

Transglobal Childhoods : Diasporic Childrens in East London

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In this working paper we offer some preliminary observations concerning the nature of what we term 'transglobal childhoods'. Whilst these observations are based on on-going research amongst British Bengali children in two schools in Tower Hamlets, East London (funded by the AHRC) we intend that what follows will contribute to the wider project of conceptualising the relationship between childhood, place and mobility (cf. Fog-Olwig, 2003; Young and Ansell, 2006). Indeed, as we shall suggest, an analysis of 'place' and 'mobility' (in all their meanings) is central to an appreciation of the nature of transglobal childhoods.

The research has partly arisen from our interest in the relationship between different forms of migration and the life-course. In earlier research in London Katy examined how first generation Bangladeshi elders' narratives and experiences of movement between and settlement in different places were shaped by age, gender and the life course: a journey over time that we all take, but which varies according to cultural, economic and geographical terrain. A major theme in this work was the way in which the elders experienced London and Bangladesh not as timeless individuals, but within their gendered roles as elders (*murubbi*) and, in turn, how the role and experience of being a *murubbi* was shaped by place. Memories and narratives of different places and journeys were central to the research.

In the current research the framing questions are largely the same, but in attempting to answer them we are focussing on the opposite end of the spectrum: not old people, nearing the end of their lives, but children, at the start of theirs. Rather than experiences and narratives of place being moulded by the nostalgia and memories of elders for whom the past is, literally, a place, in the current project places are experienced and represented by very young people, for whom fantasy, play and lively imaginations are more influential than the wistful longings and reminiscences of their grand parents. Whilst this inter-generational shift in focus obviously leads to different methods and ethical issues the basic questions remain the same:

- (a) How are migration and diaspora experienced by different people (in this case, children) at different stages of the life course?
- (b) What might focussing on different generations (in this case, children) tell us about diaspora and / or 'transnational' migration?

Before outlining some preliminary answers to these questions let us start with some observations: The first is simply that, to date, there has been remarkably little research on children in established transnational communities. This contrasts with a growing body of work on independent child migrants (cf. Whitehead and Hashim, 2005) plus a plethora of research on 'youth' in multi-cultural or diasporic settings¹. Within discussions of diasporic communities, however, children are generally either overlooked, or lumped into wider questions concerning family or intergenerational relationships with scant consideration given to how the children themselves may have specific roles and

¹ Work which deals specifically with Bangladeshi youth in the U.K includes Eade, 1994; Alexander 2000; Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2005;

perspectives². Given that children are largely presented within dominant discourses of ‘transnational migration’ as playing a central role in processes of integration, either as cultural brokers, or as a problematic group stuck ‘between two cultures’, this neglect is all the more extraordinary (Fog Olwig, 2003: 217). As our work sets out to demonstrate, research on children is important not just because children are, in themselves, a largely ignored group, but also because, once efforts have been taken to see the world through their eyes, much might be learnt about the nature of cultural identity, human mobility and the complex and ever changing interconnections, exchanges and hierarchies that constitute the global order.

The second observation is that childhood is not a universal condition in which children pass through a series of pre-defined ‘stages’, but a state of being that is constructed in different ways within particular cultural contexts and geographies of power (James and Prout, 1990; Katz, 2001; 2006). This is hardly a new revelation: Philippe Aries’ seminal text *Centuries of Childhood* was, after all, published back in 1962. Yet the assumption that children are largely the same wherever they live or whatever their class or ethnic identity still drives much international policy and pedagogic practice (Bloch et al, 2006; Holt and Holloway, 2006), as well as wider hegemonic discourses as to what childhood is, how children should behave and what parenting involves (cf. Furedi, 2002). Within the context of ‘transnational’ or diasporic communities this may have particular implications for children who are framed in one way in one setting (for example, schools) and in other ways elsewhere (for example, home). Having said this, we must beware of creating the impression that particular constructions of childhood have a fixed relationship to particular places or that they can reliably be mapped onto set cultural fields (Fog-Olwig, 2003: 4). This is not only because culture is neither fixed nor bounded by place and space (Gupta and Ferguson, 1994) but also because the children involved in our research are mobile in a particular way.

Thirdly, rather than being passive ‘adults in the making’ children are active cultural agents, with their own agendas and perspectives (Hirschfeld, 2002; Harris, 1998; Anderson, 1999). As Hirschfeld has argued, rather than children learning adult culture, it may be that culture is created, first and foremost, by children. This ‘cultural work’ not only involves the forging of distinct practices and beliefs by children, but in turn shapes the culture of the grown-ups, since: ‘Children do not become who their elders are. Rather, the elders become what the child – or more specifically, what the architecture of the mind affords.’ (Hirschfeld, 2002: 623).

Understanding children’s roles as cultural innovators is particularly important in the study of diasporic cultures where relationships between people, places, beliefs and practices are continually in flux. The children in our research play a central role in the imagining and creation of new ways of being as well as in creating new markers of identity and difference in the new world that is being forged. This ‘cultural work’ may at times be uncomfortable, especially when difference suddenly becomes apparent, perhaps during a visit to the imagined homeland, or when faced with the assumptions that others make about them. At other times the children’s cultural work is more like play: the art they’ve produced, stories they’ve told and games they’ve enjoyed as part of the research process are testimony to how much fun it can be to create new culture.

In what follows, we shall sketch out some answers to our framing questions, arguing firstly that that in order to understand diasporic children’s experiences and lives and to link these to wider global and national processes, a good starting place is the analysis of the various and interlinked meanings of two key terms: *place* and *mobility*. In

² For the purposes of our research we define ‘children’ as people below the age of thirteen. Those older may legally be children, but are generally discussed as ‘youth’ within published work.

the second part of the paper we turn to the question of how focussing on the youngest generation might bring new insights to what is conventionally termed 'transnational migration'. First, some background:

'Home and Away' in East London: a brief background to the research

Based around participatory arts methods as well as the more conventional methods of participant observation and interviewing our research involves sixty Year Five (ie aged 9-10) children who live predominantly in council estates surrounding the Roman Road in Tower Hamlets, East London and who are mainly (95%) of Bangladeshi heritage. Within some parts of the borough the schools are almost entirely Bengali, reflecting both this history of Bengali settlement in the U.K and council housing policies which tended to concentrate in-coming Bengali families in particular estates (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006).

Tower Hamlets has long been connected to Sylhet District through chains of migration which started with the arrival in the early Twentieth Century of sailors from East India who 'jumped ship' and found work in the area around East London's docks. These 'lascars' were the pioneers for today's community, paving the way for their male relatives and neighbours who came in their thousands in the 1950s and 60s, taking up the opportunity of employment in factories and industrial plants in cities across the U.K. (refs Chowdhury, 1993; Adams, 1987; Gardner 2002). Over the 1970s-80s most of the original migrants brought their Sylhet based wives and children from Bangladesh to settle permanently in Britain. During this period the decline of Britain's industrial sector caused many to move to London, where the rapidly growing Bangladeshi community offered employment opportunities³, mosques, shops selling Bangladeshi goods and the security and sense of community that comes by being surrounded by one's fellow countrymen (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006). Today, Bengalis comprise 33% of the population of Tower Hamlets (according to the 2001 census). Once aggregated by age, this figure jumps sharply to 58% of children under the age of 17; in the 'core' areas of settlement, to the South West of the borough, the percentage of Bengalis rises to 45% amongst the whole population, and 74% of children under 17 (ibid, 2006:57).

Many British Bangladeshis (or *Londonis*, as they're known in Sylhet) face an interesting paradox, which tells us much about the global economic order. Whilst within the context of Bangladesh they have been highly successful, buying up large amounts of land and building themselves ostentatious houses, within Britain they have been one of the least successful South Asian communities. This is exemplified by the Bangladeshi population within Tower Hamlets, which itself has the dubious honour of being ranked as the most deprived borough in England⁴. Within the borough unemployment rates in 2005-6 were at 12.8% for men and 12.5% for women, over double the rate for England and Wales as a whole; amongst Bangladeshis, the rate for people under 25 was over 40%⁵.

A key feature of the British Bangladeshi community is the vibrancy of the links which are maintained with Bangladesh. In many ways it is a 'transnational community' par excellence, in which continued exchanges of goods, ideas and people link places together within and across diasporic space⁶. Whilst having made lives in Britain many

³ Like many other migrant communities, British Bengalis originally occupied economic niches, in their case, the rag trade or 'Indian' restaurants, which in Britain are staffed wholly by Sylhetis.

⁴ This is calculated through the Indices of English Deprivation, 2004 (<http://www.hounslowpct.nhs.uk/cgi-bin/documents/Chapter%201.pdf>)

⁵ Tower Hamlets Public Health Report (<http://www.publichealth.thpct.nhs.uk/PublicHealthReport/index.aspx?pid=50>)

⁶ For a summary of academic discussions of transnational migration, see Vertovec, 2004

people continue to regard Bangladesh as central to their identity; a key location in lives where 'home' is situated in several places at once. An important practice in the maintenance of these connections is the regular trips that British Bangladeshis make to Sylhet. All of the project children have visited Sylhet at least once; some have been there several times. As we shall see, it is not so much that their lives are disembedded from place (or, indeed, that they are in any way 'displaced') but more that place and location are arranged in a particular constellation in which 'home' and 'away' are simultaneously the same place.

From this background, let us return to the questions of place and mobility, which, help link the experiences and representations of the children to the wider global and national processes and partly frame their lives.

Place, Emplacement and Location

As Olwig and Gullov have pointed out, place is both a social position and a physical location (Olwig and Gullov, 2003; see also Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974). Children are therefore 'placed' both in terms of their location in space, and in terms of their positions in families, communities and wider society. Both tend to be closely controlled by adults: 'Places for children, in other words, are defined by adult moral values about a cherished past and a desirable future, clothed in commonsense notions about children's best interests.' (Olwig and Gullov, 2003: 3).

As they move between different domains, children may have greater or lesser control over how they're placed and may in turn participate in different forms of compliance, resistance or subversion. Within the family domain, for example, they may be placed in relatively rigid inter-generational or age hierarchies with their parents, grandparents and siblings, which they may accept or subvert, according to context. When they physically move into different locations however (school, perhaps, or when they're 'playing out') they are placed in different relationships, vis-à-vis each other and the wider community.

Such processes of 'emplacement' depend not only on how childhood is constructed in each context but also upon gender, ethnic identity and social class. As they grow older, for example, the spaces children inhabit and positions they occupy are likely to be increasingly influenced by gender. For our Class Five children, these spatial distinctions are yet to become particularly important, at least at school. The extent to which gender differences emplace the children within their homes is an interesting research question which we shall be addressing later in our fieldwork.

Ethnically, the children are placed by wider society through various markers, all variable according to context, but mostly relying upon skin colour and / or clothing. For girls, their scarves, or *hijab* (which many wear) mark them out not only as female but within wider British society as Muslim. In the current climate in which anti-Muslim sentiment has tended to solidify around debates surrounding veiling, such markers are highly political⁷, even if the girls are, so far, largely unaware of it. Indeed, within their schools and immediate neighbourhood, processes of racialisation are largely submerged; being labelled 'Bangladeshi', 'Asian' or 'Muslim' only becomes important when difference is revealed by moving out of familiar territory into 'white' areas of London or U.K. Within Tower Hamlets place and emplacement work together to produce racialised spatial divides in which particular parts of the borough have a very high percentage of

⁷ See for example <http://www.inminds.co.uk/hijab-ban-an-attack-on-our-daughters.html>; and Jack Straw's 2006 newspaper article, 'I felt uneasy talking to someone I couldn't see' (The Guardian, October 6th, 2006); <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,,1889231,00.html>

Bengali residents, whilst others (seen by many Bengalis as ‘no go areas’) are predominantly white (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006: 57).

Whilst processes of religious, ethnic or national emplacement are likely to become more explicit as the children grow older and are increasingly forced to ‘chose’ between particular signifiers, in answering questions concerning their identity, they often refuse to be tied down, as in the following exchange:

K: When, when people are...if people are to ask you what are you? What would you say you are?

Mad Max⁸: Uh...I am a...human being...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...I’m a boy...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and stuff.

K: Mhm. And if they said you’re a human being, you’re a boy, you’re a student, you’re somebody’s son, are you British? Are you Bangladeshi? Are you both? What are you?

Mad Max: Um...both.

(Interview with ‘Mad Max’ 2/ 11/07)

Emplacement, Locality and Global Inequality

Emplacement results from global processes as well as those experienced within families and communities; indeed, neither the local nor the global can be ‘de-linked’ from the other. One way this might be analysed is through renewed focus on processes of social reproduction, a project reinvigorated by Cindy Katz’s recent work on ‘vagabond capitalism’ (Katz, 2001; 2006). In this, Katz argues that within late capitalism the reproductive costs of society are increasingly borne in a different place from where the benefits accrue. This means that within the shifting vagaries of ‘vagabond capitalism’ (in which production is mobile, but social reproduction largely place bound) certain groups of children bear the toll of environmental costs, leading to a ‘re-scaling’ of childhood (ibid: 715). By use of the metaphor of ‘topographies’, Katz suggests that the links between multiply situated actors in a range of diverse geographical locations and the diverse forces of globalisation can be made; just as topographies in physical geography include detailed descriptions of the totality of features in a given locality, with attention to elevation, distance etc, ‘critical topographies’ assume that space carries and reinforces uneven social relations (2001: 720-721).

Katz’s perspective resonates with the history of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets. As global migrants, the forefathers of the children involved in our research originally moved from their villages in Sylhet to centres of colonial and post-colonial capital; in the post war period men from Britain’s ex-colonies were actively recruited to help re-build the country’s infra-structure and work in heavy industry. Yet whilst Katz is correct in stating that during this period indigenous reproductive costs were increasingly paid for by the state, for the country’s incoming migrant workers this was not the case. Indeed, as Meillasoux argued twenty years earlier, the great benefit of labour migration to capitalist centres of production was that so long as individual migrants were not able to settle, their reproductive costs were covered in the periphery, whilst the profits are accumulated at the centre (Meillasoux, 1981).

⁸ In order to main confidentiality, the children chose interview names for themselves.

Whilst the acquisition of British citizenship and processes of family reunification by the original Bengali settlers in Britain over the period 1960-1990 demonstrates the problems with overly deterministic analyses that stress structure at the expense of historical context and human agency, the collapse of manufacturing industry in Britain and the socio-spatial divide between the places where profits from Katz's 'vagabond capitalism', pile up (for example the financial heartland of London, to the west of Tower Hamlets) and the places where its costs are felt (ie inner city boroughs such as Tower Hamlets, where unemployment, over-crowding in poor quality council housing, ill health and social deprivation amongst the families who once supplied labour are routine) suggest that the topographic approach that Katz proposes might be valuable to our own project. As she reminds us: 'The settings in which children grow up speak volumes about their value as present and future members of particular societies' (Katz, 2001: 715).

It is not difficult to characterise the settings of working class children's lives in Tower Hamlets in terms of the environmental, physical and social costs they involve. A recent report, for example, puts the borough at the top of a league of unhealthy places to live in the U.K.⁹. Pollution, busy roads, squalid tenement blocks, the lack of open or green spaces to play in and high levels of overcrowding in council flats all feature in the lives of the children involved in our research, a stark contrast to the types of homes they dream of. Whilst drawing a picture of her ideal house, Najma¹⁰ (age 10) told us: 'I would like to be a lawyer or an actress and like to live in a mansion in the country side. I wouldn't like to live near Bancroft (the name of the housing estate where she lives)'. Drawing an arrow pointing to the tower block, she wrote the caption 'everyone is so close!'

Like Najma, many of the children we've interviewed complain about the urban environment, sometimes using their imaginings of Bangladesh to critique London; as we shall see further in the paper this use of often idealised places as 'good to think with', is a common theme. In the following excerpt, for example, Farzana compares the physical environment of Bangladesh favourably to London:

Farzana: It (London) isn't as good as Bangladesh ... it's really crazy that people (in Bangladesh) think that it's really nice, because you know in Bangladesh everything is open space, you can run wherever you want. There is a bigger park then you could ever think of ...it's an adventure park, you know, (there's) theme parks and stuff. There is a bigger park than our local park...it is really small .. It's (the one in Bangladesh) is bigger than Victoria Park...and its really nice and open space. Here in London everything's like all together you know how in Bangladesh like, our house is here and like 20, 30, 25 meters away, there is the next door neighbours. In England its like all everything's together...

Whilst Jess told us that the grey colour of the Thames made her 'want to puke', Mad Max had the following story of the overcrowded streets of Whitechapel:

K: Do you like it in Whitechapel?

Mad Max: Yeah, but it's a bit too crowded.

K: Is it? ...

⁹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article3129375.ece>

¹⁰ All names are pseudonyms

Mad Max: Horrible.

K: No? What's horrible about it?

Mad Max: It's too crowded...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and it's really crowded and messy. And sometimes, once I slipped there...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and I hurt my head.

K: Mhm. Oh, God. What in the market there?

Mad Max: Um, no. On the road.

K: Really?

Mad Max: Yeah. I saw em something like a squashed banana as well, stepped on it and slipped.

Global Emplacement Reconsidered

Whilst Katz's analysis provides important perspectives on how late capitalism structures the relationship of people to place, producing 'political ecologies' in which children bear the brunt of the environmental costs of vagabond capitalism (2001: 715) we should beware of focussing only on the physical or economic environment, for as our research shows, places are also experienced in terms of the social relationships and social practices that take place within them. This comes across strongly in our interviews: besides describing their physical experience of London and Sylhet the children tend to describe places in terms of the relationships to people who live in them. Place is thus social in several senses: not are our informants socially *placed* within national, global and familial hierarchies, but they also experience places in terms of social relationships. Centrally too, the children travel *between* places rather than simply being located in one place. By moving across geographical space they are thus *emplaced* in different political ecologies and social hierarchies, their mobility adding an extra layer of complexity to Katz's notion of critical topography. I'll return to this point in a moment. For now, let's start with how, for the children in our project, places are primarily viewed as social.

Despite the overcrowding and pollution of life in Tower Hamlets most of the children talked first and foremost about their immediate neighbourhood in terms of the family members who lived close to them.

Anita: I live in a building erm and I am in number three and ... erm... on the first floor and my cousin (uncle's dad's brother and his children) just lives in number one. ...we call him like 'Abu' that means like Dad like we call him in a sweet way, Daddy instead of Uncle.

K: So he's like another dad to you?

Anita: Yes

K: So with you Abu is very close by, how often do you see him?

Anita: Yes and like every two minutes.

Similar comments might be made by many British children: places are turned into homes when one's loved ones are near. But what makes our informants different from the majority of British kids is that for them, 'home' is often situated in two places, because close family members live in both London and Bangladesh. As Max put it:

... I've got two homes.

K: You've got two homes? And what makes the home in Bangladesh homely for you?

Mad Max: Um my dad's family. Mmm...my mum's family went there as well. ...And um...just moved from there...And I like it there.

K: Mhm. And here?

Mad Max: And here? The same.

K: It's the same. So is it the people that make a home, a home?

Mad Max: Yeah. My whole family.

So how does their relationship with Bangladesh affect the 'emplacement' of the project children? All of them have made at least one trip to Bangladesh; some have gone many times, sometimes staying for months or even years¹¹. Here, they find themselves in dramatically different physical locations, exchanging crowded council flats in chilly inner city London for what are often grand houses surrounded by rice fields and mango trees, with ponds to bathe in and a climate famed for its extreme humidity. As Anita put it:

It's like a big open house. You know like in England there are lots of close houses, they are like close houses but (there) there are all these opened areas where you can walk and there's not many cars there and its blue with blue gates and long passageways and like, it's got twenty four rooms.

As the presence of these grand houses implies, on their trips to Bangladesh the children may find that their social place has changed dramatically, for in Sylhet Londonis tend to have high amounts of social and economic status. Indeed, in contrast to villagers who never migrated, Londonis have been remarkably successful, transforming their family fortunes over a generation or so through using their British wages to buy up large amounts of land, and building large, status enhancing houses (Gardner, 1995; 2006; 2008). This disjunction in social status is mentioned by many children in their accounts of visits to Bangladesh, who told us how poor and thin many people were in comparison to them. Anita described her relatively high social status in Bangladesh in terms of her family's popularity and celebrity status as returning Londonis:

... Yes, all the people would come and they would chat and they would eat and snacks and all that stuff and we would play in the sand and they would call us and we would have rice. ...lots of people come and we just play and sleep late. ...

K: Are you sometimes like a celebrity when you go there?

A: Yes, because everybody's just so popular, yes and everybody is always coming for parties and weddings. We all feel so popular.

Other children told us about their poorer relatives, who they gave money to, and the beggars who surrounded them at Dhaka airport or on the road to Sylhet. As this implies, as part of diasporic communities and families the children are not emplaced in

¹¹ A 1997 report states that 27% of Bangladeshi children had taken extended leave during term time in the previous two years (Denton, Gavron and Young, 2006: 140)

any one location; as they move between places, their relationship to the global order shifts, for the costs and gains of 'vagabond capitalism' are experienced differently in different locations. In part, this is to do with the vastly unequal buying power of the pound versus the taka but it is also intimately tied to the history of colonialism and labour migration from Sylhet, where status has become linked to one's access to foreign places and foreign job opportunities (Gardner, 1995; 2008) and upwards mobility is perceived as only possible abroad. Clearly movement as well as place is crucial to the analysis. Let us consider this in more detail.

Movement and Mobility: Across Space, Between Places and Over Time

Just as 'place' is not simply a physical location, neither does movement simply involve traversing across space. As they walk to school, travel to their cousins' houses in other parts of London or the U.K, and take planes to Sylhet, the children move geographically, socially and culturally, their journeys resulting in new social roles and statuses as well as physical and emotional experiences.

For many of the children, their geographical movement to Bangladesh is described first and foremost in terms of bodily experience. For some, the physical freedom of village life in Sylhet is presented as a good thing, whilst others experience the physical environment more negatively. Insect bites, boils and the hot, humid weather are constantly mentioned, perhaps because many of the children visit Bangladesh during the summer holidays, a season which is extremely hot and wet in Sylhet. The ponds, in which people wash in Sylheti villages, also feature in many of the children's accounts:

Mad Max: I had flea bites on my legs. We used to sleep in nets that had holes in them and some cockroaches would come in from the hole in the net. People (from Bangladesh) are not scared of nothing really, there are snakes in there ...in Bangladesh there is a ghat...my Dad's sister went all the way in the lake.

The children's bodily experiences in Bangladesh may become markers of wider difference, causing them to consider where they most belong. As Mad Max continues:

It's just that you don't get stuff from London that you get in there (in Bangladesh) like mosquitoes bites and leeches that pull your skin off and.. Allergy ...cockroaches. It's just weird, you don't feel like you are from there you just want to go back to your country...

Jess told us about the wild dogs that live in her father's village, which she is afraid of, and how she didn't like to swim in the pond : 'Because there are some little frogs that bite you and your heart stops.'

As part of their movement over space, the children are also moving across and between cultural and social spheres. Whilst we do not consider that they are 'caught between two cultures' (Watson, 1977) a phrase that despite its critique by a large number of commentators, is constantly repeated in the media as well as government reports on 'social cohesion'¹², there are significant differences in cultural practices and ideologies

¹² See, for example, Cantel 2005: For critiques see: Alexander, 2000; Archer, 2005

within the different locations that the children move between. Within London alone, these may involve cultural differences within and between home, school and community.

When they travel between London and Bangladesh, the children may (or may not) be experiencing even more radical disjunctures. For example, some children commented upon the strictness of Bangladeshi adults in Sylhet, concluding that they were better off living in the U.K. In particular, schools in Bangladesh were compared unfavourably to those in London: Other children found themselves treated better in Bangladesh than in London. In the following quotes, Anita and Mad Max are also obliquely commenting upon their lives in the U.K via their reflections on Bangladesh as a more friendly and relaxed place, where adults are kinder and have more time. To this extent, places are 'good to think with', producing critiques of the children's everyday lives in London:

Mad Max: I like my dad's sister because she was very kind to me (in Bangladesh) and when I used to say that I want chips she would make it for me, chips. They always used to be very kind to me...They have more time and (because) they don't see you for a long time...because in London they always see me and they can't take me places because they have to work.

Anita: There, no one will say anything bad about you, they won't say that you are so short or ugly, they always say something nice about you, even if you meet people they will always say something nice about you. If you got to the shops if there is something really expensive they will make a low price for you... They will always be kind to you and ask you would you like a drink and they would get it there.

No doubt a great deal more could be said about how the children experience cultural and social differences during their visits to Bangladesh; this is an important aspect of our on-going research.

What does all this tell us about the relationship between places, emplacement and mobility? Whilst, as we have seen, physical movement across transnational space can temporarily change the children's status, the degree that they will be socially mobile over their lives and the relationship this has to place (in the widest sense) is an important question which given the limited time frame of our research we can only answer speculatively. Whilst a large body of work points to the positive relationship between migration and social mobility in South Asia (Osella and Osella, 2000; Osella and Gardner, 2004; Gardner, 1995), the emplacement of the children into particular class positions and racialised categories in the UK, combined with their spatial location in the most socially and economically deprived borough in London, may mean that whilst their families in Sylhet have experienced high levels of social mobility, within Britain they are more constrained. The evidence so far is contradictory. Previous in-migrant groups in Tower Hamlets have tended to be highly successful, trading life inside the borough for the more prosperous suburbs as they have climbed up the social scale. Equally, other British South Asian groups have shown a sharp upwards trajectory, moving into professional jobs and middle class spaces over a course of a generation or two. Whether the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets will have the same success so quickly is more doubtful; Dench, Gavron and Young point to high levels of unemployment, ill-health and dependency upon social welfare as signs that they may become 'stuck', both socially

and geographically, as a deprived underclass in inner London (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006: 229).

Transnational/ Transglobal Families : Some Reflections

Hopefully, this discussion has offered some indication of the children's experiences of place, emplacement and movement. As we have suggested, each, its various forms, is central to the analysis of diasporic childhood, for not only are the children placed in the 'critical topography' of a particularly deprived part of inner London, but as members of transnational communities they have a different relationship to space and place than the majority of British children. We shall enlarge on the issue of critical topographies later. Before this, however, let us return to the question of how the study of children might lead to new insights into 'transnational' or diasporic migration.

1. Rethinking Transnationalism

As the research has progressed we have become increasingly doubtful that framing the children involved in our research, as 'transnational' is terribly helpful, implying as it does links between discrete nation states. It is true that the people the children list as being important to them live in both Britain and Bangladesh. To this extent, they belong to what might be termed 'transnational families', defined by Bryceson and Vuorela's in the following way: '... families that live some or most of the time separated from each other yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely *'family hood'*, even across national borders.' (2002: 3).

It is also the case that historically the relationship between the British and Bangladeshi states has been central in shaping the children's communities. Today, British government policy continues to influence their family life: dictating the form that migration from Bangladesh to Britain takes, as well as their own movement between places. Current educational policy, for example, dictates that families are not allowed to take their children out of school during term time; if they stay in Bangladesh for too long they may lose their children's school place.

Yet despite the undoubted importance of state policy and state boundaries in guiding the form it takes, for our informants the relationship between places is more nuanced. For many of the children, for instance, family and community are spread between places in Britain rather than simply between Tower Hamlets and Sylhet: holidays are spent with relatives in Liverpool or Luton, and day trips taken to visit cousins living in Kent or Essex. Other children have uncles and aunties in the U.S and Canada as well as Europe (eg France and Italy). Combined with this several children have visited the Gulf, breaking their journey to Bangladesh to perform Haj. For them and their families, Medina is perceived as the core of the spiritual world; for all children learning Arabic takes priority over the learning Bengali (all attend Arabic classes).

Is it therefore accurate to describe the children as 'transnational'? Not only are their families and identities spread across a wider (and more complex) diasporic space than the term 'allows, but Sylhet and East London can be seen as different locations within a *single* field of practice and morality. This is not to say that Sylhet and London are the same, or that children living in each place have the same experiences – the interviews cited so far show clearly that they do not - but to acknowledge the ways that culture, identity, kinship and values not only cross national boundaries, but transcend them altogether. The crossing of national borders may therefore be just one aspect of what one might think of as a 'transglobal habitus', in which one's outlook and

relationships are both rooted in, and exist above and beyond, particular geographical locations¹³.

This is illustrated by the children's conflation of the terms 'desh' (home) and 'bidesh' (abroad). Amongst Bangladeshi elders in London, as well as villages in Sylhet, 'desh' is unequivocally translated as 'the homeland' (Sylhet) and 'bidesh' as foreign countries (Gardner, 2002; 1993). Yet rather than distinguishing between 'home' and 'away', as their forefathers would, we found that the children merge the terms. This is partly a result of their incomplete knowledge of Bengali, for many were not sufficiently confident that they could translate the terms 'desh' / 'bidesh'. It also reflects the increasing falseness of the dichotomy of *desh* / *bidesh*. As several children told us, 'desh' is Bangladesh, whilst 'home' (using the English word) is London:

K: Where is your Desh?

Max: I'd say Bangladesh

K: What, your bidesh?

Max: My home is England...that's my Bidesh

K: So, your desh is Bangladesh?

Max: Yeah

K: What does desh mean? Is it home?

Max: Yeah

K: And what does bidesh mean?

Max: Bidesh means home and desh means away

K: Are you sure, I though it was the other way around...I may be wrong. I thought that desh was your desh and bidesh was another desh?

Max: I dunno

K: Ok...lets say where is ...home is England?

Max: and away is Bangladesh. I got family in there that I don't really get to see...Once in a blue moon

Attention to the transglobal rather than transnational also deflects a distorting focus on the 'place of origin' (ie Bangladesh) as being central to the children's identities or sense of belonging. As Karen Fog Olwig has pointed out, children are constantly creating different sites of belonging according to the various spheres of life that they encounter in their everyday lives; in this context, national or ethnic identities are not particularly relevant (2003: 217). As we have seen, the children involved in our research were not interested in labelling themselves either 'British' or 'Bangladeshi', or indeed, 'British-Bengali/ Bangladeshi'. Indeed, the discussions we had with them on the topic felt a little forced, derived as they were from our own adult and academic preoccupations.

2. *Recreating Transglobal Relationships*

Our research also shows how attention to children's perspectives highlights the paramount importance of family relationships to the creation and recreation of transglobal networks. As Bryceson and Vuorela point out, to date most studies of diaspora and transnationalism have considered either broad population movements or religious, economic or political processes (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 3). For the children, however, what keeps them connected to different places is the presence of close family members there. In their reckoning of 'closeness' and 'distance', the number

¹³ This term builds upon Steve Vertovec's notion of 'transnational habitus' (2004: 22-23)

of miles between people may be far less important than the nature of the relationship. For Nadia, for example, when asked to create a diagram with stickers that showed the people closest to her, she placed her paternal grandparents who live in Bangladesh next to her beloved cousins, who live in Kent¹⁴. Similarly, the majority of the children described Bangladesh first and foremost in terms of their relatives who live there.

Whilst born into pre-existing transglobal networks the children are by no means passive in the process of reproducing them. Instead, they actively create relationships across diasporic space, bringing new meaning to them, as well as using new means. Our nine year olds in Class Five, for example, are more au fait with mobiles than older generations will ever be, using them to speak to their transglobal relatives as well as suggesting that Kanwal call them up, so that they could chat to her.

As the youngest generation of Twenty First Londoners, the children also bring their own sensibilities and interpretations to kinship relationships that are spread across places. Whilst their fathers or grandfathers in my 1998 research described the need to keep connected in terms of ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’, or their desire to return to a romantically imagined homeland (Gardner, 2002), the children primarily talk about their relatives in other places in terms of affection. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of our interviews with the children is the emotional content of their transglobal relationships. They ‘really loved’ their cousins, grannies and aunties and uncles, the children told us. This love seems to be unaffected by where the particular relatives are located and whilst tending to adhere to Bengali kinship norms, was discussed in the children’s terms. Crucially, it is this love and affection, experienced and created by the youngest generation that maintains links between places¹⁵.

The processes of forging new links and maintaining or curtailing others is termed ‘relativising’ by Bryceson and Vuorela, who draw attention to the ways in which imagined families are materialised within diasporic space (2002: 14-15). Whilst adults may be arranging marriages, sending remittances or performing rituals for each other in different locations in the diaspora, children can play a particular role, in these processes of what Bryceson and Vuorela call ‘conscious rationalisation’, not only because their very existence creates new relationships, but also because they are usually enthusiastic participants in the practices involved in creating and recreating the imagined family.

A central way in which this is done is through gift giving, a practice I described in my earlier research in Sylhet, wherein the passage of goods and gifts between adults in Sylhet and the UK was an important way in which relationships were maintained across transglobal space (Gardner, 1993). Gifts of money or presents are frequently discussed by the children in their descriptions of the ‘desh’. Mad Max told us that his relatives in Bangladesh gave him money, clothes and DVDs, whilst Jess and Anita described the jewellery and clothes they were given. Whilst the children are not currently in a position to reciprocate these gifts, as adults their connectedness to Bangladesh may be maintained by their own donations to relatives in the village. As my research in Sylhet has shown, village based relatives are often dependent upon the ‘gifts’ of financial aid that their relatively wealthy British based kin send (Gardner and Ahmed, 2006). This is reflected in what Mad Max tells us in response to a research activity where he has been asked to chose amongst pictures of possible jobs he would like to do when he grows up. He’d like to be a doctor, he said, so he could earn lots of money which he would then ‘donate’, first to his parents, but then to his relatives in Bangladesh.

3. *Re-imagining and Re-engaging with ‘The Homeland’.*

¹⁴ In doing this, Nadia was asked to interpret ‘closeness’ however she wanted.

¹⁵ Cf. Shaw and Charsley, 2006

Whilst much ink has been spilt over the ‘myth of return’ and the role of nostalgia in creating an imagined homeland for first generation migrants, very little has been written about the role of children’s play and fantasy in creating what we might think of as a ‘new generation’ of imagined ‘homelands’ (if indeed, such a term is still appropriate). It is, however, these imaginings which in future years will help shape the form and intensity of transglobal relationships; anyone interested in how diasporic processes are created and changed over time neglects them at their peril. Just like the elder’s descriptions of the ‘desh’, the children’s accounts should be analysed as cultural constructions rather than as wholly objective. In their narrations of sites within Bangladesh, the children speak from particular positions (or places): as urban British kids, certainly, but also as children who, emplaced as their families are within the global economic order, are not accustomed to regular holidays, material treats or day trips.

One striking aspect of the children’s narratives of Sylhet is that in contrast to the rural idyll described by elders, with its ‘misti batash’ (sweet breezes) and ‘shonar jomeen’ (golden fields), a very different place emerges. Jostling with complaints about biting insects, snakes and wild animals, or accounts of the family members who live in the ‘desh’, are other comments, which construct Bangladesh as a tourist site. As Farzana told us:

... so like if you went to Sylhet or Dhaka the sites are really amazing ,so natural like, and you know the beach? It’s really big. ...there are businesses and really nice shopping centres...Actually its really nice and the thing I like about Bangladesh is that it is a really nice place to explore

When the children were asked what they liked best about Bangladesh, two locations were constantly referred to: shopping malls, and ‘Dreamland’. The presence of both indicates a new, modern Bangladesh, a place where things and experiences are to be consumed. Let us start with the malls:

The growth of ever more sophisticated and prestigious shopping malls in parts of South Asia where there are high levels of migration to the West has been noted by several commentators (Gardner and Ahmed, 2006; Gardner, 2008). Selling South and South East Asian saris, scarves and jewellery, plus the usual global brands, the malls consciously market a cosmopolitan, ‘urban’ life style, featuring shops with names such as the deliberately misspelled TESSCO, or London Fried Chicken. That they are frequently empty of customers, catering almost entirely for Londonis on trips the ‘desh’ is not the point; what matters is that shopping at a ‘mall’ (or owning one) is, for locals, a key signifier of migrant success. For Londonis who may not so much be returning, as visiting a country they have never lived in, the ‘Mall’ may be a reassuring sign of modernity in a country famed for high levels of poverty, corruption and environmental catastrophe. That the children talk about visits to shopping malls thus reflects the cultural milieu of Sylhet in particular and South Asia more generally, where rapid economic change and the enrichment of a new entrepreneurial elite is reflected in spiralling property prices and consumer consumption. It also reflects their identity as urban British kids, for whom the acquisition of particular goods (mobile phones, Play Stations, Nintendos, etc) is a highly desired signifier of ‘coolness’ and hence status amongst one’s peers. This is what Mad Max told us of Al Hamera, the most famous mall in Sylhet Town:

I like the shopping centre called Al Hamda, there is so much stuff there like play station 2, Nintendo 2 games, stuffed toys, clothes,

and everything erm... like diamonds ...and at the top there's a big fancy restaurant.'

It should be noted that few if any of the children in our research have their own play stations, computers or Nintendo games; whilst they may see them on T.V and discuss them with their friends their families cannot afford such lavish presents. Similarly, in London few, if any, regularly visit large shopping malls such as Brent Cross, or travel to the shops in central London. Instead, their experience of shopping tends to be limited to the shops in their immediate locality: the Roman Road, Bethnal Green Road and Whitechapel (a highlight is a local shop called Nansens). All of these are within the 'core' area of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets. Mad Max's excitement at Al Hamera is thus partly structured by his life in Tower Hamlets, whereby economics and racism confines him to a relatively limited locality.

The second location that the children frequently describe is 'Dreamland', a fun fair on the outskirts of Sylhet Town, built primarily for visiting Londoni families. The children's visits to this site identify them within the Syheti context as part of wealthy Londoni or urban families. Taking children to amusement parks or for child focussed outings is, it should be noted, a middle class activity in Bangladesh, carried out by only the most highly educated or wealthy Bangladeshis; in the villages children do not expect to be entertained by adults. Similarly in London, the children in our research are not regularly taken out to expensive play parks. Once again their accounts have to be interpreted in terms of their lives in the U.K. as well as their experiences in Bangladesh. Whilst 'consuming' the attractions of Sylhet as tourists, the children's narrations of Dreamland thus result from their global emplacement, as children from low income families situated in a deprived part of London.

Concluding Remarks

Do sites such as Dreamland indicate the future direction of relations between Sylhet and the U.K. in which the region is consumed as a form of heritage tourism by third, fourth and fifth generation British Bengalis, who no longer have close relatives in the 'desh'? As our research indicates, this scenario is currently rather far fetched: besides their physical experiences, the children's principal recollection of their visits to Bangladesh involves the relatives they have there, relationships which the children work hard to maintain, investing them with love and affection, and cementing them with the exchange of money and gifts within their families. As our findings also show, however, the geographical span of relationships within the diaspora, and the way that the children conceptualise questions of 'home' and 'away' imply that the term 'transnational' may have a limited shelf life as migrant communities become less fixed in particular geographical locations and more 'spread out'.

So far, then, we have a few answers to the question of how the study of children might affect our understanding of diaspora and / or transnational migration (or whatever it's to be called). What of the question of how different people at different stages of the life course – in this case, children – experience diaspora?

In attempting to answer this, we have suggested that the analysis of place and mobility, and how these are constellated in particular ways for particular children, might be a useful starting point. As we have seen, the children in our research are emplaced through a global economic history (or, in Katz's terms, a 'vagabond capitalism') which, whilst contributing to the original migration of their grandparents, now situates them in one of the most deprived boroughs of London, in families with high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. Using Katz's metaphor of 'critical topography',

one starts to appreciate the global links, economic disparities, social contours and diverse histories that together create the environment in which the children live.

Yet whilst this analysis leads to a necessarily political understanding of particular geographical locations and how they are, in Katz's words 'bound and rent by the diverse forces of globalisation' (Katz, 2001: 720), the danger of overly focussing on the features found in any given locality is that we fail to appreciate how people move *between* places. As we have seen, our 'transglobal children' are very much located in Tower Hamlets, but in their journeys to Sylhet they move into new and elevated social roles and identities, for whilst being low down the economic and social scale in the U.K, in Sylhet their families are usually at the top. In addition, the children may experience social, physical mobility within Britain as they move over their own life courses. If they do, they are likely to move out of Tower Hamlets into the suburban areas favoured by other South Asian groups in the U.K.. Whether this eventually happens, and the implications that it has for the future shaping of transglobal relationships between Britain, Bangladesh, and other places, remains to be seen.