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Jane S. Ku
University of Windsor

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Postcolonial incorporation of the different Other

Jane Ku, University of Windsor

Abstract

This article approaches the study of incorporation of ‘visible minority’ immigrants in Peterborough, Canada by insisting on framing their experiences in the legacies of colonialism, racial and ethnic formations, and processes that spill over nation-bound discourses. It attempts to understand the postcolonial condition from the perspective of migrants inserting themselves in the West. Using a postcolonial lens on difference, immigrant narratives about experience of becoming settled in Canada are analysed as constructions of ethnic postcolonial resistance and accommodation. The article reveals how immigrants negotiate with being stigmatized as different. The agency of migrants is emphasized while paying attention to the discursive limits in the new space where they try to re-establish themselves. It explores how immigrants read into the inconsistencies of the Canadian multicultural story as their own experiences contradict it. Their challenge and counter-narratives are part of the reconstruction of migrant postcolonial history that allows them to normalize their presence in Canada and to suture their history to the Canadian one. Collective experiences and knowledge among immigrants in the local space are important in supporting their challenge to neo-liberal multicultural and exclusive national discourses.

Keywords

difference

postcolonial condition

migrant experience and history

immigrant narratives

neo-liberal multiculturalism

racism

Introduction

I am sure it's not a legend; right? You've got so many immigrants here who come as engineers, lawyers or whatever but they are still working at grocery stores and looking for Canadian experience. (Raza)

An immigrant in Peterborough, a small city in the province of Ontario in Canada, seems at once convinced and unsure of the truthfulness of popular discourse of the under-employed overseas-trained professionals who languish in jobs as cab drivers, pizza delivery personnel, shelf-stockers, dishwashers and so on. The tentativeness of Raza's narration of immigrant experience points to his lack of confidence in his knowledge about immigrant realities, since it contradicts an unspoken assumption – that Canada is multicultural and accepting of differences. This is belied by the economic and lived conditions among immigrants. Immigrants are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, earn less on average (Gilmore and Le Petit 2007; Statistics Canada 2004, 2006, 2009) and are more likely to spend more than 30 per cent of their incomes on shelter (Statistics Canada 2009). This contradictory reality faced by immigrants of colour

is also part of the larger ‘ambivalence’, ‘a mix of enthusiasm and trepidation’, that Canada expresses towards non-white subjects from growing economies whose foreign capital it desires (Park 2010: 337). Immigrants hold out hope that their adjustment difficulties will be temporary, but the failure to become fully employed has been a major source of frustration, even despair (Sakamoto et al. 2009).

This article explores how immigrants read into the inconsistencies of the Canadian multicultural story, as their own experiences are contradictory. This challenges neo-liberal multiculturalism as they navigate around being constructed as different Other, and explain how their challenge and counter-narratives are part of the reconstruction of migrant postcolonial history that allows them to normalize their presence in Canada. Racialized immigrant difference is conceptualized as postcolonial alterity, the Otherness that underpins the construction of the superiority of western Self (Bhabha 1994; Gandhi 1998; Said 1979; Spivak 1999). Postcolonial theory has been criticized as addressing itself mainly to the privileged metropolitan centre and being produced by intellectuals far removed from everyday experience (Gandhi 1998: 56–58), yet there is no shortage of effort in explicating the positionality and agency of the anti-/postcolonial (Bhabha 1994; Gandhi 1998; Spivak 1999). These theorizations allow us to understand the postcolonial condition from the perspective of migrants inserting themselves in the West and to analyse their narratives as constructions of ethnic postcolonial resistance and accommodation.

The immigrant narratives presented here are derived from interviews and focus groups with immigrants in Peterborough, a small city about 120 kilometres north-east of Toronto, the most populous and diverse city in Canada. Only 2.7% of the population in

Peterborough were visible minorities, with a total immigrant population of 9.4% in 2006 (Statistics Canada 2006). In contrast, the visible minority population was over 40% in Toronto, with 21% in Ontario. Peterborough is thus a unique multicultural space where immigrants of colour have very little to fall back on in terms of their group experience with the majority group due to the relative scarcity of immigrants.

This project was undertaken to collect immigrant stories about how they become Canadian or how they conceptualize becoming settled or integrated into Canadian society. The research question was: How do immigrants understand themselves to be integrated into Canadian society through their experiences in the family, the labour market and their community in everyday Peterborough? To conceptualize newcomers' settlement realities in all their complexities requires us to place immigrants' own narratives at the centre of analysis. This allows us to see how they are regulated by the social processes and the choices that they make. Their individual circumstances are explored to materialize the specificities and how they are simultaneously Canadian, ethnic and of the world. Documenting the diverse strategies and meanings immigrants make of their lives emphasizes newcomers as social agents navigating institutional and discursive regulation.

Borrowing from the transnational/postcolonial feminist framework (e.g. Bannerji 2000; Brah 1996; Chow 1993; Grewal 1994; Ong 1996; Razack 2000) allows us to account for the ways in which race, class, gender, age, countries of origin and other systems of hierarchy shape the experiences of newcomers to Canada. Materializing immigrant realities is important in this framework in exploring the gaps and inconsistencies between immigrant lived realities and the popular representations of their

lives. Thus, immigrant narratives of settlement are also understood as the struggle over determining who is a Canadian and what constitutes difference. What discourses bind the immigrant to the normative citizen even as these discourses distinguish immigrants as alien? How do immigrant narratives cohere and counter these discourses? Finally, but most importantly, how do immigrant lived realities inform and shape the interpretive repertoire of meaning that allows immigrants to interrupt these regulative forces?

The New Canadians Centre (the only immigrant settlement service agency in Peterborough) was the main place for recruitment, and all but one participant was either a current or past service user. Race, gender, cultural background or years of being in Canada were not used to locate participants; anyone who defined himself or herself as an immigrant was asked to participate through flyers and posters placed at the New Canadians Centre and e-mailed to clients. Ethical approval through the University of Windsor was obtained. Interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed. An initial focus group was conducted with service providers and other resource people who understand immigrant experience in order to check and confirm the direction of the research. Two focus groups were conducted with immigrant women who responded to the invitation. These were followed up with interviews with immigrants. The sample and gender breakdown were limited by the responses we received. Participants were also asked to refer other immigrants. Participants were offered \$20 token compensation, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured only for interview participants (this assurance was not possible for focus groups). However, anonymity remains a concern for the researcher since this is a small sample drawn mostly from a small service organization in a small city. Thus, a composite picture of the group is given here; few

specific details associated with each individual participant are given, in order to retain the vagueness of each individual participant's identity. Most of the information here was obtained through two focus groups and ten individual interviews with immigrants for a total participant pool of ten women and four men (three of the interview participants also took part in the focus group). Length of stay in Canada ranged from two months to ten years. The participants came from the following countries: Japan, India, Cuba, Columbia, Costa Rica, Hungary, Mexico, Pakistan and Zambia. All were struggling to establish themselves in society. The limitations of the study include the exclusion of immigrants who do not seek out government-sponsored services targeted at new immigrants.

The postcolonial Other

(Im)migrant narratives of difference are manifestations of the legacy of the 'epistemic violence' of the colonial encounter (Spivak 1995) – whereby postcolonial sense of self cannot be derived from one's history, but from and in reference to the privileged western one that locates them as Others to the western Self. Ambivalence towards the West marks anti-colonial struggles, since resistance can neither be imagined outside of western history nor fully authentic (Yegenoglu 1998). By the same token, postcolonials are easily dismissed for their lack of native authenticity and converse westernization (Chow 1993; Trinh 1989). Yet peoples from developing countries are often denigrated for clinging to their 'backward' cultures. Entering western multicultural spaces, postcolonial migrants are Others from another space and of another time, essentially outside of western history and development and rendered precarious outsiders. Therefore, they are always 'subaltern', of inferior rank; their alterity is assured. Indeed, racialized minorities in

Canada are presumed to have a history elsewhere regardless of being in Canada for multiple generations (Shadd 1994).

In the postcolonial cosmopolitan moment, this particular alterity is well illustrated by immobile immigrants who are yet to establish a history in Canada; they are unlike the ‘flexible citizens’ described by Ong (1999). On the one hand, we can no longer think of multicultural reality as nation-bound (Karim 2006; Turner 2008); immigrants are not only encouraged to express difference within the nation state but to maintain ties beyond the local. On the other, they are doing so at a time when they have hardly been able to naturalize and bind their presence within Canada or narrate or excavate their made-in-Canada history. In the case of Chinese Canadians, the ‘Chinese railway worker’ (a figure of the past to be overcome) (Lee 1999) has scarcely been entrenched in our national imaginary as a critique of racist national development and history, and we find ourselves turning our attention to embed the figure of the immigrant professional whose attachment to elsewhere (or at least to foreign capital) is the reason he is welcomed to the country (Park 2010). Yet it is the latter model immigrant (Arat-Koc 1999; McLaren and Dyck 2004; Razack 1999a, 1999b; Thobani 2000a, 2000b) who has currency to counter anti-immigrant sentiments. The tension between the nationalist paradigm and the outward-looking subject classifies the model minority and manages class cleavages in global capitalism (Lee 1999: 250), but also regulates migrants through different spatial scales (national and transnational). This tension underlies the impossibility of the racialized immigrant’s becoming the universal cosmopolitan. Being cosmopolitan requires one to not only be effective in combining the universal and the particular and able to move across multiple identities and affinities, but it is also rooted in local time and space

(Kroes 2011: 20–21). The postcolonial cosmopolitan is not naturally rooted in the West or the present. Thus, the ‘cosmopolitan’ ethnic, like the Chinese railway worker, is a stock figure of alterity through which the immigrant can be understood and encountered, and is undeniably alien to the national polity. Neither the history of the oppressed ethnic of the Canadian past nor cosmopolitanism is readily adoptable by diverse newcomers. Ethnic struggle is thus not nation-bound or located only in present time-space (Li 2007: 23–35).

In Canada, managing difference involves educating citizens to become the ‘multicultural Self’ that is increasingly about becoming ‘strategic cosmopolitans’ who are ‘motivated not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts’ (Mitchell 2003: 388). Superficial differences are good for the economy if they are not conflict-generating but rather easily managed (Arat-Koc 2010; Calhoun 2008; Melamed 2006; Rouse 1995; Spear 1993). Race (or gender) operates as an ‘absent presence’ (Wade 2010) in neo-liberal multicultural societies. Difference is at once fetishized and highly visible, yet simultaneously denied as real (Mooers 2005). Fetishization of difference is the abstraction of concrete experience of gender, class and other relations while simultaneously investing these differences with exaggerated meaning in market terms. Difference as Other is made invisible while being simultaneously exposed as important to contemporary consumption culture (Mooers 2005: 44–47). Moreover, multicultural logic remains firmly entrenched in the preservation of the western liberal Self against ‘backward Third World’ immigrant and ethnic Other; this is well demonstrated in cases of misrecognition and misrepresentation

of ethnics and intersections of race and gender in a postcolonial world (Haque 2010; Jiwani 2006; Park 2010; Razack 2007). Postcolonial migrants face a paradoxical construction of their difference as simultaneously stigmatized as ‘backward’ or incompatible and desirable as commodity/labour/capital, and second, as hyper-visible yet invisible and inconsequential.

When difference is visible, it is either valorized or stigmatized. Differences are celebrated and incorporated when they are special differences that are containable (e.g. Bascara 2006; Chow 1993; Khan 2001; Ku 2003, 2009; Spivak 1999; Trinh 1989). To be ‘special’ is to be uniquely different. Spivak (1999) identifies this subject of anointed difference as the ‘native informant’. The native informant is celebrated and accepted only because his or her difference is domesticated, and that difference is the special skill or knowledge required in cultural (and economic) transactions in the society. Native informants are then ethnics who are able to inhabit their difference somewhat comfortably and perhaps achieve a degree of material success; their difference possesses ‘surplus value’ (Chow 1993: 30). Yet they still ‘exist as abjects, along the fluid line of demarcation, undecidedly both inside and outside, precariously inerasable yet vulnerable’ (Chow 2002: 148). They are not just outside of Canada, they are beyond western development. By deconstructing the postcolonial identification process (Hall 1996a, 1996b), we can begin to explore not just available identification choices, but how an immigrant of colour chooses among the options, inhabits an identity, and performs or subverts it.

Between cosmopolitanism and ethnic particularity

For many immigrants, their difference does not possess enough surplus value to allow them to commodify or trade their difference to accumulate capital, financial or social resources in order to successfully integrate into the society. Many ‘experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment’ (Ahmad 1995:16). Moreover, the very narrative of overcoming one’s ethnic and immigrant alienness reconfirms one’s subalternity and Otherness. Yet immigrants have to subscribe to this narrative of becoming to consolidate themselves. As immigrants strive to achieve ‘strategic cosmopolitanism’ against the ‘backward’ and inward-looking romanticized oppressed ethnic, an ambivalence between parochialism and cosmopolitanism also frames their narratives of how they attempt to integrate into Canadian society. The following is an example of Raza attempting to suture his history with the Canadian one by aspiring to become the strategic cosmopolitan. He provides a narrative account of his life beginning as an awkward teenage immigrant who navigated with difficulty the cultural differences between his ethnic/religious background and mainstream culture, and ending up today as a cultural connoisseur who has travelled and lived all across Canada in order to become truly Canadian. He felt compelled to move from Toronto, away from his family and large concentration of visible minority population to smaller places like Peterborough or Thunder Bay, and to other provinces such as Quebec and British Columbia, living with Mexican Canadians, French Canadians and mainstream white Canadians, as well as racialized ethnic minorities in larger metropolitan areas to naturalize his presence in different parts of Canada. This effort gave him the confidence to criticize other ‘Canadians’ for their parochialism, sparing neither Quebecois nor Anglo-Canadians:

I can say I am more Canadian after experiences in Vancouver and Quebec, and living with the French Canadian, and Mexican families. I feel more French Canadian than English Canadian because at work I've heard people saying these Quebecois are idiots, they do not know anything and they want to separate. Do you know the reason why they want to separate? Do you know that they [the Quebecois] call you idiots at times as well? They complain about immigrants because they come here, and they stick to their own culture. If you come here, you have to adopt the culture; that is right, but that is not the best mentality. ... That is their attitude and you see it; at times it even comes out at official levels, this town or village¹ in Quebec. ... Some people have this attitude and a narrow mentality; if you see things from the other side. You can see where things come from. Of course they have their point too but they have not seen your personal spectrum from another perspective and I am glad that I have seen the other perspective; *I am more Canadian than you are*. I do not say that aloud very often but I feel that. I think it is good; it is important to me that kind of effort from everyone, not only immigrants but from people that are born in Canada to know who is around it. (Raza, original emphasis)

Yet his cosmopolitan confidence is precarious. Raza sees evidence of his Otherness in the lack of effort from mainstream Canadians to see the 'other side'. If cosmopolitanism was the yardstick for measuring Canadianness, Raza would surely be more 'Canadian' than 'Canadians'. Raza takes up Canadian values but gives them a different meaning and in turn is able to mock 'Canadians' with his interpretation. If not for his uncertainty and

lack of confidence throughout the interview, this attempt at cosmopolitanism can be read unproblematically as Bhabha's (1994) mimicry.

Anna's dependence on her white Canadian spouse for a social network gave her access to 'friends' from 'a mixed community' and allowed her not to be 'stuck in an ethnic group', but nonetheless she experienced discomfort:

I think it's kind of vague but I like to be in a good relationship that I have something to talk about like something in common like sports or hobbies [...] For example, last weekend was my husband's birthday. A whole bunch of his friends [...] came over from Toronto. They are nice people but they are not my friends and then we have nothing in common. (Anna)

Ruby echoes a similar ambivalence when criticizing ethnic ghettoization in larger cities:

Sometimes I don't know why immigrants settle in places like Mississauga or Toronto; it might be the fact that at least they feel like a community. I don't have that feeling here. If I didn't have my husband who is very supportive, I would feel like a fish out of water. (Ruby)

Masof has a similar critique of a friend who lived in Toronto, where her ethno-specific socializing left her unable to speak English. All the participants noted the importance of immigrant friends they met at the Centre.

These immigrants construct relationships with 'Canadians' as a way out of Otherness. Socializing with people of one's cultural group does not help build their

cosmopolitanism. Yet Canadianness is out of their reach. Their Otherness remains highly consequential in their attempt to overcome their ethnic particularity.

Manoeuvres of difference

Immigrant attempts to erase or celebrate their difference could be considered a reaffirmation of neo-liberal multicultural production of postcolonial ethnic Other, but also a practice of resistance and of citizenship (Veronis 2006). Regardless of whether they celebrate their difference or distance themselves from it, it is the exaggerated visibility that marks their negotiation. The feeling of being different follows immigrants perhaps more so in Peterborough than in larger cities because there are so few immigrants and visible minorities in the area. They easily stand out either through their appearance or accent, but consistent with their positive attitudes, many avoid seeing this experience in negative terms:

I feel different because I have an accent. But when I was working they used to make fun of me but in a positive way. Like you have a cute accent or what's that funny word you just said, [or you are cute] because of what you said... but no. I know I am but that doesn't bother me and I try not to think about it. (Loren)

Some of the participants try to show that their difference is not a bad difference but rather a *positive* one:

[People see me as different]. Not in a bad way, in a different way. For example, in the way I dress. In the beginning, I used to dress different. I like to dress always nice. I like to wear make-up, so it is different from ladies in Canada. They don't

care about make-up, or go with running shoes, or with sandals, but I care a lot about it. I felt different when I talked, because of course, my accent. It made me feel different. Now, I am probably more comfortable here, even with my accent. I know everybody here has different accents, so if I am one more, who cares? I am improving in my English and hopefully I know I will never have a perfect pronunciation, but I know I will have enough English to be able to communicate with everybody. So in that way, I felt different. Not less, not better, but different. And something that I always tried, since the beginning, I always tried to show everybody that I was a well-educated person. Sometimes people think that because I don't have English, enough English, probably I am not well-educated person, but I have to show that I know about everything, and I know about mathematics, geography, history, philosophy, language, communications, grammar, everything, science, biology, chemistry, physics, you know. And in our culture, we have the same education as in any country, which is very important. Very important for me to show that we are educated, not people without anything. (Masof)

Ruby, however, is not so sure it is always positive to maintain or wear her difference so openly:

The children kind of get curious [when I wear my traditional ethnic clothes] and ask where are you from? And all those questions. So that kind of open doors for me to expose children to different cultures. So it's good. Whereas in some areas, they kind of look down and they don't want to talk to you, they don't even want

to look at you. So in both circumstances I come back and reflect on it: should I really keep my clothing or ways or should I get rid of it and try to fully mingle with the Canadians? (Ruby)

Not only are women here struggling over the choice of celebration or rejection, they are also compensating for the fact of their difference. Masof, despite her positive take, feels compelled to present herself as knowledgeable and to counter the notion that she and all immigrants are ‘people without anything’. Indeed she feels she has to be an ‘ambassador’ for her country:

[My husband’s] son [...] loves my country [X], which is something important. He always speaks good of my country, which is something good. Because you know [X] is not well-known. It has a lot of problems with drugs, with guerrillas, with narcotics, and he knows my country is not only that. It has a lot of things, beautiful things. It has coffee, good people, good exports, good business with Canada, even. So it is known for many things. For me, it is very important that he knows my country for good reasons and not only for bad reasons. [...] He talks about [X] with his friends, and now his friends and the community that we know here, his friends and everybody knows [X] in a good way, not just in a bad way, which is good. So I am an ambassador from my country here, and it’s good. I have to be very positive and I have to be a good ambassador for my country.

(Masof)

The hyper-vigilance over one's own difference is seen in Anna's sense of being scrutinized, under surveillance and judged. Anna seems fairly at ease with her new surroundings but in 'a small town like Peterborough [where] everybody knows everybody', she has the feeling of being 'watched' and is a bit suspicious of what seems to be good will shown by polite strangers or neighbours:

Like on the street or my neighbour. If I was walking on the street like people would say hi, how are you and they don't know about me. It's nice but I sometimes think it's fake. But it's nice of course. (Anna)

For Anna, the lack of anonymity is an issue; she stands out in a small city where many of the residents may know each other. Even though she is not doing anything wrong or has anything to feel guilty about, she worries about what she does outside getting back to her in-laws or just having everybody know her business. Similarly, Raza is a little wary:

It is nice here but still at the end of the day there is that idea at the back of your head, at the back of everybody's head, it does not matter how nice they are. Maybe who is really wise won't think about it at all but I am sure at the back of everyone's head there is that thought of that is a brown guy, and he is from a different place, maybe I should not hang out [with him], ...something like that. (Raza)

These are not always unsubstantiated doubts that immigrants carry in their heads. Mistrust of 'nice' strangers is demonstrated in the following quote in which a more

extended exchange with a stranger turns into a more revealing conversation that highlights ambiguous attitudes towards immigrants.

There might be some people who might not like the idea of immigrants, who might kind of give you the looks or the way they talk to you. You have to be kind of cautious with them. You're not able to really talk with them freely, or cracking jokes with them or anything of that sort. [...] Some people, it's quite okay. They actually like the idea of immigrants. The other day while I was working, there was a gentleman who came and asked me, 'how long have you been here?' I said four years and he said, 'yeah, we like immigrants; we want immigrants to come over here so that you can contribute towards the taxes. [...] And then he said, 'There are a lot of people here on social assistance and we want a lot of tax money'. I got a little bit bugged. (Ruby)

Anna notes that other people often remark to her on being in an interracial relationship with an interracial child. Thus, while Canadians are generally welcoming, she is also reminded that she is the undifferentiated Other – all Asians are Chinese to everybody else, even if she is not from China. In fact, her sense of Otherness is reinforced by friendly gestures that begin from recognizing and highlighting her difference:

I feel they are welcoming starting with the immigration office at the airport. And people they will ask me like where I was from. If I told them I was staying here, they would say welcome. I don't know if they are being nice. Or they are just like that. [...] My husband took my son to the park and he met an older woman

and she was chatting with them and she is like one of my neighbours, and she adopted from China too. [...] They are just assuming. That kind of thing but not really anything bad. (Anna)

Like Anna's difference, which is 'not really anything bad', other women like Belinda and Loren acknowledge that they benefited from commodifying their difference. But for the most part the contradictory reality of the difference remains. When Monica, who was generally optimistic about her difference, was asked whether she thought her accent was a good difference too, she replied, 'Depends. [laugh] You want to look for a job sometimes'. Aside from seeking out 'Canadian' people to overcome his difference and gaining English fluency, Raza relies on popular media to fill in what he sees as gaps in his cultural knowledge about Canada:

I used to watch 'Friends' in Vancouver to pick up more words, slangs and things. I did not know what was 'putting green' in golf... (Raza)

Failing to erase their difference, sometimes the participants choose to celebrate it instead, in the same way that the native informant is celebrated for his or her special skill and knowledge. However, in these narratives, their attempt to celebrate ethnic difference has not challenged their Otherness, and they continue to feel a need to compensate for their difference in their everyday encounters.

The only discrimination is job discrimination: erasure of race and gender

Since difference is also denied as real or consequential, immigrants have difficulty recognizing these power relations in our society. Although for the most part the participants did not report any overt attempt to discriminate against them, work is the one arena where immigrants find an opening to question whether it is their difference or discrimination that produces their difficult labour market experience. If the newcomer's major preoccupation is to overcome the handicap of being an immigrant from a 'lesser' country through proving his or her cosmopolitanism and productiveness in the new society, then barriers that arise in this matter would be jarring and would be noted. As such, the participants had more to say about discrimination when it comes to their employment experience. This naming of racism and discrimination is, however, uncertain and ambiguous.

The propensity and ability of the racialized subject to name and interpret his or her experience as racism depends greatly on his or her group's history of resisting racism (Essed 1991). In other words, marginalized groups have a specific set of shared knowledge about their racism that is specific to their context (location, history, relationship with mainstream society, etc.). When racialized immigrants encounter discrimination, they test their experience against this knowledge (Ku 2005). However, without a strong and robust knowledge of group experience in a place like Peterborough it is difficult for immigrants to name their experience. Moreover, the entrenchment of a multicultural narrative that explains the employment barrier faced by immigrants as bureaucratic remnants of past racism prevents immigrants from fully exploring whether racism has anything to do with their difficulties. However, immigrant activism has been able to entrench the narrative of labour market exclusion of overseas-trained

professionals as a problem in Canadian society. This experience is usually noted as an exclusion from the labour market and a difficult process of re-entry rather than a straightforward, blatant case of 'we don't want you here'. Masof, one of the most optimistic participants, says, 'I have a good experience in all the ways. The only thing that I find difficult is about work'. Both men and women note labour exclusion without necessarily being conscious of it as racism.

When my husband was looking for a job, he felt some discrimination; he has good qualifications and experience. You need a friend as a connection to get a job, to know Canadian people to get into big jobs. My husband tried to start a company but when he went to knock on the doors at different companies, they asked him who you are? Where are you from? They were rude and not open-minded. (Patty)

In Toronto, there are people who are lawyers and here have to be taxi drivers.

That puts the person down, because Canada does not recognize the university or college degree. You have to go back to school and re-graduate, and you have to finance the studies to be graduated here. This is the negative part in Canada. [...]

I think it happens to everyone at least for a short time when you are new in Canada. (Jorgez)

Note that Jorgez interprets his alienation not as discrimination but as a difficulty experienced because of newness in Canada; he has been here the longest – ten years – and he came because he was offered a job here. Moreover, rejection of overseas credentials is the source of the problem, not racism per se. Although immigrants do share

a 'general knowledge' (Essed 1991) about the exclusion and marginalization of immigrants from the labour market, they are unable to articulate this as racial discrimination since Canada is a multicultural and tolerant society. Discrimination is accidental; it is not really discrimination when this is a natural part of settling into the country. Furthermore, racism happens to someone else:

She was a librarian, lived in Canada and worked in a library. She was not able to go up the steps - that's how you say? So, she could not go higher and higher, she was stuck. And when she asked her boss why is that, and the boss told her she should go and be a settlement worker instead – because she would be able to do that. But the lady got really mad, like offended by this. Like, not everybody, new Canadian, should be a settlement worker. (Ileana)

I do not think there is discrimination. Sometimes at work when they say something; it's not about me. I do not know if there is a job and there are two people applying for it, it would be given to the Canadian or not. I do not know. Probably there is discrimination but I do not feel it. I have a friend; he said I do not permit some friends of mine to say things about immigrants. I asked why and he replied that sometimes Canadians think that immigrants will come and take their jobs. The job I took is hard and nobody likes to do it; it's a dirty job. At the beginning I worked in a farm too with the Mexicans, picking vegetables in the field and cleaning them; it is hard and I did not see any Canadians there. I don't feel discrimination but some Canadians think in that way... For any race there are good people or bad people and sometimes immigrants hear something bad or

wrong that Canadians put them through, because we are human and we can make mistake. (Noni)

Like Noni, Anna sees racism as a ‘few bad apples’ syndrome.

I think in Canada people are trying to be equal; they think racism and discriminating someone is supposed to be bad but some people still don’t like immigrants and you can’t stop it. So I am lucky not to encounter any. (Anna)

These speakers understand racism as individual prejudice rather than a systemic or ideological phenomenon. Yet poor economic outcomes for immigrants challenge their interpretation (see also Li 2003; Pendakur and Pendakur 2011; Satzewich and Liodakis 2007). Regardless of how one defines such exclusion, claims of racism and other forms of discrimination can easily be dismissed in an ideological context that is more prone to the denial of its existence (Henry and Tator 1994, 2006). The difficulty of seeing how such organizing processes work also has to do with the fact that colour, gender or class do not neatly coincide with formations of privilege and stigma (Arat-Koc 2010; Melamed 2006). In their place, the visibility of successful model immigrants facilitates and supports a neo-liberal multicultural discourse where race, gender and class processes are seen as non-issues; only one’s aspirations and hard work count.

Perhaps immigrant refusal to name racism is due to both the power of the narrative of a multicultural and tolerant Canada and of immigrant desire for this to be true. Emancipation from one’s culturally handicapped past and individual success at

overcoming structural barriers are an important part of the multicultural story. The immigrant simply finding himself or herself in the marginal labour sector is not enough to warrant naming his or her experience as discrimination, racial or otherwise. Immigrant Otherness can also be expressed as the lack of ‘Canadian experience’.

When I started looking for a part-time job, I was very tense because they ask for Canadian experience everywhere [...] First they ask for Canadian experience, second they are not accommodating [...] (Raza)

Manifestations of racism can thus look very ‘democratic’ (Henry and Tator 1994) or can occur in extremely subtle ways that newcomers cannot be expected to recognize or be able to label. This is particularly true for immigrants in small towns, who only meet other immigrants in an immigrant settlement agency where they seek services; the newcomers they befriend have no more knowledge about Canada than they do.

Nagging doubts continue to surface about whether Canada is as tolerant as immigrants would prefer to think. It is very frustrating when there is no straightforward or clear path that one can take even when one is willing to try. Ruby’s search for the steps necessary to become a teacher was a circuitous and difficult experience leading her to question the tolerance of our society:

I used to work at an office [...] come over here and maybe start teaching. [...] I tried for about two years to find out through the registrar what to do about my masters [...] to get some advice. [...] Give me straightforward answers. What are you looking for? So education wise, I guess Canadians generally have the attitude that people who are coming from the Third World countries don’t equal

out to anything over here. I didn't come to this country to pick strawberries. Sorry. And I didn't come to Canada to be a Wal-Mart employee for the rest of my life. Sorry [...] That's the other thing. [...] I used to work at a call centre- had enough of that. Sorry. I don't mean to be pessimistic. [...] It took me 2 years to find out what to do to apply [to teachers' college] [...] When I came in 'oh, you have a Masters? I don't know if it would be equivalent to anything here. I think maybe you should take some courses in Canadian history here' and they would recommend a bunch of courses that I have to take. [...] And the list went on. This meant that I had to spend more and more money. [...] I had to take TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] to get into the B. Ed [Bachelor of Education] program too. (Ruby)

Many of the participants accept that they will be excluded at least initially from the labour market or their own profession. They lower their expectations as they are mindful of the challenges of requalifying and consider their options realistically but still attempt to find meaningful jobs:

[Being a] lawyer I kind of gave up because the whole, the two law systems are different. [...] And I would have to start classes, and start law school from the beginning. And I have a baby now and it's huge money, so. That just doesn't fit. I'm still thinking though, of pursuing teaching. Maybe not exactly now, but maybe, maybe later. So I did not give that up. I also like to teach and be with kids so that's a possibility. (Ileana)

For women, family considerations gender their labour market aspirations. Women conceptualized their immigrant trajectories through the lens of marriage, love, relationships and family. For Masof, the logic of her entrance to Canada as a teacher marrying a local Canadian of European descent was simply that her ability to re-establish her career is a secondary consideration. This is also true for the following women:

What brought me to Canada was my husband. My husband is a Canadian who came to my country; there was no choice but to come to Canada (Ruby)

I'm married to a Canadian. He had been in my country for 5 years and it was his time to come back to his country and I had to come with him. (Mary)

Because my husband was here; he is Canadian (Loren)

I decided to come to Canada because my daughter lives in Canada [...] [she got married] to somebody who went to my country for a vacation. (Noni)

Monica and Anna also had similar experience and interpretation. Out of ten women who participated, six married someone native to Canada and consequently immigrated there. This needs further reflection to see the racialized genderedness of migration and settlement. Loren, previously a single parent before immigration, came to Canada because she married a Peterborough native. For herself, there was no clear advantage other than this new relationship; for her son, however, it could mean a better future.

I had a good job. I wasn't happy when I was living in [my country] even though I had a good job. I was working for [a pharmaceutical company] – it was a big company. I was making good money but it became very difficult, it took me two hours to get to work there so I had to work long hours. So I wasn't that happy because of my son. But then I move to [another city in the country of origin]; I loved that city. It was a nice city, safe. I was able to find a good job. It was good because in the morning I used to drive my son to school and then go to work. I worked around 1 [p.m.], picked my son up, have my meal and then go back to work. So it was very easy for me to work there. It's hot, it's humid but I don't mind so it was fine but when I met my husband. Do you want to move to Canada and I thought it wouldn't be that bad especially for my son to be able to speak English and go to school there. So that's why I took the decision. It wasn't that I wasn't living nicely there. (Loren)

Compare the above with male interpretations of their trajectory to Canada. One of the male participants was able to enter Canada by marrying a woman here too, but he saw his coming to Canada only through the lens of himself as a worker, and to create a better future.

I came for advancement of my life, to better my life and my wife was already here. (Shahrukh)

His wife being 'already here' is secondary to his ambition for a career and advancement.

Many identify a lack of intimate and subtle cultural knowledge available only to ‘Canadians’ as the reason for their labour market exclusion and general sense of difference. This cultural knowledge of Canadian society exceeds their qualifications, English proficiency and interpersonal skills. This knowledge cannot be obtained as immigrants are barred from the job market due to their lack of ‘Canadian experience’ or ‘tacit knowledge’ (Sakamoto et al. 2010). Ruby explains that she can access this knowledge through her Canadian husband, but sometimes she also had to learn it the hard way:

Like if you are not really in the system, how does a landed immigrant really know? I’ll give you an example. While I went for my kindergarten placement, a little kid came and asked me ‘I want to go potty’. I had no clue what that meant, so I said ‘oh, where is Patty?’ I thought that was – I knew that Patty was a name. I said ‘oh, where is Patty?’ and he said ‘No, No I want to go potty’. And the child kept repeating and I just couldn’t understand and luckily the teacher heard what was going on and said ‘oh yah, he meant he wanted to go to the washroom’. [...] The kids can get frustrated, like they think she doesn’t know anything. They would say that straight to your face, especially children over here with their ‘you don’t know anything’. [...] People going to teachers college, or immigrants, they don’t know enough about Canadian culture, so how can they become a teacher, you know? So that kind of prevents some of the immigrant population who are well educated to get into that higher strata of society or get into a job that they really want. (Ruby)

Raza notes similar difficulties, despite being educated in the Canadian public school system and university:

It is not getting into this [Canadian] context. This is a challenge faced by everyone who is new in this country because like in 'competition' and 'competitive', you learn this when you grow up maybe when you are in grade three or four. [...] In between your conversation if you say that, people spot it, and they spot a weakness in you. [...] Maybe if you have other qualities in your communication skills, it is a weakness at certain task and it will be everywhere at the marketplace, or at work or at university. This is the challenge for every immigrant. (Raza)

The lack of tacit knowledge is then identified as the culprit. For immigrant women, both race and gender processes figure prominently in organizing their experiences, even if they do not note them as such.

What I have tried to show here is the invisibility of race, gender and other power relations in maintaining postcolonial alterity. However, the narratives reveal the uncertainties and inconsistencies in the multicultural story, which lead immigrants to question both multicultural tolerance and the truth status of their inherent alienness. Moreover, the lack of general knowledge about immigrant and anti-racist experience and history in Peterborough (compared to a large city such as Toronto) means that immigrants have very little to draw on to assert confidence in naming their experience.

Conclusion

The experience of alterity is palpable in these narratives. As Others from less advanced and developed countries, immigrants work hard to challenge their alienness. They are hampered by the epistemic violence that limits how they can imagine and construct their position in the West. They are relegated to overcoming their ethnicity and ‘backward’ past to reconstruct a historical present in the West. This article reiterates the importance of studying migrant experience of difference in a postcolonial and neo-liberal multicultural society to further understand migrancy. It spells out the importance of reconstructing history in postcolonial resistance in a multicultural society. Knowledge based in a westernized history may at least offer a way to counter discrimination and lack of a sense of belonging, but the cost involves rejecting one’s own history. The experience of Otherness is not simply a lack of adjustment to Canadian realities; it also frames immigrant negotiation with Canadian realities and renders immigrant experience opaque to nuanced understanding of the complexities of inclusion in Canadian society. Questions of power relations based upon constructions of race, class and gender remain outside of the equation.

Exploring the experience of difference challenges us to question processes of incorporation and how newcomers to the space can overcome their sense of alienness. It is important that we look at how immigrants are able counter their marginalization by constructing a made-in-Canada history. How the spatial context of cities structures immigrant experience can be further explored in relation to the availability of narratives of minority resistance, accessibility to immigrant communities generally, and the culture of the dominant group in dealing with immigrants. While the immigrants in this analysis may not have many counter-narratives readily available to them, they use their own

experiences as well as what they learn from people they meet and from larger cities to create alternative constructions about Canadian reality.

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Contributor details

Jane Ku is an associate professor at the University of Windsor, Canada in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology, and in the Women's Studies programme. She teaches courses in gender and racism and is interested in antiracist and feminist activism. She has conducted research on immigrant experience in various cities in Canada. She has also published articles on the limitations of the 'native informant' as a contradictory position of racialized postcolonial subjects. Currently she is working on a project to explore the exclusion of racialized immigrants from the Canadian labour market through the discourse of 'Canadian Experience'.

Contact:

Jane Ku, Associate Professor, University of Windsor, Sociology and Women's Studies,
401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4 Canada.

E-mail: janeku@uwindsor.ca

Note

¹ He is referring to Herouville, a small town in Quebec that attempted to pass a bylaw to ban stoning of women and veiling.