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Chapter 2
Roots and routes

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Introduction

At a conference in Adelaide in 2006, and immediately after the session in which I had presented a paper, a young woman who I later found out to be a German doctoral student from a New Zealand University approached me. She was very friendly and outgoing and I had noticed her sitting in a group in the audience and paying close attention during my presentation. After the usual small talk and a few questions about the subject matter of my presentation, she said, 'We were wondering what your background was ...' Well... the moderator had introduced me along with the Australian university and its faculty I work for. So this student was not referring to my academic discipline or professional background. She was actually asking me 'Where are you really from?' or where and what my 'roots' are. I told her I was born and raised in Sri Lanka but was now an Australian citizen by migration.

But, is my identity and background that simple or straightforward? Maybe not...

The following is a personal narrative about my experiences as to other people's assumptions and questions about my ethnic and national identity at different times and locations. Personal narratives are a form of qualitative research inquiry (Richardson 2000) and are also known as autoethnography or autobiographical sociology (Weerakkody 2009). They are a recollection of autobiographical memories (Subreenduth 2008) or
stories of certain events in a person's life, in an exercise of self-reflection, which allows for useful findings, analysis and the researcher's or author's own interpretations of the phenomena under discussion.

I begin my story by recalling my experiences in Sri Lanka and later in other countries regarding how different people presumed my identity, mistakenly giving me different labels, which I see as a result of my being a 'transcultural mixture' in a globalised world giving rise to 'different readings' of my 'body' or appearance in different ways in different contexts. The chapter will try to explain why and how this happens using existing scholarly theorising and research in the field of communication, such as Translation Theory.

Roaming across Sri Lanka

I was born in the north western hinterland of Sri Lanka – an island of only 65,525 square kms (or about 25,000 square miles) and located off the southern-most tip of the Indian subcontinent. Although a small island, it is vastly diverse – sub-culturally – due to the different regional, geographic, ethnic, religious and cultural variations between its approximately 21 million people. I got to experience a good chunk of this diversity due to my father's job with the government which posted him to different regions of the country and his job description requiring him to directly and closely work with the local population – both professionally and socially. The cosmopolitan life style of my parents which was manifested in our household and the people they socially interacted with both locals and other 'government servants' and their families added to these diverse experiences. Our family remained in contact with many of the friends we made in these diverse locations long after we moved away from them. In fact, a few of them are still in touch.

My father's job also required that he did not remain in the same locality for too long and as a result I had attended eight different schools in different towns by the time I was sixteen years old. As none of these towns was my parents' hometown, I invariably was an 'outsider' and the 'new girl' at each of these schools where most of the students belonged to the local population. My last school was an exception because it was located in the capital city, and due to its academic credentials, attracted students from families belonging to all walks of life and originating from almost all parts of the country. So there I was just a 'late comer' to the school arriving in Grade 10, while most of my classmates had been there since kindergarten or at least for several years.

The move across the country following my father's postings exposed my family to the various lifestyles of different geographic regions, social classes, ethnic and religious groups and their cultural practices such as the food, religious and cultural festivals, customs, habits and so on, that would otherwise not have been available to us. My mother learnt to cook the traditional dishes and the food preparation and preserving methods of the
local population, while we were exposed to the different slang, styles of speaking, and accents of the Sinhalese language in various parts of the country. The regions we lived in varied from the dry to the wet zones; from small and medium towns to the capital city which had different realities; from the hinterland to the coastal regions which possess specific and even unique cultural attributes, as well as social attitudes, beliefs, values and practices different from the rest of the country. In other words, today I find my life experiences are so varied and different from those of my Sri Lankan friends and acquaintances living in Sri Lanka or elsewhere.

My husband comes from the south westerly coastal region of the country, which introduced me to their different cultural aspects – even though we both belonged to the same ethnic and religious groups. He had attended the same school throughout and moved from his home town only when it came to taking up employment. Thereafter he had spent most of his years living and working in the capital city. After marriage, we continued to live in the capital city.

'Global roaming'

I always wanted to travel to see the world but only got the chance to do so for the first time in 1985, when I received a scholarship from my employer to undergo technical training in Japan. I spent six wonderful months in Okinawa, Japan which has a unique culture which is a cross between Chinese and Japanese cultures due to its history. It was also home to several large US military bases. As scholarship holders and guests of the Japanese government, we had a dual role to play both as trainees and cultural ambassadors of our home country, and were often invited to Japanese homes and to functions hosted by community and local government associations. Along with a few other trainees, I was invited by the wife of a senior US Air Force officer for dinner at her home on a military base, where I met several US military personnel of my age group from both sexes and different races. I took part in a real cultural exchange by learning the Japanese language, cuisine, Ikebana, Tea Ceremony, and other aspects of Japanese culture while making many local friends in the process. I loved the Japanese people for their friendliness, extreme politeness, helpfulness and hospitality. My three weeks on the mainland of Japan exposed me to aspects of the mainstream Japanese culture and life as well. In return, I conducted cookery demonstrations for local women's groups and dressed many Japanese friends in the Sri Lankan style Sari – called the Osariya. They loved to wear it and take photos to show their friends and family. In exchange, I had the chance to wear the Kimono on several occasions. I also met many Japanese who had visited Sri Lanka. They always made it a point to talk to me at length about the positive experiences they had while visiting Sri Lanka, and often loved its cuisine.

In 1988 I left Sri Lanka for the US to pursue postgraduate study. By then I had two sons – one just two years old and the other only five months.
We lived in university postgraduate student housing which was truly international due to the diversity of the tenants. I made friends with other students and their families and my kids played with children from various national backgrounds. We lived in Philadelphia and later in one of its suburbs until we moved to Australia.

In early 1995 we migrated to Australia sponsored by my sister who was already an Australian citizen. We have lived in Victoria since 1996. Between 1996 and today, I have visited several countries for conferences, again becoming exposed to a diversity of cultures. In 2007, I visited Sri Lanka for the first time since leaving in 1988, on my way to a conference in south India. The visit was only for five nights and six days and I stayed with friends. As I have no immediate family living there any more, returning for visits was not really a priority. I found the country had undergone such physical and cultural changes during the nineteen years I had been away it felt like I was visiting a foreign country where I could speak the local language.

Recently, while I was at the local supermarket close to my home in regional Victoria, I found a young Sri Lankan couple (probably students at the university located nearby), uttering private sweet nothings in Sinhalese just a few feet away from me, apparently not realising that I was 'one of them'.

Therefore, in this paper, I will explore the 'trans-cultural mixture' I have become due to the convoluted 'routes' I have followed in my life so far and how it may have shaped my identity and its implications, as I am obviously no longer automatically recognised as a Sri Lankan by my own people - whose 'roots' I share. At the same time, I am often asked by members of the local community in my town - generally the elderly, 'Where are you from?'. I cheekily answer 'Grovedale' - referring to the suburb I live in or where my 'route' has currently paused. So where am I from - really?

Mistaken identities

While some people ask me 'Where are you from?' others seem to assume I belong to a particular ethnic or national group. While living in Sri Lanka, I (along with my mother), were often presumed to be 'Burghers' (Eurasians of Dutch descent, who generally speak English and are not fluent in Sinhalese), even while the person was conversing with us in Sinhalese. This is probably due to our lighter than average complexion by Sri Lankan standards and our fluency in the English language. In the US, I was often approached by Latino (Spanish speaking) women asking for the time, directions or even to sell me religious publications, speaking in Spanish assuming I was one of them. This had happened in Philadelphia, New Brunswick in New Jersey, and New York. I had mentioned this to one of my Anglo-American classmates/friends and she was highly amused when this happened again in Washington D.C. while we were out shopping together.
However, my identity being mistaken as Latino happened in Australia too. At my workplace a few years ago, when the fire alarm had sounded, all staff in the building had rushed out of the building as advised by the public announcement and I joined the others in the assembly area designated for us. Even though I had been working in this building for several years and thought I knew almost everyone at least by sight, I was surprised to see many unfamiliar faces that day. Someone standing close to me looked as if she was from south Asia. We began talking and after making small talk about which department she was attached to, I found out she was a new academic staff member in our faculty, had earned her PhD at a university in New South Wales, and had moved to our town to take up this job. She mentioned she was originally from Venezuela, of part Venezuelan and part South American indigenous heritage. As she was quite friendly and we appeared to get along well, I mentioned that I had first assumed she was south Asian. She replied that she had assumed I was Latino like her. This made me realise that Latinos assuming I was 'one of them' had actually taken place the other way round too, when I mistook a Latina for south Asian, especially since she had brown skin.

Anglo-Americans usually assume anyone with brown skin is an Indian and most Americans had never heard of Sri Lanka. One classmate said she had to look up the world map to see where Sri Lanka was after meeting me, to see where I came from. At a conference in Finland in 2003, the young female journalist from the local newspaper who was present to cover the conference, came up to me and asked to interview me and take my photo. Australia had a large number of delegates at this conference so I wonder if she assumed I was Aboriginal when she sought me out, because a sibling of mine and partner who were at a conference in Denmark had been asked by some of the local delegates if they were Aboriginal.

These instances indicate how the colour of my skin served as a marker for others to give me an identity based on their assumptions and stereotypes. However, I must admit that I appear to have done the same.

'Are you from the States?'

In 2004 I was in Toronto and visited Centre Island - a popular amusement park. A ferry transported visitors to and from the island, and at the end of my excursion I was waiting at the jetty for the return trip. As I was the only waiting passenger and there was some time before the ferry arrived, I started talking to the young man who was the representative of the ferry company. From his appearance I assumed he was of south Asian origin. In the course of our conversation, he told me he was of Indian origin but born and raised in Trinidad and now a Canadian citizen. While discussing the job market and other aspects of Canada, he casually asked me 'Are you from the (United) States?'

This reminded me of an experience I had the previous year in Paris. I was on a bus tour of the city and we had stopped to visit Montmartre. The
guide gave us a briefing about the site and set a time for us to return to the bus, allowing us to explore the place on our own. On my way to the Montmartre shrine located on a hill, I passed the location well known for its street artists who draw caricatures of tourists for a small fee. I had seen such drawings made of people I know and knew that these artists were not very talented and the drawings rarely resembled the person. As I was also more interested in sight-seeing within the time available and not missing the bus, I did not wish to have a drawing of myself. So when a street artist approached me, I smiled, covered my face with both hands, shook my head from side to side and said ‘Oh... No... thanks...’ and briskly walked away. This appeared to annoy the artist who said ‘You Americans’ somewhat angrily, assuming I was an American tourist.

So apparently, my years of living in the US and Australia had made people mistakenly label me also as an ‘American’. However, another experience makes me wonder if it has anything to do with the way I dress. When we lived in Pennsylvania, my sons attended primary school there. I remember my older son telling me that his second grade class mates (who were a mix of racial and ethnic groups) insisted that I (his mother) was ‘American – not Sri Lankan’ as my son claimed and that ‘he was lying’ when he argued otherwise. My explanation for this assumption was that the mothers of other south Asian students in that school generally had long hair and wore Saris or other traditional clothes while I had short hair and wore western clothes, which the young children may have interpreted as ‘being not Sri Lankan but American’. In other words, they may have simply observed how I did not fit their own assumptions of my perceived cultural identity (as a south Asian). Even though some migrants living in the west often try to downplay their differences consciously by wearing western clothes and assimilating to the host culture in an effort to ‘be legitimate’ – especially in professional settings (Subedi 2009), I was simply dressing in western clothing the same way I always did for practical reasons in Sri Lanka in informal settings rather than in an effort to ‘cover or hide’ my ethnic identity while living in the west.

Up to now, I have simply discussed my experiences of different people’s assumptions related to where I am from I will next try to discuss these mistaken identities from various theoretical perspectives in the discipline of communication. These relate to the concepts of polysemy and the ‘body’, Translation theory, migrant identities, transcultural mixtures, and ‘floating signifiers’.

**Polysemy and the body**

These mistaken identities and being asked if your nationality is something other than what it really is, happen when our bodies invite polysemy (different readings of the same ‘body’ made by different people), because all texts have multiple denotative and connotative meanings. So the same person being assumed to be or asked about belonging to different nationalities
or ethnicities by different people is an example of this polysemy (Meschonnic 2003, p. 346). This polysemy can come into effect both in terms of the text (body) and the discourse (how a topic is being ‘talked about’ in society) about the ‘other’ (Chavez 2009, p. 23). Each of these readings or ‘translations’ of the body, privileges a different form of interpretation and different values (Appadurai 1996), behaviours such as mode of dress (Western clothes), how you speak English (accent or fluency in the spoken or written language) or how you look (skin colour) and act (as perceived as a member of a particular ethnic or national group such as a woman travelling alone). Often these may be based on stereotypes of ‘others’, and personal experiences of the individual carrying out the ‘reading’ of the ‘body’ of the ‘other’-from the perspective of the one doing the ‘reading’. Meschonnic (2003) argues that these translations are infused with colonialist and racist implications and are problematic because it is always bound to the cultural contexts from which the reading emerges. Chavez (2009, p. 24) points out that these translations can never provide true meaning (even if such is possible) because the languages used in ‘reading’ or ‘translation’ is never equivalent to each other.

The Translation Theory

Using Translation Theory related to the reading of the (other’s) body-as-text, one could examine the six basic aspects or ‘scapes’ people use in any given communication exchange (Chavez 2009, p. 25).

These are:

1. **The textual signifiers of the body** (e.g. race, gender, age, ability, clothing etc.) which may serve as a ‘genre’ in translating a body.
2. **Non-verbal communication** (e.g. emotions, proximics (related to personal distance and space), chronemics (related to timing), haptics (touch), and paralanguage (or sounds which are not words), which may be either intended or unintended). A reader needs to be familiar with the cultural meanings of these aspects of the ‘other’ to be able to translate them.
3. **Verbal communication** (actual words used).
4. **Primary context** (the immediate location or environment or the specific situation where the reader of the body-as-text is located in relation to the ‘other’).
5. **Historical context** (the interplay between the discourses of nation, power and education and so on linked to the cultural, regional or national history of the interactants, such as those of colonialism, racism, ethnocentrism etc.).
6. **Metaphysical communication** (the unconscious, subconscious, ideological and spiritual assumptions of individuals that covertly come into play in any communication interaction and embedded in discourses).

Chavez (2009, p. 26) further argues that all translations are made based on and in relation to the dominant discourse. Therefore, when examining
communication about and with (presumed) migrants when asking them ‘Where are you from?’ or assign ‘others’ a national or ethnic identity, one could gauge which of the above ‘scapes’, especially the less visible ones such as historical contexts and metaphysical communication, the speaker covertly or overtly relies on. This is because speakers also use the ‘self-other’ or ‘us-them’ dichotomy based on the taken-for-granted historical discourses. For example, in Australia, migrants who are non-white, have ethnic names or non-Australian accents may be asked ‘where they are from?’, more often than those who are white and have Anglo names such as those who migrated from New Zealand, Western Europe, UK, the USA and South Africa. In other words, when migrants and other people are rendered as suitably belonging to the mainstream, they are assumed ‘to belong’ and the relevant translation scapes (Chavez 2009) are discarded. However, the fact that I was perceived as ‘an American’ in Anglo settings in Paris, Toronto, and the USA itself, also indicates that alternative translations of migrant ‘bodies’ are also possible (Chavez 2009) because I was assumed to ‘suitably belong’ to the mainstream dominant group in these settings, when I actually did not.

Migrant identities

The effects of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being; people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things because they are so defined by others, by their otherness (Rushdie 1991, p. 24).

The concept of identity as linked to the modernist understanding of the world is that it is singular and unitary. But the postmodern view argues that identities are multiple, complex and continuously changing. Identities are also linked to society, power and circumstance, which in turn are linked to a person’s lived experiences, which are shaped by their social position as dominant and privileged or powerless and marginalised, and group memberships such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, nationality, education, occupation and so on, which gives rise to multiple lived experiences as well as identities (Grieshaber & Canella 2001).

Identity gives us a location or ‘place’ in the world and a link to the society we belong to. It also lets us understand the social, cultural, economic and political changes taking place around us (Woodward 2003, p. 1). But identity is never static and contains traces of the past, and what it is to become. It is a temporary resting place in the play of differences and the narratives of our own lives (Rutherford 1990, p. 24).

The identity of a person is constituted both discursively and interactively (Mokros 1996). Identity examines how a person fits in (or belongs) to the community and the social world and links our social position with social cultural situations (Woodward 2003), giving us a sense of personal location ( Weeks 1990). Identity tells us who we are and how we relate to others
and the world we live in, while telling us how and in what ways we are the same as or different from others (Woodward 2003, p. 2).

Transcultural mixtures

A transcultural mixture refers to a mix of hybrid or even a recombination of cultures with aspects retained from the 'parent' culture (that of birth or of actual parents). Such mixtures are common today due to ethnoscapes (Appadurai 1996) of people spending time outside the country of their birth for significant stretches of time due to migration, tourism, overseas study, as refugees, and guest workers. Narratives of the life experiences of such hybrid individuals or those with hybrid identities such as I am are complex, and different from those who are not (Gilroy 2003).

Contemporary migrants living in a mobile world of culturally open societies adapt to multiple social settings and to ethnically mixed contexts which may help them develop cross cultural competencies (Pecoud 2003) and immerse themselves in their country of settlement. This may lead them to not have a sense of primary identity or visible characteristics of belonging to a particular nationality or ethnicity. This may explain why the young Sri Lankan couple in the Australian supermarket failed to recognise me as 'one of them', or the Latinas in the USA thought I was another Latina, while the French street artist, my son's classmates and the young Canadian in Toronto assumed I was 'an American'.

I also remember meeting the Anglo-American partner of my Sri Lankan-born but US-raised cousin while attending a conference in Boston. I had been living in the US for about six years when I met her. My cousin's parents moved to the US from Sri Lanka when he was only a few months old. His parents, maternal grandparents and mother's brother (her only sibling) and his family all live in Florida. I found my cousin's partner very friendly and we got along quite well even though we had just met each other for the first time. After we had had dinner, the two of them drove me around the city showing me the sights. Suddenly, the partner asked me

'Are you his cousin from Florida?'

I replied, 'No, no...I am from his father's side'.

Then she asked me 'Where did you grow up?'

These situations may indicate that as Triandafyllidou (2009) suggests, the transnational ties and cultural experiences in several countries and cultures that I have developed over the years, may have made it hard for my cousin's partner to see me as 'from Sri Lanka' or guess my 'roots' while I feel like an 'alien' in my country of birth as I experienced when I visited Sri Lanka after an eighteen-year absence. In the US and elsewhere they find it hard to guess my ethnic and national origins while in Australia – my country of settlement – people often ask me 'where are you from?'

As Giddens (1991) observes, today individuals such as myself who have been exposed to and lived in various different cultures, will consciously or unconsciously choose from different cultural aspects of their life
experiences and knowledges that were available to them (known as cultural repertoires) to create their own identities, which may confuse those who try to ‘translate’ or ‘read my body’, resulting in my being assigned various national or ethnic identities.

Transcultural mixtures causes a person to undergo a metamorphosis, which need to be recognised because their identity is a compound result of many accretions which may even result in them becoming protean, taking many forms as the sea-god Proteus or to become versatile (Gilroy 2003, p. 323). Their identities therefore could also be ‘Floating’ (Hall 1996a).

I also found that this transcultural mixture applied not just to my identity or appearance but also to the way I speak and write in English. It is not just my English accent that appears to be a ‘mixture’, but also my pronunciation of specific words, choice of vocabulary and style of writing, especially with the conventions of punctuation, where I seem to mix up the British (as learnt in Sri Lanka), American and Australian styles. It creates a problem and a disadvantage for me when I submit my scholarly writing for publication to Australian outlets, where my writing style ‘gives me away’ as someone who was ‘not born in Australia’ (the same way my English accent does when I speak) and ‘not one of us’. It results in the readers or reviewers of my writings to perceive these differences as due to my having ‘made mistakes in writing style’ or ‘been careless’. I also had one of my senior colleagues suggesting my usage of the word ‘reputable’ in a specific document as wrong and that it should be ‘reputed’. The person thought it was quite funny and pointed it out with an air of superiority. So I looked up both words in the Oxford Dictionary of Australian English and found that both can be used correctly in the same context and informed the person about it by email. I am still waiting for a reply! However, I find this situation less problematic in US settings, hence I have ended up submitting to and publishing mostly in US outlets. At the same time, I have realised this is a dilemma faced by migrants to the US too as one of my US-based academic colleagues of Hong Kong Chinese origin did with a ‘blind reviewer’ (where the names and affiliations of both the author and reviewer are unknown to each other) of one of her journal article submissions. The reviewer had commented that ‘This paper looks like it was written by someone whose first language is not English.’ Unfortunately, the repercussions of such a situation may lead to an otherwise worthwhile paper being rejected for publication.

Floating signifiers

Stuart Hall (1996a) sees identity as a profound cultural impulse to classify our diverse human society according to distinct physical or intellectual characteristics or characteristics of the ‘body’. They help us make sense of the world and make human societies intelligible. However, this system of classification is linked to the existing power relations in society and shapes how certain groups are treated differently and unequally, while others,
often the dominant groups, are granted advantages and opportunities not available to 'others' like those of a different gender, race, ethnicity, or citizenship. Some groups are also assigned positive values and attributes while 'others' are given negative ones, which helps maintain the order of the system of power relations and the status quo.

However, Hall (1996a) points out that identities or classifications based on groupings such as race are not fixed but may change from one place or era to another. Hence he calls it a 'Floating signifier' because what (racial) difference signifies is never static or the same. This classification system of identity also indicates within a society where each person or group belongs or does not belong and what the hierarchies in that society are. These boundaries and hierarchies are carefully policed to make sure those who do not belong will 'know and stay in their place', that is not try to enter a privileged or higher social circle, profession, rank, or exclusive location that is 'above their given social position'. So when someone asks 'Where are you from?' it is because they see the other person, such as a person of colour in Australia, as being 'out of place' and 'not one of us', even if they may have been born in the country (Hall 1996b).

Epilogue

In February 2009, I was at an in-service workshop organised by my university for staff in our faculty. As the university has campuses at several geographic locations, we would know of some of our colleagues based at other locations only by their name. I was sitting with one such colleague during lunch and we introduced ourselves by name and the location of our campus. During our conversation she suddenly asked me “Where are you from?” I hesitated and asked “You mean as from Sri Lanka?” She replied, “No, No... I mean... from what (academic) discipline?”

So the question ‘Where are you from?’ and its response seem to be relative, contextual and varied in their intention and interpretation. At the same time, people may be asking that question out of curiosity or as an ice breaker and probably give me different identities based on their understanding or perceptions of what I may be, which perhaps I have taken too seriously.

On the other hand, Chow (1993) sees migrants as occupying a hybrid constitutive position of ‘insider and outsider’ in both their country of birth and country of settlement. They are seen as ‘others’ in the country of settlement as well as in the country of birth when they return. At the same time they can also be ‘insiders’ in both. So according to him, a migrant is a passenger in-transit between cultures for whom homelessness is the only home ‘state’ (Chow 1991; Coloma 2008, p. 27).

I had taken ‘root’ in and been ‘uprooted from’ several places. The ‘route’ I had taken in life has also been convoluted. My journey is likely to continue spreading my roots wider in Australia, my country of settlement, gradually making it become more like a complex network. So the next time
'WHERE ARE YOU FROM?'

someone asks me 'Where are you from?' what do they mean and more importantly, what should I say?

References


