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Challenges for Linguistic Human Rights: 'Designer immigrant' students in Singapore

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Abstract

Following an increase in awareness of how language is crucial to issues of social (in)equity, Linguistic Human Rights has developed as a prominent response to the threat of linguistic discrimination and marginalisation of peoples who speak and use a different language. This paper, however, challenges the normative principle behind LHR, by suggesting that processes of globalisation and transmigration pose difficult questions for LHR's assumptions regarding language and linguistic practices. I propose a theorisation of the 'designer immigrant' student with a focus on their peripatetic nature which is currently an under-researched aspect of migrant identity. Five of these individuals who had moved from China to study in Singapore are investigated through a questionnaire. Qualitative analysis of this data is bolstered by some ethnographic insight from my experience as a secondary school teacher in Singapore. In uncovering the attitudes and opinions toward the learning and use of English, as well as the aspirations of these five 'designer immigrant' students, it will be argued that LHR's precepts regarding language and identity are too essentialist, and hence incompatible with the sociolinguistic practices of such individuals who translocate indefinitely over scales of time and space. In order to avoid misrepresentation, any politics of empowerment via language and identity must avoid top-down imposition, and instead be constructed from the bottom up.

1. Introduction and aims

The role of language and linguistic ideology has oft been cited to be crucial in the perpetuation of social inequity (Ricento 2000, Heller and Martin-Jones 2001). This has come about due to our growing awareness that language serves to portray and proliferate relations of power and domination. A familiar scenario to sociolinguists today depicts individuals who are victims of structural or institutional injustice, as they are denied access to valued socioeconomic goods or the opportunity to develop their functional capability as citizens within a nation. One overwhelming factor for this discrimination is the kind and quality of linguistic capital one possesses (Bourdieu 1991).

Such phenomena were not unnoticed by me during my stint as a secondary school teacher in Singapore. Having spent my entire life in the country, I taught English for three years in a top-ranked local secondary school. Most of those three years were spent grappling with issues concerning immigrant students in the classes I taught. I witnessed at first hand the various contradictions between linguistic identities and practices prescribed by State institutions and those presented by these immigrant students. Their linguistic backgrounds, personal aspirations and attitudes to language learning were simply incompatible with conventional expectations, as schools persisted in pedagogy that ignored the sociolinguistic diversity of students. As with other diverse classroom environments with a monolingual English-only regime, one direct result is advantaging students who already possess high proficiencies in English, alongside those who do not, having less equitable access to acquiring the language within the classroom (Lin 2001).

On the other hand, we also now know that overtures to recognise Linguistic Human Rights have become a prominent and highly regarded response to counter the threat of linguistic

discrimination and consequent subordination of peoples (Wee 2010:3). The LHR argument¹ for social justice is that minority languages and their speakers within a locality, should be accorded the same levels of institutional recognition as majority languages and their users in the same social environment (May 2001:8). It may seem that LHR might be the panacea for the ostensible sociolinguistic quandary faced by immigrant students such as those I have taught.

Instead of affirming my support for LHR, I would like to contend that it might not be able to resolve the issues of incompatible identities I have observed in the Singaporean language classroom. It is these same processes of globalisation and immigration which cast serious aspersions on LHR's theoretical conception of language and linguistic practices. By focusing on a case study of a specific group of migrants in Singapore, it will be argued that these theoretical conceptions are too essentialist and incapable of accounting for observable human behaviour in a late-modern world². This is not to say that LHR has no utility at all. On the contrary, it does at times appear to be the best recourse left to minority language speakers confronting systemic and substantive discrimination. This paper aims not to debunk the empowering principle behind LHR, but seeks to demonstrate how there are innate flaws in its paradigm which are brought to bear by considering the translocation of peoples over time and space.

The focus of my study

In line with my own experiences as a teacher, this paper challenges dominant conceptions of LHR through the eyes of five immigrant students in Singapore. The study involves a standardised questionnaire given to five individuals with the possibility of follow-up questions for clarification on certain points they made. This data will be analysed qualitatively, supplemented by some ethnographic insight from my experience as a teacher. In uncovering the aspirations, attitudes and opinions towards language learning and use held by these students, it will be argued that the paradigm of linguistic human rights promotes a view of language that is incompatible with their linguistic practices.

This necessarily entails providing a tentative theorisation of a typology of 'migrant' that some scholars have called the 'designer immigrant' student³. While modern nation states tend to define individuals in terms of citizenship and belonging to a specific territoriality, the immigrant students I have come across appear to transcend these rules of modernity. They are, I would like to suggest, physical manifestations of social subjects that Braidotti (2006:266) has theorised as "non-unitary or nomadic visions of selves"; individuals who are able to 'transpose' themselves and adapt across geographical and temporal scales. While the label 'designer immigrant' student may not seem to capture this idea adequately, it is an appellation which has

¹ It must be noted that the LHR movement is not the only significant campaign for language rights. May (2005:319) identifies three separate movements: The Language Ecology movement (Muhlhausler 2000), the Linguistic Human Rights movement (Kontra et al 1999, Phillipson 2003) and the Minority Language Rights movement (May 2001, 2005). It is, however, the enshrinement of language rights as a basic human right and consequent purported universality that garners our attention in this paper.

² 'Late-modernity' has been used to denote complex societies not completely at a post-modern phase of development, but continuing to portray characteristics of modernity (Giddens 1991). Giddens (1990) also observes that there exists an intrinsic link between modernity and globalisation, in that changes to modernist structures and behaviours often correspond with the salience of phenomena associated with globalisation. Also see Bauman's (2001) similar expositions on Liquid Modernity.

³ De Costa (2010) names the group as such for the process of exclusive selectivity by which they arrived in Singapore. This will be more clearly explained in the third section that provides the background of these students.

been used before with regard to the same group of individuals in Singapore, and so it is a term I will use as well.

Singapore may be perceived as a developed nation similar to many others with low fertility rates and reliant on immigration policies to augment the population and labour force, whilst offsetting adverse conditions of an ageing citizenry. One particular interventionist policy involves attracting foreign youths from ethnocultural backgrounds similar to current citizens, to study and settle in Singapore. Our research will hence investigate this particular type of immigrant, a group of individuals who exemplify processes of de-territorialisation and pluralistic and transient, yet often constrained identities, themes crucial in trajectories of time and space. Their linguistic practices are sited within wider processes of globalisation, and are indicative of an unprecedented situation today where flows of people, information and goods have destabilised the authority of nation states like never before, and rendered sociopolitical boundaries ever more so permeable (Harris and Rampton ed 2003:3). Mediated by new forms of communication technology, these flows have inexorably resulted in new configurations of cultural practices, global activities and social organisations⁴ (Castells 1996).

It is with globalisation in mind, that we may utilise the sociolinguistic dispositions and actions of 'designer immigrant' students, as a lens through which to critique the ideological assumptions of LHR. This is not dissimilar to Omoniyi's (2006) post-structuralist approach to problematise modernist conceptions of language and identity. It will be demonstrated that the essentialist underpinnings of LHR are irreconcilable with the linguistic practices of 'designer immigrant' students in the following ways:

1. LHR assumes the ideological bind between race/ethnicity and a particular language; it is incapable of accounting for hybridity and multilingualism within individual identities.
2. LHR assumes that language is bound to a fixed territorial space; it is incapable of explaining transnational and translocal practices which straddle traditional socio-political boundaries.
3. LHR assumes that the association between language and identity in an individual is immutable over one's lifetime; it is incapable of allowing human agency and transformation over scales of time.
4. LHR prescribes linguistic behaviours and practices, so that identity is other-ascribed and imposed, rather than inhabited.

(adapted from Omoniyi 2006:17)

The central argument and paradigm

By anticipating language rights as a fundamental human right to be enforced in all circumstances (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000), proponents of LHR leave us in no doubt as to the projected universality of LHR's application. Since the ratification of the Linguistics Rights Declaration by UNESCO in 1996, discourses of language endangerment and the need to protect languages and the minorities who use them are de rigueur amongst political positions

⁴ To be sure, Blommaert (2010:14) reminds us that these phenomena are not intrinsically new happenings. Precedents have been established in the past whenever geographically separated peoples contacted each other through actual movement such as trade and migration, or new forms of communication technology like the telegraph. The phase we are describing now is simply one within a much longer and slower historical timeframe of actual processes of globalisation, even if 'globalisation' as a term was not coined till recently.

circulating and taken up in public debate (Duchene and Heller 2007:1-6). Similar principles of linguistic equality have been adopted in a modified form by the Council of Ministers of the EU in 2002 (Nic Craith 2006:174). The inscription of the concept of language rights as intrinsic to supra-national constitutions may be attributed, in part, to the immense support from within the field of linguistics and political philosophy (Kymlicka 1995, Phillipson 1992, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995, May 2001), including much research devoted to promotion, integration and legal issues for these rights (Nic Craith 2006, Pertot et al 2009).

Despite the approbation it currently enjoys, this paper cannot agree with a LHR paradigm that presents itself as the normative means to resolve issues of linguistic discrimination, imperialism or marginalisation. Following a Braudelian (1980) perspective on the significance of historicity, the development of LHR as a movement has to be situated in and understood as borne from the construction of the modern nation state. Its precepts concerning language and identity are thus indistinguishable from those used to legitimise ideologies of nationhood.

This in turn represents a major criticism of LHR, which has been argued to conflate individualities with collective group identity, so that the aims of the group are ostensibly portrayed as uniform and unambiguous (May 2001:8, Wee 2010:25). While the Linguistic Rights Declaration does not explicitly state it, identification of specific 'language groups' by States today still tend toward race and ethnicity. Indeed, the groups themselves often use ethnicity as *the* salient feature in recognition of their right to particular language use, rather than the use of language itself (Nic Craith 2006:112, May 2005:327). This is not without adverse consequences. According language rights to groups based upon the ideological bind of language and ethnicity, appears to be a solution mired in modernist conceptions for a world existing in late-modernity, where notions of race, cultural/national identity and linguistic affiliation are increasingly nebulous and in flux.

If we are to acknowledge that the assumptions of LHR activists are predicated upon modernist notions of identity with aims of ensuring equity, then we might want to ask why it is necessary to continue in such a contradictory tradition of obscuring diversity in the name of protecting essentialist group distinctions. In the vein of Duchene and Heller (2007:11), "Rather than assuming we must save languages, perhaps we should be asking instead who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why language serves as a terrain for competition." This paper therefore hopes to answer some of the questions posed by Duchene and Heller through a survey of 'designer immigrant' students in Singapore. As migration and global mobility present various difficulties for essentialist notions of LHR, a case study of migrants will enable us to better appreciate the complex realities and problems facing LHR in a globalising world.

While other criticisms of LHR focus on its pragmatic implications for states (Blommaert 2001), this paper examines the fundamental ideological conceptions of language and identity that LHR advocates. The LHR framework is one that is at odds with an eminent sociolinguistic theory of globalisation. The debate is embedded within modern linguistics itself, where on the one hand, some scholars continue to work within a "snapshot" framework of language, "in which movement of language resources is seen as movement in a horizontal and stable space and in chronological time" (Blommaert 2010:5). In this scheme, language operates as a well-defined and timeless object of study. It is demarcated along lines of class, gender, ethnicity etc, and treated as an autonomous and artefactual ontological entity (ie each language is circumscribed by a set of grammar and vocabulary, and examined as such), stable and static over scales of

time and space (Heller 2007). Thus, the stereotypical treatment that Mandarin in a delimitable form is spoken by Chinese originally from China, while Hindi is spoken by Indians; the two languages are theoretically conceptualised as existentially exclusive, even if spoken by the same individual. On the other hand, there is the emerging model outlined by Blommaert (2010) which treats languages as 'concrete resources', of 'speech' and repertoires, or 'bits of language' that individuals employ in various contexts. This is language as human behaviour, not denoted in association with a specific time and place, but necessarily observable over *trajectories* of temporal and spatial scales. In this sense, this paper is positioned at a crossroads of sorts, where there is a clash of language ideologies between widespread modernist notions innate in concepts of statehood and typified by LHR, and a sociolinguistic theory of globalisation.

Outline of the paper

I begin with a theoretical discussion of why the LHR paradigm is ultimately inadequate to manage all issues of linguistic discrimination and disempowerment. The concern with language rights and corresponding recognition of group identities is one example of a movement aimed at removing inequalities based on linguistic and ethnic differences, albeit with the same essentialism and homogenism that States used to advance their claims of legitimacy (Duchene and Heller 2007). It will be argued that the LHR paradigm is somewhat demonstrative of and rooted in modernist approaches to nation-building, and in a way no different from ideologies of identity ensconced within concepts of nationhood. Language rights may therefore be perceived to be in opposition to the aforementioned sociolinguistics of globalisation outlined by Blommaert (2010), and conceivably ill-equipped to deal with a globalising world.

The next three sections pay particular attention to the 'designer immigrant' students themselves. The third section of this paper theorises the 'designer immigrant' student as an object of study. Migrant identity is made salient in this work, precisely because it serves as a key mediating factor for other facets of these individuals' lives. For reasons which will be clearer later, their ethnicity, linguistic profile and social class are all arguably contingent on and ancillary to their status as migrants and territorial displacement in Singapore. Crucially, if we are to critique ideologies of identity and language as imposed by LHR on individuals who do not live territorially rigid lives, highlighting other denominations such as race or class would mean losing focus on this potential for critique. That is, de-territorialisation and future aspirations as emblematic of spatial and temporal scales, are key instruments here for measuring the inadequacy of essentialist notions of identity in accounting for the fluidity of the social subjects' own positionings.

The fourth section provides an account and justification of the methods of data collection and analysis. The analysis of data from the questionnaire in the subsequent sections, will show that for the 'designer immigrant' student, Singapore is but a potential stepping stone toward greater social mobility within the scales offered by a global labour market. This paper would suggest that there is an aspect to migrant identity for which there has been a lack of research. It is through an investigation of their aspirations, attitudes and opinions towards language learning and use, that we may better understand the complexities involved in implementing language policies deemed to be socially just, as well as elucidate our claims regarding linguistic human rights. Migration in the case of 'designer immigrant' students in Singapore, is not a

simple translocation from one place to another. These individuals *aim* to be peripatetic, so that transmigration could possibly involve multiple territories with no tangible end destination of residence in sight. This poses profound implications for a LHR paradigm based upon authenticity and tradition. Questions need to be asked of how a language and identity model predicated on an immutable link between cultural practice and heritage, can account for and characterise these multiple translocations for a single individual. This is especially so when these transmigrations often lead to inevitable and unpredictable shifts in one's identity and linguistic practices (Block 2010).

The aims of this paper are hence two fold. In the first instance, it is to problematise the ideological conceptions regarding language that underpin the paradigm of LHR. LHR's theoretical framework of language is no different from those used to legitimise claims for constituting a nation and is thus untenable in light of phenomena seen in a late-modern world. Second, this argument will be illustrated through an investigation of the 'designer immigrant' student in Singapore. It will be suggested that the LHR paradigm is incompatible with sociolinguistic practices highlighted by these very processes of globalisation. Indeed, it has severe implications for human agency in linguistic and cultural practices. Due to the limited sample size of the questionnaire, the claims made regarding 'designer immigrant' students are not meant to be emblematic of all individuals in the group. The qualitative nature of the study, however, does sound a note of caution that awaits further extensive research. It focuses our attention on how migration and global mobility could present various difficulties for essentialist notions of language and identity operated by both states and supra-national organisations. Dominant as the discourse of LHR may be today, it should never be established as a normative means to language management within nations. It is the contention of this paper that the advocacy of LHR is inadequate and unsuitable to effect a politics of emancipation and empowerment, if indeed, these are its true aims. Certainly, while its intentions are laudable, it is at risk of perpetuating the same unequal power structures that it intends to eradicate.

Preamble aside, we may now proceed to a review of literature critiquing LHR, and our primary argument that it is fundamentally essentialist and modernist in outlook.

2. Essentialist notions of identity and language in a globalising world

Braudel's (1980:10) now seminal concept of multi-layered time – the *longue durée* – is an explication of historicity that could account for the complexities of human behaviour. In reaction to methods of historical study in Braudel's (1980) day (what he terms *narrative history*), he provides a critique that it treats individuals and processes as abstractions detached from the influence of time and context. Consequently, if we are to understand the basis for the development of LHR as a legitimate and powerful movement, it must first be situated within the birth of the modern nation state as a process of constructionism and hegemonisation of identity (Hobsbawm 1990, Billig 1995). For Hobsbawm (1990), the late 19th Century was a seminal period during which a Herderian romantic philosophy denoting language as the essence of a people was disseminated widely and came to legitimise claims for constituting a nation. This section provides a historical brief of this. It will be argued that the development of LHR may be perceived as inexorably borne of the same process of nationalism, so that its precepts regarding language and identity are indistinguishable from that of nationhood. This

will be followed by a discussion of what we mean by essentialist notions of identity and language, and why this could prove to be problematic in a globalising world.

The development of language as integral to nationhood

As many have observed (Joseph 2004:42-45; 92-131, Heller 2006:6-10), we may trace the indelible link between language, a people and subsequently, a nation, through its long historicity. Joseph (2004:43) notes that it was Epicurus in ancient Greece who first posited the idea that members of an *ethnos* shared in a distinct set of emotions and impressions of the world, so that the language which arises from the *ethnos* would be representative of these distinctive experiences. Central to Epicurus' thesis was an emphasis on one's bodily experience of the material world, and it was these sensory perceptions, unique to each specific group of people, that moulded and constrained the kind of language they produced as a group. It was, if you like, a form of biological determinism which Epicurus saw as a strong association between each *ethnos* and its particular language.

Intriguing as it was, this idea was not taken up by many intellectuals until the opportune historical and sociopolitical milieu of 1870-71, while German Romanticism made it an argument too compelling to ignore (Hobsbawm 1990:102). Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt were two German Romantics who extended Epicurus' Classical postulations by stating that a race, its language, the climate and geographical landscape in which it inhabits, are all inseparable elements which define a people and the nation. The conceptualisation of the *Volk* necessarily meant a classless society where nobility and peasantry were equals, with the *Volkgeist* or national spirit and 'genius' of a people reflected in their language (Joseph 2004:44). On the other hand, the denouement of the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris in 1870-71 provided fertile breeding ground for the propagation of such notions.

Without delving into the origins of nationalism in the French and German psyches, circumstances of the time appeared to drive the dissemination of Herderian Romanticism amongst the masses. Many have contended the exact role of language in this process⁵. Suffice it to say, it was during this period of sociopolitical unrest that language came to be one of the key signifiers of nationalism and statehood in Western Europe, as "any body of people considering themselves a 'nation' claimed the right to self-determination... [In] consequence of this multiplication of potential 'unhistorical' nations, ethnicity and language became the central, increasingly the decisive or even the only criterion of potential nationhood." (Hobsbawm 1990:102).

Language was thus central to the construction of the nation in two ways. First, it provided the foundations of unity through shared values and cultural practices. Second, it became possible to argue that a group makes up a nation for the very language that they share (Heller 2006:7). The rise in tandem of national identity and national language, allowed the perpetration of the myth that the nation is a natural phenomenon, not an invention, so that it became an entrenched idea that is taken for granted by all. (Billig 1995:6). The ideological postulates of a

⁵ While it is generally agreed that language was crucial in the formulation of a national identity, what is less clear is how there came to be a common language to define this identity in the first place (ie which construction came first?). Joseph (2004:115-125) provides a discussion of this subject through a critique of arguments made by Hobsbawm (1990), Anderson (1991) and Silverstein (2000).

common history and spirit was naturally pitted against a myriad of language varieties and their speakers already existing in the landscape. These varieties were then classified into local dialects with connotations of 'provincialism' or 'parochialism' and a stigma of 'backwardness' compared to the national standard language (Bauman 2011:73). It was thus, that "within the boundaries of one state, there was only room for one language, one culture, one historical memory and one loyalty" (Bauman 2011:73).

The Herderian link between language and nation is one which persists to this very day. We see these notions of language and identity played out ubiquitously in our daily lives. It is especially salient when one regards artefacts or discourses promulgated by the State at the national level. Population census questions⁶ are framed to ask what ethnic group one belongs to, which languages one speaks. Immigration laws are based upon the very same rules of circumscribing national and ethnic identity⁷. Western European nations have proclaimed the failure of multiculturalism (Weaver 2010), and are in a bind over how best to integrate immigrants of certain ethnicities and religious affiliations (Cameron 2011), as if all individuals in these 'foreign' groups or indeed within Western European polity itself, practice their lives in the exact same way. In Singapore, schools offer a bilingual education programme with the languages an individual ought to learn predetermined by one's racial grouping. The enumeration could be endless, but it does highlight how essentialist group identity is a methodology used extensively by the State for administrative expediency and appeal to national unity amongst various reasons.

Linguistic Human Rights as based on Herderian Romanticism and modernity

It is through the historicity of the nation and language, that we may gain certain insight into particular appeal of LHR for various groups. At one level, the development of LHR may be perceived as a reaction to a homogenised national identity imposed on a diverse polity within the political boundary of the state. The project of nation-building had left linguistic minorities with an impossible choice of either willing assimilation or having their distinct practices forcibly, and often violently, removed (Bauman 2011:75). This is the case Stephen May (2001) makes on the need for LHR for minority language speakers, who have otherwise been deprived of equal access to socioeconomic goods and civic participation on account of the language they speak.

On another level, it is also a national reaction to processes of globalisation which has seen the advent of dominant world languages and immigration diluting the internal coherence of nations (Duchene and Heller 2007:10). In this regard, Phillipson (2003:145-153) invokes LHR in his call for European nations to defend their national languages against the incursion of English. Phillipson argues that English as a world language only advantages native-speakers from nations which already possess English as part of their national narratives. Other countries are compelled to alter their indigenous practices in order to plug into the global

⁶ By way of illustration, and on a more personal note, I certainly found it a challenge to fill in forms for the recent UK census without adding extensive annotations and caveats. When asked what my main language was, I could only choose one language (I grew up speaking Mandarin and English and am proficient in both), and even then, I struggled to decide between English and Singlish, which in all probability would not be recognised as a language.

⁷ Blommaert (2008, 2010:153-173) provides a chilling account of how a refugee seeking political asylum in the UK was refused entry because he did not fit the linguistic profile of a typical Rwandan and was deemed to be lying about his nationality.

capitalist system dominated by the US and UK. Citizens of non-English speaking nations are hence forced to learn the language as they play a perpetual game of catch up with western English-speaking economies.

The all-encompassing nature of LHR in dealing with linguistic discrimination, both within and without nations, is evident in its broad definition of what constitutes linguistic human rights:

In terms of individual rights:

the right to be recognized as a member of a language community;

the right to the use of one's own language both in private and in public;

the right to the use of one's own name;

the right to interrelate and associate with other members of one's language community of origin;

the right to maintain and develop one's own culture;

In terms of collective group rights:

the right for their own language and culture to be taught;

the right of access to cultural services;

the right to an equitable presence of their language and culture in the communications media;

the right to receive attention in their own language from government bodies and in socioeconomic relations.

(Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights 1996, Article 3)

It is the broad language of framing these rights as inalienable and having 'universal validity' that ultimately enables many to resort to LHR as a powerful implement to deal with issues of perceived linguistic discrimination (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2008:3). From the specific individual to a collective group as large as an entire nation, LHR has been a tool used in a variety of circumstances. Equality in communication does not only concern minority speakers within a country, but in international relations between countries as well, even if the languages of these countries are unlikely to become truly extinct in any conceivable scenario (eg Spanish and Portuguese).

More pertinently, it should be apparent that the framework LHR uses in language and identity is exactly the same as those extolled by Herderian Romanticism. The arguments of a shared language used to legitimise claims for forming a nation, are the same ones used by minority language speakers in gaining recognition as a distinct ethnic community and social equality, albeit on a demographically smaller scale (Muehlmann 2007:24). We see these same processes of 19th Century nationalism repeating themselves in Quebec through French-speaking Canadians (May 2001:156-162), in Catalonia by speakers of Catalan (May 2001:239-251), in Wales by Welsh speakers (May 2001:252-271) and the same claims made by aborigines or indigenous peoples the world over (May 2001:273-305). The spectre of Epicurus never goes away, as we are reminded by these claims of how the linguistic and cultural practices of an individual is rooted in the biology and environment of which he/she shares with the rest of his/her distinct community. It is this exact nationalistic sentiment, of the nation as a singular and manifestly distinctive *Volk*, that allows countries to resort to LHR when they see their way of life and language being threatened by globalising forces (Muehlmann 2007:25). To this end, Swedish is portrayed by some Swedish politicians as being eroded by English in calls to heed the pressing need for defending national unity and cohesion (Milani 2007). A similar move is made by Spanish-speaking nations, which sought to establish greater unity and egalitarianism

amongst the global pan-hispanic community, so as to preserve their own economic and cultural interests in competition with other world languages (del Valle 2007).

The essentialism of Linguistic Human Rights

A valid question now is, if LHR permits itself to be used for such a broad swathe of society, does it not prove its worth in preventing the marginalisation of peoples who speak a different language? What makes LHR potentially pernicious, as we have suggested from the outset?

It is useful to first consider Omoniyi's (2006:16) explication of essentialism in identity as, "a philosophy behind labeling any number of normative characteristics or practices as constituting the core of an individual or group which are then used to define them and held to be true of all members of the group." Bucholtz (2003:400) goes further in stating how such an ideology of essentialism is often based upon even more fundamental beliefs that primordial biological traits and the environment inherent to a group, are key determiners of human behaviour. She concurs with Omoniyi that the ideology is predicated upon two assumptions, "(1) that groups can be clearly delimited; and (2) that group members are more or less alike." Commentators (Joseph 2004, Omoniyi and White 2006, Block 2007) have critiqued this model of identity as largely static over time and space (ie an individual's identity is rigid and unlikely to change, even as the individual translocates geographically and ages), and as an over-simplistic conflation of individualistic tendencies with group practices.

With this in mind, it is the contention of this paper that LHR is based on an essentialist paradigm of language and identity, so that it is in danger of misrepresenting individuals as their peculiarities in behaviour and aims are subsumed under a supposedly unequivocal group (May 2001:8). Should LHR be enacted for all polities (which presumably is its ultimate aim given its conception as an inalienable human right), individuals will be at risk of being forced to conform to group practices deemed as constitutive of group membership. The "ineluctable connection between language and (ethnic) identity" (the same charge of essentialism that Omoniyi and Bucholtz makes), is assumed and taken for granted, rather than developed from the positions of individuals (May 2005:327). This ideological link between language and group identity is apparent when we examine various arguments and clarifications put forth by LHR's main proponents.

"The difference between language rights and linguistic human rights has to be clarified. The first concept is obviously much broader... It should undoubtedly be a human right to learn one's mother tongue... I have suggested that we differentiate between necessary rights and enrichment-oriented rights. Necessary rights are rights which, in human rights language, fulfill basic needs and are a prerequisite for living a dignified life... Only the necessary rights should be seen as linguistic human rights. Enrichment-oriented rights, for instance the right to learn foreign languages, can be seen as language rights but I do not see them as inalienable human rights, ie they are not linguistic human rights."

(Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:497-498)

Here, it is suggested that the learning of one's mother tongue is necessary and integral to 'a dignified life', while the learning of a foreign language is of secondary import. The implication is that the mother tongue of an individual is inalienable and inseparable from its speaker, and

is to be distinguished from a 'foreign language'⁸ (Wee 2010:56). The individual right to learning one's own mother tongue is further complemented by the collective right of minorities being able to "reproduce themselves as distinct groups, with their own languages and cultures" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:498). The LHR paradigm of language and identity is hence one where the mother tongue of an individual is defined to be a non-negotiable sine qua non. An individual's linguistic practice is in turn locked into the group's practice, and both become constitutive of each other. It is this rigid bind between mother tongue, individual and group that makes it vulnerable to mechanisms that violate this presupposition.

For the purposes of our paper⁹, processes of globalisation exemplified by migration poses particular problems for the implementation of LHR. The linguistic and cultural practices of migrants are seen to transcend the notions of language and identity assumed by the LHR paradigm, so that any enforcement of LHR may be perceived to be an act of perverse supererogation against the rights of the persons it is meant to protect. Let us now examine each element of essentialism in detail.

Conflation of individual tendencies with group identity

The conflation of individuality with collective behaviour in the enactment of LHR is left in no doubt when it is stated that, "collective and individual rights are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Rights pertaining to the use of a given language are an eminent example of the way in which the rights of an individual presuppose their social and collective exercise" (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995:485). However, we have to realise that individuals who fall outside the neat categories of language communities recognised by LHR, could suffer the same oppression, disempowerment and marginalisation that the LHR movement was hoping to eliminate. Speaking of modernist operations by the Singaporean State in its official recognition of three races, Puroshotam (1998) reasons that a top-down prescription of group identity can be seen as a form of disempowerment through forced conformism or collectivisation, where subjects are made to bend into a single uniform mass, regardless of their individual distinctions. This certainly applies to LHR as well, for there will always exist segments within any labeled group who do not speak their prescribed mother tongues and who see no value in maintaining a culture and heritage they do not claim as their own.

In the Foucaultian sense, it may even evolve as a disciplinary power that 'shames' individuals who are perceived to exist outside of these language-ethnic categories. Jaffe (2007) provides a stark example of how dialectal diversity in Corsican was overridden by a standardised version of Corsican in efforts to legitimise the authenticity of the group and recognise the rights of Corsican speakers. What ensued were the same barriers to social access denoted in linguistic

⁸ This 'tool' and 'tie' dichotomy between mother tongue and a foreign language used for enrichment purposes relates to a view that the foreign language is only utilised by speakers for instrumentalist objectives. The Singapore government's policy of bilingual education prescribes one of three official mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) to be learnt in addition to English. English is itself cast as a racially neutral language so that no ethnic group in Singapore may be presumed to be privileged by this arrangement. Commentators tend to agree that the rigid definition of mother tongue vis a vis English as NOT mother tongue, appears tenuous and unsustainable in light of an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan population which does not fit prescribed social categories (Stroud and Wee 2010).

⁹ Lionel Wee (2010) provides a thorough treatment of the notion of language rights in general and offers a deeper critique of LHR, including its innate flaws and theoretical inconsistencies. The scope of this paper is limited to LHR's incompatibility with phenomena of globalisation and specifically migratory peoples.

(in)competence in official Corsican, including accusations of cultural duplicity and shame. False and forced homogeneity is not something which affects only migrants, but it is certainly an issue which will be exacerbated in the context of transmigration and adaptation to host societies, as individual identities and cultural practices are especially prone to change (Norton 2000). How then can LHR claim to predict the authenticity of group practice that is supposed to be constituted by and reflective of individual behaviour?

Neglect of trajectories over time and space

Movement through scales of time and space are aspects of linguistic practice that are not considered at all in the paradigm of LHR. In terms of spatial scales, the legality of human rights in our present global political order, continue to be administered by national bureaucracies in their respective spheres of governance. That is, the context of realisation remains very much bound in modern systems of State governance and the positions of individuals within this national form of social organisation¹⁰. Migrants as non-citizens consequently have a weaker claim to linguistic equality within a nation, whose government have an obligation to its own citizens first (Maher 2002:19). As we shall see, the fact that 'designer immigrant' students in Singapore may not even wish to be assimilated as Singaporeans, makes this an even clearer case in point. Governments will be under little moral pressure to provide limited resources in enabling non-citizens to have the same access to their own native mother tongues.

Further, as alluded to previously, the LHR paradigm of language is one which is static, stable and timeless. Language is divested from its intrinsic role in practice, so that an individual who lives out his/her daily life is assumed to always behave in the same way throughout his/her entire lifetime. We have already seen this in the presumption that an individual's mother tongue is inalienable, and no shift in linguistic affiliation is possibly desirable, so that a foreign language should always remain outside of one's identity. A language is itself a bounded entity that can be defined as an autonomous unit separate from others. Indeed, as Phillipson (2009:82-102) has contended, any change in linguistic practice to incorporate 'foreign' elements¹¹ or domain loss, are deemed to be objectionable and a violation of one's linguistic human rights. This view of language as a 'Saussurean synchrony' is one which has been argued to be an inaccurate portrayal of how language actually works (Blommaert 2010). Speaking of language ideologies and methodology, we are reminded by Blommaert (1999:7) that there is a need to avoid "an abstraction of the historical process in which the genesis of such ideational phenomena is contained, sometimes amounting, in fact, to a de-historization of the phenomena." It is a return to Braudel's (1980) notion of *durée* that would allow us to perceive both individual and language as being caught up by the *concurrent* and at times *conflicting* waves of imperceptible geographical time, momentous social time of events and sociopolitical upheavals, and the more measurable timescale of individual lives and daily occurrences. Linguistic practice is bound to change if we track them across temporal and spatial scales, when various processes of sociopolitical import (eg language policy) or mundane individual

⁶ Bhabha (1999:697) argues compellingly regarding the enforcement of human rights that "despite the growing impact of transnational forces and supranational institutions, national mechanisms are still crucial in enforcing international obligations, so that states remain critical players rather than diminishing entities."

¹¹ Jørgensen (2008) might perceive this same occurrence as 'linguaging'. Other instances may be observed as 'crossing' (Rampton 2005). Neither are phenomena cast in a pejorative light, but are instead argued to be integral, intuitive and wholly normal aspects of language use.

trajectories (eg migration and interaction with others) exert themselves on a person¹². A detachment of language from temporal and spatial scales, renders any study of human behaviour artificial and meaningless to real-world participants, who constantly make choices regarding the deployment of available linguistic resources (ie 'crossing' and 'linguaging' in daily conversation) or even language shift.

The enactment of a timeless and static language as human right, therefore runs counter to actual linguistic behaviours of individuals, who are perpetually transforming and being transformed by social structures (Giddens 1984). It plainly does not make sense for an individual to adhere to a rigid set of practices as if he/she were a historical abstraction. This then leads us to the issue of human agency in linguistic and cultural practice, which has also been sidelined by advocates of LHR.

Neglect of human agency

It is the issue of language shift that cuts to the heart of essentialism for LHR. Recall that the mother tongue has been framed by proponents of LHR as constitutive of identity and an *a priori* 'natural condition' that is inalienable and never to be diminished. The argument goes further.

"In relation to the relationship between languages, it is clear that if parents/guardians, choosing the medium of day-care and education for children, are not offered alternatives or do not know enough about the probable long-term consequences of their choices, the change of mother tongue which mostly is the result of majority-medium education for minorities, cannot be deemed voluntary, meaning it reflects linguistic genocide: the child has been 'forcibly transferred' to the linguistic majority group. The parents must know enough about the research results when they make their choices – they must, for instance, know that good MT-medium teaching can also lead to a better proficiency in both the dominant language, for instance English, and in the mother tongue than English-medium teaching."

(Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:503)

It is now made explicit that no shift from the mother tongue can ever be endorsed or contemplated. Even if a shift has been made voluntarily, it is dismissed as an uninformed choice or one of hegemonic domination and subjection ie the parents who made the choice simply did not know better (Wee 2010:57). As Wee (2010:58) observes, and as we have discussed earlier, these sharp contrasts between mother tongue/foreign language, choice/domination makes it nigh impossible for LHR to reconcile itself with the fact that identities and linguistic practices are altered over time, as a result of a duality in exchange between an individual and overarching social structures. Certainly, framing language shift as not borne of true choice, with one's mother tongue and corresponding group identity ostensibly prescribed and imposed, precludes any human agency in the formulation and

¹² See also Blommaert et al (2005:203) and Wee (2007:334) regarding 'regimes of language' in specific social spaces, where the rules of linguistic practice are inevitably partially governed by the spatial environment. A change in one's environment would hence lead to adaptations and alterations in one's linguistic practices, as well as possibly culminating in changes to the 'regime' itself.

inhabitation¹³ of one's own identity. The LHR paradigm may thus be construed to be as imperialistic as the dominant languages which have been described to displace and 'kill' autochthonous tongues (Phillipson 1992).

Moreover, the metaphor of loss pertaining to language shift is one that has been questioned as not necessarily valid for many speakers (Block 2008). The assumption is that languages defined to be mother tongues and concepts of 'community' or 'ethnicity' are the most significant markers of identity, when it may not be the case. Emotive affectations of nostalgia and reluctance may be attributed more to pronouncements by academia rather than truly felt in individual actors.

In defence of essentialism?

Despite acknowledging the failings of essentialism in the LHR framework linking language with a collectivised community, May (2001:69) supposes that there is still some value and veracity to the notion of ethnicity and appeal to group rights. Even as social choices and identities may vary amongst individuals, we must still admit that "at the collective as opposed to the individual level, ethnicity remains a powerful, explosive and durable force" (Smith 1995:34)¹⁴. While post-modern theorists may plead the constructed nature of ethnicity as group identity, scholars cannot deny that the ideological belief in the links between language and ethnicity continue to be deeply embedded in social thought and action. May (2001:50) proceeds to cite Anthony Smith's (1991) ideation of the *ethnie*, by concurring that ethnic identification need not necessarily mean a static and fixed state of cultural attributes. There is no contradiction when individuals affiliate themselves with a primordial sense of belonging to a common territoriality or ancestry, whilst varying their forms of cultural expression at the same time. This formulation of *ethnie* is itself similar to Barth's (1989) 'universes of discourse' in which individuals participate in differential manners, and yet contribute to an overall stability over time in a shared group of commonalities. In this vein, May (2005:330) is wary of committing the same essentialist discourse of LHR, by stating that "while language may not be a determining feature of ethnic identity, it remains a significant one in many instances... particular languages clearly are for many people an important and constitutive factor of their individual, and at times, collective identities."¹⁵ He goes on to place emphasis on the need to delegate autonomy to these groups, so that they may decide for themselves what is in their own interests.

In fact, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2008) do accept criticisms of essentialism and identity conflation. Notwithstanding this, their view is that LHR embodies a way forward to addressing linguistic discrimination in a world still maintained by modernist operations. It is worth reproducing here their defence in full.

¹³ Blommaert (2005a) again calls our attention to the duality of how identities are 'ascribed' by others and/or 'inhabited' by the social subject's own positionings.

¹⁴ This view is not dissimilar from LHR's contention of why collective group rights should be a natural extension of individual human rights. A collectivised entity lends greater credence to the force of enactment so that the likelihood of violating individual rights will be lessened (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995:485).

¹⁵ We might recall David Block's (2008) contrarian view on this issue in his examination of language shift. It is to this effect that we so need a contextual and grassroots level surveyance of actual practices and attitudes regarding language, rather than mere assertion.

“Much of the scholarly ‘debate’ in sociolinguistics fails to appreciate that when LHRs require formulation in the conceptual worldview of international and national law, terms like ‘language’ cannot be subjected to apolitical post-modern academic hair-splitting. ‘Dialects’ and ‘speech communities’ have no status in law, whereas ‘language’ is used in public discourse terms that derive from folk linguistics rather than armchair theorising. Language and ethnicity are salient political terms. Calling them contingent seems to be doing the bidding of dominant groups who are reluctant to accord minorities any recognition. Condoning *Realpolitik* arguments that relate exclusively to instrumental uses and greater social mobility undermines the cause, in theory and practice, of oppressed groups. Education needs to confirm their linguistic and cultural identity as well as to equip them to operate in languages of the wider community. The practical realisation of this is complex, because of linguistic diversity, urbanisation, increased mobility, networks that are displacing territorially defined groups, the power of dominant discourses in fundamentally unequal societies, and the cumulative effect of all of these in linguistic hierarchies that threaten the lives of those (languages) at the bottom... The articulation of human rights is a paradigm case of thinkers formulating principles in the hope of influencing representatives of the state.”

(Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2008:8)

However, what Stephen May, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson have not clarified is how exactly an appeal to group rights can account for individualities without any hint of essentialism and forced conformity. This is especially when these group rights are to be presented as inalienable human rights to be enforced universally. Fraser (1995) points this out most aptly in her articulation of the distributive-recognition dilemma in the enactment of social justice, where individuals within groups have a tendency to be misrepresented through an imposition of policies. If there are individuals who subscribe to a specific group identity without agreeing with its linguistic practices, then surely these language rights may be better presented as individual rights rather than collective rights, so that there is no margin for misrecognition. If this is so, then surely there is no need to speak of LHR at all, since individualistic cultural rights are already covered by other existing ordinances written into human rights law (Wee 2010:124).

Rather contradictorily, May (2001:315) concludes by quoting Terry Eagleton’s (1990:30) view that, “Any emancipatory politics must begin with the specific... but must in the same gesture leave it behind. For the freedom to question is not the freedom to be, whatever this might mean, but simply the freedom now enjoyed by certain other groups to determine their identity as they wish.” How this ‘freedom’ may be accomplished through a blanket application of LHR remains to be seen. For all of LHR’s fulminations, it does not resolve the distributive-recognition dilemma. The danger is in not being reflective enough, being unaware of promoting particular homogenising language ideologies while one is promoting certain concrete strategies aimed at improving people’s lives. Ideology and language policy are of course, inseparable.

On the other hand, we must also agree that it is one thing for post-modern theorists to suggest the constructed and pluralistic nature of identity, and quite another for an individual to live within structures which continue to define him/her along traditional lines, and as is often the case, complicit in reproducing the reality of his/her circumstances. If a framework of fluid identity and linguistic practice is to gain a foothold in the public psyche, we as academics might

need to reposition the constructionist nature of social reality as more than simply common sense or a fundamental nature of how all things come to be. It may be more useful to frame it discursively in the context of power, as a more effective means of empowerment and equality, in order to suit what Bauman (1998) argues to be consumerist attitudes and motivations of late-modern behaviour. The deconstruction of group identity as a means toward eliminating unequal treatment¹⁶, may be a better alternative to simply resigning ourselves to prevalent social structures and persist in reifying essentialist identities, as LHR is seen to be doing. Adopting the latter approach would only serve to perpetuate modernist trappings unable to capture the intricacies of human life, and therefore lead to the maintenance of systems of injustice.

All in all, this paper takes the same position as Wee (2010) that LHR may not be the best way to represent a politics of empowerment. While we do not deny the utility of LHR in enabling groups to plug into an internationally dominant discourse of liberal democratic rights (Haarstad and Floysand 2007), we must be mindful that this does not come at the expense of individuality and autonomy. It may be that LHR seeks to protect the right to be free from discrimination/oppression and hence the right to power and its commensurate socioeconomic benefits, sociopolitical functionality and social mobility. Or it could be a nostalgic sense of preserving the nature of a particular way of speaking/behaving which is emblematic and constitutive of a unique way of viewing the world (Harrison 2007). Or, perhaps, both. Whichever the case, it may still not justify the same imperialistic methods of imposing identities and practices upon individuals, as this removes the same aspect and value of agency upheld by other fundamental human rights. The only way to truly value self-determination in resistance against hegemonic subjection or oppression is in allowing persons the notion of choice in linguistic and cultural practice.

A forward step in acknowledging agency in linguistic practice, is by heeding the call of many (Blommaert 2005b, Heller 2006, Block 2008) to pay attention to the motivations and peculiarities of language use by individuals. This involves a greater reliance on ethnographic depictions of “what people actually do with language, what language does to them, and what language means to them, in what particular ways it matters to them” (Blommaert 2005b:403). Only by doing so can we say with a greater degree of certainty the effects macro-level policies such as LHR have on the ground. To this end, the importance in this paper of uncovering the aspirations, attitudes and opinions towards language learning and use held by ‘designer immigrant’ students in Singapore, cannot be understated. We shall now proceed from an academic discussion to a practical illustration of the implications that globalisation has for LHR. The next two sections will propose a theorisation of the ‘designer immigrant’ student and discuss the research methodology adopted in this paper.

¹⁶ Fraser (1995) would term this a *transformative* approach to achieving social justice. This is as opposed to the avenue of *affirmative* procedures such as LHR, which seek to recognise specific cultural collectivities so as to ensure fairer distribution of socioeconomic goods amongst these recognised groups. Also see Stroud’s (2001) argumentation for Linguistic Citizenship where group affiliation to assert any call for rights is constructed at the grassroots level through self-association, thus representing a departure from top-down surveyance and implementation of policies to a more democratic process of attaining linguistic rights.

3. The story of the ‘designer immigrant’ student in Singapore¹⁷

Linguistic minorities in the form of migrants, offer a window into the complexities of a politics of identity and empowerment in this messy epoch. Even as LHR provide an avenue for greater legitimacy in the recognition of certain social groups, it would be naïve of us to take for granted that the logic of nation-building should serve the same purposes and interests of individuals within these groups who transcend national borders. The plight of migrants particularly illustrates how we need to question conventional modes of group identity, or risk perpetuating systems of injustice. Of course, migrants are also trendy icons of hybridity whose growth in numbers and ubiquity can no longer be ignored as being statistical anomalies (Heller 2006:14). This section attempts to suggest a theorisation of a typology of migrant whose personal trajectories are not confined to any single nation state – the ‘designer immigrant’ student.

Background to the ‘designer immigrant’ student

Singapore presents an ideal case study of processes of globalisation and State management. Latest demographic figures reveal much about the movement of labour and immigrants into the nation over the last few decades. “Singapore’s total population was 5.08 million as at end-June 2010. There were 3.77 million Singapore residents, comprising 3.23 million Singapore citizens and 0.54 million permanent residents, and 1.31 million non-resident foreigners.” (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010a:3) With about 20% of the population made up of immigrants (more if you include those granted permanent residential status), the picture painted is one of consistency with a world increasingly defined by porous political boundaries and complex human networks¹⁸.

Singapore is certainly not alone in establishing criteria for potential immigrants or a proactive outlook to selecting future citizens¹⁹. Bauder (2008) notes congruent strategies in Canada where the Canadian State consciously discriminates between immigration candidates with the explicit aim of stimulating economic growth. The UK’s new points-based system for immigration is clearly another example of advantaging skilled migrants and students deemed to be more capable. The extent to which the Singaporean State proceeds to attract global talent, however, is a different kettle of fish.

The Singapore government offers a number of scholarships to foreign students from the South Asian and Southeast Asian region. Top ranked secondary schools in Singapore routinely visit prominent schools in India, China, Vietnam and Indonesia in order to headhunt pupils from these localities and attract them to study in Singapore. It is hoped that ‘catching’ them at a young age will increase the probability of them being assimilated and deciding to adopt citizenship. Such a policy would not only establish stronger political ties with our geopolitical neighbours, but also augment a declining population with talented individuals. One of the main

¹⁷ Additive descriptions are provided through personal observations and correspondences with students over three years’ of teaching, and hence can be construed as plausible interpretations rather than dismissed as entirely fictive imaginings.

¹⁸ Tellingly, only 2.9 million out of the 5.08 million total population were actually born in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010b:39). The implication is of course that close to half of the population were/are, at some stage of their lives, foreigners or immigrants.

¹⁹ From the late 1990s, the government began actively initiating policies shaping Singapore as a regional education hub for foreign students, in the hope that some of them may be retained in the workforce to contribute to the local economy (Institute of International Education website, Yeoh 2007).

criteria is that these individuals must suit existing ethnic identities officially recognised within Singapore²⁰. Coincidentally, individuals who are ethnically Chinese form the vast majority of eventual 'designer immigrant' students²¹. Potential candidates of age 15, with already excellent academic attainments, are interviewed for aptitude and sit through a series of assessments testing proficiency in basic English and other scholastic subjects. Individuals who accept the scholarship, then arrive in Singapore at age 16 with free education till their A-levels at 19, and the promise of further sponsorship should they do well enough to land a place in any local university. They are generally one year older than their Singaporean counterparts in the same cohort, due in part to their lower proficiencies in English. Their academic performance in Singaporean schools is constantly monitored, with those unable to maintain a minimal grade point average having their scholarships terminated and sent home. The deliberate nature in fashioning the exclusivity of this group cannot be understated, and prompts the apt label of 'designer immigrant' students in this paper.

Theorising the 'designer immigrant' student

It is Simmons (1999) who first drew our attention to the emergence of certain immigrants who were subjected to discriminatory processes in the context of a global war for talent and economic demands on a nation. He described how immigrants to Canada underwent rigorous selection procedures to fill perceived gaps in the Canadian workforce, and termed them 'designer immigrants'. De Costa (2010) then based his work on Simmons' (1999) observations by zeroing in on 'designer immigrants' who are also students in Singapore, as he examined how national language policy is realised at the local level for these individuals. In both instances, the same label was used for the very same reasons of selectivity highlighted in the previous section that our own research subjects went through. Even as Simmons (1999) and De Costa (2010) names 'designer immigrant' students as such, much of the focus of their inquiry was on the immigrants' current status as migrants and foreigners in the host nation and their plight while in this situation, rather than their potential and future trajectories. It is with a backdrop of multicultural, cosmopolitan Singapore as a hub of globalisation, that we should consider a further conception of the 'designer immigrant' student. Most importantly, it is to be distinguished from other more conventional notions of migrant identity.

Traditional understandings of migrants tend to perceive them as either classical migrants who move to adopted homelands and stay there permanently, or expatriates who choose to live abroad for extended periods with expectations of returning to their country of origin (Block 2007:32). Classical migrants are generally thought to undergo a period of assimilation as they come to terms with new customs and ways of life, so that they are caught in a dilemma of cultural maintenance and integration. More progressive studies have further portrayed the advent of transnationalism and transnational social spaces, where individuals who have settled in a host country are seen to have "retained and developed their cultural and economic links

²⁰ Singapore pursues an overt stance of multiracialism and multiculturalism where three races (Chinese, Malay and Indian) and four languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) are officially recognised and accorded equal prestige by the State in all bureaucratic domains. The Chinese form the majority of the resident population (74.1%), followed by the Malays (13.4%) and Indians (9.2%) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010b:viii).

²¹ The rationale for such an apparent racial criterion is presumably to prevent any immigration from upsetting the existing racial balance and status quo, which could incur negative reactions from the polity (Tan 2003:773). Neither the recent population census nor the Ministry of Education provides statistics on the exact numbers and racial composition of 'designer immigrant' students attracted thus far. It must, however, be stated that the observable ratio of Chinese to non-Chinese student immigrants in my school is easily 5:1.

with their homelands, including (in some cases) their political loyalties and commitments” (Jordan and Duvell 2003:76). This is, of course, only possible with technological advances that we have today. There are also groups, as observed by Blommaert (2010:6), who establish isolated, stable and residential immigrant communities within their host countries (eg Turks in Germany and South Asians in the UK). The conditions in these immigrant neighbourhoods, as groups interact with immigrants from other regions and overarching national discourses of the host country, create phenomena of *super-diversity* where common modernist ideas on ethnicity, language use and identity no longer hold sway.

This paper would suggest that there is another aspect to migrant identity for which there has been a lack of research. In the case of ‘designer immigrant’ students in Singapore, it is not a simple translocation from one place to another. These individuals *aim* to be peripatetic, so that transmigration could possibly involve multiple territories with no tangible end destination of residence in sight²². This is not to suggest that they will never eventually settle and lead to the developments described by Blommaert (2010) and Jordan and Duvell (2003). In the meantime as students, however, their life goals (and hence future trajectories) remain open-ended. They are to be distinguished from the concept of classical migrants who move and settle in permanence with concrete migratory objectives. Nor are they expatriates who definitely foresee themselves returning to their country of origin. ‘Designer immigrant’ students as it were, see and have the world as their oyster.

This distinctiveness to the group is more than an identity that they themselves lay claim to through their personal aspirations. We may perceive that the particularity to ‘designer immigrant’ students as a legitimate group is also an identity that has been conferred upon them, from the State level of managing immigration, to semi-officious settings like the teachers’ staffroom, albeit with different labels and connotations. In daily collegial discussions, teachers who have worked with these students are inclined to label them as ‘PRC students’²³ or ‘foreign scholars’. Certainly, the group has been seen by some teachers as a challenge to teach, and at times a burden one would rather do without, due in part to their low proficiencies in English. Immigration authorities term them as ‘foreign students’, lumping them together with a larger group of student immigrants who have arrived in Singapore on their own finances seeking education opportunities (Immigration and Checkpoints Authority website). While the State may have positioned itself to attract these student immigrants and argued that they are crucial to the nation’s long-term growth and prosperity, large segments of Singapore’s native population tend to view them with a degree of mistrust and disdain²⁴. The common perception is that these students are a drain on national resources in state-sponsored schools, which could have been better allocated to local pupils (Yeoh 2007).

Avoiding dangers of overgeneralisation and acknowledging diversity within ‘designer immigrant’ students

²² This will be apparent as we analyse data from our questionnaire.

²³ The vast majority of immigrant students are from the People’s Republic of China.

²⁴ This tension between State and citizenry regarding immigration has led to the establishment of a National Integration Council by the government, within which a specific working group for schools seeks to help “newcomers understand the importance of racial harmony, mutual respect and social cohesion in Singapore, as well as encourage local students to be open and welcoming towards newcomers” (National Integration Council website).

More reflexively, the critique of essentialism in the preceding section has then left us with a need to consider our own assumptions in highlighting migrant identity in our research. If we distrust the authenticity and veracity of specific social categorisations, will it not mean that research based on general commonalities (such as this paper itself) will risk being mere rhetorical tautology? Joseph (2004:90) argues that the methodological ideal is to find a middle way of rigour in analysing essentialist distinctions, without blindly subscribing to the absoluteness of these classifications. It is also a challenge to avoid extreme relativism by paying too much attention to constructionism and the individual, so that any concluding generalisation is not impossible and the value of research is sustained. Consequently, even as researchers use specific social variables (eg social class, ethnicity, language etc) as points of entry into denoting the subjects they are studying, it is to be acknowledged that these labels are (as we have discussed) both possibly “ascribed” by others (including the researchers themselves) and/or “inhabited” by the individual subjects (Blommaert 2005a). Also, the categorisations are never mutually exclusive and are to be perceived as necessarily interrelated in complex ways. In other words, a great amount of reflexivity has to go into explaining and theorising the choice of emphasising one particular identity over others, as well as discussing how this category is associated with and impacting other aspects of the individual’s life.

The prominence of migrant identity in this paper is, likewise, not without forethought. Migrant identity is made salient in this work, precisely because it serves as a key mediating factor for other facets of these individuals’ lives. For reasons which will be made clearer, their ethnicity, linguistic profile and social class are all arguably contingent on and ancillary to their status as migrants and territorial displacement in Singapore. Their motivations for arriving in Singapore are due in part to their aspirations for further translocation to higher scales of educational and economic attainment in places beyond the Singaporean education landscape. From a researcher’s perspective, all these reasons make it worth looking at migrant identity for these students as the crux upon which power relations hinges. If we are to critique LHR’s ideologies of identity as imposed on individuals who do not live territorially rigid lives, highlighting other denominations such as race or class would mean losing focus on this potential for critique. That is, de-territorialisation and future aspirations as emblematic of spatial and temporal scales, are key instruments here for measuring the inadequacy of essentialist notions of identity in accounting for the fluidity of the social subjects’ own positionings.

As mentioned before, I had worked in one of those ‘elite’ schools in Singapore for three years. I have had first hand experience of teaching ‘designer immigrant’ students and have had extended dialogues outside the classroom setting with many of them²⁵. Besides academic excellence, other aspects of these students’ identity are vastly heterogeneous. While most may be from middle class families in their country of origin, they are not easily comparable to their middle class Singaporean classmates who possessed high standards of English as the dominant social group. Perforce, few amongst them arrived with high proficiency in English and most could only manage a rudimentary level. Their territorial displacement and removal from their families have also severely curtailed their spending power as consumers so that most lead lives materially poorer than when they were not migrants. Though this is not to say their original

²⁵ I have formed firm friendships with some, visiting them and their families in an informal capacity in Vietnam and China on a number of occasions. It is through such meetings with them and their parents that certain common elements to these students’ aspirations unfailingly surface. All of them have a remarkable desire and disposition to excel in life.

socioeconomic class has no bearing on their identities. It does, and it indexes certain forms of behaviour that such cultural capital entails (eg the small minority who are already highly proficient in English had attended international schools or foreign language classes in their home countries; most are extremely motivated and comfortable with a school culture of academic excellence, and knew when to show deference to figures of authority in school etc). Nonetheless, we may perhaps agree with Block (2010), that there remain difficulties in theorising pluralistic identities, especially for migrants who transcend temporal and spatial scales. 'Designer immigrant' students simply do not align themselves with classical principles of socioeconomic class. It may perhaps be more useful to reconsider these labels themselves, before we choose to use them as points of analysis. Social class may be better perceived as consumerist habits (Bauman 1998), which are more suited to conditions not tied to a fixed geographical space, but contingent upon social networks that have enabled individuals to develop such habits (Block 2010). We might recall Bourdieu's (1984) arguments regarding cultural distinction and taste which elucidates this even further.

In terms of ethnicity, the label of being 'Chinese' belies the myriad sociolinguistic milieus the students originated from. This includes Vietnamese students of Chinese descent who may have Chinese orthographic names but speak no word of Mandarin or any Chinese language. Those who are from China, are themselves from various provinces. Yes, they all speak Mandarin, but are also in possession of their own unique regional tongues and cultural intricacies. As has already been mentioned, proficiency in English ranged from extremely high to basic literacy.

These otherwise disparate individualities are only mitigated when we consider their status as 'designer immigrant' students in Singapore ie they are only conceivable as a reified group within the context of Singapore. Significantly, their behaviour has been argued here to be different from their Singaporean counterparts in terms of culture, language and class. They may be perceived as a linguistic minority in Singaporean schools, disadvantaged in their learning of English due to their linguistic backgrounds, and are thus prime targets for an appeal to LHR. The implications for modernist structures operated through LHR are profound. Migrant identity as handled by LHR, is one such example of essentialism that invites post-structural criticism.

In this paper, we study five 'designer immigrant' students originally from China acting as our informants. Having provided a theoretical précis of who these students are, we will now have a detailed description of how the study was conducted.

4. Researching the 'designer immigrant' student

The tools available to sociolinguists in examining observable human experience are admittedly varied. The method I have chosen is a modest qualitative research bolstered by some ethnographic insight. I am a teacher who had taught these 'designer immigrant' students, and have spent my entire life in Singapore. It is my position as an insider within Singapore and its educational landscape that lends me some perspicacity into 'designer immigrant' students and their circumstances. The specific research methodology adopted, reasons for my choice, as well as the challenges I faced will be explained in this section.

Methodology and challenges

As mentioned in previous sections, my interaction with 'designer immigrant' students as an English language teacher made me acutely aware of their personal histories, future aspirations and current attitudes toward language use. As migrants not bound to a fixed territorial space, I observed that theirs was a linguistic and cultural practice that did not exactly fit in with those prescribed by nation states and supra-national discourses such as LHR. In an encounter outside the classroom, I once asked a student rather casually what it was that made her give up all her friends and family in China to study in Singapore at such a young age. Her reply underlined a strong desire and drive to gain socioeconomic wellbeing, so much so that her past cultural history and way of life seemed to be of secondary import.

The anecdotal observation described above certainly intrigued and caused me to embark on this study. I was confident of eliciting these attitudes on a more formal basis and demonstrating the hypothesis presented at the start of this paper. The choice of directly questioning students was therefore not hard to make.

This study was thus undertaken as a questionnaire (ie following a standardised set of pre-designed questions), targeted at a number of Chinese nationals who used to study in the same secondary school in Singapore I taught at. These immigrant students were selected for academic excellence and "wooed" by the Singapore government from their native country, and given scholarships at age 15 in the hope that they may stay on as citizens. They have studied in the Singaporean secondary school system between the ages of 15-19 and have graduated and are now undergraduates in various universities around the world.

The fact that these students are currently scattered geographically, certainly mitigated the format by which I could ask them questions. Face-to-face meetings and extended real-time dialogues were either not feasible or difficult to arrange despite technological advances such as *Skype*. I thus decided to craft a standardised survey to be administered online (Mann and Stewart 2000:65-98), coupled with the possibility of further open-ended questions seeking clarifications where required (Fowler and Mangione 1990:46). These techniques are not new and have been extensively described by previous scholars, so I was fairly confident in performing them.

The questionnaire itself was designed as 35 primarily *open-response questions* (Brown 2009) aimed at extracting information regarding personal trajectories in terms of migration, aspirations and attitudes toward language use (See Appendix). Any close-response question was to provide a generic profile of the individual. It was formulated as a Word document in softcopy to be filled in electronically.

The entire study, from sourcing for potential informants to the distribution and submission of questionnaires, was conducted through the internet and via e-mail. 20 students who matched the 'designer immigrant' profile outlined above were contacted through their e-mail addresses. They were all former students I used to teach and have continued to keep in contact with. In the e-mail, I explained the rationale for my research project and asked if they would like to volunteer as participants. They were also given full information of what the whole procedure involved. 10 agreed to be participants, and so were provided with the questionnaires with instructions to return them after three weeks. Only 5 actually returned the completed questionnaires.

The initial plan was to have a fairly sizeable sampling of about 10 - 15 students, so that some quantitative conclusions could be drawn from the research. The return rate of only 5, however, was not unexpected, given how researchers have documented similar experiences (Mann and Stewart 2000:151-152, De Vaus 2002:128). Online interviews are generally regarded to be more impersonal, so that participants tend to have less moral obligation to follow through on promises. It could also have a lot to do with my period of research coinciding with their examinations in April and May 2011. While the small sample size circumscribes the claims I may make, such 'purposeful sampling' (Patton 1990) does not reduce the value of any insight gleaned from qualitative research regarding the experiences of these students.

The raw textual data from the questionnaire was thus summarily analysed, and the main issue then was the lack of social cues and direct interaction. I did not have access to the oral and visual dimensions of language which could inform me of positions of confidence, doubt, irony etc (Mann and Stewart 2000:126). What I did gain from the online exercise, was a possibly more truthful and richer account as the participants felt less pressure to conform to my wants (de Vaus: 130). They were free to write as much as they wanted, as they could reframe and rethink their responses at their convenience (Mann and Stewart 2000:77). As I followed up with some of their comments by seeking clarification on certain points made by them, the resulting data was assuredly of great depth and complexity. These follow-up questions were themselves of a non-directive kind (eg How do you mean that? Can you tell me more?) (Fowler and Mangione 1990: 42). The period of research, from the time the participants received the questionnaires to the end of my seeking clarification on specific statements, was about three months in all from April to July 2011.

The whole research method of this paper can consequently be construed as qualitative in nature. While some may perceive my collection of data, analysis and interpretation to be unabashedly biased, it does not detract from the fact that this piece of research is meant to highlight the existence of a particular phenomenon borne out by the attitudes of these students. Its aims are to challenge the theoretical precepts of LHR pertaining to the translocation of peoples, and provide a foundation for further work in this area.

Ethnographic insight from an insider's perspective

You would have read the previous section where I provided some ethnographic description of the 'designer immigrant' student. As a final note to my methods in this section, it is imperative that I explicate the significance of my position as an insider and how it informs on the paper in general.

The stance of this paper in having qualitative research augmented by some ethnographic insight is tied to a personal attempt at 'rendering personal experience'. As Rampton (2007:590) had so astutely observed, much motivation for social research begins not through a sudden derivation of insight, but a "frustration with the institutional processes in which people have found themselves living." Such an "insider moving outwards" perspective of ethnography (ie 'trying to get analytic distance on what is close at hand') accommodates much greater comparative advantage over a researcher looking in (ie 'trying to get familiar with the strange') (Rampton 2007:590-591). Rampton (2007) outlines four positive consequences and I have reproduced them in my own words here.

1. The from-inside-outwards point of analysis, takes as its fundamental theoretical position, the need to achieve greater analytic distance from its object of study.
2. It is the position of an insider that allows one to be immediately attuned to the complexities of social experience, so that any representation of the phenomenon is less inclined to be reductionist and over-simplistic. An outsider's view of an event, almost certainly precludes him/her from the knowledge of cultural presuppositions and intimations that only a long-time member of the community would possess.
3. Consequently, a marked familiarity with the social subjects and conditions in which their practices are reproduced, allows one to be sensitive to risks of stereotyping and ascribing essentialist constructions of group identity²⁶.
4. The researcher's position as an insider would ameliorate any apprehension regarding political intervention that any outsider would feel.

(Rampton 2007:591-592)

Accordingly, my own identity as a Singaporean and a teacher at that, allows me to offer a detailed delineation of the 'designer immigrant' student, as well as credible arguments regarding how linguistic human rights might not work for these individuals. It is my own experiences, having led my entire life in Singapore, which makes me perceptive to macro-level policies and how it contradicts nuanced individual behaviour and attitudes. These are observations and inferences that an outside researcher cannot hope to obtain in any limited span of study.

The point to note is that, like Rampton (2007:593), this paper prefers to see my position as an insider of the sociological context, not as a handicap in terms of a lack of objectivity. Neither should the use of a specific social categorisation (ie migrant identity as described in the previous section) in labeling the object of our study be construed as an essentialist and hence profitless stance. Rather, these all function as valuable addendums and caveats in the process of empirical description, analysis and interpretation.

5. National identities, cultural identities and English language learning

In what follows, I draw on interview data of five particular 'designer immigrant' students, Yvonne, Xavier, Fiona, Ming and Yan. All five were former students of mine in an 'elite' secondary school in Singapore. They were born in China and lived there till the age of 16, with Mandarin being the first language they acquired as children, before moving to Singapore as recipients of scholarships offered by the Singaporean government. They are currently undergraduates in various universities around the world; three of them in the US, one in the UK and one in Singapore. The table below gives a brief summary of their profiles.

Table 1: Summary of informant profiles

| Student Name²⁷ | Gender | Age | Current school and location²⁸ |
|----------------------------------|---------------|------------|---|
|----------------------------------|---------------|------------|---|

²⁶ This issue of essentialism has been discussed in the preceding section. It is only my familiarity with these students that allows me to suggest that their otherwise disparate individualities are mitigated when we consider their status as 'designer immigrant' students in Singapore.

²⁷ Names have been anonymised to keep students' identities private.

| | | | |
|--------|--------|----|--|
| Yvonne | Female | 22 | Russell Group university in London, UK |
| Xavier | Male | 22 | One of top liberal arts colleges in the US |
| Fiona | Female | 22 | Top ranked university in Singapore |
| Ming | Female | 22 | Ivy League university in the US |
| Yan | Male | 21 | One of top private research universities in the US |

This section will first provide a discussion of themes that emerged pertaining to their attitudes toward language use and learning, in association with their hopes and aspirations. Also salient are their self-described national and cultural identities, and indeed their views on the notion of 'identity'. The implications for our critique of LHR will then be examined in the second section.

Discussion of themes

Motivations toward migration and the value of English

Their motivations for moving to Singapore at a young age appear largely congruent. Besides the obvious pull factor of the scholarship, all of them stated the widespread use of English in the education system and the nation in general, as one of the key determiners for their decision. Decision-making at this juncture is also noted to be one where their parents were extensively involved. These were elicited in their responses to two linked questions.

(1)

Q6 What motivated you to want to study in Singapore? / Q7 Is the quality of English teaching and prevalence of English in Singapore an important factor in your decision to study in Singapore? Why?

Ming: I saw the scholarship offered by the Ministry of Education of Singapore as a wonderful opportunity for me to receive my secondary education in not only an English-speaking country, but also in outstanding schools. / Definitely. Studying in Singapore has laid a solid foundation for my written English. Although the Singaporean accent is not recognized everywhere in the world, I feel that it is easy to change English accents according to the place that you are staying in.

Yvonne: The scholarship given by the Singapore government. And the bilingual society. And the fact it is safe, clean and very modern. / Definitely. English is very important. To master a foreign language is definitely an advantage.

Yan: No reason for me, but my parents wanted me to have more opportunities to enter the western world in the future. / For my parents, yes. The standard of English in China is not good enough.

Fiona: I like Singapore due to many different reasons. For instance, friendly people, well-developed infrastructure, sound education system. / It is an important factor because English is commonly used worldwide. Actually English as educational language encourages me to study in Singapore, considering the increasing importance of English nowadays.

We see here two interwoven reasons for their choice of Singapore as a migratory destination. One is an understanding that English as a linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) is very much valuable on the global stage, particularly serving as a gatekeeper to the 'Western World'. Secondly, Singapore provides a much better platform to acquiring English than schools in China do. English at this stage of their lives is seen as an instrument to be grasped, rather than

²⁸ The names of schools they mentioned in their responses have also been omitted to prevent individuals and institutions from being identified.

a part of their cultural identity to be filled. As we shall see, this is prone to change later, even in the short four to five years spent in Singapore.

To the same two questions, Xavier elucidates a more local reason, why moving to Singapore was more advantageous than staying in China.

(2)

Xavier: For one thing, the competition to go to a good college in China is too intense (and unfair for students who are not from Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and rich cities where all the good educational institutions are located) and my father insisted that I should get out of China and sought other ways to advance my studies. I thought it was a good chance to get away from my parents and go to a new environment. In addition, the MOE SM1 scholarship was pretty good so the decision was made. / Yes. I wouldn't imagine going to a non-English speaking country for school. That totally defeats the purpose of going abroad. I mean if I was fluent in English, then that won't be a factor.

Xavier was alluding to his hometown of Hubei, which was considered far from the centres of education and economic prosperity in China. Moving to Singapore was thus essential to climbing the socioeconomic ladder for individuals such as he, as remaining in China would have meant less social mobility. Indeed, while it was not explicitly stated but only hinted at, education for greater social mobility and economic success is a thread running through all of the participants' responses.

A nuanced view to the value of English as linguistic capital is also present. As noted previously, Ming stated a caveat [see (1)] that though "the Singaporean accent was not recognised anywhere in the world", she saw herself able to "change English accents according to the place that you are staying in", hence implicitly stating that learning the Singaporean variety of English would not constitute too large a problem. Xavier presents a similar but more brutal view of the value of Singapore English.

(3)

Q12 What did you think about the quality of teaching regarding English in Singapore? Was it beneficial and/or disadvantageous to you?

Xavier: I think Singapore is not the ideal place to improve spoken English. I did not like the accent because it sounded provincial so I tried my best not to pick it up. My secondary school was a Chinese school so I did not speak a lot of English there. When I got to [junior college], I started to speak more. Some of my friends mocked my "fake American accent" but that did not discourage me from not picking up the Singapore accent. When I came to the States, many of my friends did not think I had an accent at all.

When asked to elaborate on what he meant by "provincial" and why he made a concerted effort not to pick it up,

(4)

Xavier: Well, the accent is not mainstream (that is no characters in a blockbuster movie, news reporters and radio hosts speak this) and sounded bad. Maybe an analogy is appropriate here. I speak mandarin Chinese and the people from the countryside near my city speak mandarin Chinese with accents. That accent makes them sound very provincial.

Maybe it is just me but I grew up learning the standard American way of speaking and it took me a long time to get rid of the Chinese accent. I did not want to pick up another Asian accent that allows people to associate me with any nationality. In my opinion, as a foreigner, you are more respected and

accepted when you don't have an accent. A lot of times, you can tell how long a foreigner has been abroad and where s/he's been abroad simply from the accent or the lack of it.

(e-mail response dated 13 July 2011)

To individuals like Ming and especially Xavier, there exists a hierarchy, so to speak, of linguistic codes such that codes exemplified by speakers in the US and UK are deemed 'accentless' and superior to varieties used in Singapore. It is a worldview that coincides with the dominant Native Speaker Model (Quirk 1990, Rampton 1990), as well as Kachru's (1986) model where the 'Western World' exists as the Core and nations like Singapore remain in the Periphery of English use. The flow of knowledge regarding how English may be spoken and written is only permissible unilaterally from the Core to the Periphery and never the other way around (Kandiah 1997). This worldview is also extended to their understanding of the present global economic order, which is raised later as well. Despite certain misgivings in learning a less valuable form of English, we now know that for these 'designer immigrant' students, acquiring English and moving to Singapore are two mutually accentuating aims for the primary goal of greater social mobility and a better life.

Learning English

Given their rosy expectations before migrating, how then do these students perceive their experience learning English while in Singapore? Despite Singaporean schools adopting English as a medium of instruction for all subjects, and their low levels of proficiency in English when they first arrived in Singapore, some cited the linguistic environment as being advantageous to learning the language.

(5)

Q12 What did you think about the quality of teaching regarding English in Singapore? Was it beneficial and/or disadvantageous to you? / Q13 In what way was it beneficial and/or disadvantageous?

Yan: It was beneficial. / There was prevalence of English in daily life. It allowed me to learn the language in a much deeper way than from classrooms alone

Ming: It was very beneficial for me. / In order to excel in the Singaporean education system, I tried my best to overcome the language barrier as soon as possible. It turned out to be a process that took several years. But my English proficiency increased significantly during the process.

Although there was disagreement amongst them about whether the pedagogy in the language classroom actually aided their learning process.

(6)

Fiona: I think the quality is high. Beneficial. / The way of English-teaching in English-speaking countries (including Singapore) is different from that in non-English-speaking ones. It focuses more on writing essays and interpreting passages. I think this is very helpful. However, take China for an example, more emphasis is placed on grammar.

Xavier: Regarding writing and reading, I improved a lot even though curriculum was really rigid and test oriented. It did not encourage creative writing. The essays have to be of specific forms and no matter how hard I tried, I could not get a grade that was better than B. Then I got to [college in the US] and started writing English papers on books and topics that I really cared about and my professor loved it and gave me A's and good evaluative remarks. So I guessed there must be some problem with me or the way writing was taught and assessed in Singapore.

Yvonne: The quality varies, some teachers are good, most are not so good at teaching English - most of the time they just talked randomly. It is disadvantageous. I was expecting more content about using a language, like grammar, idioms, and usage of words.

There was however, a shared stance when the question was posited about whether the lack of instruction in their mother tongue (ie Mandarin) was going to pose a problem in their schooling. All of them saw it as only a minor impediment that can be surmounted easily.

(7)

Q8 How did you feel about coming to study in a country that does not recognise your mother tongue as much? Was Singapore's language policy of only using English (and not Chinese) as the medium of instruction in schools an obstacle that prevented you from making the choice to study in Singapore? Why/why not?

Xavier: I didn't feel anything. Singapore is 70% Chinese and you can pretty much get through speaking Chinese. Using English as the medium of instruction was not an obstacle.

Yan: Not for my parents, the English speaking environment is something they wanted for me

Yvonne: I had little knowledge of what I was going to face before coming to Singapore. And after I arrived, I found out that the accent seemed to be the only problem for me to understand people around me. The policy to use English only is one of the factors that attracted me to come to Singapore. Because so that I can practise more.

Fiona: It is quite OK for me. English as educational language does serve as an obstacle at the initial stage, but it gets better as time goes by. Also, I have to put in a lot of effort in studying English.

Certainly, while both Yvonne and Fiona had issues with the English-only milieu in school, Fiona's response seems to encapsulate the idea that the lack of instruction through Mandarin can be overcome via an individual's hard work. This is echoed by Ming who was unequivocal of what she thought was the crucial factor between success and failure in learning English – self-determination.

(8)

Q14 In what way can the teaching of English be improved to cater to immigrants such as yourself? Why?

Ming: I think it is good enough. However, there could be potential problems in subjecting new immigrants to high English standards, especially in elite schools. Although some are motivated to improve, a large proportion remains discouraged in their learning efforts and can be left behind, especially in terms of written English, for a long time.

Q28 On hindsight, would you ideally want a country you migrated to as a student, to cater to your learning needs as an immigrant? Why/why not?

Ming: Definitely. This would make the immigrant students' lives easier. However, I still feel that it's the student's own responsibility to mingle into the society and survive in the learning system.

Here, Ming uses rather strong terms to denote how "it's the student's own responsibility" to "survive", so that one cannot blame the system for failing him/her. Significantly, all five 'designer immigrant' students have indeed "survived" the system and are direct beneficiaries, as evidenced by their earning places in top universities throughout the world. The metaphor of survival is not a spurious claim, as one can only imagine the consequences for those who have failed to make the mark and who face repatriation. One might also wonder if those who have not "survived" would agree with Ming that it is their own responsibility.

Nonetheless, it is notable that none of them saw instruction in their own mother tongue as crucial in their choice of migration to Singapore [seen in (7) and (8)], and even future migration [as we see in (9)].

(9)

Q32 How would you feel if your children grew up in Singapore or any other country you migrated to, not being able to learn your mother tongue in schools? Is that a factor you would consider in choosing whether or not to settle down in that place?

Ming: I would be concerned about the fact that my child is not taught his mother tongue in school. However, this is not the priority factor in making my immigration decision. I will insist that my child learn the mother tongue at home, though.

Fiona: Personally, I feel that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their children their mother tongue if they think it is necessary. No, this is not a factor.

Xavier: It might be but not an important one. I will force them to speak Chinese at home and hire them Chinese tutors.

Yan: I would take my children to language classes. It is not a factor in choosing the place I settle down.

It is apparent here that all of them feel that it is not obligatory for the State to teach an immigrant's mother tongue in schools, and it is one's own prerogative to teach it at home or through extra-curricular avenues. In fact, in terms of learning English, all of them prefer a monolingual English-only language classroom, while some such as Xavier and Ming are adamant that teaching English via English is a better method.

(10)

Q30 Based on your experiences, would you ideally want a country you settled in to change its language policy to suit your linguistic background? (eg for the UK to teach Chinese in schools, or to teach English via Chinese? Why/why not?)

Xavier: No. I think the most effective way to learn a language is to immerse in an authentic environment. Why would I want to come to another country to learn English via Chinese?

Ming: I do not think teaching English via Chinese is effective. In fact, the more advanced schools in China have started teaching English via English... When I was in junior high school in China, teaching English via English was considered the more effective and advanced way, and trust me, it is. Over the years I have come to feel that English and Chinese each has unique expressions, some of which are almost impossible to translate. Moreover, teaching English via English immerses the students in the English language system and teaches them general English expressions, which means much more than what the lesson intends to teach.

The picture is now increasingly clear that for these 'designer immigrant' students, there are certain qualities of life ranked higher than the State's official sanction of their autochthonous linguistic practices. We shall see this as we consider their aspirations and future trajectories, which are in turn exigently tied to their mastery of English.

Aspirations and future trajectories

As observed previously, the desire for greater social mobility was one of the key reasons why these 'designer immigrant' students decided to study in Singapore. This becomes even more apparent when they were made to consider the dichotomy of fulfilling their aspirations versus maintenance of their indigenous culture. To the question of "Which is a more important factor for you now in making choices of future migration and settlement (including starting a family):

realisation of your aspirations or a government that caters to the use and teaching of your mother tongue in schools?”, all five respondents claimed that they would sacrifice the latter in order to achieve their ambitions. This does partially validate Block’s (2008) claims on the contention that ‘victims’ of language loss might not be reluctant sufferers after all. Certainly, Yan is seen to display some amount of nonchalance to the entire matter.

(11)

Yan: Realisation of my aspirations. I would sacrifice the latter. It can always be made up in terms of extra classes and daily life. It is not very important to me either.

Instead of intangible cultural and linguistic practice, it is materialistic aspects of life and socioeconomic betterment which dominate their priorities. The theme of materialism is portrayed prominently when they discussed the possibility of accepting Singaporean citizenship and their future aspirations. So, too, is the fact that Singapore was never really their end migratory destination from the outset.

(12)

Q11 Was taking up Singapore citizenship an option you were willing to consider when you accepted the scholarship? Why? / Q24 What are your future plans/aspirations/career ambitions? Where do you see yourself living and working after you have graduated from university?

Xavier: I did not think about it. I knew if I did, I would have to served in the army for two years. I wanted to use Singapore as a cornerstone for something bigger but had no specific plans for those things yet. I knew I would be tied down by money eventually so I just want to do everything right and when the chance came, I would be ready for it. / Path 1. Going to Wall street and make some money. Path 2. Go to graduate school and work in Silicon Valley. I will be here in the States and maybe get a Green card. However, I might go back to China or Singapore if there were good job opportunities.

For Xavier, Singapore was a mere “steppingstone” to greater things right from the beginning. Even today, his migratory objectives remain unclear. What is definite, is the material incentives which would influence his choice. This is not dissimilar from the remarks of the others.

(13)

Yan: No. / I am considering a career in business. I see myself working and living in the United States.

Yvonne: No. because I was very nationalistic at that time. I was determined to be a ‘chinese’. But now when I realise the many benefits of taking Singapore citizenship (visa, health care), I am seriously considering this option. / To be a civil engineer. I would work in the UK for a few years, then go back to china.

Ming: Yes. Although I chose to pursue college education in the US, Singapore remains an attractive place for me to pursue my future career due to its Asian roots and my familiarity with it. / I am not sure yet but probably in Hong Kong. Considering the fact that this summer, I am interning at an investment bank in Hong Kong which I truly like, I expect to continue working there full-time if possible. Moreover, since my family lives in a city near Hong Kong, working in Hong Kong is desirable for me.

Only Fiona, who is currently studying in Singapore, states her aim of settling down in Singapore for sure.

(14)

Fiona: Yes, I was willing to consider. Because I do not think that Nationality matters a lot. / I would like to first work in the accounting industry and then perhaps in the banking industry, such as investment and private banking. I see myself living and working in Singapore.

What we have here, is therefore a group of individuals who have no definite migratory goals beyond more pragmatic considerations of material provision. Even when they had certain objectives when they arrived in Singapore, these were hardly concrete and some have appeared to change their minds since then. Given their relative young age, one would not bet against their changing their migratory aims again in future. Their nomadic lifestyle is above all, contingent upon socioeconomic concerns; where career prospects are best, where the best quality of life may be afforded. This description of these immigrants dovetails perfectly with Bauman's (2011:34-35) depiction of the third wave of modern migration, where pathways of migration are no longer determined by a rush to colonise new lands or effected by imperialism. Migrants of today are "steered instead by the logic of the global redistribution of living resources and the chances of survival peculiar to the current stadium of globalization" (Bauman 2011:35). In addition to Bauman's illustration, we have now the knowledge that 'designer immigrant' students as part of the third wave of migration, are able to utilise these "living resources" to their advantage at various times of their lives, in order to further transpose themselves across other territories where "chances of survival" are more conducive. In our case, the resource these individuals have gained, is indubitably English. The act of transposition - as we have seen when they projected themselves from Singapore, and are set to project themselves yet again when they graduate from university - is continuous and largely unpredictable over a lifetime.

Further, their tentative targets for future transmigration flags their awareness of the global economic system as well. A system that has continued to be dominated by Western core nations [ala Wallerstein's (1974) World Systems Model], so that for individuals like Xavier and Yan, these remain their preferred destinations. In any case, the fact that four of them have chosen to study in the US and UK, reflects their internalisation of this geopolitical hierarchy.

In lieu of this unpredictability of their migration, how then would these 'designer immigrant' students characterise their own identity?

National and cultural identities

As has been evidenced by studies in adult migrant experiences (Norton 2000), sustained immersion in a new cultural and linguistic environment often has inexorable repercussions for the individual's sense of self. Like Norton's subjects in Canada, certain 'designer immigrant' students were observed to exhibit changes in the main language they used to mediate facets of their lives. English has become, for all intents and purposes, the predominant language for most in addition to their original 'autochthonous' tongues.

(15)

Q33 How would you identify yourself now in terms of nationality and cultural identity compared to before you studied in Singapore? Has your identity changed? Why/why not? / Q34 Is English and/or your mother tongue an integral part of your identity? Which is more important to your identity? Are they of equal importance?

Ming: My identity has significantly changed. Now I am more like an international student/worker, as compared to completely Chinese before I came to Singapore. I am a bit confused about my cultural identity, though, like many of my friends who left their home countries to study abroad at a young age. I would say that I have an Asian background, but not necessarily Chinese per se. / Both languages have

become integral parts of my identity. Chinese is more important for cultural reasons, while English is more important in practical considerations, for example finding jobs.

More interestingly, while others exhibited similar responses to Ming regarding the nebulous and altered nature of their sense of self, they also asserted a decoupling of 'national' from 'cultural' identity so that the two are viewed to be separate entities altogether. They may even be said to display a fair degree of antipathy to the concept of national identity. The following responses were garnered from the same two questions in (15).

(16)

Xavier: I hold a Chinese passport, have a Chinese upbringing but culturally independent. I identify myself as a freethinking person not tied down to a specific value system. / Yes. Both are important.

Fiona: My nationality is still Chinese. I think my cultural identity has changed. I think I have almost adapted to Singaporean culture and I identify myself more with my Singaporean peers because we share more things in common. / Both English and Chinese are an integral part of my identity. They are of equal importance.

Yan: Before Singapore, I did not have a real sense of identity because I was too young. Now, I still don't have any national identity, but culturally Chinese. They have not really changed, since my culture was pretty much determined by my parents, and I think national identity is a stupid thing. / Both are equally important.

We might recall that Fiona had remarked in (14) that she does "not think that nationality matters a lot". Both Fiona and Yan were asked to elaborate on what they thought of national identity as a conception. In Yan's case, he was asked why he thought it "is a stupid thing".

(17)

Fiona: I thought that nationality does not matter a lot when I first arrived at Singapore because nationality is sort of something like just a name itself and does not carry much meaning sometimes. Holding a particular nationality does not mean that one cares much or feels much sense of belonging to that country. Yes now I still think this way, especially in view of increasing globalisation and workforce mobility.

(e-mail response dated 14 July 2011)

Yan: I never felt that there was a country that is strictly speaking mine. In Singapore I am different from the locals, especially because of my accent when speaking Chinese, and people have always been able to identify that. But back in China, since I have not lived there for so long, I feel out of whack with everyone there as well, for instance in terms of usage of language, they use many terms that I do not know of. The entire environment is pretty foreign to me as well. Hence, I do not feel like I am Chinese either.

Recently, upon reflection, I feel that the concept of nations and states are very arbitrary. Borders that are here today weren't here not so long ago. Some people arbitrarily drew an imaginary line that creates a division between people. This artificial division has led to much senseless bloodshed that only benefits those in power. For almost everyone on Earth, the concept of nationality brings only misery. That's why I think national identity is stupid.

(e-mail response dated 12 July 2011)

Besides the obvious downplaying of their nationality as part of their identity, what emerges from Fiona and Yan's reply is a candid assessment of the global order today, where international borders are increasingly porous and fluid. Individuals like them, do have a profound understanding of the structural forces which enable them to be peripatetic. This self-awareness, in turn, has an impact on how they view themselves within the system, and hence their perception of identity. Yan, in particular, has also indicated his inability to fit in with

China's social mores, so that he feels more like a foreigner in China today and would be reluctant to see himself as Chinese.

On the other had, Yvonne does exhibit contrary views to the four of her peers, even as she acknowledges English to be a significant part of her sense of self. Her response to the same two questions:

(18)

Yvonne: I still identify myself as a Chinese. Because most of the time in Singapore I would still hang out with the Chinese friends. However, I do feel very close to Singaporeans in the UK now, because we do have a lot of similarities. / Yes English is important, but Chinese is more of my identity. Because culture, way of thinking, etc are all related to language.

It is thus somewhat unsurprising that Yvonne was also the only individual who stated that she would be willing to return to China [see (13)]. Despite inconsistencies in how the five individuals presented their identities, the data does show a strong correlation between their inhabited identities, language proficiencies and affiliation to specific territories. Ming and Yvonne both view themselves as Chinese and Asian at heart [see (15) and (18)], and have indicated a desire to either return to China or remain in some part of East Asia. Yan and Xavier with culturally independent personas [(16) and (17)], on the other hand, have no will at the moment to return to Asia but are instead more inclined to live in the US [(12) and (13)]. Fiona currently identifies herself more with her Singaporean community and sees herself settling in Singapore [(14) and (16)].

While these links between language proficiency, identity and territorial affiliation may be argued to be intuitive, the significant thing to note is the unpredictability of one's linguistic and cultural practice, and how this develops over an individual's lifespan. It certainly does prove identity as an 'ongoing project' (Block 2007:30), as the individuals themselves could not foresee the changes in their attitudes and identities, nor migratory destinations when they first agreed to move to Singapore over five years ago. Surely this poses difficult questions for a construction such as LHR, which professes particular modes of behaviour as authentic so that any mutability should be perceived as a violation of human rights.

6. Refining Linguistic Human Rights: The present and the future

We have now before us, a rich and complex picture of these five 'designer immigrant' students. As the data has shown us, these high-achieving individuals rank socioeconomic advancement higher than the maintenance of their original cultural and linguistic practices. Analogous to this attitude, is their decision to acquire English in Singapore, so that they might move on to better things in life somewhere else. This nomadic lifestyle has then led to a concomitant change in their cultural identities and linguistic behaviours. The ability to transmigrate indefinitely, coupled with their awareness of the structural forces which allow them to do so, makes it difficult to portray them as helpless victims of circumstances who have no choice but to adapt.

In order to examine how this picture is linked to the charges of essentialism I have levelled at LHR, let us now consider the same themes of group identity conflation, trajectories over time and space, and human agency which we have discussed earlier.

Conflation of individual tendencies with group identity

The most obvious problem for LHR is one of authentic group practice, and how the nebulous cultural identities of the 'designer immigrant' students can be represented as homogenous and part of a larger group, if at all. You have individuals like Xavier who admit to "not being tied down to a specific value system" (16), while others like Yan can no longer see himself as Chinese (17). To claim that their linguistic rights have been violated as an ethnic group would seem rather inaccurate and inappropriate.

Neither can LHR's assertion of linguistic practice as authentic and constitutive of group behaviour hold true, when these individuals also claim English as their identity and an intrinsic part of their lives. Imposing a monolingual regime of Mandarin (assuming that only Mandarin can indeed be defined as constitutive of being Chinese) on them seems a perverse act of linguistic discrimination too, since it will be akin to compelling them to abandon their current linguistic behaviour for one deemed 'right'.

One may then say that LHR was always intended to protect the rights of individuals at the initial stage, before they have been made to change their indigenous ways of life to embrace more dominant languages such as English. LHR was never meant for persons like Yan and Xavier who have already altered their modes of behaviour. But this only begs the question of why and how languages come to be acknowledged as authentic practice for any community or group. Mandarin itself was a mere regional tongue before its adoption as national language by China upon its formation as a republic. The immediate disavowal of English as being 'foreign' (Skutnab-Kangas 2000:497-498) thus seems rather arbitrary and unfair to immigrants who are in the process of acquiring the language and inevitably making English part of their sense of self. Stroud (2009) makes a similar point when he argues that a narrow notion of the nation-state, coupled with a traditional view of a language being linked to a specific territory, means that "there is little place for the linguistic versatility of multilingual portfolios for cosmopolitan citizenship" (Stroud 2009:202). That is, individuals are denied official recognition of the hybridity in linguistic and cultural practice that migration and living in a multilingual space affords. This denial may be attributed to both the State and LHR. Moreover, maintaining the view that each group can only claim one particular language as being authentic of its behaviour has the potential of discipline and shame that we have discussed earlier. This then brings us to the issue of trajectories of time and space, where one's identity is fluid rather than fixed.

Trajectories over time and space

As the experiences of the five 'designer immigrant' students have borne out, their cultural and linguistic behaviours were subject to change from the moment they arrived in Singapore. Their protracted exposure to Singapore's language policies in schools and their direct immersion in a multilingual landscape, made it nigh impossible for them not to have their sense of self influenced. This corroborates Blommaert et al's (2005:203) and Wee's (2007:334) propositions of how we need to be sensitive to the fact that changes in one's environment will lead to adaptations and alterations in linguistic behaviour.

By conceptualising linguistic practice as normatively immutable, LHR appears to be unrealistic in its assessment of how individuals participate in social arrangements over scales of time and space. This is especially when transformations in one's linguistic and cultural behaviours tend

to be rather unpredictable when measured across scales, just as the 'designer immigrant' students could not foresee the changes in their identity and migratory goals when they first made the move to Singapore. In establishing a timeless node of authentic practice as constitutive of all group members, and ignoring the inevitable changes that occur in real time and space, LHR's intentions of protecting linguistic practices from discrimination may in actuality be construed as a regime of governmentality or technology of discipline (Foucault 1991).

Further, the implementation of LHR for de-territorialised individuals remain fraught with difficulties at the level of the State. First, the current world system is one where human rights and citizenship rights continue to be dispensed and administered by nation states in spite of their diminishing boundaries, rather than enforced by supra-national organisations like the UN (Bhabha 1999). This entails that groups such as 'designer immigrant' students, will be hard pressed to justify how they have indeed been disempowered. It is especially so when these groups are seen to appropriate resources from a particular state, so as to transcend its national borders. To national governments like Singapore, their aspirations may at best be regarded as meaningless, at worst, harmful to the nation and to be discouraged. The 'designer immigrant' students' hopes of future transmigration (for which attaining high proficiency in English is critical) bear no meaning for the Singaporean State, whose main concern is for them to be ultimately assimilated as citizens. It does not matter that these students harbour hopes of leaving Singapore for greener pastures. Immersion in English-only education without necessarily catering to their different linguistic identities, might be seen as part of a wider initiative to successfully integrate these students into the Singaporean way of life. This is as arguments have often been put forth that teaching English through the mother tongues of individuals may reify cultural differences and lead to greater social divisiveness instead of cohesion (Gupta 1997).

Second, investing evermore resources in a group of individuals who are not part of the existing polity, has repercussions on the national level for a tax-paying population already wary and resentful of increasing immigration²⁹ (Migration Information Source 2010). It poses moral questions of whether non-citizens, who aspire to transmigrate indefinitely, should have the same inalienable rights as citizens to limited resources within nations. Most political philosophers and even hardcore proponents of liberal cosmopolitanism, would probably say no (Schwartz 1995, Carens 2000).

A modernist account of LHR, still managed along the lines of international borders, simply cannot cater to the situation of individuals such as 'designer immigrant' students. Indeed, it is not even a question of administration, but one of volition on the part of these individuals. Do they even want their linguistic rights to be protected by LHR, especially when their individual practices are no longer the same as those recognised by human rights law and when their aspirations transcend conventional notions of territorial space?

Human agency

²⁹ This effect is particularly amplified in Singapore as the government does not allow dual citizenship, with the value of citizenship and its commensurate rights being highly regarded within the nation (Yeoh 2007).

Here, some might argue that overarching structures in the form of a global capitalist economy and dominant language ideologies have shaped the views and life choices of ‘designer immigrant’ students regarding how to attain social mobility on a global scale. On the other hand, one might also say that these students have simply recognised the “rules of the game” in accruing social power. By seeking to gain access to English and appropriating available resources for their own ends and purposes, one cannot say that these ‘designer immigrant’ students have not demonstrated self-conscious agency. Indeed, they are all too aware of the agenda of the Singaporean State in recruiting them, but are also keen to exploit this opportunity for their own individual benefit.

Even so, to proponents of LHR, ‘designer immigrant’ students might be perceived as having no other alternative but to acquire and embrace English in order to attain social mobility (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2008:8). This has nothing to do with self-conscious agency given the hegemonic dominance of English. Also, the two choices of fulfilling personal aspirations and maintenance of cultural practice may be perceived as a false dichotomy. The application of LHR (eg by teaching English via their mother tongues) in the case of ‘designer immigrant’ students, might actually allow them to learn English without giving up their ‘pure’ Chinese identities.

However, this completely misses the point. As the responses have demonstrated, the five informants actually extol the virtues of learning English in an English-only environment and claim that it is a better way than learning it through their own mother tongues³⁰ (9). The prevalence of English in Singapore and in its schools was a key reason for their migration to the country. Nor do they rank mother tongue instruction in schools as an important aspect of their migratory goals [(7) and (8)], preferring instead to prioritise economic objectives. To individuals like Yan and Xavier, cultural and national identities have been understood as confusing and feckless constructs in their lives [(16) and (17)]. It is the pursuit of material wellbeing and tangible aspects of ‘the good life’ that motivates ‘designer immigrant’ students above all else, not the maintenance of heritage. It is not difficult to see how they would reject notions of LHR that seek to govern and define the ambit of their cultural and linguistic practices. In this regard, and with a respect for the present trends in global migration (Bauman 2011: 34-35), LHR’s rigid adherence to the links between language, culture and territory, might be inimical to ‘designer immigrant’ students’ personal value systems and desires to be unconstrained by modern political boundaries. Nor will they take lightly to being pigeon-holed and ineluctably associated with one particular culture and language.

For Bauman (2011:81-83), ‘designer immigrant’ students like Yan and Xavier might fall into the category of high-achievers who “do not harbour a desire for guarantees of communal security, and considering the price of any long-term obligations, do not have much enthusiasm for them either” (Bauman 2011:82). These are people who can rely on their own abilities to pursue whichever option in life they desire. There is a second group who are neither well-off nor capable, who seek shelter and protection from the instabilities of globalisation, in the solidity of life-long memberships. The reasons are succinctly addressed by Jeffrey Weeks, cited by Bauman (2011).

³⁰ While the merits of mother tongue instruction for English and other target languages have been much vaunted (Heller and Martin-Jones 2001), neither should we discount the views of the learners themselves. Changing the way we teach language involves much more than foisting new pedagogies upon learners. Without a great deal of persuasion and engagement, learners like ‘designer immigrant’ students may simply opt for schools and methodologies which suit their impressions of appropriate teaching.

“The strongest sense of community is in fact likely to come from those groups who find the premises of their collective existence threatened and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment. Seeming unable to control the social relations in which they find themselves, people shrink the world to the size of their communities and act politically on that basis. The result, too often, is an obsessive particularism as a way of embracing or coping with contingency.”

(Bauman 2011:82, citing Weeks 2000)

Like Fraser’s (1995) warning of misrecognition in the framing of social welfare, Mutua (2008) contends that the promotion of supposedly universal human rights should not be a unilateral imposition of biased norms. The moral imperative for the invocation of human rights and LHR cannot be seen to ignore the supposed victim’s apprehension and subsequent rejection or acceptance of these rights. The challenge for LHR now is how it may be applied in a more nuanced form that successfully differentiates individuals who renounce the communal from those who truly seek it. What is definite is that a normative and blanket application of LHR, is in danger of misrepresenting the two groups as one and the same, with dire consequences.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, the question posed to LHR is not one of practicality (eg whether there exists a critical number of immigrants so that mother tongue education by the State becomes viable). It is one of whether LHR is compatible with the identities and aspirations held by certain immigrants who translocate over time and space. In examining ‘designer immigrant’ students from Singapore, we have suggested that their attitudes toward language use and identity, as well as material aspirations, all run counter to the essentialist paradigm regarding linguistic and cultural practice that underpins LHR. A more nuanced approach to LHR is thus necessary as there exists various groups with different needs and desires. Key to a more refined stance is the realisation that for some, cultural and national identity appear to be impoverished of meaning. Not all individuals will want to stake a claim to a specific group identity and communal security.

It is hoped that this paper may raise our awareness of how migration and global mobility could present various difficulties for modernist ideals of language and identity operated by both states and supra-national organisations. The variety and complexity of individuals with similar yet different migratory experiences from ‘designer immigrant’ students will only increase with further research and exploration. We live in a globalising age where there is a “revenge of nomadism” regarding notions of territoriality and settlement (Bauman 2000:13). There are increasing accounts of peoples who transcend borders within which they were born, in constant search of extraterritorial resources, if only to survive (Bauman 2011:34-35). In the Singaporean context, we have solely investigated immigrant students who have succeeded in their aims. There are those who have not, who might have developed hybrid identities and linguistic behaviours just like their successful counterparts. What then becomes of them when they are returned to their birthplaces? There are numerous migrant workers in Singapore who are only allowed to be temporary participants in a menial workforce shunned by locals. Exemplified by the Filipino domestic helper or the Bangladeshi construction worker, these are individuals who drift from country to country seeking new job opportunities, yet never

permitted to take their families along and always expected to return to their original points of departure by their host nations. What language rights do they have, if any? More disconcertingly beyond Singapore, refugees who exist in the liminalities between states are said to be “outside the law”, without official identities nor homes to which they can belong (Bauman 2007:37). As Maryns (2005) and Blommaert (2008) have attested to, the linguistic stories of some asylum seekers are too complex to be recognised by any modernist conception of language permitted by the State or supra-national entities via LHR.

In light of the arguments put forth in this paper and the politico-philosophical ambiguities triggered by transmigration, the solution to resolving these conundrums of authentic linguistic practice and group identity should no longer be a top-down initiative imposed by well-meaning proponents. While we would like to prevent marginalisation and disempowerment of individuals who speak a different language, we would also not want to coerce the speakers to abandon their particularities and accept a group identity or practice they do not see as their own. Adopting a position such as Charles Taylor’s (1994) where certain cultures and practices are to be deemed inherently more valuable and authentic than others and hence worthier of preservation, would only serve to nullify true diversity, ignore human self-determination and undermine the moral imperative of structures like LHR.

This paper began by heeding the call of some (Blommaert 2005b, Heller 2006) to listen to the stories of individuals in their use of language, so that we may better understand the actual dynamics of power between languages and people on the ground. Like other scholars (Stroud 2009, Wee 2010:163-188, Bauman 2011:61-70), I will also extend this thread of argumentation to contend that any political process to determine one’s right to language must be constructed from the bottom up. Akin to Habermas’ (1994) conception of a ‘democratic constitutional regime’, it is a democratic participation in deliberation and dialogue by all stakeholders which will allow consensus to be formed regarding a socially just solution. Instead of merely reifying group differences within a polity and according each group commensurate rights as LHR does, the way of deliberative democracy attempts to avoid the pitfalls of misrecognition and truly empowers the individual by giving each a *voice* in the participatory process. In this case, differences or commonalities are negotiated, rather than assumed and imposed (Stroud 2009:211). Demands for empowerment and social justice thus becomes a set of ongoing consultations, discussions and engagement, leading to better mutual understanding amongst stakeholders and hopefully a polity more open to plurality, rather than one deeply divided by racial and religious differences³¹ (Bauman 2011:68).

As the ‘designer immigrant’ student has shown, we live in a world abounding with contradictions and tensions between the way the world is governed and how individuals often circumvent these modes of governance through constant transmigration. Increasingly fluid and permeable identities mean that these are challenging times for constructs like LHR, still founded on the precepts of modernity where language, culture, territoriality and the community are enduring aspects of life. Consequently, any politics of emancipation and protection of human rights must be attuned to the specific circumstances and contexts of enactment (Braidotti 2006, Mutua 2008), with an ear for the stories of individuals. As Cohen

³¹ Framing issues of empowerment and equality through metaphors of defending a community or culture deemed to be at risk, often impedes rather than advances engagement (Bauman 2011:95). Recent tragic events in Norway and the rise of right-wing confederacies, might be attributed in part to a lack of proper engagement between communities, with repercussions of separatism and possible violence.

(1999:265) aptly reminds us, “Democracy cannot guarantee justice, but neither can moral justification appeal to some absolute truth that exists independently of consensus.”

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