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Light communities?: Implications for research on diversity & activism

Miguel Pérez-Milans (*University College London*) &
Carlos Soto (*The University of Hong Kong*)

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Light communities?
Implications for research on diversity and activism

Miguel Pérez-Milans,
University College London, UK

Carlos Soto,
The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper engages with Blommaert's (2017) call to refocus the target of attention in the mainstream social sciences, from 'thick communities', understood as stable systems of collectivity in which individuals share a set of permanent features circumscribed by the nation-state, towards 'light communities', seen as "brief moments of tight but temporary and ephemeral groupness, as aggregations of people sharing just the rules of the encounters… but little beyond it" (Blommaert 2017: p. 34; see also Blommaert & Varis, 2015). As part of ongoing discussions of 'superdiversity' (Blommaert, Rampton, Spotti, 2016) which invite scholars in the language disciplines to problematize modernist frames in the sociological imagination of social groups, this call offers possibilities for researchers collaborating with activists in the fieldwork. There are, however, important dangers and limitations that need to be acknowledged. These issues are discussed in this paper, for which we draw on our 5-year collaborative project working with social actors commonly labelled as "ethnic minorities" in the Hong Kong context.

Diversity is often imagined in public discourses as a compound of homogeneous and bounded cultural blocks. Who belongs to which group or which qualities are conventionally attached to each of these permanent blocks is open to negotiation but the range of options for social (re)imagination often appears as limited to two main possibilities: either accepting or resisting such given blocks. Hong Kong is not an exception, and how the boundaries of 'diversity' are defined and contested speaks to this. Mainstream discourses in this context typically define boundaries along a Chinese and non-Chinese line of demarcation, lumping together highly-skilled expatriates from the global north along with groups such Pakistanis or Nepalese who often fall in the lower socioeconomic end of the spectrum. Against this background, activists aligned with struggling communities have sought to define diversity via linguistic, nationalistic, and ethnic-based communities in an attempt to counter a local government push to institutionalize spoken Cantonese and written standard Chinese.

These issues have been clear in our 5-year collaborative project working with youngsters with Nepali, Pakistani and Indian backgrounds in the educational context of Hong Kong. Commonly labelled as "ethnic minorities" in public discourses, official documents and media reports, our participants have over the years encountered the contradictions of such a label. On the one hand, the category of "ethnic minority" gives them visibility, and a platform from which to fight over issues of social rights and fairer distribution of resources. On the other, the label keeps them under the spotlight of public monitoring, always accountable, fixed, abnormalized and separated from the mainstream society.

In his critical sociolinguistics of diversity, Arnaut (2012) asks "was diversity as a potential instrument of empowerment from below turned into a precision tool of manipulating difference 'from above'?" (p. 8). He argues for approaching concrete encounters or events as sites where diversity is articulated, experienced and made sense of through communicative resources, in order to better identifying how inequalities emerge and are sustained. With this spirit in mind, we will zoom into the contradictions linked to discourses of 'ethnic minority' as lived by some of our participants. First, we will focus on a key institutional event to expose the limitations of modern-based forms of sociological imagination as they are mobilized in projects of activism. This will further our engagement with the superdiversity frame and, in particular, with an associated argument: that of the

necessity of shifting our analytical attention from "thick" to "light" communities. In so doing, we will identify possible dilemmas involved, and ways of overcoming these with implications for activism.

Our entry point in this presentation is a roundtable event held at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), under the chairing of TOGETHER, a non-governmental organisation that advocates "policy reforms for ethnic minority residents" in Hong Kong. The roundtable, recorded and uploaded to *Youtube* by a Nepalese community-based media group, took place a few months after the government allocated HK$200,000,000 to the teaching of Chinese as a second language in Hong Kong schools. TOGETHER, appointed a major role in the implementation and monitoring of the new policy, framed the roundtable as an attempt to establish a dialogue between relevant stakeholders, including community representatives, academic researchers, school actors and government officials (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Roundtable on Chinese as a second language in HKU

Lagan, an educator and community leader with Nepali background, informed us of the event. As Lagan had not been invited by TOGETHER to join the roundtable, he planned to force his way into it with a group of his students, a parent, a primary school principal, and a couple of other teachers. Wearing t-shirts with the following slogan printed on the front: "I can't keep calm because I am an ethic minority living in Hong Kong" (see Figure 2), they managed to enter the room and were placed in the back of it.

The roundtable discussion is opened by the Chair who welcomes everyone and gives the floor to an invited parent who shares his experience and that of his wife as non-speakers of Cantonese who migrated from Nepal; he also appreciates the new policy for the opportunities it brings to his daughter. After him, the Chair invites Mr. Limbu to take the floor. Mr. Limbu is a PhD candidate who does research on students with Nepali backgrounds in Hong Kong schools. The Chair introduces Mr. Limbu by saying that she was very keen to listen to him because she particularly liked the paper on identity that Mr Limbu submitted for his participation at the round table.

However, Mr Limbu unexpectedly takes the floor to share his concerns about the way in which Chinese as a second language is framed in the policy. The Chair interrupts him in the middle of his contribution, "you actually think that TOGETHER is misguided to support

Chinese as a second language?", she asks. Mr. Limbu responds: "eh no / uh / I think my point is that- first of all uh / please hold uh the topic / Chinese as a second language / is / SO irrelevant here (it's just) ethnic minorities / and I don't know why / because Chinese as a second language should be a programme for everybody / for everybody / it does not have to be only for ethnic minorities". The Chair acknowledges the contribution, "that's a very very interesting point", followed up by a request for Mr. Limbu to explain the point about identity that he had made in his submitted paper.

Figure 2. Community leaders, t-shirts and slogans

Mr. Limbu then agrees to stick to the script and highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting student's identities and ethnic backgrounds if we want them to be willing to learn a second language, a point that is later recapped by the Chair as a key cultural approach. After that the Chair passes the floor to a linguist who brings the voice of his field to highlight the important of attending to the structural properties of the students' first languages, in order to anticipate possible obstacles and struggles in the process of learning the 'second' language.

The roundtable unfolded in similar cycles over the course of the morning and afternoon sessions, with peaks of tension as participants disagreed on the target and content of the policy, followed by glosses provided by the Chair which contributed to downgrade the tension by displacing the focus of attention to the issue of how to avoid cultural friction in the teaching of Chinese as a second language to ethnic minority students. Some of these moments featured as particularly tense, as when the uninvited participants interrupted government officials to request the floor and make their voices heard, in a move that challenged the nature of the roundtable as an official performative declaration of the government's new policy.

In one of these instances, Raem, one of Lagan's uninvited students, raises his hand and is invited to speak: "so / actually we are students / we should be asked what we want to learn", he says, followed by an energetic round of applause from the other uninvited participants. Raem is then followed by Lagan who appropriates the floor and introduces himself as a member of the Hong Kong school system and as a representative of the parent communities and other cultural associations who have always been ignored by the Hong Kong government officials and other ethnically Chinese actors. He shouts, "first / you should know your own language / your own culture / then you can accept and you can respect / other culture / why

we are not building on that? / so I think this is the why the ethnic minority students are failing". As in the Chair's contributions, Lagan foregrounds an ethnic-based account of cultural communities, but in this case as a non-invited participant who demands to be listened to, and to have a say. It all comes down to accepting or resisting an official frame in which one cultural block defines what the other needs, and why. But the very imagination of these blocks remains mostly intact.

Some may argue that reproducing understandings of language and culture which draw from the modern politics of identity is vital for the political mobilization of minorities. After all, the recognition of rights to social groups depends highly on the ability of such groups to display a distinct language and culture (Briggs & Bauman, 2003). It is precisely this framework in the sociological imagination that has been addressed in discussions of superdiversity (Blommaert, Rampton, Spotti, 2016), which have stressed the need to refocus the target of our attention, from 'thick communities', understood as stable systems of collectivity in which individuals share a set of permanent features circumscribed by the nation-state, towards 'light communities' seen as "brief moments of tight but temporary and ephemeral groupness as aggregations of people sharing just the rules of the encounters…, but little beyond it" (Blommaert 2017: p. 34; see also Blommaert & Varis, 2015).

We agree with the core position behind this argument. Yet, we believe that a call for shifting our analytical attention from 'thick' to 'light' communities may be taken up in ways that reinforce long-standing and problematic binaries in the social sciences, such as that of agency/structure, micro/macro, or action/convention. We are concerned with interpretations of this shift that contribute to ontologies whereby the 'thick' may be seen as belonging to the realm of pure abstractions while the 'light' becomes iconic of situated experiences. Instead of conceptualizing 'thick' and 'light' communities as taken for granted entities that are mutually exclusive and operate in different realms, we propose to look closer at the ways in which they are embedded in the course of "trajectories of identification" (Wortham 2005, 2006), whereby social actors perform (de)alignments with ideologies about ethnonational groups that still regulate access to material and symbolic resources.

This focus on embeddedness vis-à-vis trajectories of identification, we will argue, not only offers an epistemological lens with which to critically study diversity without reifying grand narratives about communities; it has also implications for us in terms of how to return to work with students and activists like Lagan.

Let us illustrate this point by getting back to our research site. As "thick" discourses of community featured in policy documents, media reports and institutional documents in Hong Kong, we decided to run a research training programme focused on the exploration of who says what about community, where, when, how, and with what consequences for whom in their 'life projects' (Blommaert & Varis, 2015) (see Figure 3). We did so together with a group of ten youngsters that we had followed in and out of the educational context, most of them involved as non-invited participants in the roundtable that we have just described. Our goal was to provide them with reflexive forms of engagement with the different types of existing communities in their lives other than just those made salient in public and policy discourses. We requested them to explore those communities ethnographically, and to use their fieldwork as the base for the so-called "independent inquiry" that all students in Hong Kong have to carry out at the end of secondary education.

During the first sessions of this training programme, we spent time working on ways of understanding "community", from more durable to more temporary or ephemeral. We also reflected on the different forms of involvement that a given individual can take at different times in a certain community, from more peripheral to more central, as well as on the different types of communicative practices through which communities constitute themselves, as such face-to-face or online practices. Based on that, we asked our participants to explain, verbally or through other means, what social groups or communities made more sense to them among those they consider themselves part of, and in what degree.

Figure 3. Youth community research training program

We also asked them to choose one of those groups or communities as the focus of their fieldwork. In doing so, we realised that "ethnic minority" did not necessarily feature prominently in their accounts. Raem, for example, one of the uninvited contributors to the roundtable arranged by TOGETHER, drew the following bucket in response to our instruction (see Figure 4). Note how the label of "ethnic minority" does not appear in the bucket, in contrast to other communities that he seems to be foregrounding under the labels of "family", "Muslim", "activist", "aviation", "Pakistani", "Hongkoner", "photographer", or "Plane Factory".

Figure 4. Buckets and labels
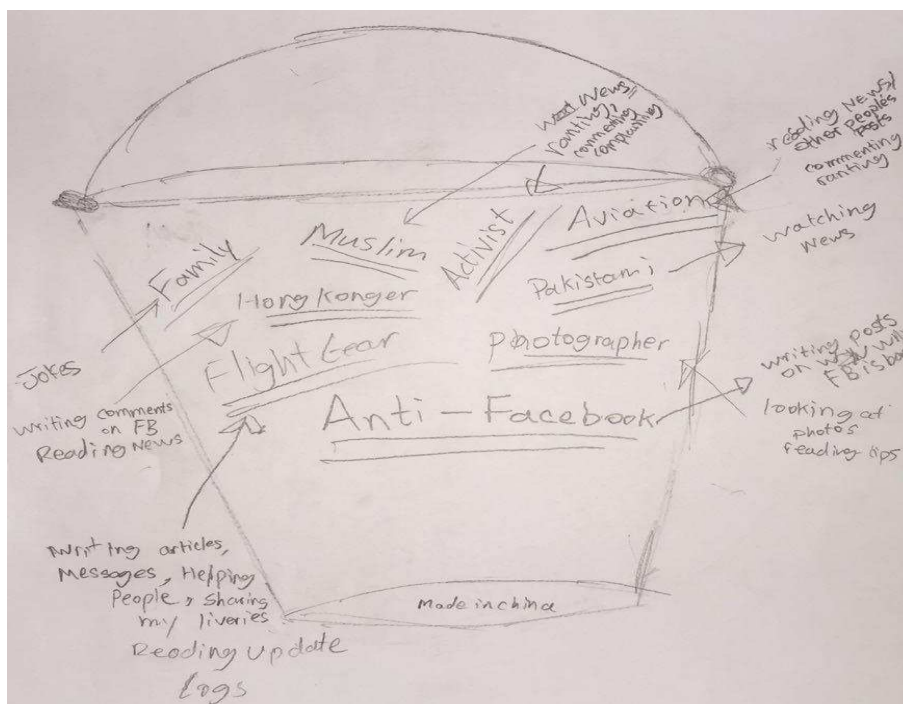
However, the 'ethnic minority' label emerged as closely linked to the social persona of the student activist that Raem recurrently performed as a salient model of identity over the 5 years that we worked with him. As in the case of other students in the group who we have reported about elsewhere (see Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2017), references to Hong Kong, Pakistan or ethnic minorities were often embedded in performances of "doing activism", whether in the context of spectacular spaces that can have a direct impact on policy making, such as the roundtable, or in the course of low-key online interactions in specialized groups and platforms. The following extract shows another instance of performance in a spectacular event in which Raem explicitly labels himself as a "student activist", as part of a self-recorded message that he uploaded to the TV programme *Aljazeera Mainstream*, in a special programme focused on the inequalities faced by ethnic minorities in Hong Kong:

Raem: hello everybody / my name is [Raem] / I'm a 15 years old / student activist / living in Hong Kong // my family is originally from Pakistan / and we have been living here in Hong Kong for three generations // I originally was in a top ELITE government secondary school in the district // I felt I was- the (( )) was very racist there / I was bullied / and the teachers didn't protect me / not at all // now I'm studying in a school where the student population ↑ / around 50% are ethnic minorities // the teachers are very caring there / they understand diversity // I believe that / a multicultural diverse Hong Kong is the future for the city

As for low-key online interactions, the extracts in Figure 5 are taken from Facebook postings in which Raem makes salient his interest in aviation. In these postings, he shares some of his aviation designs on the "Plane Factory" online group with others members of his non-aviation lovers network. In some of them, he foregrounds his skills as a designer of aircraft who submits design projects which are actually considered by real airline companies such as Pakistan International Airline.

Figure 5. Plane Factory designs
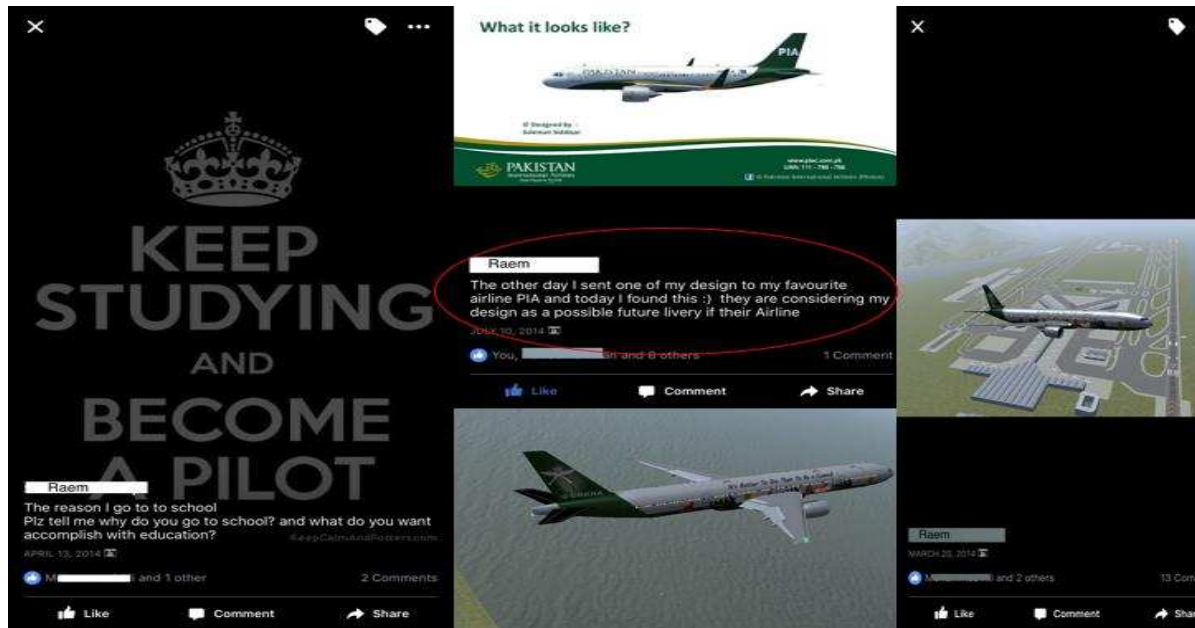
In others, he uses aviation-related materials from Hong Kong that lead to joint critical discussions in which participants in his network orient to race-related issues in Hong Kong such as in Figure 6 where they focus on the lack of ethnic diversity in an advertisement by a Hong Kong-based air company. As Raem goes: "nice try but I don't think this plane shows the true Hong Kong spirit because it doesn't show the multicultural background of Hong Kong. What do you think?".

The relevance of such videos or Plane Factory productions lies, therefore, on their function as instances of performative behaviour whereby Raem and other self-proclaimed activists participate in the enregisterment of a set of discursive and semiotic forms of doing activism. In this form of discourse register, references to ethnic minority, Hong Kong, Pakistan, or Nepal, seem to work as key emblematic signs in the performance of an activist persona that challenges the very systems of inequality that these youngsters have encountered in their own life trajectories in Hong Kong.

Figure 6. Aviation and critical discussions on race
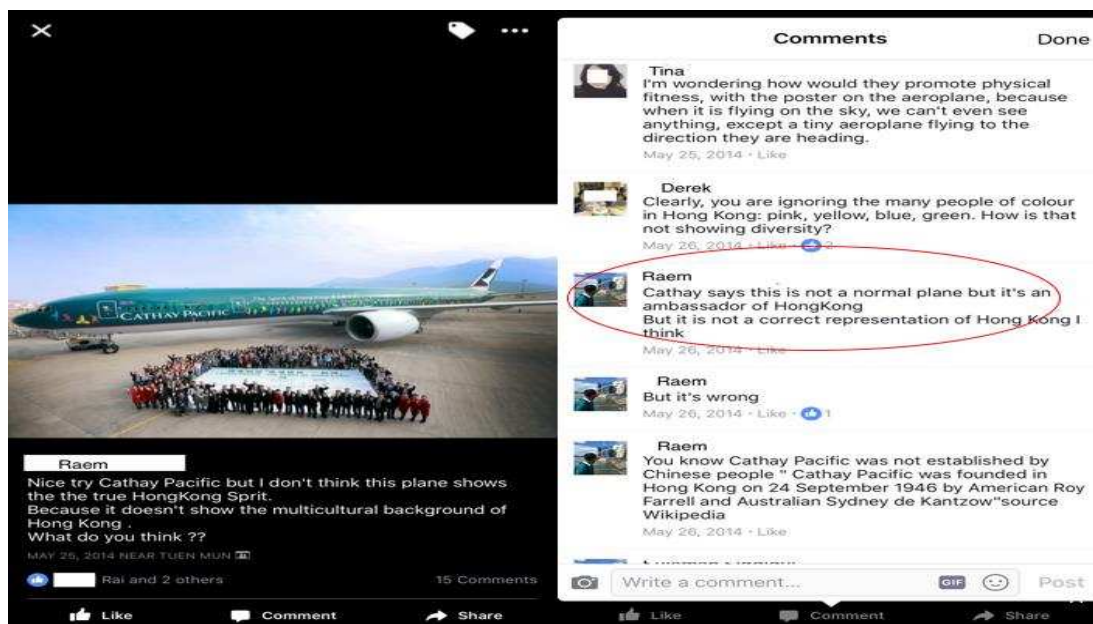
Though these systems reify models of "thick communities", the very strategies of social navigation and the social consequences that such strategies have on the trajectories of social mobility of these youngsters require more than a denotative focus on cultural blocks as talked about in key institutional events. They demand a closer look at the web-like trajectories of texts, communicative repertoires and social personae that participants play out, circulate and make sense of in their daily lives. Elsewhere we have reported on how the discourse register of doing activism gave one of our participants' access to an elite international college in Hong Kong that offers full scholarships to socioeconomically disadvantaged students who, according to this institution, are likely to be seen as potential role models open to cultural difference and committed to social justice (Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2017).

As for Raem, he is currently finishing secondary education. Though his chances to get into University may be low, he is planning to enrol in a local aviation course in Hong Kong which his family can afford to pay. What he will do in the future is still uncertain, though the ways in which "thick" and "light" communities get embedded throughout the course of his trajectory continue to provide him with opportunities of access to discursive spaces in which he does not have to be just an "ethnic minority" person, and this in turn points towards spaces and practices that may deserve closer attention by activists working with him.

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