of the 'Ohmae-esque' argument that this is an example of how to grow and prosper in a borderless world. Clearly, first and foremost, the Triangle is not borderless. It is transected by all kinds of divides and disjunctures that represent a veritable efflorescence of boundary drawing. Moreover, national boundaries within the Triangle remain significant, not just for managing migrants but also for mediating the development plans such that only those dealing with free trade and investment schemes seem to find quick collaborative consensus. Meanwhile, what economists might call the negative externalities of the Triangle's development, including increasing tensions over water, over migrants, over HIV and over sand dredging and land reclamation, continue to escalate. All these tensions cross borders, and what they show is that the economic abstraction of 'borderlessness' is in reality instantiated in a complex human geography the problems and challenges of which can not be understood, let alone addressed adequately, in the geometric terms of the Triangle.

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Note

- 1 This paper is by no means the first to pose such questions. Grundy-Warr et al. (1999), for example, have problematized the fragmented and limited development of the grandiose triangular vision, while Macleod and McGee

(1996) have pointed out that the Triangle is by no means 'equilateral' given the dominance of Singapore and very limited ties between Johor and Riau. Most recently, Lindquist's (2002) ethnographic research on Batam has contrasted the formal cross-border Triangle of business planners and technocrats with the informal and often curtailed links of frustrated and exploited migrants. Certain politicians have also questioned the entrepreneurial premise of the triangular vision. In 1993, then Malaysian Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim sounded a critical warning: 'Cross border investment . . . must not become an excuse to relocate sweatshops and environmentally harmful industries to the lesser-developed neighbors' (quoted in Vatikiotis 1993, 54). These objections to the hinterlandization vision of Singapore's Economic Development Board are important, not least because they register how the idea of the cross-border spatial fix raises political concerns that run contrary to the supposedly neat complementarities of capital, land and labour. Nonetheless, there is no doubting the economic force of such complementarities. In this region (unlike certain other concept cross-border regions [Sparke 2000; Sparke 2002b]) they are more than just a politically influential promotional story. In terms of Harvey's notion of the 'spatial fix' (Harvey 1982), the rent gap and related economic disparities between Singapore and its neighbours are enormous. Land and labour are much cheaper in Johor, and still cheaper on the islands of Batam and Bintan. Such disparities have in turn unleashed forces of 'uneven development' (Smith 1984) creating a classic economic geography of a regional scalar fix – involving transnational corporations, national and sub-national states along the lines of what Swyngedouw calls 'glocalization' (Swyngedouw 1997). The theoretical challenge, therefore, is to contextualize these economic imperatives and untangle the ways in which they are knotted together with other economic, political and cultural dynamics unfolding in interrelated but differently scaled contexts.

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