

**Identity politics and cultural asymmetries:
Singaporean transmigrants 'fashioning' cosmopolitanism**

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Abstract:

The politics of identity and difference are often most evidently experienced and intensely negotiated in everyday encounters. By examining the experiences of highly skilled Singaporean transmigrants in London and their projects of cosmopolitan self-fashioning, this paper highlights the way 'race' and nationality trouble claims to cosmopolitanism. The analysis considers the mixing of cultures and selective 'local' norms picked up by this group of migrants. I focus on the oscillating cultural framings that they navigate in their professional and social interactions, particularly in terms of phenotype, cultural discourse and bodily presentations. In so doing, I argue for a more critical view towards popular notions of cosmopolitanism currently in circulation and instead invoke an alternative cosmopolitanism urbanism.

Keywords: transnational migration, race, cosmopolitanism, Singapore, London

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Introduction

It is often in the domain of everyday encounters that the politics of difference are most evidently experienced and intensely negotiated by transnational migrants (transmigrants). Research on internationalised flows of talent has gathered pace in recent years, shifting the focus from institutional mechanisms to the ‘individual experience’ (Beaverstock, 2002:526) of migration. These studies draw attention to the manner in which migration flows and experiences are embodied in social and cultural ways (Mitchell, 1997; Nagel, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2005), and take place in geographical and historically mediated contexts. In this scholarship on transnational mobility, there has been an accompanying interest in the way abstract macro-scale regulatory structures and phenomena are (re)produced or contested through seemingly nondescript norms, values and routines (Conradson and Latham, 2005a; Smith, 2005; Dyck, 2005). It is with respect to this interest in the everyday worlds of social life that I situate my study of Singaporean transnational mobility. This paper focuses on the everyday identity politics and cultural asymmetries encountered and produced by highly skilled Singaporean transmigrants¹ living in London, a global city characterised by a blend of ‘local’ and migrant cultures. I examine the oscillating positionings of ethnicity (or ‘race’) that they partially premise on phenotype, and situate this in narratives of globalisation, cosmopolitanism and postcolonial nationhood. My discussion also advances some critical views of

¹ I use the term ‘transmigrants’ to describe my Singaporean respondents so as to capture the ways in which their ‘identities and practices are configured by hegemonic social categories (such as “race” and ethnicity) that are deeply embedded in the nation-building processes of two or more nation-states’ (Basch *et al*, 1994:34).

cosmopolitanism discourse currently in circulation: first, the construing of cultural sophistication as ‘cosmopolitanism’; second, the host and migrant-as-stranger binary framing; and third, the limits of invoking ‘race’ in a cosmopolitanism project.

‘Racialised’ cosmopolitan cultures

Highly skilled migration is an increasingly important phenomenon in countries capitalising upon migration to meet labour and population needs. In the international ‘talent-for-competition race’ (Sachar, 2006:164), the belief that human capital is premium has prompted national governments to institute policies aimed at attracting highly skilled individuals to service their domestic industries as well as multinational companies. Unlike low-waged, refugee and asylum migration, the presence of highly skilled migrants is usually not deemed as a problem for the social fabric of the host society. This is because highly skilled migrants are seen to possess the cosmopolitan cultural capital and savvy that would enable them to fit in anywhere in the world. In its philosophical usage, the embodiment of cosmopolitan culture is premised on a sense of belonging to humanity that ‘transcends the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’ (Cheah, 2006:487). However, in its popular usage the term ‘cosmopolitan’ is more often associated with images of Sklair’s (2001) transnational capitalist class depicting individuals with power, privilege and who consider themselves citizens of the world.

Recent studies on highly skilled migration have started to expand the optic of globalising people flows beyond the narrow focus on the transnational capitalist class. Instead, these studies bring to the forefront forms of ‘middling’ transnationalism

(Conradson and Latham, 2005a), such as the self-initiated mobile professionals who migrate to take up relatively insecure jobs in the host country (Conradson and Latham, 2005b; Kennedy 2004). These writings tend to portray cosmopolitanism as a project of 'self-fashioning', or 'self-conscious cosmopolitanisation' (Conradson and Latham, 2007) wherein individuals deliberately cultivate a global sensibility by embracing cultural diversity in their friendship and professional networks; developing tastes for foreign music and food; and participating in lifestyle choices (e.g. environmentalism and organic diets) characteristic of a cosmopolitan society. However, this approach, like Nava's (2002:86) interpretation of historical modernity as cosmopolitanism, only situates cultural difference and the foreign as a 'source of interest, pleasure and counter-identification'. Such readings are anchored on an imaginary celebration of difference and do not actively engage with the uneven social realities of purported cosmopolitanism as an empirical condition (Ho, 2006; Yeoh, 2006).

Research drawing on ethnographic and interview material shows that highly skilled migrants occupy social spaces of inclusion and exclusion that are mediated by intersecting axes of identity such as class, ethnicity/'race', nationality and gender (Ley, 2004; Nagel, 2005; Purkayastha, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2005). These spaces of inclusion and exclusion (or boundary-making) are arguably premised upon essentialising ideals of place, constructed as Massey (1993:64) posits, out of an inward-looking perspective of the past and static notions of 'local' culture. Local culture is taken to refer to the culture of individuals who live in a bounded space and engage in taken-for-granted, habitual and

repetitive acts (Featherstone, 1993:175). This depiction of culture often mobilises racial and ethnic categories to justify sameness and difference (Nagel, 2004 and 2005).

The apparent 'naturalness' or immutability of 'race' has been critically interrogated by scholars arguing that notions of 'race' are the products of specific historical and geographical forces rather than pre-given categorisations (Jackson and Penrose, 1993:1). This view challenges the material inequalities previously assumed to be an inevitable outcome of unalterable racial divisions. Yet more recent writings on 'race' also critique the social constructionist approach for reifying 'race' by treating it as the basis for finding solutions to address inequalities even as it simultaneously seeks to discredit the idea of 'race'. Thus one counter-view advocates a 'post-race' perspective (Gilroy, 2000; Ware and Back, 2002) but this approach has been criticised for its universalising premises and depoliticising effects (Nayak, 2006). Another counter-view foregrounds the material corporeality of 'race' rather than a discursive deconstruction of race. This view argues that phenotype is a dynamic and mutable biological state but it is the basis through which bodies forge relations with things and places in the social world (Saldanha, 2006).

In this regard, the work of McDowell (2008:6-9) is also helpful for understanding the way that the migrant labour market is segregated and segmented through the production of 'appropriate' bodies. She argues that discourses about 'different national work ethics, differently sexualised bodies, about different roles in the family and household all affect options in the labour market'. McDowell (2008) adds that bodily presentation of 'accent, dress, self-presentation, behaviour, skin colour, hair jewellery

and height' are used to position migrant bodies as appropriate or inappropriate in the workplace. She thus advocates an approach that is cognisant of the need to deconstruct intersecting master categories of race, class and gender, while being simultaneously mindful of the need to address existing social inequalities.

One may ask how can theories of performativity, drawing heavily on signification rather than anatomy or phenotype, be used alongside theories criticising discourse? For Nayak (2006:423), such an approach has highly productive tensions in that the ontological status of 'race' is disrupted by revealing the way the racialised body is repetitively enacted as a slippery surface of 'race truths'. This view complements Saldanha's (2006) argument that the material reality of bodies needs to be engaged even as it is recognised that phenotype can morph and connect with other culturally embedded bodies, things and places in infinite ways. For Saldanha, allowing for the proliferation of 'race' as a material reality and understanding the geographical differentiations between bodies is where cosmopolitanism starts. Though Saldanha's argument is persuasive, it inevitably privileges the materiality of 'race' as a dominant organising social category. Instead, intersecting axes of social difference (McDowell, 2008), including 'race', class, gender and nationality, should be mobilised for a cosmopolitan project.

By examining the experiences of Singaporean transmigrants and their projects of cosmopolitan self-fashioning (through international mobility and acquiring cultural sophistication), this paper will highlight the way 'race' and nationality trouble claims to cosmopolitanism and instead invoke an alternative cosmopolitan urbanism. My analysis

is conscious of the material embodiment of 'race' through phenotype, yet it is also cognisant of the multiple and splintered ways in which cultural meanings are inscribed onto racialised bodies through discourse, representation and linguistics. I focus on the oscillating cultural framings drawing on phenotype, discourse and bodily presentations, which Singaporean transmigrants navigate during their everyday professional and social interactions in London. Instead of dichotomous understandings of racialised inclusion and exclusion, premised on treating 'race' as a reified category, my analysis considers the mixing of cultures and the selective imitative norms that migrants pick up in their destination contexts arising from their ideas about what is or is not 'local'. I also underscore the ways in which the politics of nationality become apparent in the multiple refractions of 'race' amongst Singaporean transmigrants in London. This approach emphasises the fluidity of racial identities and the processes through which racialisation takes place (Wimmer, 2007) both discursively and through the material embodiment of 'race'.

This discussion draws on fieldwork conducted in London in 2004-2005. I interviewed forty-three Singaporeans working and living in London with the purpose of understanding their migration motivations, experiences of living in London and intentions for return. I term these individuals 'Singaporean transmigrants' by which I am referring to persons who hold either Singaporean citizenship (38), Singaporean permanent residency (3) or who identify themselves as 'Singaporean' even after relinquishing their formal affiliation with the state for personal reasons (2). All of my

respondents² had lived in London for at least a year and planned on settling for a longer period of time. The majority of my respondents were of Chinese ethnicity (31 out of 43), which parallels both the ethnic composition of the Singaporeans found in London as well as the broader population profile in Singapore. The remainder belong to the Malay, Indian and Eurasian racial groups officially categorised by the Singaporean state. All of my respondents had tertiary-level qualifications or extensive professional experience. About half of them had been educated in the UK. Three-quarters of the study sample were in their mid-twenties to thirties and an equivalent proportion held employer-sponsored work permits allowing them to remain in London. These demographics correspond to the contemporary profile of Singaporeans in London.

The remainder of the paper, first discusses some working and socialising norms Singaporean transmigrants feel they have to acquire so as to be accepted as ‘appropriate’ bodies in a foreign workplace. These cultural traits contribute to a purported form of cosmopolitan savvy that helps them navigate a foreign work environment. Second, I examine the way this cosmopolitanism is in fact premised upon essentialising racial constructs that are framed around phenotype and assumed cultural ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’. Third, I highlight the distinctions made between persons of the same ethnicity but different national backgrounds. This discussion complicates simplistic assumptions of cultural ‘sameness’ or ‘difference’ amongst persons of the same phenotype. In so doing, I suggest that cosmopolitanism as an empirical condition should be a project that is premised on a respectful acceptance of intersecting social differences.

² The names of my respondents have been changed in this paper in order to ensure their anonymity.

‘Cosmopolitans’ inside/outside the international workplace

Recent literature studying intra- and inter-company personnel transfers has argued that transnational elites move at the behest of the parent company, partly for the transfer of skills, knowledge and expertise internationally, but they also do so to further their own career progression (Beaverstock, 2005). The majority of the Singaporean transmigrants I studied had moved to London of their initiative rather than through company transfers. Like Conradson and Latham’s (2005b) study of New Zealanders in London, most of my respondents did not migrate merely for economic incentives, such as higher salaries. Many said that their salaries command a lower standard of living in London compared to Singapore. Instead, their migration motivations are interlinked with a desire for self-development and exploration. Nonetheless, they are aware that migration benefits their career advancement in that they are ‘build[ing] career competencies and labour market value through transfer across boundaries’ (Thomas *et al*, 2005:341). Oftentimes, these individuals are depicted as engaging in a process of self-fashioning (Conradson and Latham (2007:249) to become part of an ‘emergent cosmopolitan society’. They are acquiring a form of cosmopolitan capital that enables them to navigate the foreign cultures encountered in their internationally mobile work lives. However, this view of cosmopolitanism should not neglect the discursive and embodied power relations in which migrants become embedded when they move to a foreign work environment.

The international workplace represents a new professional and cultural territory that Singaporean transmigrants learn to negotiate as they inhabit it. For instance, Ian

(Chinese, male, thirties) who had moved to London to pursue a business postgraduate degree with the intention to work in the city, describes the initial culture shock that he encountered:

I think there may have been a little getting used to on the cultural side: sometimes people crack jokes that you don't understand; they watch sitcoms that you don't watch; they talk about football or rugby and [you] don't follow it. That kind of stuff... But when it comes to working I feel that I get the respect. I have been able to hit the ground running and people recognise [my] contribution.

As indicated by Ian's anecdote, Singaporean transmigrants find that there are particular working and socialising norms that they have to acquire to fit into their new work environments. Although the workplace in London is likely to encompass a diversity of migrant cultures, the way my respondents described their work environments usually referred to 'British³' – or more specifically, what is still often unquestioningly regarded as 'English' – codes of behaviour⁴.

In terms of work etiquette for example, Irene (Chinese, female, twenties) who works as a brand consultant compares her experience of working in Singapore and London:

I think [in terms of] the work styles, people are a lot more gracious [in London]... Here people, for instance, would pick up the phone and before they ask you for anything, even if you are an absolute stranger, [they] would say, 'How are you?' and ask how your day was. Then you chat for at least one minute, be polite and move on to what you wanted. When I first arrived at my workplace I [would walk] up to the secretary and say, 'Could you do this, please?' They looked at me in a particularly crass way,

³ The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in Britain commissioned a study in 2005 to uncover what is signified as 'Britishness' to British citizens from various ethnic backgrounds. The study found that a portion of the focus group participants still equated 'Britishness' with an exclusively 'white English' society (CRE, 2005).

⁴ Some of these norms and habits are described and explained by the social anthropologist, Kate Fox (2004) in her popular culture book, *Watching the English: the Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*.

but after a while they figured out [that she] just says exactly what she thinks... I think that is quite an Asian thing. So they have gotten used to me and me to them.

Irene's description depicts a story commonly told by my respondents about the misunderstandings that happen as a result of the different work etiquette they encounter in London. McDowell's concept of 'appropriateness' (2008:7) comes in useful here for understanding the social negotiations taking place in these interactions. The relatively forthright Singaporean (interpreted by Irene as 'Asian') manner of speech is contrasted with the less brusque social rules of English speech. Irene highlights the way she was chastened by 'crass' looks from her colleagues and the appropriate bodily comportment she learnt to be considered an 'acceptable' worker, thus attesting to her successful acquirement of cosmopolitan capital ('They have gotten used to me and me to them'). In considering the experiences of financial professionals in the (predominantly Chinese) Singaporean workplace, Ye and Kelly (this issue) similarly highlight the significance of bodily presentation and comportment for 'fitting' into purportedly international and cosmopolitan work environments. In my study, differences in work and social etiquettes are – as Irene's anecdote shows – attributed to representations of being 'Asian' or 'Western' ('that is quite an Asian thing'), distinctions that are inscribed in the everyday consciousness of the respondents.

Being 'Asian' or 'Western' is also inextricably associated with phenotypical difference, or the materialist basis through which racialisation takes place. This is exemplified in Oscar's account of the British after-work drinks ritual, another work-

related norm often brought up by other respondents. Oscar (Chinese, male, thirties), who has worked and lived in both Singapore and London, describes the difference between after-work socialising in Singapore and London

[On] weekdays I normally hang out with my colleagues, mostly the *angmohs* [Caucasians]. Go down to the pub to drink.. [Amusedly] I can stand and drink at the pub for six, seven hours now quite easily...That is something I picked up here. In Singapore you wouldn't stand to drink. [Emphasises] Nobody stands to drink in Singapore. They would think, 'You mad ah?' The other thing is, in Singapore you eat first then you drink. Here you drink and drink and you go back to eat....

The phrase '*angmoh*⁵' is used in Singaporean society to describe persons of Caucasian origin (or the 'white' English in this instance). The expression is variously used in a derogatory or tongue-in-cheek manner by Singaporeans to attribute and explain cultural differences through phenotype. Thus Oscar ascribes the socialising over drinks habit to *angmoh* culture and it is a norm that he says he has picked up from living in London. Although he does not disapprove of the after-work drinks ritual, he describes in a mocking tone the way that his *angmoh* colleagues 'stand and drink at the pub' for a stretch of several hours, a practice that he expects would be looked upon with bemusement in Singapore ('you mad ah?'). Nonetheless, he has cultivated the habit in order to cement social bonds with his colleagues.

The differences described by Oscar may appear banal but the after-work drinks ritual affects the extent to which Singaporean transmigrants feel that they bond with their colleagues at work and outside of work. Seemingly trivial differences in working and

⁵ *Angmoh* is an old Chinese dialect expression that can be literally translated as 'red hair' and it was originally used to describe the Caucasians who have a different phenotype from the early Chinese migrants in Singapore. Nonetheless, the term is still used in Singaporean parlance today.

cultural norms can create alienation for those less adept at adapting to their new environment. Dorothy (Chinese, female, forties) who works at the management level of her company explained her predicament when her Singaporean employer sent her to London:

I found working here very tough, even tougher than in China... I guess it is because we are a Singaporean-owned hotel and we are the owner's [representative] though the management here is all *white* (emphasis mine). So it was difficult for them to accept that we are Chinese and coming here to tell them what to do... When we came, we have to implement our policies here and run things the way the management did in Singapore and there was some objection. The way [they] run the hotel is different... It is mainly their attitude towards work. In Singapore if you have a deadline, 'die-die' you have to do but here it is only a report.

Dorothy who has worked in several international locations, including China, regards the management changes that she had to implement in the London office as the most difficult. On the one hand, she associates this with the racial prejudices and vestiges of colonial superiority that her 'white' subordinates might have against her, an ethnic Chinese from a former British colony. On the other hand, she professes that the different management style and what she interprets as the nonchalant work attitudes of her colleagues (professional degeneracy relative to Singaporean work attitudes) could have led to the disagreements too. Such dialectical identity representations between the 'host' and migrant communities are, as Ehrkamp (2006) points out, integral to the way migrants see, or fashion, themselves.

Dorothy adds that she does not usually socialise with her 'white' colleagues and prefers to spend her social time with Singaporean friends instead:

Even my colleagues I find that they are very different from us. If it is after work they wouldn't say, 'Let's go for dinner'. I don't know why. I have been here for so long and a lot of my colleagues have been here for a long time. The most is on Fridays they would have a set timing to go to the pub for a drink.... The problem is when they start drinking they [will] talk nonsense. You really see their true colours and they smoke so when you come out your clothes stink. If I want to go out I want to get to know them better. I would rather go for a nice dinner and talk. It is very strange. All my colleagues don't know each other well... Like for us Chinese New Year we would invite friends to our house but not for them, [even at] Christmas they don't invite. It's kind of like a family thing. I don't go home for Christmas but they don't invite me to their house. It is always the Singaporeans here who group together and cook and go to each other's place to talk.

Dorothy's narrative contrasts the Singaporean preference for after-work socialising over meals with what she associates as the British preference for socialising over alcohol. Her difficulty with the latter arises from what she considers to be the misdemeanours that manifest amongst her colleagues after a few rounds of alcohol, which she believes prevents her from getting to 'know them better'. In Dorothy's case, she equates the drinking and smoking habits of her colleagues with moral degeneracy. However, Dorothy's narrative also reveals a longing for hospitality from the host society ('I don't go home for Christmas but they don't invite me to their house'). Hospitality is a sensibility that, as Dikec (2002) argues, can advance a cosmopolitan project if it is built on an engagement that facilitates mutual acceptance between the host and migrant-as-stranger.

The above examples reveal the ways that acquiring 'local' work and social norms are integral to becoming an 'appropriate' body in the British workplace. The meaning of 'local' in London is usually associated with Britishness even though ninety-five percent

of those who have moved to London since 1995 were born outside the United Kingdom (Tate Modern, 2007). Britishness is also often conflated with ‘white’ English culture despite the presence of other British-born ethnicities, such as the South Asian and Chinese communities. Nonetheless, being accepted in the British workplace necessitates a performance of what is popularly perceived as ‘Britishness’. In so doing, Singaporean transmigrants aim to acquire the cultural sophistication that can be converted into cosmopolitan capital. As Dorothy’s example makes clear, those unwilling or inept at doing so are likely to face social exclusion compared to their Singaporean counterparts who are better at acquiring these cultural competencies. Nonetheless, the cosmopolitan savvy of the latter group should not be taken at face value. These ‘cosmopolitan’ Singaporeans often struggle to acquire the cultural traits that would facilitate their acceptance in the host society. They are also apt to simultaneously negotiate the multiple subjectivities and cultural politics of defining ‘self’ and ‘Other’ that arise from being in London, a global city populated not only by the ‘local’ British but also a diversity of other nationalities and ethnicities.

Embodying and negotiating racialised subjectivities

In this section, I focus on the positive and negative oscillations of identity articulated in my study. On one level, ‘cosmopolitan’ Singaporeans appear able to accept different cultural work norms and capitalise on their cosmopolitan savvy to gain acceptance in their new workplace. Yet on another level, what seems to be cosmopolitan capital on the surface is usually premised on essentialising constructs of ‘race’, largely framed around

phenotypical difference. This is illustrated in the following anecdote by Patricia (Chinese, female, thirties), a lawyer who has worked in both Singapore and London:

From what I can see and what I experience, the culture is different. It is more professional [in London] in terms of interaction with your colleagues. You don't feel that everything is personally driven. You can have an argument with your boss and after the argument is over it doesn't carry on into your personal life whereas in Singapore I felt that everything rolls into one. You are you, your work [and] your social life. Work takes your whole life and you are not able to have that professional interaction with your colleagues... In a way, I am being very critical, but I think that Singaporeans have not evolved in their work in terms of professionalism, like work is work and life is life. They are not sophisticated enough to make that distinction. It is also Chinese, taking things to heart that Western people I think, have less of.

In Patricia's narrative, she associates the lack of 'professionalism' amongst Singaporean workers as a national attribute and she presumes that 'Western people' are less likely than the Chinese to take things to heart. Such attitudes reflect a larger malaise in Singaporean society wherein stereotypes conflating whiteness with 'Western' superiority⁶ vis-à-vis 'Chinese' inferiority (the latter tends to be conflated with 'Singaporean' or 'Asian') are uncritically circulated and reproduced. Significantly, Patricia (like Irene) attributes the differences in working norms to seemingly inherent civilisation distinctions as well. However, her point of view can be usefully contrasted with Dorothy who believed that her 'white' colleagues have less professional work attitudes than Singaporeans. The same phenotype and signifiers ('white'/Western) are thus mobilised in different ways to explain behaviour.

⁶ Such racialised representations are likely to have its roots in Singapore's colonial history and continue to be sustained in popular parlance today despite the existence of 'white' populations beyond the Western hemisphere.

Despite acquiring the cultural traits that enable them to gain acceptance from their local colleagues, these ‘cosmopolitan’ Singaporeans unanimously express the belief that they are still regarded as outsiders in their workplace. Steven (Chinese, male, twenties), who was preparing to move to China after having studied and worked in Britain for approximately five years, explained his rationale for doing so:

I always tell my friends that no matter what you do in this place, you being Chinese and not European you will always be the away team. You have the ten percent of fans supporting you but you can never win over the whole stadium... I am Singaporean and Chinese. If I work really hard I can break through all those things but there will be a lot of setbacks. It is just the way things are around here. You can stay for a couple of years but to make it really big, you have to become a total European, which I am not. I can be westernised but I am not hardcore, *jia gan tan*⁷ that kind of stuff. I am a more *cheena* [or Chinese] person, which is why I think China or a more Asian environment would be more suitable for me because I get along better with Asians.

The signifiers of difference spelled out in Steven’s anecdote is not Britishness or Englishness, rather it is more broadly construed in terms of being non-European. His anecdote underscores the widely held belief amongst the Singaporean transmigrants in my study that there is a limit to their career progression in a European-dominated society. Even Ian, who had extolled the meritocracy of his workplace in London compared to the ‘foreign talent’⁸ policy in Singapore, admitted that he might encounter a racialised ‘glass ceiling’ in London later in his career because of his embodied Chinese identity. As such, returning to work in Asia at a later stage is an attractive option for Singaporean

⁷ This Singaporean slang is used to refer to Western-influenced speech, behaviour or mindsets. The phrase literally translates into ‘consume potatoes’, which is popularly believed to be the staple diet of Caucasians.

⁸ The ‘foreign talent’ policy refers to the initiatives made by the Singaporean government to attract highly skilled non-Singaporeans to move to and work in Singapore in order to fill in labour shortfalls and population needs. This policy is widely contested by Singaporeans who argue against the preferential treatment accorded to non-Singaporeans by the government and employers alike (see Ho, 2006).

transmigrants who believe that, on the one hand, they have a career advantage from the international exposure they had gained in London. On the other hand, they also expect that phenotypical and cultural similarities would make it easier for them to fit in and climb the career ladder in Asian countries.

The perceived similarity between ‘Asian’ cultures and norms further influences the social networks of these Singaporean transmigrants in London. Even if they have mastered their performance of ‘Britishness’, their closest social circles still mainly consist of other Asians living in London. Steven explains:

The kind of things [the Europeans] do is just different. They go out to drink and smoke. It is not that I don’t want to do this kind of stuff but it is not me. I have tried it and I felt that it is not what I want to do... Let’s put it this way. If we have a housewarming party for a British guy, I would not feel as at home as if it is a housewarming party for a Hong Konger or Malaysian... It is very subtle, really. It boils down to the kind of person you are. I told you that I am more *cheena*. I wish I could be more *gan tan* [Westernised], if you want to use that word. Four years in university I have a few good *angmoh* [Caucasian] friends but I hang out more with Asians.

Although Steven has been able to socialise with the European colleagues and friends he had made in London, he feels most at ease with friends from other parts of Asia because of his embodied identity as ‘Chinese’. For Steven, going out to ‘drink and smoke’ is a form of self-conscious cultural mimicry (‘I wish I could’) that he did in order to fit in with the European clique whereas he construes his natural inclination (‘the kind of person you are’) as different. He describes his other group of friends generally as ‘Asians’, but I later found out that they are the Chinese from Hong Kong and Malaysia. His anecdote depicts the ‘viscosity’ (Saldanha, 2006:10) of bodies

wherein the physical characteristics of racialised bodies and associated cultural habits invoke stickiness during social interactions ('I would not feel as at home'), thus producing aggregations of racial clustering in social settings ('I hang out more with Asians').

In fact, living in London tends to reinforce the Chinese identity of the Chinese-Singaporean transmigrants. For instance, Patricia had praised the professionalism in her London workplace and decried the narrow-minded attitudes in her Singaporean workplace, yet she qualifies that:

On the other hand, there are a lot of things I would never give up some of the Chinese values that we have. Like loyalty, respect and filial piety, which I think are on the decline in [Britain]. To a certain extent I think those values are superior to the kind of family relationships they have in [Britain]. So there are good and bad sides but because I am Chinese and I identify with my upbringing, I see that as my roots.

Patricia's narrative aptly illustrates the oscillating 'Western' and 'Asian' identifications subjectively taken up by Singaporean transmigrants. As I argued earlier by comparing the narratives of Patricia and Dorothy, selective mobilisations of ethnic identity are used to justify preferred values and behaviours. Her invocation, 'I am Chinese', referring to phenotype, alongside the reference to 'upbringing', demonstrates the perceived inseparability of these two dimensions in constructions of identity and relationality.

However, references to the distinction between *angmoh*/'Western' and Chinese/'Asian' cultures take for granted the cultural homogeneity and norms of the respective ethnic groups and broader civilisation identity. This is in spite of the diverse

representations of cultures and nationalities encountered by Singaporean transmigrants in London and the distinct cultural differences between Chinese communities in different parts of the world. ‘Asian values’ – a term often used by my respondents as an explanation for social identification and belonging/non-belonging – can be read as a boundary-making process for inclusion and exclusion. The politics of ‘Asian values’⁹ are discounted in these accounts of cultural interactions and differences. Even the non-Chinese Singaporeans I interviewed in London used the term ‘Asian values’ to rationalise perceived cultural similarities and difference in an unproblematised manner. This is despite debates in Singapore arguing that the purported shared ‘Asian’ values popularised by the Chinese-dominated Singaporean government have Confucian origins. Nonetheless, ‘Asian values’ and cultural familiarity are reasons often cited by Singaporean transmigrants to explain their intentions to eventually return to Singapore or Asia for the sake of their career and family (Ho, 2008).

Splintering ‘race’ through nationality dynamics

The viscosity of phenotype and the invocation of shared ethnic/civilisational values as a way of understanding racialised social relations is, however, complicated by the axis of nationality. For the Chinese-Singaporeans, it is perhaps the cultural context of their destination country that makes their Chinese ethnic identity more salient amongst a predominantly non-Chinese population in London. Nevertheless, this does not take away the significance of their ‘Singaporean identity’. Despite phenotypical ‘sameness’,

⁹ The immutability of ‘Asian’ values as the product of a distinct cultural civilisation have been disputed by scholars such as Robison (1996) and Kessler (1999). Instead, they point to the political nature of this ideology, which is utilised by bureaucrats, the political elite and corporate interests to advance statist and economic goals.

Singaporean transmigrants are prone to differentiate their nationality from the other Chinese they meet in London. Like the Chinese-Singaporeans in the studies conducted by Kong (1999) and Yeoh and Willis (2005) in China, Singaporean identity comes to the fore when the Chinese-Singaporean transmigrants in my study interacted with Chinese from other parts of the world. This points to an interpellation of cultural identities that is performed situationally by Singaporean transmigrants, as demonstrated in the following conversation that I had with Michelle (Chinese, female, twenties):

Michelle: Being Chinese, I like to say that I am from Singapore. To me that is important. It defines where I am coming from, like whether I am from Taiwan, China or Hong Kong, it is different. Maybe it is because we know Chinese from other places, it is just different. When you say Singaporean it doesn't make you different from Indian-Singaporean... If you [meet] a Singaporean [who is] Indian, being a Chinese-Singaporean you know where that person is coming from whereas [for] an Asian here in London, you know that they don't share similar experiences as you do. If I met an Indian from England, it is different from what you are familiar with. With Indians from Singapore you click. Not that I don't click with the Indians here but we speak *Singlish*, or you use certain slang and you know where each other is coming from. That is how I feel about Singapore.

EH: What about if you meet a Chinese from Taiwan and at the same time you meet an Indian from Singapore, who would you identify with more?

Michelle: In terms of language, unless you want to be selfish and speak Chinese, then of course you identify with the Chinese more. But if you say where you are coming from then definitely the Indian.

Although the Chinese identity of Singaporean transmigrants in London may become salient in their interactions with a predominantly non-Chinese society, their Singaporean identity becomes dominant during interactions with the Chinese from other parts of the world. English is the lingua franca in Singapore but the different ethnic groups learn their

respective mother tongues¹⁰ as a second language in schools (except the Eurasians who can choose their second language). The Singaporean political elite reason that this two-pronged strategy is necessary so as to build a cohesive national community out of disparate migrant cultures that converged in Singapore during its trading days under British colonial rule. In addition to that, Singaporeans speak a form of pidgin English known as *Singlish* (Singaporean English) that includes phrases from the different languages and dialects spoken by Singaporeans. Hence Michelle claims that even though speaking Mandarin (the primary Chinese language used in Singapore) would enable her to communicate well with other Mandarin speakers, her shared nationality with an Indian-Singaporean who speaks *Singlish* means that she would identify better with the latter person.

Similarly, Dina who is an Indian-Singaporean (female, thirties), differentiates herself from other South Asians that she has met in London and claims a closer affinity to fellow Singaporeans. Commenting on the British use of the term ‘Asian’, she argues that:

When they say ‘Asian’ here it means the Indians. [The Indians] are very conservative here. [They] somehow feel that they are better than [those] in India or Singapore... It is like ten, fifteen years ago... They still believe in arranged marriages. The funny thing is it is not about arranged marriages between two people living in the same city, like someone in London who is doing well or who would be able to take care of their kid. They would educate the child up till university and when it is time to get married, they would look for a husband from India and the guy probably doesn’t speak English. So she ends up looking after him. He won’t be able to find a proper job [whereas] she is educated. To me that is very backward... If you think about it, [in Singapore] we have integrated the culture so much so

¹⁰ The second language policy in Singapore has been criticised for merging the diverse vernacular languages spoken by the different dialect groups represented in Singapore under the Mandarin (Chinese), Tamil (Indian) and Bahasa Melayu (Malay) languages only.

that [...] sometimes if I go to a wedding I [give] an *angpow*¹¹ ... You go to [a food centre] and order *mee goreng* [an Indian noodle dish]. You don't even think that it is Indian. You just think of it as *mee goreng* and Singaporean. We have a better idea of different cultures. I know why you give oranges during Chinese New Year and you know something about Indian culture.... We have a good understanding, maybe not completely but at least enough to know why you do certain things. Over here they can be quite naive.

Dina's anecdote underlines the intersecting politics of ethnicity and nationality. Here, Dina claims that she identifies better culturally with other Singaporeans even if they are from another ethnic group, rather than with a non-Singaporean Indian that she might meet in London. She explains that the cultural practices of the British Indian community have made limited historical progress compared to the Indians who had migrated to Singapore. Significantly, she construes the lingering cultural practice of arranged marriages (with an Indian from India) amongst the Indian community in Britain as 'conservative' and 'backward', likening it to the Indian-Singaporean community in the past. The British Indian community is thus portrayed as an unchanging and closed cultural entity. In contrast, cultural integration in Singapore is portrayed as progressive in that the various ethnic groups have been open towards accepting one another's cultural differences instead of maintaining clearly divided boundaries. Dina's example shows that despite shared phenotype, difference is constituted through intersecting cultural inscriptions of 'nationalised' bodies in social environments. The configuration of difference in these examples reveals 'the racialised body as a highly dubious zone upon which to anchor difference and a treacherously slippery surface on which to sustain race meaning' (Nayak, 2006:423).

¹¹ It is customary among the Chinese in Singapore to give a red envelope [*ang pow*] with some money inside to signify good wishes during the Chinese New Year and weddings.

The above examples illustrates that boundary-making is a shifting process that adjusts to the dynamics of social interactions, such as depending on the ethnicity/‘race’ or nationality that one meets. By identifying the outsider, one delineates notions of self and defines national identity as well. These are in fact ways of ‘making’ the nation even whilst such Singaporean transmigrants are physically absent from the territorial confines of the nation-state. Yet, my study also reveals that we should not assume that shared national identification arising out of a common background amongst Singaporean transmigrants equates to a strong sense of national identity. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, Singaporean transmigrants in London tend to self-consciously question the idea of a ‘Singaporean identity’ (Ho, forthcoming 2009). The multiculturalism project in Singapore is also contested; several non-Chinese respondents, including Dina, spoke of instances in which they had experienced or been made aware of racial discrimination in Singapore (also see Ye and Kelly, this issue). Such cleavages in Singaporean society are prone to manifest extraterritorially when racialised divisions emerge more acutely amongst the overseas Singaporean community. What I wish to emphasise here though is less the way that my respondents laid claim to particular identifications, but the dance of identities they perform as they pick their choice of cultural identification according to the occasion.

This discussion also highlights the limitations of framing the barriers to cosmopolitanism only through the host/stranger binary often brought up in debates about relationality and responsibility (Coney, 2002; Dikec, 2002; Massey, 2004). Gradations of

‘hosts’ and ‘strangers’ are made through migration flows and processes. The British South Asians were earlier migrants themselves but have become legal bearers of British citizenship now, some even spanning a few generations. To what extent are they ‘hosts’ in British society or are they still considered ‘strangers’? The cultural norms that Singaporean transmigrants stress they have to acquire to be accepted in their workplaces are premised on stereotypes of white-British culture/civilisation as the local/host society. The cultural norms of the naturalised British South Asian community are instead depicted as still foreign, less progressive and thus unacceptable to the ‘stranger’. Just as the idea of the ‘local’ needs to be interrogated (Massey, 1993), so do our perceptions of the ‘host’ society. These considerations open up further questions of whose responsibility it is to extend an attitude of openness towards cultural difference – only the host (if so, which host?) or also the migrant-as-stranger?

Conclusion

In this discussion, I have teased out the complex ways in which ‘difference’ is encountered and negotiated through ‘co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power’ (Yeoh and Willis, 2005:271). The Singaporean case study is unique in some aspects because of the legacy of colonialism that privileges ‘white’ cultures and the postcolonial project of building a nation out of migrants from China, India and other parts of the world together with the indigenous Malays. However, the aim of my discussion is to draw attention to the shifting boundaries of identity-making and the strategic interactions arising from relational situations. I further argue that migrants mix-and-match cultures

and imitate cultural norms selectively in order to sometimes fit in, and at other times, to differentiate themselves. At times they may use phenotype and simplified cultural codes presuming historical, cultural and moral similarities amongst diverse cultural groupings (Cohen, 2007) and mobilise these codes to explain difference. However, as this paper demonstrates, the meanings behind the labels are slippery and shift according to the context. By constructing sameness and difference, migrants inhabit a 'broad field of racialised meanings' (Nagel, 2001:389) that needs to be unpacked instead of taken for granted.

These politicised meanings of racial difference should merit a deeper reflection of claims to cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan capital demonstrated by the Singaporean transmigrants in this study is often premised upon essentialising racial/cultural/civilisational constructs framed around the superiority (or inferiority) of some cultures over others. They may be asserting their difference and negotiating it in a productive and affirmative way for themselves (Coney, 2002) but rather, what about for the 'Other'? These framings of cultural hegemony are antithetical to the ethos of a cosmopolitan project in which difference should be received with mutual acceptance (Dikec, 2002) and respect for one another's differences. The onus for this attitude of hospitality should not only be on the receiving society, rather it is also the responsibility of migrants to extend such an attitude towards the multiple 'hosts' represented in the receiving society. The empirical findings presented here on intersecting racial and nationality dynamics further demonstrate the limitations of using 'race' as the primary organising social category to advance cosmopolitanism. Saldanha's (2006) vision of a

cosmopolitanism starts from the proliferation of 'race' in celebration of racial differences. However, a cosmopolitan project is one that needs to take into account the multiple relationships between intersecting dimensions of identity (McDowell, 2008:1), such as 'race' and nationality as discussed in this paper, and equally, gender, sexuality, class and other social axes.

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