

Performing Transnational Citizenship and Projecting Counter-Knowledge for Decolonization

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Abstract

Since the migratory movement of people has increased due to various disasters, both natural and man-made, it is increasingly important to pay attention to the complex identity (trans)formation of transnational citizens, which is not simply classified according to their nationality, birthplace, race, and ethnicity (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). What stories are told by immigrants as transnational citizens whose identities are continuously shifting between the West/destination and the non-West/origin? This paper is based on interviews and participant observation conducted in Ottawa, Canada and elaborates on her/his-stories of those living in the Cambodian diaspora. What becomes clear from a discussion on their daily practices is how Cambodian residents in Canada negotiate their identities and perform their transnational citizenship; they are transnational citizens constantly transgressing national, cultural, and language borders. Applying the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” proposed by Fraser (1992), I suggest that such counterpublics form a new space that allows its inhabitants to go beyond the dichotomy of the West/destination and the non-West/origin. This study contributes to destabilizing the normative discourse sustaining essentialization and dichotomization and hindering diversity and inclusion.

Keywords: Cambodia, Canada, Citizenship, Diaspora

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Introduction

We are currently seeing and experiencing various borders emerging and merging through the transnational flows of merchandise and people under accelerated globalization. Focusing on the movement of people, those who suffer from political, economic, and social difficulties leave their home countries for new places. Both the United States of America and Canada played a key role in granting resettlement to those who arrived from Indochinese countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s (Haines, 1989). The long years of conflict inside the country led to the occurrence of the Cambodian diaspora (Um, 2007).

This paper focuses on Cambodian people living in Canada. Multiculturalism is its key characteristic, as indicated by the Government of Canada (2024): “In 1988, Canada was the first country in the world to enshrine its multiculturalism policy in legislation ...” (para. 2). While diversity among the people is promoted, it is essential to be aware of the existence of the following two—the majority and the minority. According to the provided definition, a person “... who is non-white in colour/race, regardless of place of birth” is considered a “visible minority” (Government of Canada, 2016, para. 3). It continues and states:

The visible minority group includes: Black, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, South Asian-East Indian (including Indian from India; Bangladeshi; Pakistani; East Indian from Guyana, Trinidad, East Africa; etc.), Southeast Asian (including Burmese; Cambodian; Laotian; Thai; Vietnamese; etc.) non-white West Asian, North African or Arab (including Egyptian; Libyan; Lebanese; etc.), non-white Latin American (including indigenous persons from Central and South America, etc.), person of mixed origin (with one parent in one of the visible minority groups listed above), other visible minority group. (Government of Canada, 2016, para. 3)

Bannerji (1995) pays attention to a dichotomy between the majority and the minority and points out its imbalance by exploring “[h]ow histories, cultures, ideologies of Europe constructed a ‘European = White self,’ in relation to whom the ‘others,’ now called ‘people of colour,’ ‘visible minorities,’ ‘immigrants,’ ‘third world people,’ are ‘different,’ ...” (p. 101). The dichotomy as such is a consequence of Orientalism, as Said (1978) points out:

For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, ‘we’ lived in ours. (pp. 43-44)

In this way, Said reveals the mechanism of Orientalism creating inclusion and exclusion as well as (re)producing and preserving the dualistic structure of West/East, us/them, and insider/outsider.

The migratory movement of people has increased due to various disasters, both natural and man-made, so it is increasingly important to take account of the complex identity (trans)formation of transnational citizens, which is not simply classified according to their nationality, birthplace, race, and ethnicity (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). What stories are told by immigrants as transnational citizens whose identities are continuously shifting between the West/destination and the non-West/origin? To examine the question, I apply the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” proposed by Fraser (1992). She indicates that the “subaltern counterpublics” are “... parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social

groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1992, p. 123). Hence, I consider that such counterpublics form a new space that allows its inhabitants to go beyond the binary of the West/destination and the non-West/origin, and those living in the Cambodian diaspora are situated in this new space.

Methodology

This paper draws upon my doctoral dissertation (Hara, 2012). A total of twenty-one people participated in this study, and I conducted interviews, ethnographic observation, and filming in Cambodia, Canada, and Japan. Here, I focus on three research participants: the Venerable Nanda, Aria, and Jadon living in Canada. The Venerable Nanda provides Buddhist services at a temple situated in Ottawa. He was born in Banteay Meanchey, Cambodia and is in his 30s. Aria and Jadon with Cambodian heritage are in their 20s. They reside in Ottawa and take an active part in teaching and performing Cambodian dance. Their activities include giving performances in events such as a large-scale festival of the Khmer New Year held annually in Ottawa and instructing students of the younger generation at a non-profit organization.

Name in Pseudonym	Occupation	Place of Residence
The Venerable Nanda	Buddhist monk	Ottawa, Canada
Aria	Cambodian dance performer/instructor	Ottawa, Canada
Jadon	Cambodian dance performer/instructor	Ottawa, Canada

Table 1: List of research participants.

In discussing their daily lives in Canada, the study participants point out some advantages of using digital technology. The first one is accessibility to information regarding the country of their residence. The Venerable Nanda mentions how he obtains information: “Mostly I check the Internet. I watch TV sometimes, maybe once a week. I sometimes get newspapers at a bus stop. And I read magazines sometimes, not regularly, once a month or twice a month.” Regarding the Internet, he remarks: “I often use Google. Google is easy to do search on.”

Jadon and Aria explain from which sources they get information of Canada, society, and culture(s) as follows:

Jadon: School, so a lot of books and stuff. ... It would be the TV, of course and books.

Aria: For the majority of our lives, it’s definitely to schools, to books. That’s how we learn most of everything we know but as the world became more digitized, more technology driven, Internet has come into play. Maybe it’s the majority form now for everything we know of.

Jadon: It’s an electronic version of books.

Aria: And it’s always available. We can always find again years from now, if you wanna look into something up to remember, five, ten years ago it’ll still be there. You’ll always find it.

Jadon: It’s a great library.

Thus, the research participants refer to not only the various media including books, newspapers, magazines, and television but also the Internet as an effective tool for searching and gaining the information they need.

The next advantage is that digital technology fosters communication across the national borders. The Venerable Nanda illustrates the usage of a digital camera in his daily life in Canada: “Mostly I like to take pictures of nature like the scenery, the forest, the riverside, and the green nature.” He then starts explaining how technologies are integrated in communication across the borders:

I send pictures to my friends in Cambodia sometimes. Especially in winter time when it snows, I take pictures of it and send and email them to my friends in Cambodia to tell them that here in Canada it's like this. (laugh)

In this way, his everyday practice entails a combination of the digital camera and the Internet as a way of communicating with those living in Cambodia.

Disseminating the Buddhist Teachings Across Both Physical and Cyberspace

The Venerable Nanda is engaged in offering Buddhist services to the Ottawa community. Daily services at the temple cover seven days a week and yearly services based on the lunar calendar include the Khmer New Year (a celebration held in April), *Bonn Phchum Ben* (a festival venerating the deceased such as the ancestors), *Bonn Visakha Puja* (a celebration worshiping Buddha and reminding oneself of the precepts), and so on. These events take place at the temple as well as an arena so that a large number of participants can be accommodated. The Venerable Nanda shows untiring zeal in the pursuit of his work:

I think what motivates us to provide Buddhist services for the Khmer community and also people who want to learn about Buddhism is that through our study of the Buddha's teachings, I think the Buddha's teachings has enough teaching, enough way to practice for peace and happiness in daily life. So if people understand and follow the Buddha's teachings, everything bad will not happen. The community will be peaceful, if people follow only the five precepts in Buddhism: no killing nor hurting each other; no stealing; no sexual misconduct; no telling a lie; and no drinking alcohol. These five precepts are enough to make the community to be a peaceful one, if people practice them. And these five rules are not impossible, if people learn to do them.

Grounded on the sense of mission illustrated above, the Venerable Nanda considers the diffusion of the Buddhist teachings in diverse spaces including cyberspace as important. Therefore, he takes the initiative in making full use of technologies on behalf of the missionary work:

Researcher (R): Who creates the website of the temple?

Ven. Nanda: It's me. I created and manage the website of the temple.

R: Why did you decide to open the website of the temple?

Ven. Nanda: The reason is because I think the website is a great way to convey, to spread the message of Buddhism and the activity of our organization to the world. Everywhere you can check, know it, and learn about it. I just updated the site last night.

R: Is the website bilingual—in English and Khmer?

Ven. Nanda: English and Khmer are mixed each other. Some sections are in English and some in Khmer.

R: You have added the Buddha's words and Khmer literature to the site.

Ven. Nanda: Yes. I have included the Buddha's words and Khmer literature on the website. And also, I have uploaded pictures and videos. Over here I placed links from other websites, useful websites so that people checking the site can access information easily.

R: How often do you update the website?

Ven. Nanda: I do not update the website often. Sometimes I leave it for about a few months. I update it every two or three months. But sometimes I do it every week just to check which link is broken and which is not.

In addition to the website created specifically for the temple, the Venerable Nanda currently takes charge of a Facebook page, a Twitter page, and his own blog supplying information of Buddhism as well as Cambodian culture(s) and also introducing poems by monks. Moreover, he produces videos capturing the events and makes them available on a YouTube channel he maintains. He describes the experience in filming and editing as follows:

R: Do you yourself do video recording or who does recording?

Ven. Nanda: When we celebrate ceremonies, we have someone who does video recording for us.

R: And who does editing?

Ven. Nanda: Most of them I edit. But one thing I cannot do is taking a picture because when the ceremony is in process, I have to sit. But sometimes when we have a chance, we take pictures. But when the ceremony is proceeding, we sit in front of all the people, so we cannot. (laugh)

R: Which editing software do you use?

Ven. Nanda: For editing, I use AVS Video Editor. But with Ustream, we can play it with Windows Media Video and QuickTime.

R: Do you enjoy editing films?

Ven. Nanda: Yes. I like editing films but it takes much time.

R: How many videos did you already edit and upload?

Ven. Nanda: I have just a few videos about ceremonies. And I uploaded some videos onto YouTube. But most videos on YouTube are available only in Khmer. It takes a lot of time to manage the website. The thing about the website is that it is only me maintaining and updating it. And there are some difficulties with the server. Sometimes it develops links in my website. I have to update them again and again.

Thus, while locating himself in Ottawa, his activity with digital technology is limitless.

Making the best use of the technological tools, social networking services in particular, the Venerable Nanda expresses his hope as follows:

R: So you intend to distribute the Buddhist teachings to not only Khmer people but also other people.

Ven. Nanda: We have to distribute the Buddha's teachings to people and we want to share our Khmer culture with the community and the Khmer generation who were born in Canada. When they want to know about the Khmer, they will know what Khmer has to do and what Khmer culture is.

In consequence of the devoted activities portrayed above, the broad and strong network is formed, and it renders services to the expansion of the temple, as the Venerable Nanda remarks:

R: How do you see the past, present and future in relation to the activities of your temple?

Ven. Nanda: ... We see the development of our organization. It's getting better and better. I think in the past it was good and now it's better. And I think it will be much better in the future. Our work has got support from people in the Cambodian communities—Cambodian people not only in Ottawa but some from Vancouver, too. Supports also come from Montréal, Toronto, Hamilton, and Sherbrooke—so many communities of Cambodia from everywhere. When they know we are new and want to build a temple, they support us.

Hence, it becomes obvious that inhabiting the “subaltern counterpublics,” the Venerable Nanda's practice with digital technology connects the physical space and the cyberspace beyond the borders and stimulates communication among those living in the Cambodian diaspora.

Teaching and Performing Cambodian Dance

Aria and Jadon are actively engaged in teaching and performing Cambodian dance in the Ottawa community. The two talk about how they came across Cambodian dance in their teens:

Jadon: We both started around 2000. My sister danced for Soma Selepak when she was ten or eleven, which was like fifteen years ago, a long time ago. She's been doing it and I always had an interest in it and dancing made me want to instruct, which made me want to learn even more.

Aria: Before I was in it, when I was a child, I used to see older generations do dances at Cambodian parties, and I always had an interest in it. When it came the opportunity, I learned about it and I joined myself. Something I always wanted to. And it felt good. After all, you know, the practices and the nerve-racking performances, after all of it I feel proud of it. It's probably the only part of me that really represents Cambodia, as I am very much a Canadian girl. (laugh)

Aria and Jadon then elucidate what made them determine to be instructors as follows:

Aria: ... We started teaching because people who used to teach us basically became too busy and retired themselves, so we didn't want it to end. So we took it in our hands. Jadon stepped at first and took care of it, and I came in and helped out.

Jadon: It was very hard jumping into the instruction side because what had happened is people from Cambodia had immigrated here; they came here and then, you know, it's a perfect way to learn traditional stuff from those who were there.

Aria: They are professional Cambodian dancers. They went to school of dance there. So we're getting it directly from professional dancers, which was a great opportunity first, so it was good but now we are at the point where we are not learning anything new; we have to refer to videos off of YouTube basically.

Jadon: Which is hard because again, every video comes with a slight alteration or slight editing.

Aria: Each performance is different in little ways.

Jadon: Which is great but it'd be also amazing for us to teach something that is authentic, something that has been passed down from family to family or from teachers to students. For us, we are more free-lancing it. Again, we were learning it in our own home and did the best as possibly as we could do with it, so it was definitely a huge challenge to step up and become an instructor.

In addition to the hard task involved in dance instruction as described above, Aria indicates some difficulties associated with acting as a teacher:

And it's definitely different as dancers because normally, when you are a dancer, your only real concern is just yourself making sure that you have your part done right and you trust that all your other counterparts are doing their parts as well. But as an instructor, we have to take care of everybody now. And it's definitely a really big challenge dealing with the people's abilities. Some are more skilled, others aren't, and learning to deal and work with everybody's differences is definitely a challenge. The time and effort is a very big challenge. Nonetheless, it's something, you know, we want to keep it going. That's why we took it and set it up. We went from just dancers to instructors.

Under the resolution to do their utmost as instructors, Aria and Jadon provide students with the opportunity to learn, practice, and perform various types of Cambodian dance:

R: How many dance styles do students learn every year?

Aria: There's classical.

Jadon: It's a ballet basically. It's a Cambodian ballet.

Aria: It's a very technical dance, slow motion. Every movement has a meaning. So that's more the classical side. And the clothing itself is just beautiful, lots of color, shine.

Jadon: It's very expensive and heavy. And it's very tedious to get on. It is about an hour process.

Aria: It's a long process to get dressed for performance of a classical dance. Then there's the folk dance, which usually represents, you know, different regions almost; there're like the mountainous people, there're the countryside people. There is a whole bunch of folk dance; it's more fast beat, higher tempos.

Jadon: They're more of fun, life-related types of dance. I find that there are two categories that we have—the classical dance that is performed more for royalties within the temples, within the Kingdom, and then you have the folk, which is more on the townspeople, people outside of that. So you have a great outlook of very high classical, traditional dance and you have the fun, laid-back lifestyle things.

Aria: I guess also the classical has more of a storytelling, historical type of meaning to it, whereas the folk dance is usually displaying things people just do, their lifestyle like the harvest thing showing how they harvest.

Jadon: With the folk dances, there is a lot of regular harvest type of dance but also there are a lot of flirting dances as well, whereas the guys are trying to get the girls, and the girls don't want them but the guys persuade the girls. So those are all little fun stuff that happens with it. ... I mean folk dance I find that it's basically taking anything that you have and turning it into a dance.

While teaching the diverse kinds of Cambodian dance with zeal, Jadon and Aria express a concern:

R: How many students are in one class?

Jadon: It ranges from year to year. It has been decreasing. People have been growing up, being busy with everything. So we are basically trying to focus on the younger generations, so we are talking about, you know, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen like early teens.

Aria: Early teens and we are trying to get the even younger generations in because like I said before, it's something I don't wanna see go away. I definitely want my kids to be a part of it, when I have kids. So in order to keep it going, we have to continue it because obviously, if you let it go, it's easily lost.

Jadon: Yeah, you destroy a part of yourself as well as where you come from.

Aria: ... I would say about five to six years ago, there were up to twenty to thirty, so it's like I said, the generations are getting older. They are away from early teens to teens to adults and they are losing interests. It's something that we don't want but it can't be helped all the times. It's not something we can force on anyone, either.

Nonetheless, the difficulties that have become apparent in the conversation do not daunt them. The strong will and passion spurs the two instructors on to an effort:

R: What messages do you want to convey through teaching Cambodian dance?

Jadon: For me, my main message is no matter the age remembering where you come from and remembering what you represent and your back history. I find that that's the best thing to do because you'll get respect from anyone, if you know where you came from. And I just want any generation and all generations to respect each other because they have at least one thing in common, which is, uh, traditional culture.

Aria: For me, basically the same thing. We are basically on the other side of the world from Cambodia where these dances are originated from, and being able to dance, being able to teach, showing we are your descendants, we are still very proud, I am very proud of our country still. I mean there are things that are sad about it but I think one of the things that I'm very proud of is teaching it. I'm gonna pass it down to someone. It'll keep going. We are here.

R: Is there any particular population or to whom are you addressing the message?

Jadon: It's mainly to everyone but the most important people we are trying to send our messages to will be ourselves and our family. I think that's more important for me. Do you agree?

Aria: Yeah, to our family and to our community. Not just Cambodian community but Ottawa community as well.

Jadon: Yes. It's true. I mean our families are our communities basically. We just want our community to grow stronger, to unite everyone together.

Aria: Basically, it's our contribution because I don't know much about other Cambodian dancers that we really know of that they can pass onto anyone else, so this is our form.

Jadon: I agree.

Jadon and Aria then elaborate on the significance of teaching and performing dance as a means to send the message illustrated above:

R: Why do you think the medium you chose, which is teaching and performing dance, is the best way to convey the message?

Jadon: Very good question. I think for us it's our best way to prevail the message because it's from a performer side of view, I think that people can talk about it, people can show you, people can also draw you in message. For myself and I'm sure Aria

agrees, we wanna do all of that but also we wanna perform it. Performing is one of the harder things to do but I find that for us it's the easiest way to send our message.

Aria: In the form of dance, like he said, you don't need words to express your feelings and to express the message you want to get out, you can see it in the motions and in the facial expressions.

Jadon: It's just for us a great creative way to express how we feel and also to tell the story as well.

Aria: Also, a really good way to challenge ourselves, you know, physically, mentally, and also building on our courage because definitely, I would say everyone individually is very shy but as a group, we perform together and we are different personality.

Jadon: I mean everybody can perform on stage. People can do jazz, people can do hip-hop, people can do whatever it is, acting. When doing Cambodian dancing, you don't need to be able to do any of that. It's just you on stage and expressing your feelings. So that's why it gets very nerve-racking on stage for us but when you throw us out there, we are fine. Most of us. Some of us. A couple of us. Just me. (laugh)

In this way, inhabiting the "subaltern counterpublics," the dance performers/instructors' practice shapes a new space detaching itself from the dichotomies of West/East, Canada/Cambodia, and insider/outsider and acknowledging the interplay of the diverse cultural components.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the cases of the three study participants living in Canada. The Venerable Nanda's practice employing digital technology connects the physical space and the cyberspace beyond the borders and activates communication among those living in the Cambodian diaspora. Aria and Jadon's performing and teaching practice creates an interactive space where the performers/instructors and the audiences/students coming from diverse cultural backgrounds meet and communicate with one another. It has become clear from their stories that they are transnational citizens inhabiting the "subaltern counterpublics" and moving here and there, back and forth. Cambodia/Canada, the West/non-West, and the origin/destination are complicatedly interwoven and coexist beyond the dualistic structure in their daily lives. Their border-crossing movement suggests a new way of projecting counter-knowledge and destabilizing the normative discourse sustaining essentialization and dichotomization and hindering diversity and inclusion.

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