Contrasting Parallels:
Reflexive Sociology/ies from a Migrating Sociologist

Godfrey Baldacchino

Canada Research Chair in Island Studies
& Department of Sociology & Anthropology
University of Prince Edward Island
550, University Avenue
Charlottetown, PE
Canada C1A 4P3

ABSTRACT

This paper grapples with the specific situation of a professional sociologist struggling to make sense and articulate the analysis of his transition to the status of a trans-migrant, after leaving Malta to take up employment in Prince Edward Island, Canada. This is done by focusing on the problematization of the process of 'coming round' to migrant status, particularly in how the understanding of 'home', and its 'bridging' across two geographical spaces, is seen and analyzed by the subject/object. The assessment presents both a positivist-rational and a self-reflexive exercise in accommodating to the decision to migrate. The rational component of the analysis is teased apart separately from the more intimate ethnographic one, offering a sense of the complex multi-layering of the 'coming to terms' with the migration experience. The overall parallel analysis presents insights into the distinct social, cultural and psychological 'remote preparation' to, and after, actual migration, and its effects on the changing meaning(s) of 'home'.

The Bridging Experience of Trans-Migration:
Reflexive Sociology/ies from a Migrating Sociologist

"Home is, I suppose, just a child's idea. A house at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe." – Sir Vidia Naipaul, (*in* Adams, 2004: 1).

INTRODUCTION

Both the here/there and subject/object boundaries of traditional migration research are collapsing. Contrary to historical patterns and received social science wisdom, neither the permanent settlement in a foreign country, nor the severing of home country ties, are inevitable processes any longer. The members of specific occupational groups, in particular, can forge, maintain and intensify active and multiple links between sender and destination countries, reinforcing a pattern of 'back-and-forth' migration that has historically been restricted to specific geographical regions (Clifford, 1994; Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1995; Portes, 1999; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). Just like the physical proliferation of bridges, trans-nationals are a growing example of a hitherto rare viability, the human embodiment of bridges across place and time. Meanwhile, as with Clara Law's movie *August Moon*, it is increasingly common and acceptable to find social scientists privileged in being *themselves* the subjects of their own, critical, reflexive inquiry as migrants (Law, 1992). Exclusivist, often dichotomous, notions of identity, place and time need to be reconsidered in coming to terms with the challenges posed by a-historical subjectivity and a-temporal trans-nationalism, a virtuality that applies to contemporary international migration research (Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Lowenthal, 1985; Vertovec, 2001) as much as other manifestations of consciousness (Hannerz, 1996).

This paper considers one such case of here/there and subject/object liminality: the story of a social scientist in the process of deciding to migrate with his spouse and one of his sons from his country (Malta) to another (Prince Edward Island, Canada), and the fallout of that decision, including a loss (or is it a recoinfiguration?) of 'homeness', up to 12 months after the actual physical move.

Involving oneself as a participant *and* an observer, thus adopting the 'double vision' of an 'outsider-insider' (e.g. Bagdikian, 1995), or being a convoluted 'spect-actor' who is audience and actor to the same plot (Boal, 1992), complicates the research process (Jacobs, 1970; Foote Whyte, 1994). It also begets a style of and focus on writing one's story that may appear self-indulgent, self-serving, narcissistic and thoroughly unscholarly to orthodox

research perspectives (Coffey, 1999). Critical self-reflexivity sits uncomfortably with such traditional criteria as credibility, dependability or trustworthiness, used to judge the merits of scholarly qualitative work (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998; Holt, 2003). However, the approach does have its concurrent rewards, enabling powerfully introspective accounts of a subject/object in transition. In corresponding to the practice of personal/auto ethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 1997) the author engages in a highly personalized account, tapping into one's own intimate experiences and excruciating deliberations, and using the ensuing narrative to leverage a socially embedded understanding of discipline, of culture and of self-construction (Merton, 1988; *Sociology*, special issue, 1993; Callero, 2003). In so doing, the genre challenges accepted views about (re)presentations of the world where the researcher's voice is suspiciously sanitized, camouflaged or stifled (*e.g.:* Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997).

This paper offers a critical account of the transition towards the assumption, acceptance and uncertainty of the status of a migrant by the author, a professional social scientist, and particularly in the re/de-construction of the concept of 'home' within this context. The piece was not originally written with a view to seeking scholarly publication; in fact, it was intended as a therapeutic and cathartic exercise, a 'coming to terms' with/for myself with regards to a hitherto unknown, daunting (and still continuing) change process. Rendered on paper, it was a means of articulating this quite unique and transitory experience, disentangling some of its various components and thus hopefully rendering it more amenable to those cool and dispassionate considerations that are deemed to be so crucial in taking correct decisions. Regretfully, deeply self-reflexive considerations are far from being cool and dispassionate, and their proper articulation can in retrospect be painful, as I have found out to my chagrin. Thus, the paper's central challenge has become, in its articulation as auto-ethnography, the convincing display of a move from personal confession to testimony for the benefit of a wider audience (*e.g.* Bordowitz, 2001). While so doing, the paper proposes to unpack a clutch of complex analytic features in order to facilitate a better, general understanding of the disposition towards migration.

The rest of the paper is laid out in three main sections. It opens with a review of the concept of the temporality and spatiality of 'homeness' and how this is challenged by a specific pattern of de-territorialized and cross-boundary migration called *transnationalism (e.g.* Duval, 2004; Hatziprokopiou, 2004**)**. There follows an analytic, double discussion of the specifics of the case, bringing to bear two diverse sociological methodologies on the self-as-subject, one more reflexive than the other, with – even to my own surprise - glaringly diverse results.

I – DESCRIBING HOME

International migrants often find themselves conjuring up conceptions and images of the old and the new places, of the present and the past significant locations of their lives. These antinomic reflections are (re)evaluations and (re)conceptualisations of personal relationships of the psychological and social self with place, space and time. They can be assumed to take on a particular meaning in the case of trans-migrants, distinguishable from other immigrants by virtue of not being forced to engage in a process of interpretation and reconstruction of a vision of a life, a land and a past permanently left behind (Guarnizo *et al.,* 2003). For those who can afford regular physical visit-journeys that criss-cross boundaries, along with modern day electronic virtual communication supplements of phone, fax, e-mail, internet chat, cellular phone, web-cam, digital photography and/or video, the old dichotomies may be thoroughly erased, and certainly problematized differently (Cohen, 1996; Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport, 2000; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004). A wealth of personal and collective meanings and perspectives may be reconfigured thanks to "new subjectivities", which include playing off one 'home' against another in order to secure tactical advantage (Nonini and Ong, 1997:23). There is not a world of a 'here and there' rigidly fixed in space and time; but of a fuzzy atemporaneity that defies the need for shuttling between self-exclusionary intimate spaces and their management. Bridging is rendered redundant.

'Home' is indeed one fundamental concept that is thoroughly reworked in such situations. As a much cherished, 'taken for granted' concept, steeped in nostalgia, 'home' is vulnerable to a shattering and loss of meaning (*after* Schutz, 1945). By practising 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995; Courchene, 1995), the international mobile immigrant is neither a total stranger nor an entirely local person in the places that s/he haunts or inhabits, in both physical and virtual ways. By positing the self 'in-between', s/he experiences and occupies a third, distinct yet indeterminate space; a cultural hybridity and liminality which confronts paradigms and fetishism of fixity, duality and identity, including those of 'home' and 'away' (Bhabha, 1994; Hoogvelt, 1997:158; Rutherford, 1990:211). It is one's (mobile) body which becomes, as much if not more than physical place, the literal embodiment of 'home'; the ambulatory, bridging, a-temporal and a-spatial memory preserve of what might be a planetary wide experience (Casey, 2000).

Still, while one is neither 'here' nor 'there' in multiple ways - because there is *no* clear here and there - one may nevertheless still feel a strong sense of obligation to assert and claim a base or a special place for oneself. Moreover, as an immigrant, one is also expected and requested, in formal or informal settings, to relate one's immigration 'story'; as well as to respond, often spontaneously, to such questions as 'so, where is your home?', 'where do you feel you belong?' and/or 'when are you coming back?'. Such requests, furthermore, are not always accompanied by expectations of a studied, erudite and elaborate response (as is this essay?) voiced as they often are either by an unwitting or dichotomy-driven audience or responded to by a not necessarily reflexive subject/object. No wonder, therefore, that feelings of ambiguity and oscillation can easily dominate in such circumstances where a powerful urge to 'normalize' one's story can lead to romancing and nostalgia construction (*e.g.*: Davies, 1979).

Self-narrative is a major practice that could provide a vehicle for articulating a subjective sense of continuity and coherence across all these ruptures. The personal narratives of transnational immigrants locate the flux of their identity/ies across multiple boundaries; while concurrently seeking to assign a semblance of structure and meaning to the same (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). Life stories and histories can highlight individual experiences and thereby allow "… glimpses into the lived interior of migration processes" (Benmayor and Skotnes, 1994:14). They can be pivoted on an *active* relationship between past and present, subjective and objective, poetic and political (Samuel and Thompson, 1990:5; *emphasis in original*). Concurrently, however, the auto-biographical technique relies on invariably subjective verbal and oral expressions, what are often routinized narrative renderings of life experiences (Denzin, 1989). Through this method, "real appearances of real people" are created and they shape how lives are being told (Settelmaier and Taylor, 2002).

Thus, while real, concrete subjects live lives with meaning, these meanings are not directly accessible; and while the autobiographical method may come closest to glimpsing a person's inner life, ambiguity will persist, metaphors and myths will reshape and recast experiences, the present will cloud the past, chronological strictures will dampen salient moments. The habitual discontinuities and de/reconstructions of experience fall victim to the imaginary coherence of a life story (Linde, 1993). Perhaps an auto-ethnography by a professional sociologist could help to better exploit the potential of self-narrative while minimizing (albeit never eliminating) the risks associated with the conventionalization of the data?

For these reasons, this article will 'tell' my story, but will do so via two parallel auto-biographic accounts: the first couched in an impersonal style driven by an academic distancing and a rational approach to knowledge which are faithful to the tenet of my own undergraduate academic training; the second being a much more personal and reflexive voice which I have grown to respect and appreciate in later years.

II – RATIONAL & ANALYTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Other than of interest to myself and the specifics of the case, which insights derived from my idiosyncratic migration experience suggest themselves as useful to a more generalised understanding of international migration? This is where this male, somewhat white-skinned, heterosexual sociologist should elaborate on how privileged he has been in the process of rationalizing and problematizing the migration phenomenon. My training in the rigour of conventional sociology makes me suggest five analytically distinct but inter-related observations:

a - Migration, in this particular case, is being conceptualized as potentially cyclical. The travel opportunities associated with a comparativist and internationalist research programme render the construction of a 'dual base' (Malta - PEI, Canada) as both logistically and financially possible, certainly in principle. There is no intent of undergoing a definitive break with one's erstwhile 'home' and a permanent embedding in a new location – but a dual citizenship status which is possible given the two countries in question. This is a pattern of behaviour which falls within the category of "amenity migration" more common amongst retirees (*e.g.*: Walters, 2000) but increasingly popular with academics. As with such migrants, weather considerations would suggest that travelling to and staying in Malta during its mild winter and returning to Canada during its pleasant summer is a rational choice. (I am therefore taking my annual vacation leave during January and spending that time in Malta, avoiding a spell of harsh weather and associated heating bills.) Such an outlook has the hallmarks of a trans-national corporate strategy, exploiting the distinct and complementary advantages of different locations and their resources (Bertram and Watters, 1985).

b - The justification of the momentous decision to migrate leads incumbents to initiate an often unconscious process of rationalization. There are defence mechanisms which are resorted to in order to support the validity of one's choice. The would-be migrants prepare themselves psychologically for the move by nuancing features of the local in a bad light (in Malta: heavy traffic; bad roads; eroded physical environment; claustrophobic social fabric…);

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trivializing local assets (the splendid weather and sea all the year round…) while, in contrast, eulogizing features of the imminent host nation (Canada: land of opportunity; open spaces; more civilized drivers; relatively cheaper price of property…) or under-rating specific negative features (the cold Canadian winter; the absence of a social support structure; a less favourable health care system). Many of these processes are often discrete, rarely articulated, at times subconscious; nor are they necessarily conceived in terms of a comparative assessment, although such judgements will also be made. Admittedly, the assessment may change when confronted by actual experience once the migration takes place. After all, local, 'push factors' are often experienced; while, foreign 'pull factors' are often imagined and even romanticized in their promise of leading to a better life. Still, perceptions remain sociologically real in their consequences to those who profess and believe them, even if these perceptions eventually are, or prove to be, intrinsically false or incorrect.

c - A different type of defence mechanism relates to psychological and social closure. This is the initiative, taken by the would-be migrants, to rupture, to refuse to engage, or otherwise to engage less intensely, in local social interactions. Feelings of 'home' and 'community' often depend on a sum of meaningful relationships – with relatives, work colleagues, friends… Thus, migrants-in-the-making would start to reduce the 'ties that bind': toning down the affective depth and range of their bonding with significant others in the community which they are leaving; and seeking instead to build and fuel (where possible) newly meaningful relationships in the eventual destination. All things being equal, existing 'social capital' may be pursued and cultivated less assiduously; while opportunities for new friendships may be deliberately foregone in the sending context; the opposite occurs in the receiving context. This is a variant of Durkheim's (1893/1997) theory of anomie where, however, the subject is not so much a confused victim of normlessness resulting from structural social change; rather, s/he is very much more in control of a self-initiated social process which ushers in a lowering of commitment to one's current social milieu. Such managed pursuits of community estrangement or 'systematic desensitization' (Wolpe, 1958) are indeed a form of behaviour therapy. They will of course be contoured by other features such as the migrant's personality, the receiving culture's receptivity to incoming migrants and individual preferences for social and communal living and sharing.

d - The decision to migrate also pushes its would-be migrants to seriously consider the manner of, and the opportunity for, terminating open-ended commitments. In the course of a traditional life-course with no sign-posted, migratory horizons, a large number of social pursuits – recreational, family,

sport, religious, political, occupational, residential - would be followed or maintained by specific individuals or households as a matter of course; they would tend to be terminated possibly by marriage, sudden ill health and other rites of passage but irrevocably only with the onset of death. In a small island state such as Malta, the power and tenacity of ascribed and/or inherited criteria in deciding such pursuits as against achieved ones is even greater (Tönnies, 1955). This amounts to the role set of each citizen; of his/her 'network' in society (Boissevain, 1974); of the terrain for social participation over a lifetime. It is only when incumbents transfer their basis of residence over large distances for fairly long, particularly permanent, periods that such existing role sets are suddenly dysfunctional or irrelevant and require replacement by brand new ones. Migration affords a rare opportunity to wind down social obligations in a more organized fashion, preferably constructing and experiencing the act of finality with some sense of dignity, ceremony or drama. This act can take the form of a retirement ceremony, some physical recognition of service rendered, a sending away dinner, an applause, a photo session, a gift memento…). The date of the actual migration acts as the obvious temporal deadline for such 'conclusions'. So much so that interactions after the definitive rupture, when they happen, are experienced differently.

e - I have deliberately left financial considerations for the very end of my assessment. They remain critical but they have not been significant in shaping my decision. They act as hygiene factors rather than motivators (*after* Herzberg, 1976), meaning that they would have been significant in their absence but not in and by themselves serving as key inducements to relocate. However, calculations of how many years of salary will be required to buy a new home, new car, necessary household appliances and cover any school fees have been on the agenda of keen family discussions.

A Commentary

Interesting, perhaps; but partial. The main weakness of the above 'analytic considerations' is that, while they are about the self, they are not deep and intimate enough, avoiding to engage with my own, critical self-reflexivity. They resort to a specific form of scholarly rigour which appears hell bent to pre-empt an even deeper, possibly more painful, differently rigorous, exploration of the self as a 'would-be migrant'. While this paper is about my knowledge and worldview, I realise that I have so far restricted myself to being an almost disengaged eye-witness of myself, seeking objective data, or hovering over the surface features of the issue like some academic tourist (Pelias, 2003: 369), rather than a relaxed subject seeking to articulate deep knowledge, a convincing I-witness (Geertz, 1988: 79). The processes I have

described above as "often discrete, rarely articulated, at times subconscious" would benefit from a different, more self-reflexive methodology. As Ellis *et al*. (1992) warn us, so much is being missed by social researchers when their attempt to understand 'the human experience' is restricted to just a series of rational, cognitive, clinical choices – as I realize are mine above.

Unbinding and unbundling my own ethnography (*after* Burawoy *et al*., 2001) and peeking out furtively from behind traditional sociological methods to 'tell my story', I sense, is/will be painful and much less smug, although the story is a powerfully suitable medium for such an interpretative disclosure. Here goes.

III – INNER & DEEPER REFLECTIONS

I am an obsessively organised and self-disciplined individual. An introspective academic colleague of mine describes me as a repressed fellow, bred and broken in a strict Roman Catholic environment and unable to 'let myself go'. I have dedicated my adult life to my work; and hardly have any friends (if one could call them so) outside my work-related network. I have no ongoing relationship with any of my relatives. I speak dutifully to my mother in Malta for a couple of minutes over the phone about once every two weeks; to my only brother in Scotland about once or twice a year. This means that I am less rooted emotionally to any particular environment, and therefore more easily mobile. But the truth of these observations hurts me: it makes me feel deficient, sadly defensive in my intellectual pursuits, somewhat less human than I should be. My rational side tells me that, were it not for my wife and two sons, I may be a textbook candidate for anomic suicide.

Yet, I seem to have translated this deep deficiency into an occupational advantage; or it may have been a deficiency crafted unwittingly by virtue of wanting very much to succeed in my work. My overriding emphasis with professional competence has left me little local attachment; like many other professionals (*e.g.* Ó Riain, 2000: 182), I have been rendered mobile by my rootlessness. In my stint – already 12 months long as I write - away from home/Malta and in Canada, I am losing any sense I might have had of the word 'home'. It is as if, looking back, I set out to prove some things to myself (that I could prove to be of international calibre among scholars beyond my small pond of Malta) to others (that I am indeed more than just a big fish in a small pond) and to achieve a better quality of life overall (being away from the stifling public gaze, the obtrusive media, the difficult-to-refuse administrative chores, state-appointed tasks and postings of Malta). But, certainly *this* part of the mission has gone awry, turned sour: there is no dramatic sense of triumph in securing grants and book contracts while in

Canada; there is hardly any sense of loss in Malta at my departure; and being an unknown alien out of the public gaze in Prince Edward Island, Canada has its downside. Was it just my bloated ego, my strong sense of ambition, which pushed my family into this condition?

I was reading *Elle: A Novel* when I hit upon this passage. It was (*after* Denzin, 1989) an epiphany event: its autobiographical resonance struck home with a shudder:

> "This is the style of the anti-quest: You go on a journey, but instead of returning, you find yourself frozen on the periphery, the place between places, in a state of being neither one nor the other. Instead of a conquering hero, you become a clown or fuel for the pyre or the subject of folk tales." (Glover, 2003: 167).

How are the mighty fallen. So much for my vain intimations of grandeur. I am deservedly cut down to size, gripped by alienation. Am I frozen and stuck on the bridge that I had seen as the seamless connector between two worlds, and both of which I had confidently hoped to be able to continue calling 'home'? I harbour a nagging self-doubt of the wisdom of the whole international adventure I have embarked upon, and which I have obliged my wife and one of my sons to adopt, largely against their will. (My other 18-year-old son refused to join us in Canada and remains in Malta, a University student there.)

My wife is physically living with me in Canada but remains psychologically rooted in Malta. She uses modern information technology and cyberspace to continue daily to nourish her commitment to that place and its people. Every morning she sends short, text messages to the mobile phone number of a clutch of Maltese contacts; every afternoon she engages in a lengthy e-conversation by web-cam with her sister in Malta; every evening after dinner she reads her e-mail (most of which is from Malta) and replies in lengthy descriptive prose. She has set one of our kitchen clocks to Malta time (five hours ahead of local, Atlantic Canada time). Her diary houses a collection of birthday and anniversary dates of friends and relatives in Malta, reminding her to send off a suitable card well in time for each occasion. Although she has a work permit, she has been an 'on call' kindergarten teacher on PEI, Canada, and has only been employed for a few hours on particular days, when and if required. She is determined to return to her unequivocal 'home'. I envy her simple non-ambiguity. But I am getting distracted again, avoiding to engage with myself.

The decision as to whether I/we should return to Malta from Canada will be one that has to be faced in/by June 2008 when my job position comes up for review. I find myself posing that question to myself on a daily basis. My wife may sway us to return to Malta, her family, her parish choir, her former kindergarten job. My younger son, who will be almost 17 years old by then, may influence us to stay in Canada, where his significant others are more likely to be. My wife and I now own a house of our own in Marsascala, Malta (where our elder son is now living) and a second house in Charlottetown, PEI, Canada. All told, whether I/we return to Malta or not, or whether I manage to strike what looks like an ideal '6-months here, 6-months there' dual base arrangement, I fear that I am doomed to a limbo-like 'in-betweenity'. The same disconnect that distanced me - like some kind of (perhaps just self-indulgent and self-professed) enlightened yet disappointed organic intellectual (*after* Gramsci, 1972: 252) - from Malta and the Maltese prior to my departure from there in July 2003, will linger stubbornly on. Indeed, it will nag me even more assiduously with a 5-year stretch of international experience under my belt; and an equivalent, 5-year detachment from goings on in Malta. Comparisons are odious; but unforgivably unavoidable. We may have two houses; I will however not have a home, nor two homes, but none at all. Having started off believing that I could be a bridge between two societies, I may have ended up with only a bridge, suspended tragi-comically in mid-air, to call my own.

I am not alone in this predicament and have found – in the course of another epiphany - an affinity with a Maltese fictional character. A psychological novel by a Maltese playwright, features a young local adolescent, Fredu [Alfred] Gambin, who wants to escape the stifling intimacy and piddling parochialism of his village, then of his country, but ends up returning begrudgingly to Malta after having failed to settle abroad (Sammut, 1971). He dramatises his departure, only to have to swallow his pride and return to the engulfing bosom of Malta. The village, the country, was not the problem: *he* was. "The reader is left with the impression that, no matter how much and how far Fredu tries to escape, his problems and dilemmas survive and thrive within him" (Cassola, 1995: 175). It appears that Fredu and I are similar, mock-heroic conquerors that have to swallow their pride.

Conclusion

Migration studies are often associated with the diagnosis of the patterns of personal and social adjustment through time. This paper argues for the appreciation of a distinct, socio-cultural, emotive and psychological 'remote preparation' not usually (e)valuated in migration research. Indeed, there is a whole process of accommodation prior to, and after, the actual migratory act

that is not often articulated. A personal/auto-ethnography becomes the medium and the driver to force a more public rendition of this transition by the narrated/narrator.

Packing one's bags to leave is, therefore, also a psycho-social act, ripe with opportunities for introspection. Armed with a set of personally grounded but diverse sociological imaginations (*after* Wright Mills, 1959), this paper has sought to unpack and analyze what may, from another perspective, be construed as the trauma of potential migration, and potential return migration, at a micro level. It diagnoses this condition precisely at a time when one is dealing with a process, a 'migrant-in-the-making' conditionality that continues to influence thoughts, aspirations and actions well before and after the actual, discrete event of physical rupture. The outcome is a disturbing rupture of another kind: that between a confident exposition of rational choice and a deeper/inner confusion of isolation and delusion, flushed out via a parallel, autobiographical assessment. There is no trace of an accommodating denouement between these parallel reflexive sociologies here. There is no indication of developing a "rooted mobility" (*e.g.* Fog Olwig, 1993) or a "double identity" (*e.g.* Bindorffer, 1997). There is no triumphant discarding of a defunct sense of 'home'. At least, not yet.

Meanwhile, scholarly literature, mainly of a post-modern mould, celebrates the unbounded character of culture and human experience; trans-migrants are construed as empowered individuals unburdened by fixity and equipped with an 'imaginary coherence' (Hall, 1990) stemming from the construction and maintenance of multiple identities that link them simultaneously to more than one place and time. Such coherence, however, remains absent from my own, current understanding of my location and positioning. Glocality is no antidote to loss of rooted identity. Claiming hybridity brings no solace. Intimations of bridging sound hollow. Attempting to become a protagonist, I find instead that I am an agonist.

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