Finding Home in Migration: Montagnard Refugees and Post-Migration Identity

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This essay examines post-migration identity of the Montagnard men who came to the United States as refugees. In particular, given the salience of home to identity, interview participants’ notions of home space are explored. Findings are discussed first in terms of emotional, relational, sociocultural and political significance of home spaces that were identified by the participants. Then, the articulations of home are discussed in terms of implications they have for the current post-migration theories of cross-cultural adaptation and diaspora. The Montagnard men’s experiences with and views of home shed light on applicability and limitations of the theories.

Keywords: Adaptation; Diaspora; Migrant Identity; Montagnard; Refugee
Some of them smile and tear up as they catch sight of their families in the welcoming party. Others look perplexed and fatigued. It is now five minutes to midnight. Without much drama, the group and the welcoming party swiftly walk toward the parking lot across from the terminal. No baggage to be claimed. Just the plastic bags they carried with them. What lies ahead for them in this new land? Will they come to see this place as their home? Place of belonging? (from Author’s fieldnotes, December 2, 2005)

I first met the Montagnards in fall 2004 as a volunteer tutor in an after school program. Later, through an introduction by a resettlement agency, I came to know Montagnard adults. I began to observe English as a second language (ESL) classes for newcomers and visited them at their apartments, sometimes by myself and sometimes with an interpreter who knew them well. Since I had never heard of this ethnic minority from Vietnam before my move to North Carolina, I became interested in learning more about them. Why did they become refugees? What was their migration like? And more importantly, what is their life like now? The more I got to know the Montagnards, the more I grew interested in their expression of identity and home because these ideas were often invoked in our conversations and they intertwined in their stories of resettlement.

The Montagnards are indigenous peoples in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. To understand the forces that caused them to become refugees, we must turn the clock back to the 1960s. When the United States became involved in the Vietnam War, they actively recruited and trained the Montagnards to fight along with them against the Viet Cong and North Vietnam. A series of large-scale battles which took place in the Central Highlands destroyed 85% of the Montagnard villages and killed over 200,000 Montagnards (Hickey, 1993; Montagnard Foundation, Inc., n.d.). When the war ended in 1975 with the victory of North Vietnam, the Vietnamese government began to persecute the Montagnards for assisting the U.S. troops and for being members of FULRO.1 According to the Montagnard Foundation, Inc., the persecution included a variety of forms of genocide: execution, torture, rape, confiscation of land, prohibition of religious practices and native languages, forced eviction from their farmlands, and exclusion from education.2 Consequently, the Montagnards began to flee the country for survival.

After many years of hiding in jungles and living in a refugee camp, the first group of the Montagnards who had fled Vietnam eventually resettled in North Carolina in 1986.3 Since then, North Carolina became the primary destination for the Montagnards. By 2000, the Montagnard population in North Carolina reached over 3,000 (Bailey, 2002). In 2001, the Montagnards in Vietnam staged a demonstration against the government’s forceful seizure of their ancestral land, economic discrimination, and religious oppression. The event resulted in imprisonment of many demonstrators (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.; “Vietnam’s ‘appalling’ persecution”, 2004), and a large number of Montagnards fled the country and eventually settled in North Carolina. Their population in the state had grown to roughly 5,000 by 2005, constituting the largest concentration of
Montagnards outside Vietnam (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Despite the fact that the Montagnards have lived in the United States for more than 20 years and that their population is growing, little academic literature is available about their immigration experiences. Moreover and perhaps more significantly, little intercultural communication research of immigrant identity has explored refugee experiences in general, except for a few recent works such as disempowering racialization of the “lost boys” of Sudan (McKinnon, 2008), African women refugees’ negotiation of dialectical tensions during cultural adaptation (Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, & Kudak, 2008), and Iraqi refugees’ narrative construction of diasporic identity (Witteborn, 2008). Implicit in these studies is the intimate relationship between identity and space of belonging. All immigrants face the question of identity and home, but experience with these concepts varies immensely depending on the political, economic, cultural and personal circumstances of immigration and post-migration lives. For starters, whether one immigrates voluntarily or involuntarily has significant implications for post-migration identity formation. When one is forced to flee one’s homeland and is thrown into a whole new environment, as today’s 16 million refugees worldwide are, where is their home? What constitutes their sense of home? What do their stories of home say about their identities? This essay explores these questions through a qualitative study with the Montagnards who came to the United States as refugees.

Home and Identity in Migration

The Importance of Home to Identity

I begin this essay with an assumption that “home” is inseparable from immigrant identity formation. While little attention has been given in intercultural communication studies to the concept of home in theorizing identity, the relationship between the two has been articulated elsewhere (Hoffman, 1999; hooks, 2009; Jones, 2007; Mathews, 2000; Morley & Robins, 1995; Pipher, 2002; Sarup, 1996). We live in a world where time-space configurations have changed dramatically due to technological development, and it may seem as though identity is no longer place-bound. Yet, as wars, unequal global economy, and ecological devastations continue to move people transnationally, there is a corresponding strong need for finding home space and cultural belonging. Jones (2007) called this growing need for home “one of the most significant results of transformations in the experience of contemporary space” (p. 53). Even with (or maybe because of) all the movements and border-crossing, home space is still not only relevant but is salient to identity formation, and various writers have addressed this link. For example, writing about the Jewish diaspora, Hoffman (1999) argued that Jews have preserved their identity by nurturing a powerful notion of home which has become less geographic but spiritual. Pipher (2002), in her widely read book about refugee resettlement, The Middle of Everywhere, even declared that place is identity because identity is shaped through a shared space,
a community, a home that serves as “a global positioning system” (p. 22). Similarly, reflecting on her relationship to her home state, hooks (2009) wrote about how much her sense and sensibility, her being, her writing and vision have been shaped by the culture of her home. Thus, as Al-Ali and Koser (2002) succinctly put it, “it is not only national, cultural and social belongings, but also a sense of self, of one’s ‘identity,’ which corresponds to various conceptualizations of home” (p. 7). How we view, construct, and experience home inform and help to shape us: who we were, who we are, and who we will be.

But what exactly is “home”? It may be physically or territorially marked (e.g., neighborhood, town, region, or nation), but what constitutes its salience is more symbolic: that is, emotional, relational, cultural, and political significances. Emotionally, it invokes our belonging, desire, memory and a firm point of return, comfort, safety, and intense emotional relationships (Ben-Yoseph, 2005; Hoffman, 1999; Sarup, 1996; Silverstone, 1994). Home, thus, “comprises an emotional investment in a particular material space” (Jones, 2007, p. 55). It is also deeply relational. At one level, this refers to the social and emotional relationships we have with others in the space as well as those who are outside the space (Silverstone, 1994). Places cease to be places without people (Pipher, 2002), and, in turn, relationships are based on a place (Sarup, 1996). Home space, then, consists of human relationships shaped through interactions and activities. At another level, it refers to the everyday struggle of making home in an increasingly mobile, fragmented, thus “placeness” world (Silverstone, 1994), or in our relation to what is not home—the outside that is frightening, dangerous, unknown, and alien (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002). Home is also sociocultural. Home space contains cultural meanings and practices important to individual and communal identities. It is at home, whether family, community, or otherwise, where cultural identity is maintained through daily performance of traditions, customs, and rituals. In the context of migration, a strong sense of belonging to a specific place comes with the need to reinvent cultural traditions and to adhere to cultural ideas, practices, and values (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Hegde, 2002). Finally, home is political. Home as a desirable space of belonging, safety, stability, and comfort is not always the case. Home can also be the site of conflict, abuse, and struggle (Jones, 2007), exploitation and dispute (Silverstone, 1994), and where “life is simultaneously safe and threatened, affirmed and violated” as individuals dwell in larger social and political spaces (Hart & Ben-Yoseph, 2005, p. 2). Home, in short, consists of emotional, relational, sociocultural, and political spheres, and it is through the working of these spheres that identity is formed.

Approaches to Post-Migration Identity

While the literature above suggests the salience of the notion of home to identity, especially in transnational migration, the relationship between the two has not been teased out in intercultural communication studies. Rather, post-migration identity has been predominantly studied through the lens of cross-cultural adaptation. According to this model, migrants move through a predictable, upward path in their
adaptation to their new environment (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Kim, 1989, 1995, 2001). In this spiral yet linear upward progression, acquiring the new comes with the cost of losing the old (Kim, 1995); migrants acculturate to the characteristics of the host culture, while at the same time deculturate from their old ways. Correspondingly, a key to successful adaptation is maximizing their communication with the people of the host society, while minimizing their intraethnic communication (Kim, 1989, 2001, 2005). In fact, interpersonal communication with the people of the host society is so crucial that it is sometimes a sole indicator of successful adaptation (Kim, 2001). In contrast, ethnic communication, while initially helpful, eventually hinders one’s adaptation (Kim, 2005; Kim, Izumi, & McKay-Semmler, 2008). Migrants, therefore, must initiate their host society communication in order to achieve successful adaptation (Kim, 2001, 2005).

The model champions the essential role that communication plays in the process of cultural adaptation and helps to explain and prescribe communicative practices and relational choices that enhance or hinder assimilation to the host society. However, the model’s assumptions about individual autonomy and more or less linear acculturation to the host society (and corresponding deculturation from their old home) suggest that immigrants, regardless of their backgrounds and interpellated differences, adopt their host society as their new and only home which pivots their identity development. While this may be the case for some immigrants, it fails to ruminate multiplicity, contradictions, and power dynamics that constitute immigrant subject-making.

More recent intercultural communication studies began to examine immigrants as diasporic subjects (Drzewiecka, 2002; Halualani, 2008; Hegde, 1998; Mendoza, 2002; Witteborn, 2008), an approach I argue, while not addressing home and identity specifically, more inclusively grapples with the complexity of immigrant identity and its relationship to the concept of home. In contrast to the linear cross-cultural adaptation model, diasporic theorizing rejects the assumption that physically leaving homeland results in deculturation from the homeland. Instead, it links immigrant identity to both their place of settlement and their homeland (Clifford, 1997; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Lavie & Swedenberg, 1996). According to Vertovec (1997), the transnationality of diaspora is pronounced in three interrelated ways: double consciousness, transnational relationships, and cultural (re)production. Diasporas hold a sense of double consciousness as part of a transnational community that shares the same route and root and as part of their host country (Clifford, 1997; Gilroy, 1993; Töloolya, 1996). The consciousness is derived from paradoxical duality, multilocality, and potentially active engagement with politics springing from diasporas’ precarious conditions (Drzewiecka, 2002; Mendoza, 2002). This consciousness is both embodied in and maintained through transnational relationships (e.g., social, cultural, economic, and political) with their homeland and/or other transnational groups of the same origin. This belonging beyond time and space, in turn, allows them to cope with their post-migration lives (Clifford, 1997), but diasporas may be hailed into the belonging by their respective nation-states (Drzewiecka, 2002). Finally, diasporic consciousness and relationships are articulated
through cultural productions; diasporas (re)create and enact cultural meanings, images, and practices at their transplanted places (Agnew, 2005; Halualani, 2008; Hegde, 2002; Vertovec, 1997).

This study builds on the diasporic theorizing of immigrant identity to the extent that I approach immigrant identity as a dynamic process that involves simultaneous and often contradictory relationships and negotiations with multiple home spaces (i.e., physical and symbolic homeland, host nation-state, transnational ethnic community). I will, however, address more specifically how home spaces are salient, given the literature that suggests emotional, relational, sociocultural, and political significance of home. Moreover, rather than ruling out the cross-cultural adaptation approach altogether, I will discuss ways in which the Montagnards’ articulations of home shed light on the current theories of immigrant identity.

Methodology

Interviews and Fieldwork

Informal, conversational face-to-face interviews (Kvale, 1996) served as the primary method for gaining insights into the Montagnards’ post-migration experiences. The 12 men who participated in the study included recent immigrants and long-term residents in Guilford County, North Carolina; at the time of the interviews (fall 2005 to spring 2006), seven of them had been in the United States for 1 to 2 years, and the remaining five participants had lived in the United States for 8 to 13 years. Their ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s. Four of the seven newcomers had part-time jobs and the remaining three had full-time jobs. All of the recent immigrants worked either at restaurants or factories. The long-term residents included one college student, two case workers at a refugee settlement agency, one recent community college graduate, and a factory worker. The interviews took place at various places of the interviewees’ choices, including their homes, a public library, a park, and workplaces. In the interviews, which lasted for 1 to 2 hours, I asked them to tell me their stories before and after coming to the United States with more focus on the latter. I asked them to discuss what place they see as their home and why.

The long-term residents were fluent in conversational English, hence required no interpreter. However, the interviews with the recent immigrants were conducted with the help from a Montagnard interpreter who is fluent in two Montagnard languages, Jarai and Rhade (the languages of the interviewees), as well as Vietnamese and English. Most of the newcomers knew the interpreter because he worked with their resettlement agency. In addition to the actual interviews, the interpreter aided me in the construction of interview questions and member-checking of the generated themes during the analysis. While language translation always involves the problem of establishing meaning equivalency (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), the interpreter’s familiarity with the languages, culture, and interviewees allowed me to attend to the social constructionist concern that knowledge construction largely depends on one’s social and cultural standpoint (Temple & Young, 2004).
I also interviewed two ESL teachers of a language program and two sponsors. I asked them to tell me their stories of how and why they are involved, what their experiences have been, and what they think the Montagnards’ settlement experiences have been. The interviews took place at restaurants and classrooms. The ESL teachers were both veteran teachers: one has taught for 5 years, and the other has taught for 18 years. The two sponsors have assisted refugees for more than a decade through their churches. According to them, several churches in town, including theirs, adopted helping refugees as one of their community service focuses and sponsor refugees every year or every other year. Sponsors assist refugees in a variety of ways, including paying rent for several months, driving them to important appointments, helping them open a bank account, and, as cultural brokers, assisting their socialization in general.

In addition to the interviews, observing ESL classes for new arrivals and visiting with refugee adults at their apartments allowed me to see part of their daily lives and to get to know them personally. The ESL classes, held on workday mornings, teach many basic communicative and functional skills such as asking directions, answering phones, counting money, and writing a check and familiarize newly arrived refugees with public services available to them (e.g., police, fire department, paramedic). Though I intended to be an observer in the classroom, I frequently acted as a volunteer tutor when there were not enough volunteers.

My weekly visit to an apartment complex (fall 2005 to spring 2006) where about 20 newcomers (in the United States 2 years or less) lived allowed me to establish personal relationships with them. The residents were all adults who either came alone or came with one or two family members, and all but two were men. Five to six individuals normally occupy a two-bedroom apartment to share the rent, utility costs, and food. After accompanying a resettlement agency employee to the apartment complex once, I started to visit with them weekly. I would stop by unannounced as they do with each other, and I would immediately get invited to their living rooms. We spent time conversing about daily matters and families, teaching languages to each other, practicing driving, or sometimes going to a grocery store or a city library. Though our conversations were elementary due to my lack of knowledge of their languages and their limited knowledge of English, I was nonetheless able to learn about their backgrounds, families, current jobs, and their daily experiences through a combination of fragmental words, dictionaries, and visuals.

**Analysis**

Since I am concerned mainly with the notion of home as viewed and experienced by the Montagnards, my primary texts were the transcribed interviews with them, while interviews with the sponsors and teachers and my fieldnotes served as supplemental texts. I adopted a phenomenological approach to examine their resettlement experience. Phenomenology views the reality as constructed in the relationship between the perceived and the perceiving subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and
describes the world as it appears to the person who is experiencing it (Moran, 2000). Thus, a phenomenological analysis aims to explicate experiences from subjects’ perspectives and elucidate their meanings as fully as possible (Kvale, 1996). This involved several steps: Read through a transcribed text once without making any notations to understand the text as a whole; read the same text noting words and phrases that represent ideas and feelings central to the participants’ sense of “home”; and read the ideas and feelings to see whether and how they relate to the sense of self and their adaptation to their post-immigration life. After repeating these steps for all transcripts, I reviewed all transcripts for emergent themes across participants. Then, with the help of a Montagnard interpreter, I checked with several interviewees whether the themes reflected their ideas and experiences. Finally, I clustered themes into a total structure of lived experience of the participants. The information I gathered from the sponsors, the teachers, and through my participant observations, as well as the literature on immigration, home, and identities were used to further understand the stated experiences.

Home Is . . . Home Ain’t . . .

The concept of home, Hegde (1998) wrote, is salient to migrant consciousness. Like the Asian immigrant women in Hegde’s study, the question of home and belonging was highly pertinent to the Montagnard men. They discussed home as primarily existing in one or more of three different spaces: the Montagnard community in Vietnam, the ethnic community in the United States, and the U.S. mainstream society. The majority or 10 of the 12 participants felt that both the Montagnard community in Vietnam and the Montagnard immigrant community were their homes, though some identified more with one over the other. As discussed below, these homes were valorized based on emotional, relational, sociocultural and political reasons (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Hart & Ben-Yoseph, 2005; Hoffman, 1999; Jones, 2007; Pipher, 2002; Silverstone, 1994).

Montagnard Community in Vietnam as Home: Emotional, Relational, and Political Significance

“I’m here, but I’m not really here. My mind is with my people in Vietnam,” said a 28-year-old man. His words reflected the most common emotionally and relationally invoked (Jones, 2007; Pipher, 2002; Silverstone, 1994) articulation of home. The men were very clear that it is not the country that they missed but “my people” or “the Central Highlands”—their indigenous land. Not surprisingly, most of the newcomers felt strong emotional attachment to their community in Vietnam mainly due to the fact that they still had family members there. Fleeing the country requires much physical strength and involves the danger of getting caught by the police. As a result, most Montagnard men usually immigrate alone or with one or two other male family members and later sponsor their female family members and children to join them. The situation of a 24-year-old man is typical. He came with his father a year ago, and
had left his wife and a 3-year-old daughter in Vietnam. “I call my family yesterday, and my daughter cry. I really miss her. . . . I want to go home. There is no place like home.” He expressed his yearning for “back home” and family on many occasions when I saw him. This yearning was recurrent among the men I saw during my numerous visits to their apartments.

Emotional ties to the indigenous community existed also among some who left Vietnam many years ago. For example, a 29-year-old man who has lived in the United States for 11 years with his immediate family said that his “real home” is still in Vietnam because “It’s where I’m from. I’m Montagnard. You can’t change that no matter how long you’re here. . . . I don’t feel I’m becoming an American. Not really. It’s like you are one tree, and America is another tree.” While his response on the surface seemed to be simply about his ethnic root, further conversations reflected over and again his emotional yearning for the communal quality of relationship that existed in the Montagnard community in Vietnam. He felt that the Montagnards in the United States lost that quality:

In the Montagnard culture back home, they get along very good, but when they get here, they change. The way they act, very different. I don’t know how to say the right way, but it’s not like back home. They are busy making their living here.

In addition to the emotional and relational attachment, the indigenous community was politically important for a couple of men; they felt strong commitment to the Montagnard liberation in Vietnam. The two men in their early 40s who came to the United States 2 years ago were avid supporters of the Montagnard Foundation, an organization whose goal is to advance human and civil rights for the Montagnards in Vietnam. For them, Vietnam as home simultaneously embodied struggle (Jones, 2007) and belonging. It was their home and ancestral land to be reclaimed, which only could be achieved through gaining the international support the Montagnard Foundation seeks. They participated in two trips to Washington, DC: One was to peacefully demonstrate in front of the Vietnamese embassy for the government’s human rights violation and the other was to seek help from the United Nations and the U.S. government to improve the situation for the Montagnards in Vietnam. During our interviews as well as my visits to their apartments, they spoke of their desire to fight for “the Montagnard people back home.” For instance, when I visited one of them, he and his friends were watching their favorite movie, Braveheart. When William Wallace (played by Mel Gibson) cried “freedom!” right before his execution, they shouted with him. At the last battle scene, one of the men smiled at me and said, “It’s good. They get freedom!” Although they did not comprehend details, they knew the story and strongly identified with the Scots. When the movie ended, one of them turned to me and said, “I want take back my country. Like them. My freedom.” Others nodded in agreement.

While these men viewed fighting for Montagnard justice as an essential part of their selfhood and claimed their legitimate involvement with their homeland (Drzewiecka, 2002), other participants—particularly those who identified more with their immigrant community or with the U.S. society—did not share this view.
Many were hesitant about expressing such commitment because they believed that it would not make any difference and feared that their actions could have dire ramifications on their families in Vietnam. A man, who had recently paid a visit to his family in Vietnam, explained that he was closely monitored by the police during his visit and was asked whether he knew Kok Ksor, president of the Montagnard Foundation. Although he did, he maintained that he did not so that he and his family would be left alone. Similar fears surfaced during my study. Two men were initially hesitant about audio-taping their interviews because they were afraid that the Vietnamese government might get hold of the tapes and something they said might trigger them to harass their families in Vietnam. These fears illustrate that leaving Vietnam does not mean that the Montagnards are free from the politics of the place.

A couple of men were even critical of those who were politically involved in the Montagnard affairs and felt that the focus should be on their lives. For example, one respondent articulated this point as follows:

I don’t know why they are like that. Why can’t they move on? Yes, we want to bring freedom to all Montagnard people, but when does it happen? People who go on demonstrations and meetings are really stuck. They don’t want to move on.

He and another man felt that the Montagnards should focus on getting out of Vietnam and making a new home in the United States rather than engaging in a futile fight to reclaim their home in Vietnam. Hence, the indigenous community in the Central Highlands of Vietnam was seen as an emotional and relational home by most participants, but their political relationship with the community was more complex due to varying degrees of fear of persecution and conflicting beliefs about liberation and the best future for their community.

Montagnard Community in the United States as Home: Emotional, Relational, and Sociocultural Significance

As noted earlier, most of the men I interviewed found home in the Montagnard immigrant community as well as in the ethnic community in Vietnam. The immigrant community served as home away from home and played a significant role in their lives. It provided them with emotional and relational needs through daily socialization and mutual support. All of them lived close to other Montagnards and found comfort in speaking their native tongues. Their interactions outside work were largely, if not entirely, with other Montagnards. Friends, strangers, old-timers, and newcomers, they all hang out during their free time as I often witnessed in their apartments and at a volleyball court.

The relational significance of the ethnic community was also articulated through the labels such as “family,” “brothers,” and “one body” that they used to describe other Montagnards and accompanying support they provide to each other. For
example, a 23-year-old man who immigrated 8 years ago once introduced a couple to me as his cousins when we ran into them at a restaurant. He explained later: “Not by blood, but we met right before we came [to the United States], and now we call each other cousins.” The notions commonly associated with family such as unquestioned trust and support are extended to friends and even to strangers. This was articulated in an example of funerals that a 28-year-old man gave me: “Montagnards get together for funerals regardless of kinship and tribal affiliation. They just come. Some bring food, some bring money, some bring other things to the family. It doesn’t matter. We help each other. We still do this here.” While one man I quoted earlier complained that many Montagnards who immigrated to the United States have changed and lost their communalism, others felt that it is still preserved after immigration.

In addition to the emotional and relational support it provides, the immigrant community was socioculturally important (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Hegde, 2002) to the participants: The community allowed them to enact their cultural identity through their mundane activities such as daily interactions with other Montagnards, speaking their native languages, and going to Montagnard churches. The importance of the churches came up often during my interviews and fieldwork. Much like any American church, the Montagnard churches hold weekly services, provide emotional and practical support to their members, and bring members together for special events such as Easter and Christmas. But church is more than a faith community for the Montagnards: It embodies freedom. As a 37-year-old man said, “In Vietnam, we had to use private houses for praying, and we had to change places often so the police don’t find us practicing Christianity. In this country, we don’t have to worry about that anymore.” Moreover, the practice of faith serves as an anchor, a stabilizer in their often stressful daily lives. It is, in one man’s words, “something we know well, something that hold us together.” In their vastly different new environment, the practice of faith allows them continuity between the life they left behind and the life they lead now. In short, the Montagnard community in the United States served as a home away from home, a “global positioning system” (Pipher, 2002, p. 22) that grounded them emotionally, relationally, and culturally in their transplantation.

What is Not Home: Lack of Emotional and Relational Connections

So far, the Montagnard communities in Vietnam and in the United States are discussed in terms of what they offered to the participants. Home, however, is also shaped through what is not home (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002) and the kind of relationships we have with people who are outside the space (Silverstone, 1994). If emotional and relational ties with people are salient to the notion of home as they were to the Montagnard men, a space that is not conducive to nurturing such ties fails to be home. For all but two men in this study, the space outside their ethnic community, which consisted of generalized U.S. Americans, lacked such ties.

The difficulty of forming personal relationships with U.S. Americans stemmed from perceived cultural differences and limited opportunities. Culturally, they most often mentioned that the life here is too busy and stressful, and interactions and
relationships are time-regulated. “Everyone here is busy. They don’t have time for anything else. What do they say? Time is money. Right?” said a 58-year-old man. The commoditized use of time was felt through everyday events like store transactions and appointments. For instance, customers are expected to swiftly move through the checkout line, and failing to do so, as the newcomer Montagnard men often did, sometimes prompted resentment and frustration from the cashiers and customers behind them. Meeting someone, even friends, requires that you make an appointment. Dropping by unannounced, a common, embraced practice within their ethnic community, is rare and is unwelcomed outside the community. Related to the issue of time is the perceived incongruence between verbalized friendliness and actions. A sponsor who also teaches an ESL class to new immigrants, including the Montagnards, shared one of the most frequent questions she receives from her students: “My students ask me ‘what’s wrong with Americans? They want to be friends, but they don’t visit. They say they want to get to know me, but they don’t want to actually come see me.’” The felt relational distance, therefore, does not necessarily result from a drastic negative event. Everyday small actions and interactions (or lack of them) the locals take for granted as “normal,” can collectively contribute to estrangement that newcomers feel between themselves and people of their new “home.”

More significantly, however, many participants lacked opportunities and resources to get to know U.S. Americans. Some participants felt that their limited knowledge of English contributed to their alienation from the locals, thus making it their problem. However, as adults who are expected to earn a living, their opportunity to learn English was limited. ESL classes were offered at no charge or for a very small fee, but many refugees could not attend the classes on a regular basis because they lack means of transportation, they have to work when the classes were offered, or often a combination of both. Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, they simply did not share the same space with U.S. Americans. New refugees were housed in the same low-income apartment complexes. At their jobs, they often worked with other recent immigrants. A 25-year-old man who had resettled 2 years ago complained about the lack of opportunities to speak to U.S. Americans: “At work, my boss is American, and I see other Americans. But you don’t talk when you work. And where I live, everybody is Montagnard or refugees from other countries.” His interactions with U.S. Americans, as it is for so many other refugees, were more or less limited to his ESL teachers, the staff at the resettlement agencies, and his boss at work. These interactions are nonsocial and are less likely to develop into personal relationships.

The men also talked about limited opportunities to interact with U.S. Americans in terms of general indifference toward and ignorance about them. They agreed that, outside the few organizations (e.g., the resettlement agency and the churches that directly work with the Montagnard refugees), most U.S. Americans are unfamiliar with the Montagnards and do not seem to care to get to know them. One man’s comment, “American people don’t really know us. Most Americans still think we are Mexicans. If they know that we are from Vietnam, they think that we are Vietnamese,” resonated with how other participants felt. The frequency of being
mistaken for a Mexican was mentioned by a few others, and they did not feel right about the assumption not only because they are not Mexicans, but also because “Americans don’t seem to like Mexicans” and hence being thought or called Mexican was unflattering. They felt that this mistaken association contributed to the U.S. Americans’ indifference toward them. Thus, as much as it was the comfort out of familiarity and sense of belonging to the traditionally communal culture that drove the participants to find home among their fellow Montagnards, sociocultural, economic and spatial limitations in their daily lives also shaped this “choice” and regulated their home-making.

The U.S. Society as Home: Creating New Belonging

While most of the participants felt attached to their indigenous community and immigrant community as their homes, a couple of men found their home in the mainstream U.S. society. For these men, relational and cultural belonging was central to the notion of home as it was to other participants, but it was something that needs to be created anew upon migration. The words by a 52-year-old man illustrate this response: “You are here now. You have to change your life to fit into the new environment.” He first came to the United States alone and was joined by his wife and two children 5 years later. He explained that, being teenagers already, it was initially difficult for his children to adapt to their new lives in the United States, but he persistently told them that this is their new home. He said, “I tried to remind them that we have everything here, and kids there, they have nothing to eat. So, to keep the spirit and learn and learn. I taught them to concentrate. Focus.” He decided that it was important for his children to immerse themselves in the new culture if they were to turn this new place into their home. For him, successful immersion required making right choices. Going to an American church instead of a Montagnard church was one of the “right” choices. He gave the following example to illustrate his detachment from Montagnard churches:

Montagnard churches practice traditions. For example, Christmas is a big deal. People start preparing for it three months earlier. People work a few hours, and the rest of the time they work toward the celebration. Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. Montagnard churches encourage that, so children stop concentrating on school work. This tradition needs to change. When you go to a new place, you need to change the old ways to survive in the new place.

Similarly, a man in his early 50s, who came to the United States 13 years ago, made a conscious choice to live outside his ethnic community. Like the first father, his responsibility to raise children successfully was the main reason why he made a choice to be “not really around other Montagnards” and actively sought to integrate his family into the mainstream community:

Refugee children need to join in some programs so that they can integrate with American children. You never see refugee kids being part of sports programs. It’s expensive to put children into those programs. When I let my daughter join the
soccer team, I paid for everything. But refugee parents don’t see that paying for such programs is a priority.

He proudly told me that his daughter became a fast runner and was recruited to go to a college on an athletic scholarship. His daughter’s success represented his family’s belonging to the mainstream U.S. society. The two sponsors I interviewed supported this father’s approach. One sponsor, for example, commented:

When you talk about adaptation, there are very few Montagnards I know that are well adapted to this society. What’s interesting with the Montagnards is that they typically join Montagnard churches, because it’s easier. But a few parents I know, they made conscious decisions not to have their children spend much time with other Montagnards. They really pushed them. When parents make conscious effort to immerse their children into the society, they will succeed. The ones who stay in their own group, they get nowhere.

These comments by the fathers and the sponsors sharply contrast with the views expressed by other men who saw their immigrant community as their home. The Montagnard church and the ethnic socialization that were seen by other men as central to their home-making are perceived here as a predicament to transforming the adopted culture into home.

In addition to his dissociation from the Montagnard community, this father did not particularly wish to pass on his native tongue: “If my grandchildren want to learn Rhade, that’s good, but it’s their choice.” In contrast, those who primarily live among other Montagnards viewed speaking Montagnard languages as a daily necessity and everyday performance of home-making, and thus stressed the importance of passing on the languages to the future generations. At Montagnard churches, for example, services were conducted in their native tongues. Upon learning that I am a teacher, one man suggested that schools with many Montagnard children create Montagnard language classes so they could preserve their native languages.

If the two men were able to find themselves on the assimilation path, it was not propelled by their individual efforts alone. Just as home of those who live in the ethnic community is shaped significantly through lack of social networks with U.S. Americans, the two fathers’ home-making was impacted by existence of such networks and the cultural and social resources that made the networks accessible to them. Most notably, they both worked with middle-class U.S. Americans on a daily basis as co-workers. This was made possible mainly because of their educated background and high English proficiency—something that most newcomers lacked. Because they worked with U.S. Americans, they acquired knowledge about how to navigate their social world. Moreover, both immigrated before big waves of refugee resettlement when church sponsors and resettlement agencies were able to assist them better and offered opportunities to interact with the locals. These cultural and social resources helped to pave a way for them to situate themselves and their families among the local middle-class U.S. Americans and thus on the path toward assimilation.
Studying Immigrant Identity: Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Diaspora, and Beyond

Since home and identity intimately reflect and inform each other (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; hooks, 2009; Jones, 2007; Mathews, 2000; Pipher, 2002), stories of home are useful in understanding immigrant identity. The stories, of course, are not meant to represent all Montagnard experiences. In addition to the relatively small size of participants, this study lacks women's voices that are crucial to the understanding of identity in migration that is a gendered, classed and raced experience (Hegde, 1998; Semlak et al., 2008). Moreover, this study is limited to adults. Nevertheless, the Montagnard men's articulations of home shed light on the current approaches to immigrant identity—cross-cultural adaptation and diaspora—and what insights they suggest for future research of immigrant identity.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation: Applicability and Problems of Individual Autonomy

The cross-cultural adaptation model suggests the necessity of minimizing intraethnic communication and maximizing host culture communication for successful adaptation (Kim, 1989, 2001, 2005; Kim et al., 2008). This communicative and relational choice may be important for successful assimilation to the host society. In fact, the two fathers who found the U.S. society to be their home followed the premise of the model rather closely. They made a conscious choice to stay away from the Montagnard community and to immerse themselves and their families into the mainstream way of life in the United States. The life in Vietnam was only invoked to facilitate making home out of their new country. For these men, their immigrant community was still “stuck in the old life,” reminding them what they need to unlearn. They came to embrace new values and a new way of life (Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1987; Gibson, 2001; Keel & Drew, 2004), and the sponsors in the study found this to be a wise choice.

As shown in the previous section, however, what differentiated these two men from the rest of the participants was their access to social capital. From the point of view of cross-cultural adaptation, all immigrants go through more or less similar adaptation processes, but each migrant must actively communicate with the locals if they want to increase host communication competence (Kim, 2001, 2005). This premise is consistent with the dominant U.S. ideology of individualism and autonomy (Gergen, 1999). Echoing this premise, one of the sponsors in the study stressed that “Refugees have gone through so much that they do not need you to hold their hands. They will tell you if they need help.” Such an assumption, however, falls short in considering the fact that migrants begin their post-migration life from unequal conditions due to their class, gender, racial and other systems of inequality, and thus communication opportunities may not be available to everyone. The cultural-adaptation lens works well for those who have the privilege of regularly communicating with middle-class U.S. Americans through whom they can build social capital for assimilation, but not for those who lack such opportunities.
Indeed, most of the Montagnards in the study faced a great deal of structural limitations that prevented them from having host interpersonal communication. The “choices” of home were not solely based on individual preferences but were significantly shaped by the availability of interactions and relationships with U.S. Americans. The majority of the Montagnard men lacked cultural capital (e.g., education and English proficiency) that allowed them to build social capital or social networks conducive to integration into the mainstream U.S. society. For those without the resources, integration and assimilation may not be an option.7 “Bridging” social capital, or the social networks of reciprocity and trust between different ethnic, racial and cultural groups, is important for building a community across diversity (Putnam, 2007), but, as Arneil (2006) argued, accumulation of social capital is political to the extent that economic and cultural forces at work deny some individuals and groups opportunities for creating networks or utilizing resources. The differential accesses to resources and lack of “bridging” social capital reveals a perpetual contradiction that marginalized immigrants (due to such unequal systems as race, gender, and class) face in the United States: the expectation of assimilation on the one hand and the structural limitations that prevent assimilation on the other.

The individual autonomy premise of cross-cultural adaptation is also at odds with the communal orientation of the Montagnards. Originating from farming villages, the traditional Montagnard culture is communally structured and regulated (Hickey, 1993). After immigration, this orientation was still evident in the Montagnard men’s stories of home: from the use of family labels to the emotional and material support exchanged daily and in time of difficulties. This contrasts the highly autonomous and time-regulated relationships that pervade the United States. Hence, in both theorizing and aiding resettlement of the Montagnards and other communally oriented refugees, the tensions that may arise from such difference must be considered. Because intercultural communication involves many dialectical tensions (Martin & Nakayama, 1999), it is important that studies of immigrant identity ask questions such as what tensions exist, how immigrants deal with them, and how the host society may help them to deal with the tensions without demanding them to strip away what is fundamental to their being.

Immigrants and Refugees as Diasporas and Problem of “Transgressability”

As it is already clear from the preceding discussion of home, all but two participants felt emotional, relational, sociocultural and/or political attachment to the indigenous community and the immigrant community. Their articulations of home reflected diasporic subjectivity of transnationality, multilocal consciousness, and reproduction of culture (Clifford, 1997; Gilroy, 1993; Halualani, 2008; Vertovec, 1997). Their resettlement made the United States their physical home but did not result in corresponding abandonment of their old home. For some men, their emotional and relational home continued to exist in Vietnam because it is where their loved ones were and where their way of life existed. For a couple of men, freedom and justice for their people in Vietnam remained salient, and they became part of the transnational
emancipation effort. In the contexts of migration, exile, and displacement, the desire for home space comes with the need to reproduce cultural meanings and practices (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002), and participation in their immigrant community allowed them to materialize the need. The community served as the home space where they reciprocated emotional and social support and maintained their cultural self through everyday communication and reproduction of cultural practices and communal relationships (Agnew, 2005; Vertovec, 1997). These mundane performances played a vital role in their home-making and survival in the alien land, which in turn informed their identity.

The prevalence of the homeland and the immigrant community to the lives of the Montagnards suggests that, despite the predominance of the cross-cultural adaptation framework, communication scholars must pay more serious attention to diasporic formation of immigrant identities. Homeland and ethnic community are not the past that immigrants leave behind but continue to play active roles in shaping their identity by providing them with emotional, relational, sociocultural and political anchoring. Particularly in the cases of refugees, the need to maintain diasporic identity may be intense and enduring due to their forced resettlement and difficulty, if not impossibility, of returning to their homeland. Diasporic identification with homeland and people of their homeland allows them to live in transplantation (Clifford, 1997) and sustains one’s identity (Hoffman, 1999). Contrary to what cross-cultural adaptation theory claims, then, intraethnic communication may be imperative for immigrant adaptation.

While the diasporic approach grapples with the complexity of immigrant identity, it is not without a trap. The Montagnard articulations of home suggest that we need to be careful about prematurely theorizing “transgressability” of diasporas. Because diasporas by definition maintain multilocal consciousness and relationships, they are often assumed to be beyond structural constraints when in fact complex power dynamics permeates diasporas’ relationships with the homeland and with the hostland (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002) and not all transnational migrants can freely navigate between spaces literally and symbolically (Ong, 1999, 2003; Shome, 2003). Related to the assumed transgressability of diasporas is the increasingly popular postmodern idea that home these days exists in journeys between places (Ahmed, 1999) or the idea that home can be chosen from a global “cultural supermarket” (Mathews, 2000). Both metaphors for home are predicated on the assumption that migrants are equally mobile and may assume memberships to any cultures they desire. If not contextualize, then, diasporic theorizing and postmodern conception of home may unwittingly reproduce the ideology of autonomy of identity- and home-making—the very assumption of the cross-cultural adaptation model that diasporic theorizing problematizes.

We may uncritically consider Montagnard refugees (or any other refugees) liberatory by virtue of their transnational migration and settlement and their everyday performances of carving out spaces that are alternative, if not oppositional, to the norms of the United States. However, their homeland still exerts much power in their subject-making by way of restricting their returns and policing their
emotional, relational and cultural home of their indigenous community. Once resettled, too, their identity construction is subjected to their host nation’s ideologies about immigration and racial history. For disadvantaged newcomers, transnational migration is not about flexibly choosing where to live and work but about being subjected to a variety of constraints and marginalization (Ong, 2003). They do not begin with the privileges of travel and mobility. As the Montagnard men experienced, refugees enter into and often perpetually inhabit spaces with less resources.

Moreover, they are subjected to preexisting racialization that is spatially inscribed. In the South where Latina/os are often constructed as undesirable foreigners (Calafell, 2004), being subsumed into this group was deemed by the Montagnard men as disadvantageous to their relation to “Americans,” and, by extension, their home-making. As Shome (2003) argued, then, spatial relations must be taken seriously as “active components in the unequal and heterogeneous production and distribution of identities, politics, and actions” (p. 43). Even within an ethnic group, some have more access than others to the global “cultural supermarket” where identity and home can be chosen and can be used to transgress boundaries. Others are not so lucky. Toward a more critical understanding of immigrant identity, therefore, we must, on the one hand, recognize the diasporic formation of immigrant identity and resilience of immigrants and refugees. On the other hand, we must also recognize varying degrees of structural forces and dominant ideologies that inform the politics of identity, home, and belonging.

Notes

[1] The United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO) is a resistance organization established in 1965 to fight for the Dega people’s sovereignty and independence.

[2] The Montagnard Foundation, Inc. is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization fighting for the human rights for the Montagnard people and preservation of the indigenous culture. The colonization and oppression that the Montagnards have experienced are sometimes compared to those of the Native Americans (see Bailey, 2002; Montagnard Foundation, Inc., n.d.).

[3] North Carolina became the first and the most popular destination for the Montagnards due to the active support provided by former Green Berets who fought along with the Montagnards during the Vietnam War. The first group included about 200 FULRO fighters, mostly men. After 11 years of hiding in the jungles of Vietnam, they reached a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia and eventually settled in North Carolina (Bailey, 2002; Rosser-Hogan, 1990).

[4] I kept the original words used by the Montagnard men, even when they are grammatically incorrect.

[5] Through these men, and later through sponsors and websites, I learned that there are largely two groups initiated by Montagnards in the United States that work toward freedom for the Montagnards in Vietnam, and the two groups have very different visions for achieving this common goal. The Montagnard Foundation wants to end the oppression by the Communist government by appealing to the United Nations and the U.S. Government. The other organization, the Montagnard Human Rights Organization (n.d.), primarily focuses on bringing Montagnards out of Vietnam and into the United States. The Montagnard community is split depending on which organization they support.
The majority of the Montagnards are Christians. Christianity was first introduced to the Montagnards in the Central Highlands in the mid-19th century by French Catholic missionaries and then by the American Protestant missionaries in the early part of the 20th century (Bailey, 2002).

Availability of resources was more or less a matter of class (i.e., education) in this study. However, it is certainly also gendered and raced experiences. Since participants in the study were all men, future studies need to give attention to Montagnard women's experiences.

References


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