

Transnationalism and the spaces of commodity culture

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Abstract: This paper presents a critical assessment of the concept of transnationalism and its place within the current refiguration of cultural geography. Identifying three specific concerns with current theorizations of transnationalism (regarding the concept's scope, specificity and politics), the paper discusses the widely perceived need to 'ground' the study of transnationalism in specific empirical research. It argues that this discussion has been unhelpfully dominated by an overemphasis on identifying transnational migrant and diasporic communities. The paper highlights the authors' research with a range of food and fashion firms working between Britain and the Indian subcontinent to argue that an analysis of commodity culture provides an alternative way of advancing our understanding of contemporary transnationality. This approach suggests that transnational space can be recognized as both multidimensional and multiply inhabited. The paper concludes by outlining the alternative ways in which attention to commodity culture helps 'ground' the concept of transnationalism.

Key words: transnationalism, diaspora, commodity culture.

I Introduction: transnationalism and the refiguration of culture and space

The last decade has seen a profound shift in our understandings of the spaces of culture (Featherstone and Lash, 1999). The previously hegemonic figure of the 'cultural mosaic', with its territorialized union of people and place, has been complemented and 'undone' (Featherstone, 1995) by alternative figures of travel, mobility, migrancy, flow and displacement (see, for example, Chambers, 1994; Clifford, 1992; 1997; Crang, 1996;

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Kaplan, 1995). Thus the anthropologists Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg reflect on how 'the notion that there is an immutable link between cultures, peoples or identities and specific places, [a] permanent join between a particular culture and a stable terrain, [is] increasingly wearing thin' (1996: 1). In a similar vein, John Urry's manifesto for twenty-first-century Sociology seeks to shift the discipline 'beyond societies' and on to considering 'the diverse mobilities of peoples, objects, images, information and tastes' (2000: 1). Transnational guru Ulf Hannerz concludes that '[i]t must now be more difficult than ever, or at least more unreasonable, to see the world . . . as a cultural mosaic, of separate pieces with hard, well-defined edges. Cultural interconnections increasingly reach across the world' (1992: 218).

Hannerz deploys the interrelated notions of a 'global ecumene' (1989; 1992; 1996) and '*transnational connections*' (1996; emphasis added) as correctives, highlighting globally extensive regions of persistent cultural interaction and exchange. More generally, it is now widely recognized that social and cultural processes regularly exceed the boundaries of individual nation states, sketching 'transnational' cartographies of cultural circulation, identification and action (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Kearney, 1994; Appadurai, 1998). 'Transnationalism' has thus become a ubiquitous term of reference for the 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec, 1999: 447). At times it operates as part of a wider vocabulary (Tölöyan, 1991), a connective thread pulling together work on diasporic social formations and senses of identity (Brah, 1996), cultural globalization (Tomlinson, 1999) and hybridization (Mitchell, 1997a), experiences and political economies of migration, and forms of political engagement that escape or rework the borders of the nation state (Sheffer, 1995). Journals such as *Public Culture*, *Diaspora*, *Identities* and *Global Networks* all explicitly draw on the idea of transnationalism to signal broadly defined, interdisciplinary fields of inquiry. This reflects transnationalism's role as a 'sensitizing notion' (Meyer and Geschiere, 1999: 1), highlighting a de- and recoupling of culture and place, through which cultural identities are no longer clearly wedded to particular nation states, and places are rethought not as intrinsically bounded entities but as constellations of connections within those wider cultural circuits (cf. Massey, 1992).¹ Conversely, the notion of the transnational, and thus transnational studies, originally emerged from a tighter set of concerns: first within work on transnational corporations (Taylor and Thrift, 1982; 1986) and later through the translation of the concept to migration studies as part of a move beyond oppositions of linear and circular migration (see Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). In that light, Katharyne Mitchell has defined transnationalism more narrowly as 'an ongoing series of cross-border movements in which *immigrants* develop and maintain numerous economic, political, social and cultural links in more than one nation' (Mitchell, 2000: 853; emphasis added). The notion of transnationalism therefore signals both a broad refiguration of human geographies away from a national (and indeed international) imaginary (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Malkki, 1992; 1994) and throws into sharp relief debates over how to specify and 'ground' such a refiguration, to prevent the term from becoming too casually deployed.

This sometimes uneasy situation is exemplified in the early and seminal contributions of Roger Rouse. In stated contrast to Frederic Jameson (1984), Rouse attempted to map 'the social space of postmodernism' by eschewing the architecture of Los Angeles and Las Vegas in favour of an analysis of migration flows between the rural Mexican

municipio of Aguillilla and the USA (Rouse, 1991; see also 1995a; 1995b). As he puts it, 'the raw materials for a new cartography ought to be equally discernible in the details of people's daily lives' (1991: 9). In terms of his specific research, Rouse concluded that the migration processes he had studied unsettled the traditional mappings of space, based as they were on notions of bounded rural Mexican communities and of clear distinctions between the spaces of the core and periphery. In particular, he found that existing accounts of migration as a movement from one community and environment to another, with perhaps some circular reverse flows added in, failed to capture the extent of this cartographic disruption. This new social space, he suggested, was best described in terms of 'transnational circuits'. He was at pains to explain this phrasing. The term 'transnational' was deliberately employed in preference to the alternative of 'binational' both 'to evoke as directly as possible the association between migrant forms of organization and transnational corporations' and to allow 'for the possibility that a circuit might include sites in more than two countries' (1991: 20, footnote 18). The idea of a circuit was used to emphasize how migration may be not just a set of movements to and from distinct places and perhaps across national borders but a 'continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information' through which 'various settlements have become so closely woven together that, in an important sense, they have come to constitute a single community across a variety of sites'. At least for Aguillillan 'transmigrants' 'it is the circuit as a whole rather than any one locale that constitutes the principal setting in relation to which Aguillillans orchestrate their lives' (1991: 14). More generally, based on this empirical work, Rouse concludes (1991: 8, emphasis added) that:

the comfortable modern imagery of nation-states and national languages, of coherent communities and consistent subjectivities ... no longer seems adequate ... [D]uring the last 20 years, we have *all* moved irrevocably into a new kind of social space.²

This paper seeks to explore an awkward cohabitation of two rather different geographies, both in Rouse's seminal work and in the notion of transnationalism more generally. On the one hand, the transnational operates as a figure that liquefies geographies, contests appeals to local contexts and local studies, and evokes a condition in which we are all in some ways implicated. On the other hand, the transnational also operates as a more grounded and grounding notion, with the proven potential for correcting overgeneralized accounts of cultural globalization and displacement. In this vein, focusing on transnational geographies is seen to offer a corrective 'view from below' to portraits of globalization that centre on the homogenizing operations of global capital and its adjuncts (cf. Smith, 2001). Moreover, transnational studies are applauded for their track record of providing textured empirical materials to set alongside more abstract, epistemological and celebratory explorations of multiple and mobile subjectivities, migrant positionalities, border crossings and translations (Mitchell, 1997b).

In that light, this paper critically examines the notion of transnational space. More specifically, it sets out our concerns over the geographical 'grounding' of transnational discourse. It begins by identifying three principal worries that have been raised in the light of the growing popularity of the figure of the transnational – concerns about scope, specificity and politics. Together these have led to a chorus of calls for the concept's 'regrounding' in studies of particular people and places or, in Katheryne Mitchell's

apposite phrasing, the bringing of geography back in (Mitchell, 1997b). However, we have some ambivalence towards these appeals and how they enlist geography in the cause of regrouping. In particular, we argue that the resultant emphasis on identifying and comparing specific, located 'transnationals' and 'transnational communities' provides empirical specificity and texture at the cost of: (a) remaining, paradoxically, locked within a national geographical imaginary of culture and identity; (b) an overdrawn distinction between nationals and transnationals; and (c) an unhelpful pre-occupation with 'disciplining' transnational studies and concepts. Drawing on some evidence from our own work, we suggest that commodity culture offers a productive lens through which to view transnational spaces – one that can locate accounts of the transnational in the particular movements of things, people, ideas and capitals, yet avoids 'fixing' transnational space into overly simplistic and concrete forms. In place of such static conceptualizations, we conceive of transnationality as a multidimensional space that is multiply inhabited and characterized by complex networks, circuits and flows.

II Grounding transnationalism (take one): transnational communities

The current fashionability of concepts of transnationalism has not been universally welcomed. Several authors have noted with obvious despair that transnationalism does not, as yet, operate as a tightly defined analytical concept. To the frustration of some (for example, Portes, 1997; Portes *et al.*, 1999), its deployments have been varied both in conceptual premises and empirical applications. In reviewing this diversity, Steve Vertovec (1999) – the Director of ESRC's 'Transnational Communities' research programme – identifies no less than six interrelated strands of work concerned with transnationalism. These include studies of transnationalism as social morphology, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural reproduction, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement and as a reconstruction of 'place' or locality. While himself keen to avoid closing down research avenues, Vertovec admits that 'the excited rush to address an interesting area of global activity and theoretical development' has precipitated a conceptual muddle (1999: 448). Others have voiced similar objections in more strongly negative tones, raising worries about overgeneralization (particularly the masking of differences between various transnational processes and experiences), exaggeration (particularly the equation of the transnational with an epochal 'postnational') and romanticism (particularly through the inference that the transnational is inherently transgressive and resistant). Let us think a little more about each of these criticisms.

First, then, several authors have argued that notions of transnationalism have been deployed too sweepingly, with too little attention to place-specific variations in the form of cross-border activities and sensibilities. After all, 'displacement ... is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space, and does not unfold in a uniform fashion' (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996: 4); or, as Carole Fabricant (1998) puts it, while many people may appear to be 'riding the waves of (post)colonial migrancy' one has to question whether 'we are all really in the same boat' (see also Krishnaswamy, 1995). Putting the point deliberately starkly, Fabricant argues that transnational theories 'must address the yawning gulf separating those privileged groups apparently able to flit around the world at will from the much larger group of migrants threatened with

incarceration' (1998: 26). Similar juxtapositions are made by Caren Kaplan, as she reflects on the deployment of the notion of 'a world without boundaries' in a range of popular and academic discourses (Kaplan, 1995: 45):

Just how tempting and powerful is the notion of 'a world without boundaries' at this historical juncture? . . . As free-trade zones proliferate and tariffs are dismantled, mobility, flexibility, and speed have become the watchwords of both the traders and the theorists in metropolitan cultures. The notion of a 'world without boundaries' . . . appeals to conservative, liberal and progressive alike – the multinational corporation and the libertarian anarchist might choose to phrase their ideal world in just such terms. But can the formation of free trade zones and post-modern theories of diasporic subjects be equated?

So, it is argued that the transnational needs specifying and locating, its geography re-emphasized.

A second related set of worries centres on questions of historical specificity, challenging the epochal overtones that concepts of transnationalism have sometimes acquired. This involves both contesting transnationality's alleged novelty and challenging the implication that the nation state has diminished in significance as a unit of social analysis. Transnationalism has long and complex historical geographies, which elisions of the 'trans-' with the 'post-' (postnational, postcolonial, etc.) can occlude.³ As Nancy Foner argues, 'Transnationalism is not new, even though it often seems as if it were invented yesterday' (1997: 355). Indeed, an understanding of past forms of transnationalism is vital if we are to grasp something of its present complexities, and how it weaves together in the present both colonial and postcolonial impulses.⁴

Moreover, while transnationalism may have radical implications for our understanding of citizenship and nationhood, the nation state continues to play a key role in defining the terms in which transnational processes are played out. Nina Glick Schiller, in her critique of some of the more celebratory studies of transnational identity formation, argues: 'while borders may be cultural constructions, they are constructions that are backed by force of law, economic and political power, and regulating and regularizing institutions. What they come to mean and how they are experienced, crossed or imagined are products of particular histories, times, and places' (1997: 159).

A third set of worries concerns the frequent assumption that the politics of transnationalism are necessarily progressive. For some authors, transnationalism resonates with progressive possibilities through its epistemological emphasis on destabilizing fixed constructs of people and place. From such a perspective, there are clear distinctions to be drawn in cultural-political terms between stasis, tradition, rooting and emplacement (seen as politically constraining, conservative and hegemonic) and movement, flow and boundary crossing (seen as politically transgressive and resistant) – see, for example, Cresswell (1996). *Routes* are cast as better than *roots*, to put it crudely. For others, it is the ontological emphasis on forms of flow that are not simply imposed 'from above' but emerge 'from below' that makes the concept of transnationalism so attractive. Within this perspective a range of transnational cultural studies have sought to explore the ways in which global cultural flows are used, inhabited and indeed enacted by 'resistant' populations worldwide. This may involve an emphasis on the local 'indigenizations' of global products (Hannerz, 1992) or the roles played in their reproduction by 'local' or 'transnational' citizens. Thus, when American sports logos for the Chicago Bulls, the LA Lakers or the New York Knicks turn up in even the remotest towns and villages of Belize, a process of cultural imperialism might be the immediate diagnosis; but the research from which this example is taken (Miller Matthei, 1998)

insists that such findings cannot be taken as evidence of a generalized 'Americanization' process. Instead, they are interpreted as the product of specific inter-personal networks of Belizean migrants in the USA. American sports clothes are thoroughly imbricated in transnational Belizean social, economic and cultural circuits, and in reproductions of distinctively Belizean cultural economies.⁵

However, there is nothing intrinsically 'given' about the politics of transnationality, and those who make appeals to concepts of non-fixity, in-betweenness and third spaces as inherently progressive construct transnationality in equally one-dimensional terms as those who equate transnationality with the operations of monolithic, American-centred transnational corporations (Mitchell, 1997b; 1997c). This stand-off between political-economy perspectives that define transnationalism as driven 'from above' through the operation of powerful corporate and suprastate agencies – a placeless power impacting on powerless places, in Gillian Hart's (1999) phrase – and culturalist framings of transnationalism as actor-directed 'from below' is unhelpful to say the least.

Taken together, these three strands of criticism – on the scope, specificity and politics of transnationalism – have led to calls for the (re)grounding of transnational studies: empirically, conceptually and disciplinarily (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998: 11). Such a move would, it is argued, avoid the more rarefied, abstract and ultimately fetishistic vocabularies of transnationalism. It would locate cultural forms and articulations of cultural identity in more solid grounds (for some this ground is political economy, for others it is ethnographically represented local experience) and it would provide a disciplinary and institutional setting within which to impose some order on the field and instil a stronger ethos of support for more 'solid' empirical and conceptual work.

Thus Katharyne Mitchell argues for the grounding of transnational vocabularies in accounts of the actual movements of things and people across space (Mitchell, 1997b: 110–12; cf. Mitchell, 1997c; 2003):

without 'literal' empirical data related to the actual movements of things and people across space, theories of anti-essentialism, mobility, plurality and hybridity can quickly devolve into terms emptied of any potential political efficacy . . . It is through the contextualization of concepts such as hybridity and margins . . . that theories of transnationalism can best serve a progressive politics of the future.

Similar arguments have also appeared in recent anthropological writing where the projects of ethnography and political economy are frequently set in opposition to a 'cultural studies' approach and its (empirically ungrounded) appropriation of transnational vocabularies. A particularly spirited example comes from Ong and Nonini as they lambast the journal *Public Culture* and what they call its 'lite anthropology' of transnationalism (1997: 13):

The earlier promise of ethnographies investigating the cultural and social effects of transnational identities in third world societies . . . has lately been diluted by an American cultural studies approach that treats transnationalism as a set of abstracted, dematerialized cultural flows, giving scant attention either to the concrete, everyday changes in people's lives or the structural reconfigurations that accompany global capitalism . . . [W]hat has often dropped out of this approach is an interest in describing the ways in which people's everyday lives are transformed by the effects of global capitalism, how their own agencies are implicated in the making of these effects, and the social relationships in which these agencies are embedded.

Smith and Guarnizo likewise criticize the more abstract tendencies of recent transnational research. It is clear, they argue, that practices remain 'embedded in enduring asymmetries of domination, inequality, racism, sexism, class conflict and uneven

development' (1998: 6), forces that are all too easily elided in empirically ungrounded studies of cultural hybridity where it may be implied that cultures 'mix and match' on remarkably equal terms. Glick Schiller (1997), too, calls for a reconnection between the study of cultural representations and the exploration of structures of inequality.

While we sympathize with these calls for 'grounding' the study of transnationalism, we want to raise three important concerns. First, we are uneasy about the call for a more circumscribed quasi-disciplinary approach to the study of transnationalism. This, we feel, risks 'grounding' the concept in an overly fixed and static set of definitions. Some recent attempts to construct an identifiable and clearly bounded field of transnational studies have gone so far as to provide a set of 'conceptual guidelines' that all future research on transnationalism should follow. Portes *et al.* (1999: 219), for example, insist that such research should begin by delimiting the object of study (restricting the transnational to 'occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation'); defining the unit of analysis (individuals, networks, communities, institutional structures); distinguishing between types of transnationality (economic, political, etc.); and identifying necessary conditions (such as the existence of appropriate technology). Whether directed at establishing a coherent body of transnational studies, or in reclaiming them to the traditional projects of already established disciplines, this sort of disciplining, we feel, unduly closes down the field of transnational studies.

Perhaps more importantly, this conceptual disciplining rests upon a clear demarcation of what and who counts as truly transnational. Portes suggests that 'true transnationals' are 'at least bi-lingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require a simultaneous presence in both' (1997: 16). A strict definition of 'transnationality', Portes concludes, requires near-instantaneous communication across national borders and long distances, the involvement of substantial numbers of people in these activities which, once a critical mass is reached, tend to become normative (1997: 18). While there are good reasons for rejecting the endless extension of the concept to the point where we are all now, equally and indistinguishably, 'transnational', there are also dangers in too narrowly specifying such distinct transnational groups. For instance, in so doing, transnationalism may be recuperated into long-standing ethnic discourses of national 'minoritization' and 'majoritization' (Brah, 1996: 189). In other words, notions of transnationals and transnational communities all too easily become synonymous with national 'ethnic minorities', and point to the exceptional transnational geographies of these groups, while overlooking the transnational connections of so-called national 'majorities'.

A body of work which flirts with this danger is that which compares and contrasts varying 'global diasporas' (Cohen, 1997). There is undoubtedly much valuable work to be done in empirically specifying and conceptually typologizing different diasporas, marked as they are by different circumstances of leaving, different forms of settlement and different imaginations of themselves as a community (Stratton, 1997).⁶ So, for example, Robin Cohen has usefully distinguished between 'victim', 'imperial', 'labour', 'trade' and 'cultural' diasporas, and set about expressing their different spatialities (using horticultural metaphors to evoke these as 'weeding', 'sowing', 'transplanting', 'layering' and 'cross-pollinating', respectively) (1997: 177–96). Nonetheless, as Avtar Brah has argued, outlining the spatialities of different diasporas needs to go hand in

hand with the rather different project of explicating the character of 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996: 209). For Brah, diaspora space is a concept and reality inhabited by people who may not belong to identifiable diasporas, a space of national reconfiguration that involves both supposed 'majorities' and 'minorities' (1996: 209):

In the diaspora space called 'England', for example, African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish and other diasporas intersect among themselves as well as with the entity constructed as 'Englishness', thoroughly re-inscribing it in the process.

Or more generally (1996: 209):

My argument is that diaspora space as a conceptual category is 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.

Diaspora space, then, is multiply and differently inhabited, and alludes to transnational cultural geographies that cannot be regrounded in identifiable diasporic communities.⁷

This connects to our third concern, namely that in seeking to avoid vague and uncritical appeals to the fluid and the mobile, attention to identifiable diasporic or transnational people, institutions and communities fails to break sufficiently from more conventional, and in particular national, geographic imaginaries. To put it simply, in such transnational studies the spaces of cultural identity and belonging are rightly remapped in ways that problematize and complicate the assumption of national territories. 'Triadic' geographies of belonging are emphasized instead, combining a place of residence, a sense of homeland elsewhere and a sense of belonging to a diasporic community (Vertovec, 1997; see also Karamcheti, 1992; Sheffer, 1986; Saffran, 1991). However, this manoeuvre continues to focus on bounded communities even as it redraws their location in space. It also continues to conceive of cultural geographies in terms of identity as belonging. Consider, for example, Robin Cohen's working definition of diaspora and diasporic community (1997: ix):

The idea of a diaspora . . . varies greatly. However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that 'the old country' – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom and folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak, or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstance of historical period, but a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link within their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background.

Co-ethnicity, belonging, loyalty – these fundamentals of the national imaginary remain the touchstones of this sort of transnational, diasporic study.

A sense of an alternative is given if we break from the grounding of transnationalism in migration studies and concepts of diaspora based upon them. Artemis Leontis (1997) makes just such a move in her 'spatial study' of the nineteenth-century Greek author Demetrios Vikelas. Here, Leontis distinguishes between two topographies of the Mediterranean, based on the notions of *diaspora* and *emporion*. Etymologically, *diaspora* evokes the notion of a scattered people or stock – *speiro* being 'to sow', *dia* being 'over' or 'throughout'. In contrast, *emporion* translates literally as 'commerce', and etymologically evokes ideas of 'motion', 'passage', 'traffic', through the verb *poreuo* ('to set in

motion, make cross, secure passage'). These two topographies in turn produce rather different geographies of the Mediterranean. In the diasporic imagination (Leontis, 1997: 189):

It is a *mediterranean* topography in the weaker sense of the word, referring to a strictly circumscribed midland *terra*. Society is organized in self-sufficient, self-enclosed states . . . Minorities subterraneously disrupt the feigned homogeneity of the larger collectivities, though they cannot fully undermine their sovereignty; they can only mark its limits.

In contrast, the notion of *emporion* suggests to Leontis (1997: 189):

. . . a *medi-terranean* topography in the strong sense of that word. It brings to mind an inland sea, surrounded by land. Human society comes together in cosmopolitan port cities . . . The common interest of keeping things in circulation is the cities' glue . . . It is not a world of boundaries that separate but of routes that connect. At its center is not a sovereign power that subordinates pockets of difference, but dark, fluid waters, the medium of dangerous yet fruitful passage, which continuously feed an inwardly undulating, outwardly radiating circumference.

For Leontis, then, the Mediterranean Sea is interesting as a potential 'counter-topoi' (1997: 192), a literally fluid maritime space (notably not a ground) that figures transnational geographies differently from the land-based scatterings of diaspora.

In this spirit, we do not want to suggest that transnational studies based on notions of diaspora and migration are in any way illegitimate, inappropriate or unhelpful. We do, however, want to suggest that restricting transnationalism as a geographical concept to diasporic and migrant people, institutions and communities, as part of an attempt to reground transnational studies, can be all of these. Implicit in our discussion has been an ambivalence towards recent calls for a *re-grounding* of transnational studies. The idea of the ground, as a geographical bedrock, is perhaps too appealing, too easy, layering on top of each other impulses for empirical texture and specificity, disciplinary solidity and a conceptualization of geography that is reassuringly secure and familiar. The issue, it seems to us, is to find ways to explore transnational geographies empirically without fixing the transnational on identifiable transnational communities, while being open to other more fluid and multidimensional cultural geographies.

III Grounding transnationalism (take two): studying transnational commodity culture

Drawing on our own work, we suggest that transnational commodity culture provides a particularly productive entry point into this wider conceptualization of transnational space. The study of transnational commodity culture widens the field of study to encompass a range of activities, goods, people and ideas that would not qualify as transnational if the term were restricted solely to 'an on-going series of cross-border movements in which *immigrants* develop and maintain numerous economic, political, social and cultural links in more than one nation' (Mitchell, 2000: 853; emphasis added). Through empirically grounded studies of transnational commodity culture we argue that there is potential to widen the envelope of what might be reasonably described as transnational and deepen how we understand transnational space. Our research on transnational commodity culture seeks to operationalize Leontis's space of the *emporion* and its associated 'traffic in things' (Appadurai, 1986; Jackson, 1999). Rather than starting from identifiable transnational communities, it is inspired by Appadurai's

injunction 'to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories . . . it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (1986: 5).

In making this move, we seek to broaden the concept of transnationalism beyond the narrow confines of specific ethnically defined 'communities' and to encompass all who inhabit the transnational spaces of, in our case, contemporary commodity culture. A focus on commodity culture allows us to embrace many of the strengths of recent accounts of transnationality outlined above while simultaneously avoiding the problems we have identified with this literature. It allows us to trace the global flows of specific commodities and cultural styles without falling into an uncritical celebration of what Mitchell (1997a) describes as the 'hype of hybridity'. It allows us to trace the leakiness of commodity culture beyond the confines of specific ethnically defined communities without implying that we are all equally and in the same way transnational. It allows us to explore the commodification of 'ethnic' difference without reinscribing simple dichotomies between minoritized transnationals and ethnically unmarked members of a nationalized 'mainstream' majority.

Before drawing on some examples from our recent work on British South Asian transnational commodity culture in relation to food and fashion to develop this argument, we want to first emphasize the value of a commodity cultures approach to transnationality by situating it within current debates about consumption geographies. In a recent paper, Peter Jackson (2002) outlines an approach to studying the geographies of contemporary commercial culture. He suggests that focusing on commercial cultures may enable us to transcend the unhelpful divide between 'the economic' and 'the cultural', recognizing that these divisions mask the extent to which 'cultural meanings are regularly appropriated for economic ends . . . [and] . . . that the apparently rational calculus of the market is inescapably embedded within a range of cultural processes' (2002: 5). In the same paper, Jackson argues for a commodity circuits approach to understanding commercial cultures, drawing on the work of Whatmore and Thorne on food networks (1997) and that of Crang and Cook on 'eating places' (Crang, 1996; Cook and Crang, 1996). Cook and Crang argue that the networks associated with food (including production, retail, marketing and consumption geographies) can be traced laterally through complex networks rather than via vertical 'commodity chains'. These lateral networks produce a set of metaphors of understanding which emphasize 'entanglement', 'juxtaposition' and 'displacement' rather than the metaphors of unveiling or unmasking the 'commodity fetish' (Harvey, 1990). Thus Cook and Crang (1996: 138) argue:

in terms of food consumption the figure of displacement might be used to suggest an understanding whereby processes of food consumption are cast as local, in the sense of contextual; but where those contexts are recognized as being opened up and constituted through connections into any number of other networks . . . furthermore where imagined and performed representations of 'origins', 'destinations' and forms of 'travel' surround these networks' various flows; and where consumers (and other actors in food commodity systems) find themselves socially and culturally positioned, and socially and culturally position themselves, not so much through placed locations as in terms of their entanglements with these flows and representations.

Thus a commodity circuits approach is helpful in seeking to understand the complexity of commodities which can be understood as 'complex, mutable, and mobile sets of social relations, cultural identity and economic power' (Castree, 2001: 1519–20). Indeed, commodities can be understood as many things (Watts, 1999): the product and

embodiment of social relations of production; a form of aesthetics, or, to use Haug's definition (1986), 'sensual understanding'; a means of realizing an exchange value; the product of particular businesses and organizational geographies; and a resource allowing the objectification of social relations for consumers. It is this multi-dimensionality of commodities which our research on transnational commodity cultures has sought to explore through a commodity circuits approach. A commodity circuits approach also recognizes the value in distinguishing between commodities themselves and processes of commodification and commoditization (Castree, 2003), recognizing the need to understand how, as Appadurai argues, 'the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things' (1986: 17).

Our approach to the study of the commodity culture associated with British-South Asian transnationality has much in common with Appadurai and others' approach to the study of public culture in South Asia (Appadurai, 1986; 1998; Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1988; Breckenridge, 1995), focusing (in our case) on the flows of particular transnational commodities between the Indian subcontinent and Britain. Unlike more conventional single-site ethnographies, such an approach involves what George Marcus has characterized as multisited ethnography: 'tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity' (1995: 96).⁸ The appropriate methods for such a study are designed to follow 'chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations' (1995: 105), as illustrated, for example, in the work of James Clifford (1997) on travel and translation or in Nicholas Thomas's (1991) work on the mutual 'entanglement' of material objects and (post-)colonial histories. The work of Thomas is a particularly helpful reminder of the historical antecedents that might be traced alongside our contemporary discussions of transnational commodity cultures (cf. Ogborn, 2002).⁹

Our own research, funded as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Transnational Communities' programme, involved a study of the transnational commodity flows between Britain and the Indian subcontinent in relation to the food and fashion sectors. This research began with a more expansive understanding of transnationalism than previous studies. As we have already argued, most previous studies of transnationalism have restricted their analysis to those who are themselves transmigrants. Even where researchers have spoken in broader terms, such as Nyberg Sørensen's (1998) reference to the 'Dominicanization' of New York City or Mahler's (1998) expansion of the definition of transnationalism to include those who do not themselves migrate, the analysis still has a very restricted scope.¹⁰ In contrast, our understanding of transnational commodity culture emphasizes that this is a space which is inhabited by a whole range of differently positioned actors, including producers (owners of labour and capital), wholesalers, buyers and retailers (in supermarkets and specialist outlets) and cultural intermediaries (including advertisers, journalists and other expert writers), as well as a wide array of consumers in a wide range of places. Within all these positions, of course, investments in and experiences and expressions of transnationality are themselves likely to vary. Seeking to understand this broader, more extroverted field of transnational social space, our research involved a number of phases. These included: an overview of the food and fashion sectors (based on secondary sources and company interviews); the selection of a smaller number of case-study firms for in-depth interviewing, work-shadowing and more ethnographic

styles of research; and a series of focus groups with consumers in Britain (London) and India (Mumbai/Bombay). Our approach is explored in more detail in Dwyer and Crang (2002), Dwyer and Jackson, (2003) and Dwyer (2003).

Through this empirical work we were able to develop an argument which emphasized that 'transnationality' is *multiply inhabited*. By this we mean that the social space encompassed by the circuits, flows, trajectories and imaginaries of British-South Asian transnational commodity culture includes a wide variety of actors who have varying investments in, experiences of and expressions of transnationalism. Thus, our case-study firms included companies run by British-Asian entrepreneurs (such as Daminis clothing company or Pataks food manufacturers) but also companies whose founders were not part of this Asian diaspora (such as the fashion retailer EAST and the food company Sharwoods). Detailed ethnographies of firms run by British-Asian entrepreneurs highlighted the involvement of a wide range of other intermediaries, including buyers, retailers and cultural intermediaries such as food writers and stylists, widening the envelope of transnational social space. A focus on the variety of consumers involved in this transnational commodity culture also highlighted the complexity and multiple inhabitation of this transnational social field. The multiple inhabitation of transnational social space is also emphasized in the comparison we make between the two food companies Pataks and Sharwoods (see Jackson, 2002) in terms of how the two companies chose to develop the transnational imaginaries associated with their brands in various advertising media.

This comparison of the various ways in which transnational imaginaries might be mobilized by different companies also provides evidence for the second argument we want to make about the relationships between transnationalism and contemporary commodity culture. Our research reveals the various *dimensions* of transnationalism that can be traced in an analysis of commodity culture. Thus, we can think about transnationalism in a biographical sense in terms of the personal familial biographies of particular entrepreneurs or in tracing the histories of specific firms. In the case of Sharwoods or Pataks, both companies have transnational histories rooted in specific biographical stories – Sharwoods through an association with a legacy of colonial trade, Pataks via the much-vaunted story of ethnic entrepreneurship. Both are transnational biographies, although routed rather differently. Similarly, a comparison of clothing companies Daminis (Dwyer, 2003), EAST and Anokhi (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003) or Ghulam Sakina (Dwyer and Crang, 2002) reveals a variety of different biographical stories which reveal the complexity of transnational connections between Britain and the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the history of a family company like Anokhi links British missionary connections with India, with the families of the Rajastani élite providing a contemporary echo of past colonial transnational textile commodity culture. In contrast, Ghulam Sakina, the fashion design company founded by British-born Asian Liaqat Rasul, illustrates the ways in which a familial immigrant transnational biography is entwined with professional transnational linkages developed through education and professional contacts.

The case study of Ghulam Sakina highlights another dimension of transnationality: transnationalism as business practice. This involves tracing and analysing the transnationalities associated with networks of suppliers, sourcing and production. In terms of the fashion industry, our research reveals both the complex ways in which production is 'managed' across transnational space (see Dwyer and Crang, 2002; Dwyer, 2003) and

the complex trajectories of transnationality involved in the manufacture of goods which are marked as 'transnational' (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003). Thus, small-scale producers of clothes for the British-Asian market may be involved in detailed transnational exchanges involving the manufacture of an individual garment (Dwyer, 2003; see also Bhachu, 1998), while larger companies may organize design, fabric sourcing, production and quality assurance across transnational space (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003). Similarly, our research on the public culture associated with the restaurant trade emphasized debates about the transnational exchange of ingredients (particularly spices) and the role of the transnational labour market with regard to specialist chefs.

Both the transnationality of personal biographies and company histories and the transnationalism of business practice can be traced literally through transnational space as well as discursively through the representational practices of the case-study companies. It is this third dimension of transnationality that we now want to highlight, and this is to emphasize the role of transnationality in terms of the *stylization* of a company's products. In both food and fashion sectors, 'Indianness' is a constructed and highly contested signifier, the meaning of which varies according to context (cf. Brah, 1978; Gillespie, 1995; Dwyer, 1999). Like 'Chineseness' in the account of Ong and Onini (1997), it is 'an inscribed relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities' (1997: 3–4). Like the notion of 'Chinese identity' studied by Lily Kong among Singaporean transmigrants, it is also a 'resource' that can be mobilized for economic gain but which can also elicit negative treatment (Kong, 1999b: 233). Our task in tracing 'the social life of things' in the commercial world of British-South Asian transnationality was therefore to understand the different contexts in which ethnic markers are mobilized, by whom (and for whom), in which ways and with what consequences. Our research revealed the variety of ways in which 'transnationality' was produced imaginatively in the fashioning of products for consumption. Several examples from our research on fashion illustrate this point.

Our comparison of the companies EAST and Anokhi (Dwyer and Jackson, 2003) highlights the careful managing of concepts of 'difference', 'the ethnic', 'India' and 'design' in the marketing and retailing of their clothes. As our analysis shows, associations with 'ethnic fashion' are complex and vary across time and space. They can both open up and restrict the market for transnational fashion. Our case study of Ghulam Sakina (see Dwyer and Crang, 2002) traces the ways in which one young designer, Liaqat Rasul, engages with what we define as the commercial spaces of multicultural. Rasul engages both imaginatively and materially with the multicultural. This affects the aesthetic design of his clothes but also their commercial placement in terms of how he negotiates his own position within the competitive marketplace of contemporary fashion. For companies such as Damini or Sequinze who market to a predominantly British-Asian clientele (and increasingly beyond this niche market to a broader customer base), transnational stylization is managed through a negotiation between the discursive oppositions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (see Dwyer, 2003).

Returning to our emphasis on the multiple inhabitation of transnational social space, these contested transnational imaginaries and representations are inextricably entangled with the material and social relations of transnational commodity cultures. They are themselves variously understood and interpreted by the range of different consumers who formed the other focus for analysis in our research on the circuits of transnational commodity culture. Consumers bring their own transnational

imaginaries and geographical knowledges to the practices of consumption, thus opening up a further dimension to our understanding of transnational social space.

IV Conclusions

Our research on transnational commodity culture, illustrated here through some brief examples, seeks to 'ground' the concept of transnationalism through an examination of the specific movements of particular people, things and ideas, examining their material and symbolic geographies. While we are keen to 'ground' the research in terms of our specific case-study evidence, we have also emphasized the transnational flow of people, goods and ideas associated with these specific commodities. Our approach seeks to illustrate how commodity culture offers a particularly productive means through which to refigure the study of transnationalism. There are a number of reasons for this. First, through our emphasis on the circuits of commodity culture we are seeking to extend the social space of British-Asian transnationality beyond the confines of specific, ethnically defined communities. While it is important to recognize the diverse connections British-Asian communities have with their places of residence in the UK, with their real and imagined homelands in South Asia and with fellow South Asian transnationals elsewhere in the diaspora, it is important to extend the boundaries of transnationality to include differently located groups and individuals who may or may not be members of these specific 'ethnic' communities. For example, we aim to emphasize the role that British-Asian firms play in a wider transnational field that is *multiply inhabited* by a range of actors, including differently positioned producers, cultural intermediaries and consumers with different degrees of 'investment' in British-Asian commodity culture. Such a view expands the notion of transnationality beyond specific 'ethnic' groups and actively destabilizes traditional views of 'Britishness' by refusing to restrict the transnational to members of specific ethnically defined minority groups. This more expansive view of transnationality also recognizes its historical antecedents and wider contemporary resonances.

Second, we are exploring a field that is not only multiply inhabited but also *multidimensional*. As we have argued, commodity culture has this multidimensionality at its heart in so far as a commodity is inherently many things. We wish to suggest that commodity culture is a particularly powerful lens through which to see the many dimensions of transnationality, and the disjunctures between them, whether in terms of transnational biographies, transnational modes of business organization and practice, or transnational stylizations that characterize contemporary commodity culture.

Third, we have argued that commodity culture is a valuable way of bridging the unhelpful separations of transnationality as an abstract cultural discourse and transnationality as a *lived social field*. Rather than insisting that the 'hype of hybridity' should be grounded in concrete analyses of real lives and political economies, commodity culture brings political and symbolic economies together. Cultural discourses and stylizations of identity are a central part of what is being produced, circulated and consumed, but always through specific material forms and through variable, economically motivated, social practices.

In this paper we have sought to open up the definition of transnationalism, moving beyond specific ethnically defined or spatially dispersed 'transnational communities' to

a more encompassing notion of transnational space. We have argued that this deepens our understanding of commodity culture including the current fashion for commodifying 'ethnic' difference. Conversely, we have also demonstrated that an emphasis on commodity culture has the potential to broaden and deepen our understanding of transnationality. To describe our case-study commodities as 'transnational' is not to imply that they are ungrounded. Rather, it is to insist that they are grounded in several places and in complex ways. Moreover, an emphasis on the transnationality of contemporary commodity culture does not deny the continued salience of the national in a globalizing world. Rather, it emphasizes the active constitution of identities through the process of commodification across specific national spaces.

Our approach has also sought to undermine ontological definitions of transnationality (in terms of what and who can be seen as transnational) and to challenge those who want to restrict its epistemological range (insisting on a particular disciplinary approach or narrowly defined subject matter). Our study of the transnational spaces of contemporary commodity culture focuses instead on the multiple strands involved in such transnational networks, with their complex cultural circuits of meaning fabricated from a range of social practices occurring across space. In tracing the symbolic imaginaries that circulate through these transnational spaces, we also remain convinced of the need to focus on the way they are materialized as practical accomplishments.

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Notes

1. See also Escobar (2001: 140) who argues that place continues to be important in the lives of people if we understand by place the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable) and connection to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power and never fixed.

2. In terms of the specific context of his own research, Rouse argues that 'the forces shaping [Mexican migrants'] lives are . . . coming to affect everyone who inhabits the terrain encompassed by Mexico and the United States' (1991: 18).

3. For elaborations see Chuh (1996) on 'transnationalism and its pasts', and McClintock (1992) on the potential dangers of invoking the 'post-'.

4. Compare Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) discussion of travel and transculturation which she analyses in terms of a series of 'contact zones': social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination, including colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths.

5. Though more nuanced in their detailed analysis, recent studies of the local contexts of

consumption of global products such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola can be interpreted in broadly similar terms (Gillespie, 1995; Miller, 1998).

6. There are, for example, clear contrasts between the portraits of transnationality found in Asia-Pacific studies – with their focus on the local impact of high-income transnational migrants and their strategies of capital accumulation, such as the Hong Kong Chinese in Vancouver studied by Mitchell (1995; 1997a) or the implications of transmigration for nation-building projects, such as the case of Singaporean transmigrants in China studied by Kong (1999a; 1999b) – and studies of low-income transnational groups in North America, such as rural Mexicans in California (as studied by Kearney, 1995; Kearney and Nagengast, 1989; Rouse, 1991; 1995a) or Haitian, Filipino and Dominican transmigrants in New York (studied by Basch *et al.*, 1994; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; and others).

7. Catherine Nash (2002) also contributes to this unsettling of the notion of 'indigeneity' in a rather different way in her study of the practice of genealogy and the possibilities it may offer for re-imagining the nation as a plural diaspora space.

8. Marcus (1995) advocates an approach which follows the people (especially migrants), the thing (commodities, gifts, money, works of art and intellectual property), the metaphor (including signs and symbols or images), the plot, story or allegory (narratives of everyday experience or memory), the life or biography (of exemplary individuals) or the conflict (issues contested in public space). Appadurai's (1998) attempt to trace the flow of persons, technologies, finance, information and ideology through a number of different 'dimensions' (termed ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, finanscaples and ideoscaples) reflects a similar methodological agenda.

9. Our approach to understanding transnationalism through commodity cultures is also comparable to the arguments about 'globalization from below' adopted by Henry *et al.* (2002) in their study of regeneration in postcolonial Birmingham.

10. In her analysis of an advertisement for Dominican rum, for example, Nyberg Sørensen (1998) restricts herself to an interpretation of the ad's reception among Dominicans in New York and in the Dominican Republic (excluding non-Dominican interpretations of the ad). The ad's content includes an ironic representation of Americans' inability to understand *merengue* or to talk Spanish ('*Ay americano, no sabe nada*') suggesting that the transnational field to which the ad alludes could be cast more widely than Nyberg Sørensen herself implies. Similarly, while Mahler raises questions about transmigrants as agents of change 'across entire transnational fields' (1998: 94) she is still preoccupied with members of particular (ethnically defined) transnational communities rather than with the transformations they may be effecting across a wider social field.

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