Transnationalism and identity: a tale of two faces and multiple lives

SUTAMA GHOSH
Department of Geography, York University, Toronto, ON M3J1P3 Canada (sutama@yorku.ca)

LU WANG
Department of Geography, York University, Toronto, ON M3J1P3, Canada (luwang@yorku.ca)

Transnational ties add new complexities to the continuous and dynamic processes of identity formation. Based on self-reflexive narratives, this paper examines the authors' identity transformations associated with their respective transnational experiences. We are two Asian women from India and China, respectively, who are international students pursuing doctoral degrees in Canada. Although we share similar demographic and economic backgrounds, we perform distinct transnational acts. Focusing specifically on social and cultural linkages, we have identified reasons that have influenced our cross-border involvements. Based on our findings, we present an emergent conceptual framework that highlights interactive psychological, sociocultural and economic processes that influence the formation of individual transnational identities. We also share with our readers some methodological lessons learnt along our path of self-expression, analysis and representation.

Les liens transnationaux ajoutent de nouveaux niveaux de complexité au processus continu et dynamique de la formation identitaire. Cet article, basé sur l'auto-examen de cheminements personnels, étudie le mécanisme de transformation identitaire des auteurs associé à leur expérience transnationale respective. Nous sommes deux femmes asiatiques, provenant respectivement de l'Inde et de la Chine, qui poursuivent leurs doctorats au Canada en tant qu'étudiantes internationales. Même si nous partageons une origine démographique et économique similaire, nous accomplissons des actes transnationaux distincts. En nous penchant plus spécifiquement sur nos liens sociaux et culturels, nous avons identifié certaines facteurs qui ont influé sur nos expériences transfrontalières. Tirant parti de ces découvertes, nous présentons un nouveau cadre conceptuel qui souligne les processus interactifs psychologiques, socioculturels et économiques affectant influencent la formation d'identités individuelles transnationales. Nous partageons également avec nos lecteurs quelques leçons méthodologiques apprises dans le contexte de notre propre auto-expression, analyse et représentation.

We began writing new chapters of our lives when we came to Canada as international students. Both young Asian women from middle-class, urban backgrounds, we simultaneously embarked upon a migrant life in Toronto. The simple condition of being far away from 'home', alone, facing the challenges of a new country was the common ground on which a friendship developed.

Within academia, when we came across the term 'transnationalism' we were curious about our own transnationalities and asked: Are we transnationals? And if we are, how did transnationalism(s) change our identities? Particularly interested in knowing when and how our identities first began to change, we wondered whether it had all started when we arrived in Canada or much earlier, when we initially thought of migrating to North America.

Despite being aware of the metamorphosis in our identities, we never imagined that we would have the liberty to study ourselves as 'research subjects'. Our previous research experiences as 'participant observers' had only permitted us to 'objectively' read the subjects 'out there'—at an arms length—far from our emotions, politics and lives. As 'social scientists', we learnt 'to treat human subjectivity as a threat to rationality...objective truth has to be given priority over emotion and opinion' (Ellis and Bochner 1996, 21). Nervous of researching along a less-trodden path, we wondered how readers would respond to our stories, and what would be the extent of our vulnerability—how much exposure is too much?

Juggling traditional techniques and experimental methods of qualitative research, we considered using semistructured questionnaires, unstructured interviews and oral narratives. In our efforts to understand the transformation of our individual identities, we eventually decided against the idea of interviewing each other. First, we thought it would entail an imposition of our respective transnational experiences onto one another. Second, the nature of the research problem—that is, exploring the processes of belonging and identity formation by reflecting on the transformation of ourselves—necessitated a more individualistic, phenomenological approach.[1] Among all other alternatives, writing autobiographies seemed to be the most appropriate method, because, 'like ethnography,

it has a commitment to the actual' (Fischer 1986, 198). Fischer (1986) has argued that biography and autobiographical fiction can perhaps serve as key forms for the exploration of ethnic identity in the current pluralist, postindustrial society.[2] Neumann (1996) cites the works of Janet Gunn (1982) and Pico Iyer (1988) to stress that the relationship between experience and knowledge and between the individual and culture is best revealed through autobiographical research. Neumann (1996, 188) says,

Although ethnographies traditionally have looked outward toward constructing worlds of the primitive, poor or deviant, between their lines—sometimes only as a phantom tracing—we often may read a language of desire and control, stories of those who seek grounding and affirmation for their own world. Ethnographic voices speak a story of a self, looking for a point of orientation in the representational constructs of others. Conversely, autobiographies have traditionally been in a genre in which a writer looks inward, and as George Gusdorf (1980, 48) says, 'wrestles with his shadow, certain only to never laying hold of it'. Reading autobiography with an anthropological eye, however, can allow us to follow a writer's singular path through a diversified culture as he or she constructs a story of a self.

Deciding to shift the 'observer's gaze inward, toward the self as a site' (Neumann 1996, 183), we began writing autobiographies, and, following Foltz and Griffin (1996, 302), we, too, modulated our academic voices so that 'our ethnographic journeys of self discovery could be heard'.

Until the autobiographies were completed, we decided not to immerse ourselves in the transnational literature or communicate with one another, lest the life-stories of other transnationals or of one other might influence the content of our individual narratives. Before we began writing, we deliberated about appropriate temporal parameters for our autobiographies. We both agreed that there were three meaningful moments in our migrant lives thus far: our first journey from 'home' to Toronto; our first visit back 'home'; and

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1 See Lawson (2000) on methodological approaches in migration work.

2 Autobiographical methods have been widely used in sociology and anthropology. Authors such as White and Jackson (1995) in population geography and Vandsemb (1995) in migration research have advocated for the wider use of this method.

our return to Toronto at the end of that visit. In these precious moments, we have had the opportunity to live our imaginations, negotiate unfulfilled desires and begin to know ourselves. Thus, our autobiographies begin at the time we left Beijing/Kolkata for Toronto, and end at our return to Toronto after our first sojourn back home. While writing our stories, we also decided to reflect specifically on the acts we have performed across borders, and to think about the ways in which those acts may have shaped 'who we are' today.

In the next section of this paper, we will present our individual narratives. Some similarities are expected, due to commonalities in our general demographic characteristics and congruent migrant lives, and differences are not surprising, given our diverse cultural contexts and personality traits. Following the narratives, some of these similarities and differences in our experiences will be highlighted and analysed in the discussion section. While we analysed our own stories, a new perspective for understanding transnational identities emerged, which will be presented next in the form of a conceptual framework. In the final section of the paper, we will share with our readers some methodological lessons learnt along our path of self-expression, analysis and representation.

Lu

Two years after leaving China, where I was born and grew up, I find I am becoming increasingly more 'Chinese' than I was in China. Not only have I self-consciously retained Chinese values and traditions, I have also been trying to dig out the Chinese culture that I long neglected.

The decision to come to Canada was not a difficult one. Receiving a higher education in North America is part of the desired life trajectory of many young university students in Beijing and Shanghai, where I obtained my degrees. Leaving China did not, therefore, upset me, nor did I fear much from a new country. My imaginary Toronto was much like Beijing or Shanghai, with modern high-rises spreading cross the city, the same movie showing in the theatre, the same Gap and CK merchandise in the stores and the same music playing, but certainly without the carmine walls of the Forbidden City, the sinuate bridges over the water in the Winter Palace or the soft voices of women speaking Shanghai dialect.

My flight from Beijing to Vancouver had all the appearance of a domestic route, filled almost exclusively with both Chinese crew and passengers. Through conversations on the plane, I found out that I was a minority as a student visitor to Canada, rather than a permanent immigrant. Then I understood why the flight to Canada had been overbooked for months. I had always imagined Canada as a multicultural society, but the magnitude of Chinese immigration was beyond my imagination.

On arrival in Canada, I was immediately welcomed by my own people. Ning and Qiao, two senior York University students, picked me up at Toronto Pearson Airport. As I was very excited, curious and even a little nervous about my new home, the fatigue from the long trip did not prevent me from asking Ning and Qiao numerous questions about Toronto as they drove me to my residence. My first cultural shock came when they asked if I had an English name: '[Y]ou know some Chinese names can be very hard to pronounce for non-Chinese…Both Qiao and I adopted English names here: John and Lisa. It's easier for them to call us and thus remember our names.' 'Lu', meaning morning dew, is a beautiful name in Chinese. My mother used to tell me that I was born in the early morning when she saw so much nice dew outside in the garden. Is it possible to accept someone calling me Lisa or something else? No, they are just not me. Although my name is simply two letters, to me, it's myself.

Ning and Qiao (hereafter John and Lisa) became my major sources of information on study and life. Accommodation, shopping, applying for a bank card and social insurance number and everything else one needs to do in order to settle down in a new place were taken care of by them. They also opened for me a door to the Chinese community, in which my feelings of loneliness in a new country could be put aside. I was amazed to find so many Chinese living in Toronto. I was even more amazed to see so many Chinese businesses scattered across the city. Knowing my parents' fear that I might be acculturated by Western values, which they deem contradictory to Confucianism, I wrote to assure them.

The other side of Toronto is a mini world of Chinese where you can easily find Chinese shopping malls, Chinese movie theatres, Chinese bookstores, Chinese gas stations, Chinese pharmacies, Chinese restaurants, Chinese supermarkets and, most

importantly, the Chinese way of doing things within the community. Unless I force myself to change, it's much easier to retain my identity than to become Lisa or whoever.

Schoolwork kept my schedule full. I thought I had found a way to keep a balance between being Chinese and living in a Western society, to be exposed to both worlds: Toronto as a Canadian city and Toronto as a Chinese community. Externally, however, I found myself far less Chinese than I had thought or wished. At a Christmas potluck party, besides bringing traditional food to the party, many of my fellow students came in their traditional apparel—Indian *shalwar kameez*, Ghanaian textiles, and so on. Expected to wear something Chinese, I was asked why I had not done so. The question upset me because I had nothing that qualified as Chinese, nor could I define what such a costume would be. Should I be wearing the elegant dresses of the Tang Dynasty I saw in movies, or should I follow the dress code of the Qing dynasty, China's last feudal society, the female dresses of which were modified into *cheongsam* and gained a lot of popularity before the 1950s? There have been too many changes in my country. The latest fashion rule is probably to be globalized. I felt culturally deluded by my lack of a traditional costume. I began to feel incomplete as a Chinese.

The dress issue reminded of my trip to Chinatown. Feeling connected to that area, I visited the central Chinatown on my third day in Canada. Walking in Chinatown was like walking in China's past. Store owners and people living in the neighbourhood were still in less-fashionable or somewhat odd Chinese clothes, unlike any that could be found in Beijing or Shanghai, where most people try to put themselves at the cutting edge of the fashion industry. Similarly, red and bright yellow were favoured by all store signboards in Chinatown, which traditionally symbolize happiness, luck, fortune and honour, but have gradually faded away from the modern aesthetic of modern China. I also saw an old manner of Chinese writing, in traditional characters and from right to left, which slowed down my reading speed. Shortly after this trip, I had another chance to see Mississauga Chinatown. I was amazed to see a nine-dragon-wall, which originated in the Forbidden City in Beijing, and a Chinese garden with a typical Chinese kiosk, little bridge, bamboo and small pond, a style not found much in the new architecture of China. The landscape of Chinatown only appeared in movies and novels. Have I, as a contemporary Chinese, moved forward too much, or are the Chinese here anachronistic?

I began to cultivate my affiliation with China and Chineseness. The Internet has become the most important and efficient vehicle to connect myself with home. The tiny window of my laptop takes me home whenever I desire. Browsing on Chinese Web sites (culture, academia, entertainment, news, cooking), emailing and Internet chat have become weekly routines.

I am also connected to China in more intangible ways. Aside from emails, phone calls, parcels and so on, my mental space recollects past experiences, actively pictures what is happening at home at any moment and imagines me in the context of home, thus constantly carrying me back and forth between Canada and China. My mind reads and speaks two languages, regards two countries as homes and forms a continuous dialogue between the two.

After a year, I returned to China for a visit. Wanting to accumulate experiences to complete my Chineseness, I decided to sacrifice some time from family reunions to seek the traditions and heritage I had neglected in the past. I became a diligent observer, of the city and of the people. Happily, I saw another side of the city, a city full of cultural sensibilities, hidden under the conspicuous processes of modernisation. While high-rises kept on reproducing themselves, traditional houses with carefully planned structures and locations based on feng shui were still there. Stepping into a museum, I saw an art world in which Chinese brush-painting (*guohua*) and Western oil-painting share equal space. Urban residences show a Western layout, but a sculpture of Avalokiteshvara (*guanyin*) is in each room, incorporating the hand symbolism of the lotus, giving the family a sense of perfection in purity. While Nike, CK, Gap and Levis advertisements are everywhere, small tailor stores making cheongsam are still there. I began to feel that despite the numerous rises and falls of emperors and dynasties and the major streams of ideas and sensibilities, the river of Chinese culture is still colouring the lives of ordinary people. I felt I had retrieved part of what I had neglected and missed.

At the same time, however, I had a sense of alienation and estrangement in China. I did not feel

the same as my friends did during conversations, nor could we share common experiences. There was a feeling of difference that was difficult to admit at the time. Surprisingly, I began to miss Toronto. The pictures of China my imagination used to feature had been replaced by the image of Toronto. I do not know why this happens, or where, then, my real home is. Am I just being transnational, flying back and forth between two countries without either of them being my destination? After returning to Toronto, similar feeling of homelessness occurred to me. I started missing my holiday and China.

Sutama

The decision to study in Canada was a life-changing moment. Standing at a crossroads in life, I realised that I must leave home indefinitely in search of a new beginning. The reality that I was leaving Kolkata—the city I had always known as my home, and that I loved dearly—filled me with pain. For Kolkata[3]—'the City of Joy'—is a beautiful collage of culture and politics, poverty and riches. The nerve of vibrant Kolkata pulsates in the hot debates at street corners, cricket matches at the Eden Gardens, Satyajit-Mrinal-Ritwik's cinema, Tagore's songs, group theatres, the ChinaTown, the effervescent affluence of the skyscrapers, a brawl over a pail of water in the slums—the list is endless. The city's attractions grew even stronger as the day of my departure approached. The irresistible pull of the city was compounded with the fear of separation from familiar sorrows and happiness, and the guilt of leaving my dear *Baba* (father) behind. Trying to tear away from the warmth of the known was difficult. But then I reminded myself of the injustices I had faced and temporarily suppressed the intense feeling of loss.

Although a Bengali middle-class family of Kolkata such as mine deems getting educated in the 'West' a 'once in a lifetime opportunity', my situation was judged differently by my numerous relatives, for I was daring to challenge a predestined life course. What was even more worrisome to

them was that I was venturing into that part of the world of which I had little experience—in Canada particularly, I knew no one. Some were extremely concerned about the possibility that I might transform into a *mem* (a Westernised woman) and disrespect Bengali traditions and culture once I stepped out of home into *bidesh* (foreign land). In retrospect, I think I fought gallantly against such comments, but I must admit that behind that brave mask, I was crumbling inside with anxiety.

When, ultimately, I found myself flying over the mighty Himalayas, I felt I was rising above the known agonies—racing towards an ocean of unknown faces and a land full of new challenges and possibilities. I was excited in the hope of growing intellectually and proving to myself that I would struggle, strive and survive. At the same time, I also felt the 'what ifs' of my well-wishers slowly creeping into my mind—I felt cold with loneliness. In that 29-hour-long journey from Bose (Kolkata) to Heathrow (London) to Pearson (Toronto), I swayed in the hands of fear, excitement, guilt and pride. Sometimes I thought that perhaps I was a refugee, seeking 'safety' amongst aliens to escape the troubles of home, overwhelmed with a sense of freedom, yet afraid of losing an identity that embodied my soul—a Bengali woman from Kolkata.

Upon arriving in Toronto, I was in a state of confusion, trying to internalise two separate strands of feelings—emptiness and freedom. My profound emptiness at leaving Baba and the warmth of Kolkata was often confronted by a newfound sense of freedom. Having unrestricted movement and few obligations and responsibilities towards others forced me to be with myself and to face the individual now free from the entangled web of relationships—the person and her abilities that I had had little chance to know.

In the new environment, surprised by my own likes and dislikes, I grappled with who I am. In the process, I was faced with numerous dilemmas when the consciousness of my Bengali upbringing collided with the permissiveness of 'Western society'. Scared of being perceived as different, yet at the same time eager to maintain my distinct cultural identity, I adopted a dual lifestyle. In the outside world, I wore trousers, drank coffee, ate pork and beef and spoke English all day, while in the inner confinements of my room I wore *shalwar*

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3 Kolkata is the capital city of the state of West Bengal, India. It was the capital city of the 'British Raj' until 1930. Due to its long association with the British (about 250 years), Kolkata is arguably the most 'colonial' city of India—in its built form and in its culture.

kameez and listened to Bengali music over and over again. In those lyrics, I could hear the sweetness of *bangla*, my mother tongue. I realised that I had not spoken a word of *bangla* for months. The most taken-for-granted thing in life—speaking in *bangla*—was now a rarity. I still remember to this day how frantically I searched for *bangla* books in the York library and, being unable to reach Rabindranath-Nazrul-Sukanta, read Wordsworth. On many evenings, I chose to be alone, sitting on my chair in the department with my eyes closed, and imagined that I was in Kolkata: walking down the streets of my neighbourhood—taking the first left-hand turn—opening the gates of our house and being welcomed by the refreshing smell of rainwater on the thirsty mud in the garden. I could see Baba reading under the soft illumination of the brass lamp in the drawing room—Ma's photograph on my bedroom wall adorned with flowers. At times, my imagination was truly 'the bliss of solitude', but more often it intensified my longing for home—longing for *adda*,[4] food, *Durga Puja*, *puja barshiki*, and *Boi Mela*.

In those first few months, despite the constant aching for home, daily life in Toronto left very little time to 'stand and stare'. I was always racing on a continuous and unstoppable track of change. In academia, I was absorbing new ideas from the literature, professors and colleagues; in the social realm, I was getting used to calling elders by their first names; and in mundane life situations, I was learning to use coin laundry, instant banking, frozen food, 'cards' and 'passwords'. I was changing so rapidly then that perhaps the 'myself' in

Toronto overwhelmed the 'me' who came from Kolkata, with my taken-for-granted Bengaliness.

Once the initial period of daze was over, my eyes began searching for someone from 'home'. Seeking to reroot myself became such a necessity that after some time it did not matter whether the person was from Kolkata: anyone from West Bengal, India or the Indian subcontinent, or even a Toronto-born Indo-Canadian would do. At that point, the diameter defining my 'home' had stretched far beyond mere territorial demarcations.

Seeking to find someone from home in Toronto was an arduous task. I gave up hoping to socialise with them when I found out that most Bengalis[5] lived primarily in the suburbs of Toronto, far away from my university residence. Chandri and Ani were the only other Bengali students from Kolkata at York. They told me that since students from Kolkata were very few, they socialised with other Indian students.

My connection with Kolkata was not very regular. I primarily communicated with Baba on the phone for about half an hour every fortnight. Since Baba did not have a computer at home, email exchanges were rare. On the Internet, however, I read the *Anandabazar* (Bengali newspaper) on a daily basis. With few personal links with Kolkata or the Torontonian Bengalis, I felt as if I was far away from whatever was once 'known' to me. While I was somewhat detached from home, I was becoming more and more 'international'. I bonded with other international and Canadian students, with whom I exchanged my thoughts, experiences, food and the arts.

In the summer, I visited home for a short while. Before the journey, I began contemplating whether I should be 'like me' in Toronto or 'like me' in Kolkata—should I wear trousers or shalwar kameez—particularly when I get off the airplane at Kolkata. I was worried which external appearance of mine would be more appropriate. Ultimately, I decided to wear trousers until London and shalwar kameez thereafter. To my surprise, in the women's washrooms of the Heathrow airport, I found I was just one of the many homebound women of Indian origin busy transforming from a mem to a *desi*.[6] I was

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4 Bengalis are known for their drawing room *adda* over cups of tea. *Adda* involves informal discussions with family, neighbours and friends on numerous topics ranging from music to cinema to global politics. *Durga Puja*, held in September/October for four days, is the biggest and the most awaited festival of the Bengalis. With little religious significance today, it is considered the time for celebration of Bengali culture—particularly food, clothes and the arts. *Puja barshiki* is the annual literature published during Durga Puja. For over a hundred years, it has been a tradition with the leading printing houses of West Bengal in general and Kolkata in particular to publish works of contemporary literary luminaries of Bengal during Durga Puja. For educated middle-class Bengalis, this is perhaps the most exciting part of the celebration. They compete against their neighbours, friends and family to acquire and read the literature, and engage in debates on the content of each piece. *Boi Mela*, the book fair, is an annual event that draws publishers from all over the world to Kolkata. During this event, in particular, my parents never tired of buying books for themselves or me.

5 Bengalis may come from the state of West Bengal in India, as well as from Bangladesh.
6 People from the Indian subcontinent are sometimes colloquially referred to as *desi*: the word '*des*' means homeland, and '*desi*' from homeland.

amazed how easily and competently married women, in particular, put on *bindi* (dot), *sindoor* (vermilion), *sari* and *churi* (bangles) and metamorphosed in minutes into the traditional *bou* (daughter-in law). In the privacy of those 'green rooms', many others like me were hastily getting ready for the next role, to be played at the next destination.

As soon as I met my folks, I began answering their numerous queries about Toronto: Is it like Montréal?[7]...Did I meet many Indians?...Did I see any cricket matches?...Do I get to eat any river fish?...How is my daily life? I showed them photographs and described the Toronto cityscape, Niagara Falls, York University, my apartment, the professors and my classmates. I told them how Ethiopian food was similar in taste to Bengali cuisine, how the bus driver is also a conductor and chats with the passengers and how the streets are 'ploughed' in winter. I realised that I was their first-hand source of information, and that my representation of Toronto was creeping into their imagination of a place they had never visited. This reminded me that in Toronto, I would answer similar questions of those who had never had an Indian connection.

During my stay in Kolkata, I was careful not to reveal any of my newly acquired Canadian vocabulary or changed habits. I was earnestly trying to prove that I was the same person. In contrast to my fears of being negatively judged by 'my people', however, I found my relatives showering attention on me. I felt that my status had risen in their eyes; after all, as Mamoni (my aunt) said, I was now a *bilet ferot* (foreign returned). This time I was actually able to argue why women should have the independence to choose their lives, and why going to *bidesh* (foreign land) does not necessarily mean forsaking one's traditions. Before departing from Kolkata, I carefully picked 'made in India' gifts for my friends in Toronto, in the same way that I had brought 'made in Canada' souvenirs for friends and family in Kolkata.

Sitting on a London-bound plane once again, I took a deep breath and reasoned that I should not feel sad. I was, after all, returning to my own place—my own apartment in my own Toronto—the city where I found myself, where I have an identity of my own—even if it is still somewhat blurry.

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7 I found Montreal was better known than was Toronto, being the venue of the summer Olympics.

Discussion

Since we are aware of the uniqueness of our stories, the purpose of this discussion is not to claim their universal applicability. Considering the limits of space, a detailed analysis of our complex life experiences is not possible here, so we will take the two narratives as case studies, highlight salient similarities and differences in our experiences and trace the evolution of our individual identities.

Lu and Sutama had a similar reason for migration—to study abroad—but their intention to migrate 'predated the migration act' (Findlay and Li 1997, 39). More importantly, this apparently clear motive was embedded in values 'developed over [an] entire life course, rather than being linked only to the circumstances in the period immediately prior to departure' (Findlay and Li 1997, 38). For Lu, studying abroad was a 'desired life trajectory', an ambition neatly tied into the value system of a particular segment of the Chinese society—'young university students of Beijing and Shanghai'. For Sutama, the decision to study abroad was 'a life-changing moment...in search of a new beginning'. We believe that this fundamental difference may have played an important role in shaping our individual identities after we arrived in Canada (see below).

Both Lu and Sutama arrived in Canada with the thrill of anticipated freedom and adventure, as well as insecurities regarding unmoored displacement. One common insecurity was regarding the possible loss of our respective cultural identities and associated transformation into 'Westernised' women. This fear, induced externally by Lu's parents and Sutama's well-wishers, was internalised, and thereafter acted upon by refraining from being 'Western' (whatever being Western meant to us at that time). The vignette of homeward-bound Indian women transforming from Western mems to desi bous in the women's washrooms at the Heathrow airport demonstrates that such insecurities are perhaps more common among women, bounded by the gendered 'morality' and the norms of the home society. Even though we are thousands of miles away from home, transported 'morality' still polices us, shaping 'who we want to be'.

Lu and Sutama were very concerned about being perceived as 'the other' by the host society. As a consequence, we made adjustments (to different degrees) to various aspects of our lifestyles.

Generally, in the public sphere of Toronto we adopted a 'Western' life, while maintaining a 'Chinese/Bengali' lifestyle more privately. For example, in Toronto, Sutama changed her dressing and dietary habits, 'wore trousers...ate pork and beef and spoke English all day', but within the four walls of her room 'listened to Bengali music over and over again'. A similar duality in lifestyle was present in the case of other migrants; for example, Lu's friends adopted 'English' names among the general population of Toronto while maintaining 'Chinese' names in the company of their own group.

Electronic media—particularly the telephone and the Internet—have played a major role in transporting us back and forth between the 'West' and the 'East'. We have particularly used the Internet to keep us updated on the news of our country and our loved ones and entertained. More traditional means of communication, such as the postal system, have also enabled us to keep tangible connections with our folks back home.

Place has variously painted our 'imaginations', 'nostalgias' and 'fantasies' (Appadurai 1996, 6) of immigrant life through unique sights, sounds and smells. Our pre-migration 'imagination' of Toronto/Canada, our 'nostalgia' about Kolkata/Shanghai, our 'fantasies' of return to our home countries and our longing for Toronto while at home are examples in which place has embodied all other axes of identity—gender, age and culture.

Place has also made us more aware of 'who we are'. Living in a 'multicultural' society such as Toronto, interacting with other international students, Lu found herself 'far less Chinese' than she 'had thought or wished' to be. She 'felt culturally deluded...incomplete as a Chinese', and began to cultivate her 'affiliation with China and Chineseness'. In Toronto, we have found that similarities that constitute 'us' and dissimilarities that differentiate 'us' from 'them' are not necessarily primordial in nature. We have viewed earlier immigrants of our own ethnic groups as 'different' from us, whereas we developed oneness with students from various places of origin and socioeconomic and political dispositions. Lu found that the earlier immigrants had shaped place as a repository of their memories: the Chinatowns in Toronto (downtown and Mississauga) were replicas of China's past in colour, built form and spirit. Observing these places and its peoples, Lu contemplated whether 'as a contemporary Chinese, [she] has

moved forward too much, or are the Chinese [in Toronto] anachronistic?'

We have longed to be 'here and there' simultaneously because, over time, we have made homes in two localities. When nostalgic, we have visualised home through the mind's eye in minute details. Lu writes that while in Toronto, 'my mental space recollects past experiences, actively pictures what is happening at home...thus constantly carrying me back and forth between Canada and China', while sitting on a chair in her office, Sutama senses her neighbourhood, house, garden, family and friends. Then, when we visited our home countries, we were eager to return to Toronto. In Beijing, Lu, to her surprise, misses Toronto: 'The pictures of China my imagination used to feature had been replaced by the image of Canada'. Sitting on the London bound plane, Sutama rationalises: 'I was, after all, returning to my own place'.

We have both desired to reroot in Toronto, although the process has been varied (see below). Lu's new friends in Toronto 'opened for [her] a door to the Chinese community'; she found 'the other side of Toronto...a mini world of Chinese where you can easily find...the Chinese way of doing things within the community'. After the initial stage of bewilderment, Sutama began to search 'someone from 'home'. Seeking to reroot myself became such a necessity that after some time it did not matter whether the person was from Kolkata: anyone from West Bengal, India or the Indian subcontinent, or even a Toronto-born Indo-Canadian would do'.

Both of us have metamorphosed over time into multiple, hyphenated selves, and the phase of transition from a 'single'[8] identity to 'hybrid' identities is still continuing. Although it is not easy to point to the exact moment at which our transformations began, it is evident that the metamorphosis from, say, 'Chinese' to 'Chinese-Canadian' was not a 'one-time' operation, but rather a prolonged process during which each part of the hybrid self simultaneously developed. Upon reflection, we feel that we have created several hybrid identities, and often switch positions between those hyphen-

8 Arguably, there is perhaps never any one 'single' identity. For the sake of our argument in this context we hold that Chineseness or Canadianness is one identity, and Chinese-Canadianness is a form of hybrid identity.

ated identities in accordance with the demands of the context (place and time). Within our respective ethnic groups in Toronto, we express a more 'local' identity—say, an identity that could be related more specifically to Shanghai or Kolkata, rather than generalised to China/India. Within the larger society of Toronto, we express 'Chinese/Indo-Canadianness'. In China/India, we express a 'Canadian-Chinese/Bengaliness', and in Shanghai/Kolkata a 'Canadian-Shanghai/Kolkatanness'. We switch smoothly and, at times, even unknowingly between our multiple, complex, hyphenated selves, evoking our situational and fluid local, regional, national and transnational identities.

We have influenced the 'imaginations' and 'fantasies' of those with whom we have shared our 'mythographies' (Appadurai 1996, 9). Through oral and visual depictions to our home audiences of our lived experiences in Toronto, and through descriptions to friends in Toronto of the 'essence' of our respective cultures, we have tinted our audience's imaginations. Carrying these images across borders, we have acted as cultural intermediaries in both places, bringing unknown distant 'others' nearer to home.

During our sojourn at home, we were aware, not only of our own transformations, but also of the changed perspectives of our family and friends about us. Lu felt 'a sense of alienation and estrangement in China'. She 'did not feel the same as [her] friends did during conversations, nor could [she] share common experiences' with them. Sutama felt that her status had suddenly elevated, being 'foreign returned'; even those who had cautioned her about becoming 'Westernised' now 'respected' her. She used this elevated status of having acquired 'cultural capital' to expose her previously hidden assertive self.

Although we performed similar acts, they were not all of equal intensity and/or regularity. Moreover, we retained and expressed our individual cultural identities to different degrees. Lu effortlessly rerooted in Toronto, led a 'Chinese' lifestyle both indoors and outdoors and maintained frequent tangible connections with home; Sutama led contrasting lifestyles between the private space and public place in Toronto, missed home intensely yet had less frequent connections across borders.

Upon reflection, we believe that the differences in the intensity and regularity of our actions ensue from a complex web of self-perceptions of 'who we

are', individual desires of 'who we want to be' and conscious/unconscious balancing of social and material circumstances in Toronto and 'back home' helping us to realise the boundaries of 'who we can be' and 'how we can be both here and there'. Before we discuss this point further, however, let us return for the moment to the initial question that triggered this project: given our experiences, can we call ourselves transnationals?

The term 'transnationalism' refers to the various acts migrants perform across territorial borders (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Castells 1996; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999). Vertovec (1999) cites numerous studies that show that transnational acts are often born out of an awareness of multilocality and a desire to maintain multiple identities (Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993; Cohen 1996). It is evident from our narratives that we have been aware of multiple places simultaneously and have desired and led multiple lives in these places. Although there is negligible reference in our narratives to economic and/ or political linkages, we have conducted and embodied numerous social and cultural exchanges across borders. In that sense, then, we claim that we are transnationals.

In order to understand how transnationalism affected the evolution of our multiple identities, we will now consider some factors that may have shaped our transnational acts. As we argued earlier, our transnational acts differ because we negotiate 'who I am', 'who I want to be', 'who I can be' and 'how I can be both here and there' differently, profoundly influenced by our self-perception of the migration act, our individual social identities developed at home and transported across borders, our social connections and material circumstances in Toronto, our sense of the perceptions and expectations of the host and home societies about us and the material circumstances of our friends and family back home.

Although we entered Canada as international students from similar 'diasporas of hope' (Appadurai 1996, 8), we perceived the migration act differently, and arrived in Toronto in dissimilar mental states. For Lu, it was a transition from one stage of life to another, whereas Sutama perceived a rupture, feeling somewhat like a refugee.

We came from different social environments and familial backgrounds. Together with our upbringing, our life histories have influenced our specific

imaginations, nostalgias and fantasises of a migrant life. Whereas Lu came from a 'Western'-looking China, equipped with concrete images of a 'Western' city and practicalities of Western lifestyle, Sutama came from a family and a place more exposed to the English language but with relatively little experience in the 'Western' way of living. In Lu's imagination, Toronto was another 'Western' city, and she found Toronto similar to Shanghai and Beijing—same clothes, same cinema and same music in the air. In Sutama's imagination, Toronto constituted a place to begin a new life. She came with few preconceptions or expectations about the city. Our nostalgias for home were of different intensities. Lu felt less nostalgic than Sutama, partly due to differences in their personality traits, but also because of the nature of their social networks in Toronto. Lu's favourable social networks not only facilitated her adjustments to the daily life in the migrant city, but also eased her nostalgia for home. The long-established Chinese community in Toronto presented her with opportunities for cultural self-expression both in the various 'Chinese' public places (e.g., the Chinatowns of Toronto and Mississauga), and in the company of her own group. A lack of access to her own community forced Sutama to express her cultural identity primarily in the privacy of her room and to engage in acts more 'Indian' in the public sphere. It is possible that restricted opportunities for cultural self-expression may have increased Sutama's nostalgia for home. Although Lu and Sutama both carried similar fantasies about travelling frequently back and forth between home and Canada, their material circumstances did not permit this desire to be translated into reality very soon.

The nature of the social network of our respective immigrant groups, and the extent to which we could access them, influenced the retention and expression of our ethnic identities in Toronto. Depending on the reality of the circumstances, we variously revised and modulated our desires to reroot and created memories in new spaces. Immediately upon arrival, Lu was drawn into a support system of well-networked Chinese students at York from mainland China, with whom she spoke Mandarin, celebrated festivities and visited numerous Chinese places in and around the city. Her group and their associations enabled Lu to follow her usual routines, as in China, and allowed her to explore her 'Chinese' identity among new friends and within the wider Chinese community. Lu wrote to her mother that '[U]nless I force myself to change, it's much easier to retain my identity' in Toronto by exploring the numerous Chinese malls, movie theatres and bookstores. In Sutama's case, the Bengalis from India were hard to reach and Bengali places distant. These circumstances made Sutama reroot in Toronto differently from Lu: rather than being in the company with her own group, she socialised with other international and Canadian students at the university, earning invaluable 'cultural capital'.

The material circumstances of our respective families and friends back home—especially their access to the Internet—regulated our chances of being in both places simultaneously. Since Lu's family and most of her friends in China had access to the Internet, in comparison to Sutama's, she was able to maintain more frequent and tangible contacts across borders.

Comparing the two narratives, it seems that in certain realms, such as dietary, speech and dressing habits, the perceptions and expectations of the home society had stronger influence on Sutama than on Lu. Sutama narrated that she selectively revealed aspects of her external identity while visiting Kolkata and made conscious efforts 'to prove that [she] was the same person'.

With these understandings of the nature, means and intensity of our individual transnational acts, we will now revisit some concepts in the transnational literature, particularly focusing on how transnational identities are constructed.

Revisiting the conceptual framework

In Figure 1, we have presented a conceptual framework that illustrates the close relationship between transnational acts and identities. We argue that each is manifested through the other: identities influence acts, acts create identities and over time both identities and acts change and ramify (Portes 1998). Vertovec (1999, 450) has suggested that transnational acts are born out of a transnational awareness (of multilocality) and its corresponding desire (to be in multiple places), which he sees as 'a type of consciousness'. Building on Vertovec's idea, we believe that transnational consciousness is essentially individualistic, composed of an abstract awareness of one's self, diaspora and multiple belonging. It is in the transnational consciousness that an individual negoti-
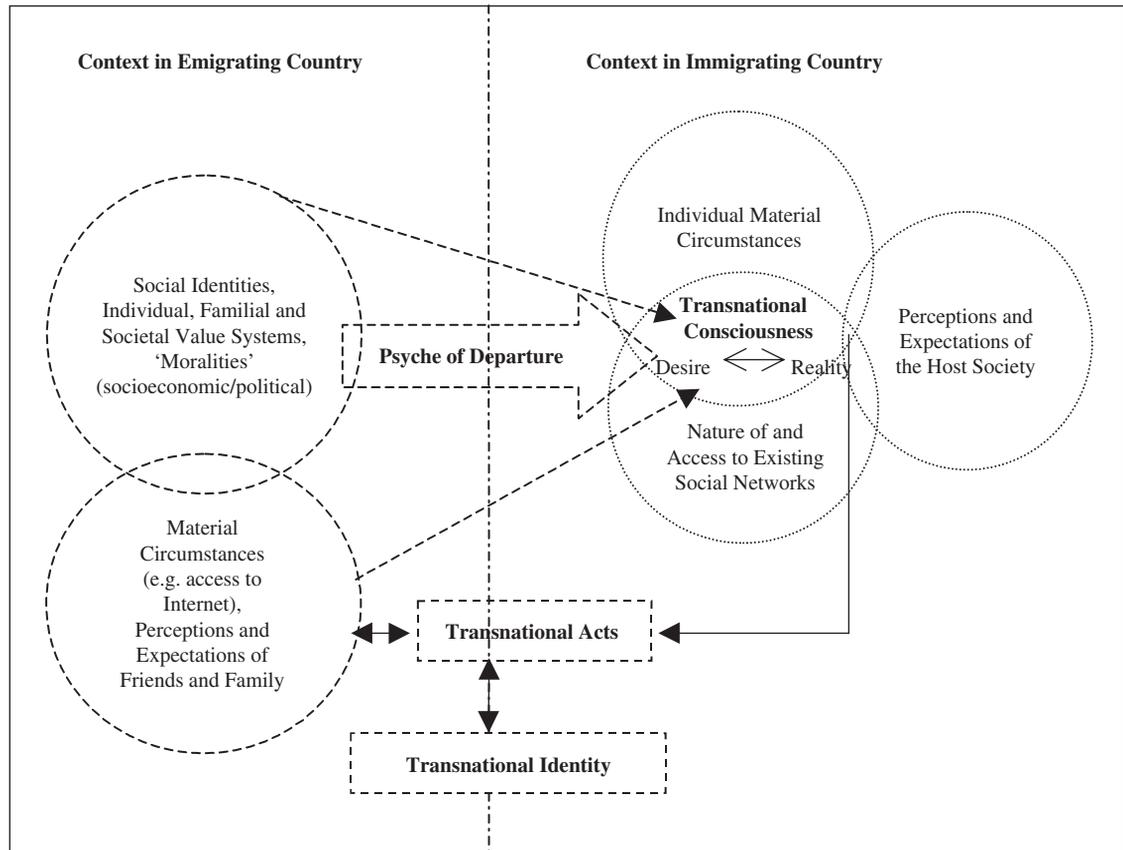
Figure 1
Transnationalism and Identity: A Conceptual Framework

ates her/his 'desire' to engage in particular transnational activities and the 'reality' of the situation. We argue that transnational consciousness is fed by intertwined conduits of the immigrant's premigration social identities, her/his individual, familial and societal value systems and 'moralities' (socioeconomic/political), psyche of departure, material circumstances and social connections in the migrant city and a sense of perceptions and expectations of the host and the home societies about her/him. Additionally, we believe that the material circumstances of friends and family back home, particularly their access to means of communication such as the telephone and the Internet, play an important role in this regard (Figure 1).

Migrants carry across borders their premigration social identities (e.g. of age, class,

gender) and individual, familial and societal value systems and moralities. The migration act itself, together with these various components, may give rise to ambivalent feelings at the time of departure—'imaginations' of a new way of living in the immigrant country, 'nostalgia' for home and 'fantasies' of return (Appadurai 1996, 6). We call this ambivalent state of mind at the time of the migrant's departure from the known homeland towards an unknown future the 'psyche of departure' (Figure 1). We believe the psyche of departure is unique within every individual, and that it may not always correspond to a particular diaspora or immigrant category. Appadurai (1990, 7) suggests that migrants come from three different diasporas—hope, despair and terror. He argues that economic immigrants may migrate from 'diasporas

of hope' in search of 'greener pastures' or may move from 'diasporas of despair' desiring tolerable lives, whereas refugees flee from 'diasporas of terror' to safer sites. Building on this understanding, we argue that 'grounded realities' may give rise to multiple diaspora-consciousnesses, with their associated emotions, that shape the migrant's psyche of departure. For example, not all refugees necessarily 'drag' (Appadurai 1996, 6) a 'baggage' only of terror; similarly, an economic immigrant may carry a 'mixed bag' of hope, fear and despair. Thus, we conceptualise the psyche of departure as an individualistic, complex and variable phenomenon, arising out of the mental state of the migrant during departure. Moreover, the psyche of departure changes with every subsequent departure from the homeland and infuences future desires for transnational activities.

Upon reaching the destination country (shown in Figure 1 as the 'Immigrating Country'), migrants face an unfamiliar context. Their psyche of departure, transported identities, value systems and moralities may collide with a new 'reality'. This 'reality' is essentially comprised of the migrant's material circumstance, the nature of and the migrant's access to existing social networks, a sense of the host and the home society's perceptions and expectations about the migrant and the material circumstances of the migrant's friends and family back home (Figure 1). When faced with the 'reality', an individual variously modulates her/his 'desires' and develops a sense of 'who I can be' and 'how I can be both here and there'. It is also important to note that not all desires are translated into transnational acts. Furthermore, grounded 'realities' may differentially regulate the nature, means and intensity of individual transnational engagements.

In transnational research, one taken-for-granted situation is that, in this jet-set and 'wired' age, where travel both physical and virtual is made easy, transnationals have both choice and freedom of movement between sending and receiving countries. In response to this, we echo Westwood and Phizacklea's (2000, 2) concern that '[I]ncreasingly the term transnational is being used to refer to the growing number of people who have the freedom, legally and economically, to move across borders and between cultures, doing business their own way'. We point out that, in the glitter of the 'astronauts' and the 'parachute kids', the stories of financially poor transnationals are sometimes eclipsed.

In reality, migrants from the 'less-developed' countries often borrow enormous sums of money to invest in the migration process. Even when coming from the diasporas of hope, these people with limited resources embark upon a journey of uncertainty, with a very slim hope of visiting their homelands any time soon. Moreover, the material circumstances of folks back home—particularly their access to fast means of communication, such as the Internet—variously regulate the migrant's virtual contacts with home. Thus, perhaps the most common transnational desire of being at multilocalities does not always translate into the presumed transnational act.

Scholars have noted that individuals' access to social networks plays an important role in shaping their transnational acts (e.g., Smart and Smart 1998, 104, 122). While members of well-established immigrant groups may have many avenues for fulfilling their cultural needs, those of smaller, widely dispersed and less powerful ethnic groups often sublimate their yearnings by participating in activities that may be culturally remote. We believe that in extreme cases, the less fortunate transnational perhaps lives a life comparable to that of an 'exile' (Said 2000, 181), a life that is chequered with rupture, impeded movement and separation anxiety. They are forever in the pursuit of resuscitating 'the unhealable rift forced between a human and a native place, between the self and its true home: [the] essential sadness [which] can never be surmounted' (Said 2000, 171).

On the basis of its own perceptions (largely based on 'race'), the 'host society' (composed of charter groups and other immigrant groups) often thrusts upon individuals highly homogenised collective identities, particularly of 'class' and 'ethnicity', which may only remotely relate to their self-perceived pre-migration identities. The host society expects them to act and behave in a way that is both 'normal' to its own and also 'typical' of the ethnic group to which they have been assigned. Pan-Asian/Chinese identity is often thrust upon 'Chinese-looking' people; migrants from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are expected to behave in a 'South Asian' way; migrants from Hong Kong are thought of as being all millionaires and those from Sri Lanka as being primarily poor. The host society also perceives and expects a migrant to be well networked within her/his own 'ethnic' group, however defined. In order to fit into

the host society, individuals often internalise such assigned identities, with all their externally imposed boundaries, and desire to engage in (and/or refrain from) associated acts.

Perceptions and expectations of friends and family 'back home' may variously influence individuals to refrain from and/or engage in certain transnational acts. The sociocultural norms of the home society play an active role in this regard. The home society often perceives an immigrant as 'rich' and generally more knowledgeable of the outside world, and expects her/him to send social and financial remittances. Individuals often comply with such expectations and engage in cross-border economic activities.

In summary, our experiences have made clear that place plays a pivotal role in constructing transnational acts and identities. Transnational acts differ in intensity and regularity among individuals, being contingent upon the interplay of a number of factors that may range from psychological to material and sociocultural. We have found that, as in other forms of constructed social identities, transnational identity is often assigned and internalised. With changes in circumstances, acts change and ramify (Portes 1998), and individuals develop, not just dual, but multiple lives and, consequently, multiple identities.

Methodological lessons

The exercise of writing and interpreting autobiographical narratives has provided many methodological lessons. Contrary to the popular idea that researching from within (as an insider) is somehow less difficult, we argue that it is perhaps the most arduous task. The self-reflexive quest to understand the evolution of our transnational identities was difficult and time-consuming. Revisiting personal 'archive[s] of lived actualities' (Appadurai 1996, 11), we were inundated with emotions that, rather than being therapeutic, left us at an impasse. We toiled, trying to articulate our feelings and emotions in appropriate 'English' words and phrases, which did not come naturally. Concerned about the veracity of our narratives, we rewrote them several times. Representation and interpretation were equally difficult.

This experience raises questions about rendering complex concepts, such as consciousness and identity, 'thought out' in one language and mode and expressed in the syntax and cadences of another.

Moreover, if understanding and expressing our own emotions, opinions and identities was so difficult, time-consuming, and sometimes contradictory, we wonder how complicated it would be to capture others' feelings unerringly and represent them 'truthfully' through standard methodologies of interview, survey and observation. We are still grappling with 'what degree of immersion is necessary before the collection of life histories should begin' (Miles and Crush 1993, 870), and how those histories can be collected so that mishearing, misinterpreting and misrepresenting can be minimised.

This process of self-reflexive research has suggested that in order to probe migrant identity formations, it is not enough to study human actions alone, because transnational acts and behaviours cannot be divorced from transnational awareness and circumstances. It is, therefore, imperative to examine the formation and metamorphosis of individual transnational consciousnesses in order to understand why individuals apparently choose to engage in and/or refrain from particular transnational acts and selectively express specific transnational identities.

Conclusion

We had two main tasks in this paper: to understand whether we are transnationals and, if so, how transnationalism shaped our identities. Initially, we simply wanted to list acts that we have routinely performed across borders. When our narratives unfolded, we realised that although we came to Canada from the same continent, with similar demographic and economic backgrounds, we have engaged in dissimilar transnational acts, led multiple lives and, as a consequence, developed distinct transnational identities. Analysing the nature, means and intensity of our individual transnational acts, we found that at the base of the similarities and differences in our acts lie our individual transnational consciousnesses. Following Vertovec (1999) we have argued that transnational consciousness is essentially individualistic, composed of abstract awareness of one's self, diaspora and multiple belonging. More specifically, we have realised that transnational consciousness is fed by intertwined conduits of the immigrant's pre-migration social identities, individual, familial and societal value systems (socioeconomic/political), psyche of departure, material circumstances and social connections in the migrant

city, sense of perceptions and expectations of the host and the home societies, and material circumstances of friends and family back home. We believe that in the transnational consciousness, the 'desires' to perform cross-border acts are negotiated according to the 'realities' of the contexts. The interplay of the transnational consciousness and existing material and sociocultural circumstances in host and home countries regulate the extent to which desires are translated into cross-border linkages. Over time, actions change and ramify and create fluid and situational transnational identities.

Because our stories are unique, we do not claim to understand the transnationalisms of all international students in Toronto/Canada. We acknowledge concerns regarding the selected research methodology, sample size, transparency and level of details in the narratives, problems of recall and appropriate representation. Respecting the values of 'objective' modes of inquiry, we nonetheless argue that the nature of this research problem necessitated an individualistic, phenomenological and 'subjective' approach. We believe that through this exercise of self-discovery, we have looked beyond 'rational' acts and probed deeper into sociopsychological factors and value systems that influence such acts. '[H]erein lie the challenges and the satisfactions of an autobiographical approach to migration research' (Findlay and Li 1997, 38).

Acknowledgements

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