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Transnational Migration and Nation:
Burmese Refugees in Vancouver

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TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND NATION:

BURMESE REFUGEES IN VANCOUVER

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Abstract

 Official language ability and employment status of immigrants are often indicators of settlement and integration into Canadian society. We argue that analyzing settlement patterns and successful integration within a strictly national context is insufficient to understand the political, social, and economic relations that shape the lives of refugee immigrants upon arrival. To support this claim, a less state-centric theoretical framework is outlined, namely transnationalism. This research examines these factors in relation to the experience of 'non-traditional immigrants' to Canada, in particular Burmese refugees who have settled in the Greater Vancouver Area. Based on 50 personal interviews conducted with refugee newcomers from Burma who are now settled in the Lower Mainland, the authors present preliminary findings, but also use the case study as a basis to raise methodological questions about immigration research. We argue that the very politics of doing research with this group of refugees and other immigrant groups are shaped by the relations of power experienced before arriving in Canada.

Keywords: Burma, refugees, transnationalism, collaborative research.

I.   Introduction

Rarely in immigration circles are the limits of migration language discussed, nor is the assumption that the nation-state is the primary and dominant venue of migration questioned. The possibility that newcomers to Canada are participants in extant communities that exceed the boundaries of this country is obscured by their very status as immigrants. We contend that any study of immigrant integration and resettlement requires an examination of migrant experience both within and beyond Canadian borders, and a critical look at all territorially defined notions of migration in a broader sense. Links with friends, relatives, and political allies beyond Canadian borders shape the lives of Burmese refugees who have become landed immigrants in this country. This critical examination of assumptions about immigration is important precisely because it defines research questions, shapes government policies, and generates common frames of reference.

Issues of migration have traditionally been framed from a state-based perspective, with the major causes of migration seen as economic (Ravenstein 1885). More recent work has displayed considerable disagreement among scholars about the motivations for migration (Isbister 1996), but there is evidence that factors such as overpopulation, agricultural failure, war, famine, and political repression still motivate certain groups of people to seek economic opportunities, real estate options, and political freedom elsewhere. Over time, scholars have accorded differential explanatory power to these push and pull forces and their connection to migratory movements (Williamson 1988). Migration, however, is not reducible to rational decision-making on the part of individuals, since patterns of migration are expressive of past and present relations of colonial power, trade, and foreign policy (Sassen 1996). Immigration is, then, a social and transnational phenomenon that tends to build upon connections that cross international borders. Migrants' movements can only be mapped by analyzing the contexts of both the home and host country, as well as the larger global economy in which they are situated. Discussions of immigration that focus solely on integration, adaptation, and employment outcomes in the destination country, often overlook these transnational processes, politics, and human geographies that transcend, and/or subvert, the primacy of the nation-state as the *de facto* unit of migrant

identity.[1] Our main point is that the nation-state, as common territory and time, is traversed and, to varying degrees, subverted by diasporic attachments (Clifford 1994). Diaspora refers to the scattering or dispersion of a people, and is an apt descriptor for Burmese forced from their country who are now living in British Columbia.[2] From the outset then, we approach this research in Vancouver as partial; it is but one stop on a continuum. This paper aims to address the theoretical implications of thinking transnationally about immigrants to Canada. We present research based on the settlement experience of Burmese refugees who have settled in Vancouver, B.C. as landed immigrants. The paper also analyzes the politics of community collaboration in such a context and its methodological implications.

II.   Transnationalism: Questioning Immigration as State-Centric Discourse

 The discourse of transnationalism emerged from a synthesis of two dominant modes of thought in the 1980s: postmodernism, which emphasized new, more fragmented relations between knowledge and power enabled by new technology; and Marxist critiques, which paid attention to the material transformations associated with increasingly global capitalism (Shami 1996; Rouse 1995). In outlining transnationalism and its various proponents and critics, we link our findings of social and political connections across space with a theoretical literature that has not conventionally been associated with analyses of immigration. As a more encompassing theoretical framework, both spatially and in terms of cultural difference, transnationalism has seen increasingly widespread use, especially within anthropology, (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1994;

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[1] The word immigrant evokes images of permanent rupture, of the uprooted, the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1994). Michael Kearney (1995: 548) adds a distinction between globalization and transnationalism: "whereas global processes are largely decentered from specific national territories and take place in a global space, transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states." Globalization can easily lead to the erasure of the local. Whereas globalization renders transnational mobility and livelihoods largely irrelevant (except perhaps as a labour source or outcome of multinational capitalism), transnationalism views them as constitutive of distinct social, cultural, political and economic spaces, which do not adhere to the more straightforward categories of nation, class, ethnicity, and gender.

[2] James Clifford makes a distinction between paradigms of diaspora and of transnational border crossings. He notes that borderlands and the marginal histories of cultures crossing them, are distinct from analyses of diaspora in that they presuppose a territory defined by a geo-political line: two sides arbitrarily separated and policed, but also joined by legal and illegal practices of crossing and communication. It is worth holding onto the historical and geographical specificity of the two paradigms, while recognizing that the concrete predicaments denoted by the terms 'border' and 'diaspora' bleed into one another (Clifford 1994: 304).

Gupta and Ferguson 1992), cultural studies, (Hall 1991) and more recently within geography, (Mitchell 1997; Hyndman 1997; Nolin Hanlon and Kobayashi 1998).

One might argue that, like immigration discourse, transnationalism represents yet another white, Western attempt to theorize the experience of non-Western peoples, subjugating them further. If, however, transnationalism and its hybrid cultural forms are contextualized as a form of local response and a remaking of global and international forces, as Néstor García Canclini (1995) contends, they hold out the possibility of a transformative politics. We combine this analytical lens of transnationalism with other critical interventions, in order to develop a more comprehensive approach to the processes of migration. In particular we draw attention to the following themes: gender and nation, stretched economic and political networks, spatial dislocations and articulations, and cultural transformations.

II. 1   Gender and Nation

Feminist authors theorize and politicize transnationalism from within cultural studies by employing a more explicitly postmodern approach to migration and its politics. 'Transnational feminist practices,' for example, focus on the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 7). Processes which constitute and fragment migrant subjectivity are analyzed within the purview of the geo-politics of postmodernity. Geographically speaking, transnationalism is about identities with multiple places (Nolin Hanlon & Kobayashi 1998). Modalities which construct centres and margins, such as First and Third World, are challenged by transnational approaches that examine ways in which women are constructed in subordination or positioned unequally in discourses of nationalism and/or the patriarchal state. While Grewal and Kaplan acknowledge the risks of abandoning identity politics, they contend that existing categories of identification elude the representation of certain histories and obfuscate the links among diasporic subjects in transnational culture. Likewise, immigration discourse tends to truncate the histories and experiences of newcomers before they arrive in a destination country.

Such approaches to transnationalism examine the processes which contribute to identity formation and the unequal links which constitute these maps of power. Concepts of 'immigrant' and 'refugee' are defined by juridical and political apparati of national governments, premised upon the territoriality of nations, and predicated on the political borders of individual states. They are pure categories of migrant status, which do not always capture the contradictions and politics of historical and geographical experience. A refugee is defined as one who is outside the borders of her nation-state due to violence or persecution, and displaced from what has become the centred norm of citizenship — or 'placement' — within her country. An immigrant is seen to replace one nationalist identification with another (Kaplan 1996): he is a newcomer, a former outsider now authorized to participate in, if not belong to, the host society. The refugee is expelled from her state; the immigrant is incorporated into his. Both are territorially rooted, sometimes overlapping, conceptions of migrant status defined by the borders of the nation-state as a territorial entity. Analyzing conditions of displacement from a country that may still represent 'home' is a critical component to understanding immigrants' experience, priorities, and civic participation in a Canadian context. This is especially salient in the case of involuntary refugee movements.

II. 2 Stretched Economic and Political Networks

While some notable anthropologists have focused upon refugees within a context that sees the identities and boundaries of nations as problematic (Malkki 1995; Shami 1996), most authors in the field of transnationalism are concerned with migrant circuits of movement related to their economic activity, with its obvious connections to social relations, and in cultural studies, to the construction of new identities. Both sets of analysis are important to demonstrate the overlapping of migrant identities and the power relations which position them unequally in economies of 'nations unbound' (Basch et al. 1994). Sociologist Luin Goldring (1996), focusing on the patterns of return migration for Mexican workers employed in Las Animas, California, chronicles the creation and maintenance of a transnational social space across the US-Mexican border. Goldring defines 'transnational communities' as dense social fields consisting of people, money, goods, and information that are constructed and maintained by migrants over time, across space,

and through circuits which repeatedly cross borders. What these movements suggest is that borders themselves are less political containers and demarcation sites of absolute state control, but zones which are frequently transgressed and reconstructed through the constant movement of people, information and capital. It is in relation to this latter category — capital— that borders have become their most porous (Sassen 1996; Basch et al. 1994).While geographers have made major contributions to this field of investigation, Katharyne Mitchell argues that the discourse of economic globalization has itself become homogenous and needs to "bring geography back" into its understanding of the role of the state in relation to migrants and accompanying flows of capital. This, she suggests, can be developed by theorizing border zones: "as highly contested and dynamic areas of ideological cultural and physical turmoil . . . spaces of possibility as well as spaces of control" (Mitchell 1997: 106).

II. 3   Spatial Dislocations and Articulations

Transnationalism is differentiated from immigration discourse by its consistent deconstruction of the nation-state as a primary category of analysis. References to this process include "relations stretched out over space" (Massey 1993: 66), the articulation of the local and the global (Hall 1991), and the global production of locality and translocalities (Appadurai 1996). Arjun Appadurai's (1996) work is a key example of how transnationalism complicates state-centric accounts of migration. Global relations and events become manifest locally through the "globalized production of locality" (Appadurai 1996: 42). Increasing cross-border migration coupled with developments in communication technology — which Appadurai elaborates through Anderson's (1983) "print capitalism" and "imagined community" — have seen globally dispersed groups create their identities and communities outside of the territory of the nation-state along the lines of an "imagined community," whether that be regional, national or religious. The new territorial clusters that emerge as translocalities are often located in border zones, or within global cities receiving large proportions of immigrants. These global cities are often ambiguously related to the power and identity of the nation-state (Sassen 1996; Appadurai 1996). Within the global city, immigrant groups instantaneously share information between home and host localities, shaping the daily lives of not only diasporic groups, but of their surrounding

neighbours, communities and governments. Immigrants become important actors in transferring information, and maintaining linkages among nations and across the borders of nation-states. Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues (1992) argue that such actors should be seen as *transmigrants*, individuals who maintain a number of different ethnic, national, and racial identities. The potential of these embodied networks across space complicates the nature of localities as well as our concepts and cartographies of spatial scales, be that the home, the city, or the nation (Appadurai 1996).

These altered discourses of space usher in completely different understandings of what immigration means for the individual and the host and home states. Appadurai (1996) mentions Vancouver as one of these new translocalities. One can begin to imagine this 'translocal' urban space by conceptualizing immigrant communities not simply as newcomers who assimilate and integrate into Canadian society, but as people whose roles and identities are constituted across a field of translocalities, whether that be Hong Kong and Vancouver (Mitchell 1993), Vancouver and Punjab, India (Singh Bains and Johnston 1995), or Thai refugee camps and Vancouver, as our study illustrates. Though empirical studies are still limited in number — Basch et al. (1994), Kearney (1995), and Hyndman (1997) being a few exceptions — the provocative queries of transnationalism and its recognition of reordered socio-spatial articulations are significant.

II. 4   Cultural Transformations

Significant transnational movements of people and information often concentrate in global cities. This results in the jostling of a plethora of cultural forms in tight spatial concentrations creating interesting fusions and antagonisms. Music has been the most obvious medium for such experimental mixing of cultures, and is now so widespread that Gilroy (1990) has suggested it is almost superfluous to comment. The medium of film, like music, also facilities the development of popular themes of migration and hybridity. Films such as *Double Happiness, Mississippi Masala, My Beautiful Launderette* and *Carla's Song* offer us images that complicate the separateness of source and destination countries, as well as the unitary images of the immigrant and the indigenous subject. As well as creating new identities, global communications technologies play an important role in maintaining established identities through film distribution,

home videos, letters, phone calls, and religious and nationalist materials. In contrast to the often abstract interpretations of this phenomenon, Gillespie (1995) presents a rich empirical examination of how Indian film and media contribute to the formation and maintenance of identity for Punjabi teenagers in London, England. Her work examines the ways in which dislocations accompanying immigration and transnational connection shape the ways migrant communities establish and maintain their cultural identities.

II. 5   Outstanding issues

The materiality and corporeality of transnationalism does create a vibrant theoretical and political surface for both subjects who defy national boundaries and those tracing the meanings of their movements. The emerging literature on transnationalism, however, tends to focus on economic and cultural analyses at the expense of social and political considerations. The failure of transnational discourse to adequately theorize the diversity of experiences bound up in migrant flows remains a problem. Differences of class, (Mitchell 1993), gender (Massey 1993), race (Hooks 1993), and mobility (Hyndman 1997; Shami 1996) demand further attention. Future accounts of transnationalism must attend to the embodied, material dimensions of movement on a human scale, in order to reflect processes of on-going marginalization among immigrant, or transnational migrant, groups.

The conditions precipitating forced migration and the politics they produce are one example. Relatively little is said about refugees, whose politically induced migration involves elements of cultural dislocation and economic costs. Political and economic crises often act as catalysts of migration and motivate people to maintain ties and return home, but their analysis does not address the problematic construction of 'refugee' as an expression of state-based discourse (Basch 1994). Refugees may more appropriately be thought of as 'transmigrants' who may support an opposition party or human rights movement from afar and/or return to participate in a new government. Nonetheless, these transnational connections remain largely absent from most immigration research.

What does transnationalism mean for immigration policy in general, and experiences of refugee resettlement in particular? Whereas the Canadian state views immigration as one of its

most sacred and enduring sovereign realms, it now faces pressure from its own citizens and residents, who are themselves earlier generations of newcomers, to maintain these migrant flows. Governments recognize the political power and solidarity embedded in these networks, as well as the migration consequences of their own actions overseas, be they colonial connections of the past or more recent neo-colonial military operations (Sassen 1996). In Canada, government recognition of transnational ties is primarily economic in meaning, as investment opportunities and business capital are sought through the immigration of wealthy Asian business immigrants, with limited success (Nash 1994; Froschauer 1998).

III.   Research Background

Research for this paper began as an inquiry into the relationship between language ability and job success among two 'non-traditional' immigrant groups in Canada. Non-traditional was a term specified by the Federal Department of Canadian Immigration and Citizenship (CIC), which partly funded this research and had input into the research question through the Metropolis Project, its national initiative on urban immigration research. While the term was never explicitly defined, people born in places like Burma, also known as Myanmar, represent a non-traditional immigrant group in two ways. First, the group is relatively new to Canada; it is one which had not been counted among immigrant-sending countries to Canada until the 1990s. Second, Burmese refugees come to Canada from a country adversely affected by the widespread violation of human rights and documented state-sponsored violence. That is to say, most enter disproportionately as Convention Refugees or refugee claimants. They were literally forced to choose Canada or some other resettlement country, and hope that it would choose them. Our focus in this paper is on newcomers to Vancouver from Burma, a lesser-known group whose small size and relatively recent arrival have averted the attention of settlement agencies, immigration officials, and researchers for the most part. We contend that status as refugees or claimants upon arrival distinguishes Burmese newcomers from other immigrant classes in important ways. Accordingly, we incorporate into our interviews questions which probe refugee experiences before their arrival in Canada and trace their on-going connections to Burmese citizens elsewhere.

We begin by examining the antecedents of Burmese immigration to Canada, including an update on the scale and scope of Burmese displacement in neighbouring Thailand. Moving to the Canadian context, a short sketch of the literature that analyzes the links between official language ability and employment is provided, followed by the preliminary results of our research conducted among Burmese newcomers to the Lower Mainland of Greater Vancouver. We then analyze the actual politics of research and community collaboration in a critical attempt to evaluate how equitable this particular process of knowledge production has been.

IV.   Transnational Migration and The Burmese Democratic Organization

Our project is based on meetings and interviews with Burmese newcomers who are now landed immigrants in the Lower Mainland and, in particular, with the Burmese Democratic Organization (BDO), a local group concerned with the welfare of Burmese refugees both in Canada and overseas. Background research was also conducted in refugee camps located in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand, along the border with Burma. From the outset, then, our approach was transnational in its conception. Access to one camp near Mae Hong Son was arranged for one of the authors by BDO members in Vancouver, highlighting the very transnational nature of communication and social organization among displaced Burmese in Thailand and Canada.[3] The camps have hosted refugees from Burma for many years. For those who have travelled to Canada, the camps were a transit point en route.

IV.1   Human Displacement From Burma to Vancouver

Political instability and ethnic strife have affected Burma since independence from Britain in 1948. Since 1988, however, the actions of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), (recently renamed the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]), which governs Burma by military decree, have caused widespread human displacement. On August 8, 1988 (8/8/88) a popular uprising against the military government by civilians on the streets of Rangoon was met with redoubled repression and violence. Thousands of unarmed students, civil servants, and other

citizens were shot by military forces and killed. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of revolutionary independence leader Aung San, spoke out against the government and was subsequently placed under house arrest in 1989. In 1990, free elections were held, and the National League of Democracy (NLD) an opposition party to which Aung San Suu Kyi belonged won the election with well over 80% of the seats. SLORC did not concede defeat and refused to allow the NLD to take power. In the past couple of years, numerous reports by UN, human rights, and refugee organizations have documented SLORC's on-going violation of human rights in Burma (*New Internationalist* 1996). These include forced labour, forced relocation — particularly of ethnic minorities away from urban centres — and torture, among other charges.

Many Burmese citizens who opposed and/or feared the practices of their government fled to the Burma side of its border with Thailand in the late 1980s, to areas controlled by armed ethnic minorities. As the strength of the SLORC military increased, however, minority ethnic groups — which had claimed much of the border area since independence in 1948 — and other displaced groups, including students, were forced to give up their arms and seek safety in refugee camps on the Thai side of the border. Today these camps are growing, with 17,000 new refugees seeking safety in Thailand during 1997 alone, bringing the total number of Burmese refugees to 130,000.[4] The US Committee for Refugees (1998) also estimates that another 350,000 people live in refugee-like circumstances, but without official status.

There are, in effect, two groups of refugees in Thailand: those designated persons of concern by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bangkok, who are currently living in a 'safe camp' in Ratchaburi province; and those living along the Thai-Burma border, who are not officially recognized but receive assistance from a number of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Refugees at the border must travel to Bangkok on their own to seek status from UNHCR in Bangkok — the only location permitted by the

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[3] The organization of this trip preceded the research and was based on a one year acquaintance between BDO and one of the researchers.

[4] Foreign investment in Burma, in conjunction with the military government, has exacerbated the use of slave labour and the dislocation of minority ethnic groups within the country. Land along the border with Thailand formerly controlled by these ethnic groups is now under siege by the military to stabilize strategic areas necessary for the construction of a major natural gas pipeline project between Thailand and Burma. The pipeline is financed by UNOCAL and TOTAL, US and French multinationals, underscoring Sassen's point that economic and political alliances have everything to do with migration (Rodman 1998).

Government of Thailand to confer person-of-concern status, since the Thai Government prohibits status determination facilities at the border, although this appears to be changing. Recent concern expressed about the vulnerability of this group by the UNHCR and its member governments has resulted in the establishment of a limited UNHCR presence at the border (*The Nation* 1998).

Persons of concern, designated by UNHCR in Bangkok, are not refugees *per se* because such a designation might trouble bilateral political relations between Bangkok and Rangoon, Burma's capital. In conjunction with several multinational companies, the governments of Thailand and Burma have cooperated on a number of cross-border investments and infrastructure projects. Given that there has been little political pressure on SLORC from either Thailand or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), resettlement for those displaced out of Thailand takes on more urgency. Refugees who have been living along the Thai-Burma border for as long as a decade are losing hope that they will defeat the military government and return home. These unrecognized refugees fuel an increasing demand for resettlement to Canada and elsewhere because there are virtually no other options.

Consular officials from the few countries with immigration programs interview and recruit small numbers of prospective immigrants. From here, a fortunate few are provided with visas and make their way to Canada. We seek to represent, albeit partially, the current experience of a significant sample of these Burmese refugees through interviews conducted in the Greater Vancouver Area.

IV. 2   The Canadian Context: Official Language Proficiency and Employment

A modest literature links official language fluency to employment achievement in the Canadian context. Findings show that language acquisition has important implications for access to employment and job achievement (Boyd 1992; Frideres 1989; Chiswick and Miller 1992). Gender is shown to be an important variable in these studies. Using aggregate data, Boyd (1992) sets out to determine social and economic correlates of language knowledge for female immigrants. She recognizes the difficulty women have in working, caring for family, and attending classes, and notes that women tend to have less education than men and different employment-related training. Her statistical analysis suggests that immigrant women, on average,

have half as much official language ability as their male counterparts and that women from Third-World locations tend to be more disadvantaged in terms of language ability than other women. Boyd found that the lower labour participation rate of men and women lacking fluency in dominant languages holds across all educational levels. However, she notes that despite lower levels of language proficiency, 40% of women with little language ability are still employed, though they work more hours, and are paid less. While the level of language skill is a critical factor to understanding the socioeconomic situation of immigrants, Boyd's work does not disaggregate immigrant categories to examine the relationship of official language ability and employment outcomes for refugees specifically.

As with all immigrants, those who fall under the Convention refugee class (excluding refugee claimants) have access to the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. LINC, traditionally funded by the Federal Government, represents 500 to 750 hours of language instruction. This is basically survival English or French since language training for labour market readiness is estimated to be 1000 to 1500 hours. While LINC data do not include information relating to post-LINC job prospects, both LINC administrators and government representatives acknowledge this gap between language competency after LINC level 3 (the highest level of English as a Second Language [ESL] training provided) and language skills adequate for the workplace. In an interview with a senior Citizenship and Immigration administrator in the BC/Yukon region, he noted that LINC 3 is not necessarily enough:

> It is not a high functioning level at all, if you have ever talked to someone with level 3 . . . There is no natural bridge [between LINC 3 and language proficiency required for employment] (CIC, 1996a).

Post-LINC, pre-employment programs funded by both federal and provincial levels of government continue to be developed and deployed, but they represent an expensive and non-mandated service that may be viewed as discretionary.

V.   Findings

This is one of the first research projects which examines the settlement experiences of Burmese immigrants in Vancouver. In conjunction with the BDO, fifty interviews have been conducted

using a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Questions posed related to tenure in

Thai camps, education and occupational status in Burma, official language ability in Canada,

household composition, household location, employment status, current concerns, and on-going

contact with Burmese family and friends in other places. A selection of responses most pertinent

to the relationship between employment and official language ability and to the continuities of

relationships with Burmese elsewhere are discussed here. Twenty-nine men and twenty-one

women were interviewed. Of fifty respondents, all had spent between eighteen months and nine

years as displaced persons in Thailand.

Of those who responded, 84% said that financial difficulties and unemployment were the

most pressing issues at the present time, and many attributed this to their lack of official language

ability. One person without a job noted that finding a job with LINC 3 is not possible (interview #

18) Nineteen people, or 38%, cited lack of language ability or language difficulties as either a

barrier to employment or as a pressing issue, for example one respondent said: "I worry how I

will survive without speaking the language in Canada" (interview #37).

Another related the anxiety of dealing with the immediate financial pressure of finding

work, and how this conflicts with the potential longer-term benefits to be gained from language

training:

> "I am attending language courses at present . . . even though I would like to get a
> job because an allowance of $500 is not enough. I cannot seem to get an interview
> even due to language difficulties. Even if I can get a part-time job, I do not want
> to miss the rare opportunity to attend school" (interview # 19).

Financial stability was the most pervasive concern of those interviewed, and one

respondent noted the high cost of rental housing:

> "Rent and food allowance of $500 and transportation allowance of $54 is not enough. There is a
> lot of burden on my mind. I could not study. The training provided is not going to be good
> enough for me to support myself as finding a job is difficult" (interview #47).

Table 1: Employment status

	Employed	Unemployed
Men (n=29)	17%	83%
Women (n=21)	24%	76%

Financial concerns were prominent within the sample, since most respondents were unemployed (see Table 1). Only five men and five women of the fifty people interviewed held jobs, and some of these were part-time positions. The educational profile of the employed respondents reveals that the majority have completed high school or higher. All of the employed women had some high school or college education, and at least LINC level 3. Of the men, two had LINC 3 or higher, two had some university training, and one had completed secondary school. The education levels of those employed were significantly higher, on average, than the sample as a whole (Table 2).

Table 2: Educational Experience

	No high school	Unemployed	High school plus post-secondary
Men (n=29)	17%	83%	31%
Women (n=21)	24%	76%	14%

While men have more education than women on average, a greater proportion of women are employed overall. Respondents noted various barriers to employment, with nine citing their lack of experience, particularly in the Canadian context, as a major problem. In some cases, respondents were frustrated that jobs often required training certificates, but that employers would not recognize such credentials from other countries. While foreign credentials and training certificates are often ignored by Canadian employers, refugees interviewed noted that they seldom have such documents anyway, given the conditions of their departure from Burma.

Significantly more men than women have arrived in Vancouver from Burma (CIC 1996b). Accordingly, men often share accommodation with other men, whereas women are usually part of family households (see Table 3). This raises some important questions about gender relations and networks of support. With the pressures of integration and language barriers, those without access to co-ethnic support systems, which are often found most immediately through the home, may well encounter more intense feelings of emotional isolation. Indeed, four men reported loneliness and emotional stress as their most pressing problem, while no women reported this.

For example, one man in his mid-twenties, commented, "I feel lonely because Canadians are very distant and estranged to us" (interview #50). Another spoke of his family in Burma:

> "I miss my wife and children everyday. I also worry for their future. I do not want them to grow up uneducated and vulnerable in a country with a bleak, unstable future. I want them to be able to enjoy the human rights like the Canadian children" (interview #46).

Men were more likely to report that they had little or no help settling in compared to women (a finding that may be explained by the time at which they arrived). For both men and women, official assistance was more impersonal and less helpful then networks of friends and other Burmese groups. Collective household arrangements may also reflect important economic coping strategies, considering the modest means and employment profile of the sample.

Table 3: Household Composition

	Total Sample	Men	Women
Friends	49%	71%	19%
Family	33%	21%	48%
Friends & Family	16%	4%	33%
Alone	2%	4%	-

Findings indicate that the amount of informal assistance provided by Burmese who are now landed immigrants in Vancouver to new arrivals also from Burma is phenomenal. A spokesperson for BDO offered this comment:

> "Helping each other is part of our upbringing. Everybody is more than happy to help each other. That is how I think most of these things are happening in the community, like moving or finding a house, or solving a medical problem" (Dr. Win, evaluation interview 30th July 1997).

Such self-sufficiency and cooperation are laudable on all counts. However, the extent to which Burmese immigrants help each other solve settlement-related issues risks obscuring more obstinate problems and unmet needs altogether. Furthermore, language training and lack of employment are good examples of salient issues that have not been, or cannot easily be resolved from within the group alone.

Perhaps the most interesting findings for us as researchers, were the transnational connections which the vast majority of the sample maintained with Burmese outside of Canada. Evidence from the fifty interviews suggests that transnational connections are numerous and diverse and many people have parents, siblings, and children back in Burma. One person reported close friends in Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Burma, a sister in the US, an uncle in Singapore, cousins in England, and relatives in Australia. Of friends in Thailand, many are in the safe camp where refugees are held in Ratchaburi province, west of Bangkok. With so many people having friends and family elsewhere, transnational communication is obviously important.

Telephone calls and mail are the most common forms of this communication, though mail to Burma is problematic because much of it is checked by the authorities and subsequently goes missing. Of this group, many send information, money, and other material to overseas contacts. The incidence of such contact (see Table 4) suggests that women may be more active in communications and resource sharing since the use of postal orders is twice as common for women as for men.

Table 4: Transnational connections

(Actual occurrences shown in bold, figures below are frequencies, and percent of occurrences indicated in total)

	None	Mail	Phone	Fax	E-mail	Postal Order
Men	**4**	**21**	**23**	**5**	-	**2**
(n=29)	0.13	0.72	0.79	0.17	0	0.06
Women	**1**	**20**	**15**	**2**	**3**	**4**
(n=21)	0.04	0.95	0.71	0.09	0.14	0.19
Total	**5**	**41**	**38**	**7**	**3**	**6**
	(10%)	(82%)	(76%)	(14%)	(6%)	(12%)

What is most remarkable is that fully half of those interviewed said that the type of contact they maintain with other Burmese is human rights-oriented. Preliminary evidence suggests that immigrants who come to Canada as refugees or refugee claimants are more likely to have such a connection at this scale. Nonetheless, the potential political impact of Burmese living in Canada and the US should not be underestimated. If 50% of Burmese refugees now landed in Canada are pursuing human rights work with links outside of the country, transnational connections are only multiplied. One example of such activity is The National Coalition Government of the Union of

Burma (NCGUB), a well-organized government-in-exile located in Washington D.C. Backed by funding and support from The Soros Foundation's Open Society Project, it connects a number of advocacy and action groups across North America.

We can see the importance of global communications technologies in maintaining connections across space, but they also play an important role in maintaining identities and community through film distribution, home videos, letters, phone calls, religious and human rights resources, both written and audiovisual. For Burmese refugees audiovisual communication has been important as a vehicle for contact among diasporic Burmese populations concerned about democracy and freedom in Burma. Taped messages from Nobel Peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, such as the one aired in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, are useful and important given that her mobility is highly restricted by the military government.

Such political connections complicate the conventional analysis of the immigration process and its assumption of straightforward integration and adaptation into the host state. The precarious situation of internally displaced persons in Burma and refugees in Thailand leads to social and political networks of solidarity. Evidence of such links include active fundraising and human rights organizing by Burmese immigrants to Vancouver who send money, supplies and information to friends and relatives at the Thai border and elsewhere. In revealing the importance and potential impact of these networks, including the possibility of shaping refugees' lives back in Thailand, we challenge conceptions of immigration that view the process as the termination of this historical relationship and the commencement of a new and discrete identity as immigrant.

These transnational political relations may become an increasingly important factor for the government of Burma/Myanmar, as overseas communities draw attention to the oppressive practices of the military government. These pressures have a local dimension, and are increasingly covered by the Vancouver media (*The Courier,* December 18, 1996*, Vancouver Sun,* November 26, 1997). Dr Sein Win, Burma's prime minister-in-exile, visited Vancouver, and focused attention on the links between Myanmar's military government's promotion of the heroin trade and the problems of drug abuse in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (*Vancouver Sun*, December 1, 1998). We consider the growing voice of Burmese overseas communities against Burma's

military regime as indicative of a growing transnational force questioning issues of trade and political relations. In 1997 for example, both the US and Canadian governments imposed various trade restrictions on Burma/Myanmar, based on the increasing publicity of its abysmal record of human rights violations.

While these findings are preliminary, they do offer some important glimpses of the struggles faced by Burmese landed immigrants in Vancouver. The picture is not pretty: unemployment and lack of official language ability are correlated in this modest sample and translate into low incomes for many newcomers. However, rather than deliberate on employment status and language ability, we move now to discuss a potentially more constructive element of the research findings, namely the politics and practice of doing collaborative research at one stop on the migration continuum.

VI.   Community Collaboration and the Politics of Method

The politics of research among academics, research assistants, immigrant-serving agencies, and immigrant groups are fuelled by competition for the finite resources available to study immigration processes. There is considerable debate about who the beneficiaries of research should be, as there are concerns about the unequal power relationships between university researchers and researched groups which risk being exploitative, among other issues. Though many scholars harbour concerns regarding the research process, open discussion of such issues of equitable relations between all parties is often neglected, possibly for fear of the volatile questions and accusations it may generate. During our research conducted in conjunction with BDO, we encountered a number of these issues, which we seek to underscore and analyze briefly below.

Many scholars, including those inspired by feminist theories, have begun to critically evaluate research methodologies, the power relations they embody, and their effects on the construction of knowledge (Smith 1993). For researchers involved in the Metropolis Project, these issues are becoming increasingly significant. At the second National Metropolis Conference in Montreal in 1997, issues of community partnerships, research approach and ethics were raised by Teresa Dremetsikas from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, and Adrienne Chambon, from the University of Toronto (Chambon et al. 1998). Their research collaboration experiences

encouraged them to challenge traditional styles and structures of research, and instead develop an approach based on the concept of taking a "witness stance" in dealing with issues of immigration, integration and the atrocities and trauma of torture. This suggests that some academic researchers involved in collaborative projects can be self-critical and are reformulating their own positions and priorities. Questions such as who the research is for, and how it will benefit immigrant/refugee groups become as important as questions of how research will be conducted, and the form output will take. Good research is not only about accuracy and precision but implies that method, too, is a contested social and cultural process imbued with unequal power relations. Without serious consideration of these challenges, researchers risk co-opting the subjugated knowledge of immigrants to legitimize the academic project (Haraway 1991). Community partners, which are required in the academic proposals funded by Metropolis, risk becoming marginalized once their purpose has passed or their contributions have been collated, transcribed, coded and represented.

As co-researchers and partners with the Burmese Democratic Organization in Vancouver, we were aware of these constraints, challenges, and risks from the outset. Accordingly, one of our main objectives was to establish a meaningful collaboration between ourselves and BDO. We attempted to do this in a number of ways. First, we approached one of the leaders within the BDO with whom we had a rapport that preceded the project, and asked whether the group might be interested in cooperating on a research project. We then inquired as to what they would like to get out of it. As a relatively new and small group in the Vancouver area, this immigrant group has a very low profile in the eyes of provincial settlement agencies and various levels of government. While members of the group had been working with church groups and the media to promote issues of social justice in Burma, there was little research available about the group itself and its constituents. Recognizing this, a physician and community leader who was our contact in the BDO agreed to participate in the study, which would look at links between language and employment, as well as the transnational connections of this groups members. This was our agenda. The project would ostensibly provide a needs assessment for the group's own purposes, meeting one of the goals of the organization. The BDO had plans to submit future funding proposals and felt that our research could be helpful to that end. This first step enabled a collaborative research agenda to be formed. This is an important methodological point, since

creating a collaborative agenda can optimistically prevent any one party from controlling the process, or from feeling that its agenda is being manipulated or distorted.

We shared the modest financial resources of the project with BDO in an important way. Our main contact there volunteered to coordinate translation of a draft interview schedule and to organize a group of interviewers. Seven people who could speak Burmese were selected and recruited for a training session organized in tandem by one of the researchers and our BDO contact. Each interviewer was responsible for conducting approximately seven interviews. People were encouraged to interview acquaintances and friends, as the results of earlier non-academic research with Burmese newcomers proved to be poor in the absence of established trust and rapport (Hyndman 1996).

Interviewers were paid for their training and for each interview; interviewees also received an honorarium. The interview schedule required translation, providing further participation and income for two people. In total, ten people from BDO received some remuneration directly from the project; fifty more received an honorarium for participating in interviews. Our project, then, included a large proportion of the Burmese refugee population now living in Vancouver. Considering that refugees from Burma began arriving in BC only in 1993 and that the total number of Burma-born people living in Vancouver who arrived between 1991 and April 1996 is just 225, our project reached a large segment (more than 25%) of this immigrant group (CIC 1996b).

Many of the Burmese immigrants benefited concretely, albeit in modest ways. By analyzing in some detail the research process, we want to underscore the spirit of the project as one which aimed to promote the interests of Burmese immigrants in Vancouver, as much as it analyzed their experience, language skills, and success in finding employment. We suggest that this type of community research collaboration can actually contribute to the settlement and integration process in and of itself. Interviewers benefited financially, but also developed interviewing and research skills. The scale and scope of these benefits was admittedly modest, but so too was the budget. Partnering with the university gave the project a credible basis, the benefits of which we were able to extend to the individual community researchers through providing letters of reference, if requested, attesting to a small but significant form of the ever-

elusive "Canadian labour market experience."[5] We were concerned about maintaining connections between the university and the group, and some months after the research was completed BDO catered an international conference lunch at UBC as part of an effort to raise funds for Burmese refugees living in camps near the Thai–Burma border. Proceeds were sent to a refugee camp at Mae Sarieng, in Northwest Thailand. These resources were tangibly beneficial to Burmese refugees in Vancouver and abroad, and consolidated the relationship formed between the university and community group.

Project management was also another key ingredient to the success of the collaboration. Of the three main investigators — two from the university and one from BDO — each had a distinct role, which involved organizing and executing particular responsibilities, but everyone also had autonomy. No one was simply given random tasks; rather, each person could decide how to accomplish a particular set of goals outlined from the outset. We believe such attempts at autonomy and team work are important in collaborative research projects since colleagues are often situated differentially in relation to resources and knowledge.

One weakness of the interview process was the lack of sufficient input from the community interviewers early on. This was mainly a problem of translation and time limitations. In hindsight we recognize that more resources and effort should have been allocated to the development of the interview schedule itself so that maximum input and accessibility could be provided by having sufficient time and genuine collaboration on its development from the ground up. Unfortunately, university funding structures and ethical review requirements tend to preclude this type of approach. In this case, interview schedules had to be submitted for approval before the project could begin.

At the conclusion of the interview process, a follow-up evaluation was held among the university researchers and the BDO coordinator for the project. A number of issues were raised and observations made. It became apparent that trust was a critical factor in the success of the project. In the first instance, interviewers and interviewees had assurances from their community leader coordinating part of the project. The community leader had a rapport with one of the researchers who had spent more than a year working with other Burmese immigrants (Hyndman

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[5] Respondents recounted this phrase as one of the most common they heard employers offer to explain why they

1996). BDO members felt that the researchers had good intentions, and they respected the

university affiliation as a more neutral one than that of an immigrant service organization. In a

transnational and political context, the university was viewed as a more legitimate institution than,

for example, the government, based on the experiences of the group back in Burma, where the

government could not be trusted. The interviews underscored a reticence on the part of some

respondents who did not elaborate upon their thoughts and experiences. The BDO community

leader mentioned that several interviewers were frustrated by the answers they received to many

of the questions because "people say everything is good, good, good." She made the point that

this situation testifies to normal etiquette and politeness among Burmese, but also said that people

need to be probed further and given leading questions in order to get detailed answers. She also

noted that people resist criticizing organizations that might still affect them, i.e. immigrant

settlement services or CIC, because they fear reprisals. The lack of disclosure on the part of some

interviewees may also be related to the earlier question of trust and negative experiences back in

Burma, a point that underscores the significance of understanding political and cultural

circumstances in the source country from which prospective immigrants migrate. Likewise, the

cultural politics of reception at the receiving end can also bias the treatment of one group over

another. The BDO contact working on the project underscored this viewpoint, stating that the

university was viewed as less partial than immigrant settlement agencies for members of BDO.

The idea of developing a community profile and a more public presence was an important

element of the project from the perspective of BDO. The BDO coordinator and contact noted

that: "We are very new coming here and we don't have all this other information, like other

bigger ethnic groups" (Dr. Win, evaluation interview, July 30, 1997). The project represented an

opportunity to develop a profile of the group and put it on the map, so to speak. The BDO

coordinator also said that this project marked the first occasion that the university had taken an

interest in the group and how it had settled in the Vancouver area:

> "There is a lot of hope there that this project can reflect for the community welfare; that is
> one of the biggest motives for trust and hope that makes the project go on. I hope also that
> there will also be some follow up from the government with this coming on" (Dr. Win,
> evaluation interview, July 30, 1997).

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would not hire immigrants who had recently arrived.

A significant degree of hope is pinned to the project as a potential tool for assisting Burmese people now living in Vancouver, both in providing more services for settlement and as a basis for further self-promotion and community development. We would argue that such hope is critical to effective community partnerships, and yet it also creates pressure for researchers to meet expectations that are not always made explicit. These issues of trust, hope, and community visibility are not generally factors in the development of methodology for scholarly research. Our evaluation of collaboration with BDO elucidates the importance of considering such variables. Just as research concerning refugee-immigrants introduces methodological issues that cross cultures and social distance, so too does such research demand a theoretical context that incorporates experience and connections that exceed the borders of the country of destination. Integration and resettlement do not simply occur within the parameters and borders of the Canadian state for these Burmese newcomers. As the research findings show, most Burmese refugees in Canada maintain social, political, and economic ties or transnational connections to Burmese elsewhere. The idea that the nation is narrated (Bhabha 1990) — that there are many stories of (not) belonging, which undermine the nation-state — is important, especially for refugees whose arrival in Canada is complicated by extenuating circumstances in their home countries. People whose sense of identity is defined by collective histories of nation and culture, as well as shared visceral geographies of displacement and violent loss, do not simply forget or abandon these connections upon arrival in a new country. This is just as true of distinct cultural groups in Canada, which live within the boundaries of a single nation-state but whose lives are constituted by more than one geographical location and more than one appellation.

VII.   Conclusions

A cursory glance at the findings of our study reveals much about the struggle of Burmese immigrants who settle in BC, though less of the significant people and conditions they left behind. The research illustrates that (un)employment and official language ability are not only linked, but are among the most pressing issues facing Burmese immigrants to Canada. Stress, worry, and financial difficulties prevail. Those with employment have better language abilities and more education than those who do not have work. Language training is keenly sought, but LINC 3, the

highest available level of government-sponsored ESL, is considered by many to be insufficient to meet the demands of the workplace. Recent Canadian research on language acquisition among immigrants to BC (Cumming and Gill 1991) notes the limited amount of work on this subject, a finding which is corroborated by this preliminary study into the links between language acquisition and job achievement.

Burmese immigrants to BC provide a wealth of informal support to each other, much of which is undocumented and uncounted. A few key people from among the pool of recent Burmese immigrants have helped in the resettlement of subsequent Burmese newcomers to the Vancouver area. They agreed to undertake this research as a step towards promoting their community and developing proposals that would seek resources for unmet needs. The extent to which the research project and findings will contribute to this goal remains to be seen.

In a national context, Burmese immigrants to BC constitute a small group with fewer resources and less experience over time in sorting out settlement issues, remaining relatively invisible to organizations mandated to assist immigrants and refugees. On a more global scale, the Burmese Democratic Organization, which has expanded its work over the duration of the research project to create the Burma Roundtable in Vancouver, works across borders, conducting human rights campaigns, staying connected with friends and family abroad, and sending money, materials, and information. The modest size of this group may affect its lack of political importance to various levels of government and to settlement organizations in Canada. Nonetheless, on-going human rights violations in Burma, growing refugee populations in nearby Thailand, and recent Canadian sanctions on Burma promise a considerable increase in the size of this immigrant group in Canada over the next few years.

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