Book Review

Janet Carsten, *Blood Work: Life and Laboratories in Penang*, Durham, NC: Duke University, pp. 256, 2019.

Far from being sealed-off laboratory spaces indicated by their doorways and entry points, processes of domestication, kinship, and morality are at the heart of what goes on in these labs. (p.156)

Blood Work: Life and Laboratories in Penang is a superbly written, thickly ethnographic exploration of those spaces in the multi-ethnic Malaysian state where human blood is collected, tested, processed and used. In Carsten's own telling, this project has a dual purpose (as so many anthropological studies do): first, to explore social life in Penang as it is reflected in its clinical pathology labs, blood banks and operating rooms; and second, to reflect on the social meanings of blood through its various manifestations in Penang social life. By the end of the concluding chapter, yet a third gain is presented, as the preceding analysis is brought to bear on contemporary musings about what living in modernity entails. Alongside her elaborate experience-near narrations, Carsten also makes extensive use of material published in Malaysian media as a means of delineating the broader social and political contexts within which the more micro-scale dynamics of Penang's blood-related spaces unfold.

Carsten's ethnography and analysis are effective in realizing her declared goals. First, the many detailed descriptions of the social dynamics in and around the pathology labs and blood banks constitute a nuanced and compelling portrayal of sociality in Penang. Penang, we are taught, and Malaysia more generally, is a setting in which social relations and dynamics are principally (and quite explicitly) structured around supposedly clear and mutually exclusive identity categories. As demographically diverse blood donors, professional staff and other actors within and around the labs busy themselves with offering up their veins, extracting blood, testing and labelling it, as well as with sharing meals, exchanging ideas and reflecting on the value of their work, their engagements lend themselves to a careful consideration of the roles that notions of ethnicity, gender and kinship play in Malaysia's social world.

Meanwhile, Carsten also offers much to those of us not necessarily interested in Malaysia's social life but who are reading this monograph for its emphasis on blood work. In this sense, her careful attention to the intricate social dynamics in the labs, as well as their spatial characteristics, proves an effective starting point

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for thought-provoking reflections over the ontological status of blood itself. 'What is blood?' is thus a question around which Carsten's research continually circulates, offering a finely tuned analysis of the interconnections between blood as a life-giving and life-saving substance, and blood as a rich and contentious cultural artefact. Carsten shows the work of blood to be in large part a work of creating boundaries – for the sake of safety and efficiency, certainly, but more abstractly, for the sake of upholding modernity itself. But as social connections and political tensions constantly 'contaminate' the ongoing process of the blood's purification and domestication into an objective and detached scientific product, those hardly sought-after boundaries always prove, on closer inspection, to be permeable. Carsten thus demonstrates the many ways in which blood proverbially spills out of the different spaces that are supposed to contain it, and the manners in which it subsequently flows between distinct spheres of meaning.

In her analysis, Carsten frequently circles back to reflecting on the many tensions that blood invariably inhabits – simultaneously a symbol and a substance, living matter and an inanimate fluid, the object of constant de-personalization efforts and nevertheless a nexus of social engagements. Blood, Carsten muses, is constantly in a state of 'suspended animation'. Yet it is equally suspended with regards to the other tensions that encircle it, and it is this suspension, this rich ambiguity, that allows it to successfully carry the weight of the analysis throughout the monograph. Indeed, one of Carsten's major contributions, in my view, to the recent surge in anthropological literature on blood and blood economies lies in her insistence on collapsing the imagined dichotomy between the symbolic potential of blood and its material properties and uses, addressing both of these qualities in equal measure, while heeding to their ongoing effect on one another. Finally, Carsten's ultimate claim with regards to the boundary crossing between objectivity and social embeddedness, inherent to both laboratory life and modernity more generally, is particularly valuable: such boundary crossing, she argues, is not merely an inevitable by-product of domestication efforts, but it is their precondition. That is, if social connections and dynamics would not constitute an integral part of any scientific construct, such constructs would be inconceivable. With this evocative statement, Carsten offers a promising potential steppingstone towards novel theorizations of laboratory work, scientific endeavours more broadly, and indeed, as was indicated earlier, of the very idea of modernity and its present manifestations.

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