Citizenship in the Midst of Transnationalization: *disClosure* interviews Kathryne Mitchell

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The particular, clean essence of spearmint reminds me of passive-aggressive participation in world religion—iconic doodling on the back of tithing envelopes; the time I choked on communion grape juice and had to exit the entrance, Judas of some ambiguous deceit that involved egg on one's face, or in this case, Christ's blood on one's shirt but no wine. I gasped past half-dozing ushers to the bathroom, and then beyond my mother's reach, out a side door, inevitably down into the world.

In the family of Christ I figured I was a third, maybe fourth cousin. But I've always held his blood thicker than water, and though I haven't taken communion since, spearmint gum reminds me of all threats that have come and gone, unknown and known to me, of how brief and unpredictable life can be, and how in the absence of profundity frivolity proffounds itself in the deep vein of our memory, in our mother's purses or in our pockets like lent for a diamond.

Marcia England, Vanessa Hudson, and Kyonghwan Park
Citizenship in the Midst of Transnationalization
disClosure interviews Kathryn Mitchell
[19 April 2002]

Kathryn Mitchell is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Washington. Her extensive publications include work on Asian migration to the United States and Canada, debates regarding globalization and transnationalism, and the politics of the public sphere. She has conducted research on these issues as they relate to Asian diasporic populations in cities on the west coasts of the US and Canada as well as Great Britain. Her current research examines the effects of transnational migration on conceptions of public education, with a particular focus on how children are educated to become citizens of a nation-state. Her book, Transnationalism and the Politics of Space, is forthcoming.

Mitchell has been centrally involved in building interdisciplinary area studies programs at the University of Washington, and is the Principal Investigator for a number of grants to assist in this work, including a Title VI Grant from the U.S. Department of Education (2000-2003). She has served on the Editorial Boards of several leading journals and is Book Review Editor for Society and Space.

In Spring 2002 Mitchell visited the University of Kentucky as part of the Committee on Social Theory's Spring Seminar and Lecture Series. During her visit, Mitchell delivered a talk entitled "Comparative Geographies of Citizenship Education," which outlined her research agenda regarding the production of citizenship in the education systems of England, Canada, France, and the United States. In her interview with disClosure, Mitchell discusses how citizens are constructed in an increasingly transnationalized world.

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Disclosure: How did you become interested in issues of transnationalism and citizenship? How did your research program develop? How is it evolving?

Kathryne Mitchell: I started doing work in the early 1990s on the rapid flows of capital and people from Hong Kong to Vancouver. I hadn't considered the idea of transnationalism at that point. I was thinking more in terms of the impact of rapid capital flows on the city and what happens when people come along with that capital. When the capital is "faced" in some way, it is no longer "neutral" capital; it is capital that has people associated with it, and this instantly brings cultural and racial dynamics into the story. After I finished my fieldwork, I started reading the literature on transnationalism. I fell into it because I was reading migration literature as a backdrop and I came across the work of people like Roger Rouse, Nina Glick Schiller, and Luis Guarnizo. I became interested in the concept of a kind of migration where people are moving back and forth rather than unilinearly. Fitting my empirical work with this new theory, I began to think about the Hong Kong migrants as a transnational group. What interested me about them in particular was the fact that most of the work up until then had been done on the transnational movements of migrant laborers, and this was the transnational movement of capitalists. I then came across the work of Alhwa Ong, who was becoming involved in these issues as well. She wrote a piece in 1993 in Positions that was important for me. I then felt it was important to investigate the impact of this transnational group on the established Chinese community. Not much had been done on that, so I spent one summer where I looked at the Chinese community in Vancouver, trying to determine some of the effects of this new Hong Kong business immigrant class on community politics. My most recent work has been on education, and the broad questions: if people are moving and living bi-nationally, how do you educate those people to be citizens of a particular nation? How are you creating subjects of the state in the contemporary transnational period? In that vein, I have started some comparative work, examining the movement of Muslims into Britain, as well as the Hong Kong-Vancouver migration. What is the impact of the movement of these groups on narratives of multiculturalism in education, both in Canada and in England?

dC: Since you brought up your interest in educating citizens—in your article, "Education for democratic citizenship: transnationalism, multiculturalism, and the limits of liberalization" (2001), you ask, "How should students be educated in and for democratic citizenship?" What is the role of public education in creating democratic citizens in "an increasingly global context"? What should be our role as educators and academics?

KM: That's a good question, but it's less of a scholarly question and more of an activist question. Most of my work has been done on critiquing what's out there, or what's been thought or done before. I think it's a legitimate question though because we are people who believe in coming up with a better society, a better world. I would say that the really important thing is to think about democracy and citizenship internationally in terms of deep linkages. You must educate kids to understand their own positions in the world as situated within a global environment rather than just within a national site. Education, until very recently, has been very much about educating children to be citizens of a nation. Children aren't encouraged to look outside of the nation, to look at the impact of their activities in the United States on other countries and people around the world. If you can make those linkages thicker in terms of getting children to understand their positioning in the world at different scales, from the body to the globe—from their school, their neighborhood, their city, their nation and then beyond that—I think that's a good beginning. And also to make them understand how they are positioned in the system, that they are producers and not just consumers. They should know that the U.S. consumes something like twenty-five percent of the world's resources and that even actions like driving an SUV or purchasing a cup of coffee can have an impact on how other people live their lives. I want them to understand that everyday life is connected to democracy in all sorts of ways, that the political and the civil are always connected to the economic. I think it is important for kids to understand these kinds of linkages and to acknowledge them.

dC: Do you think that the responsibility for this type of education should be a parental responsibility or part of the K-12 curriculum and then followed up in the college and university system?

KM: I think it's got to be the schools as well. And I do believe in cultural diversity as working within a culturally plural system. And democracy is a process of learning, of working together with difference. But it can't stop there. Sometimes that's the endpoint. We need to be working towards global social and economic justice, not just having your community get along. Getting along is a good start, but we are now so interconnected that we need to think about this in broader, more global terms.

dC: How could transnationalism fit within specialty study groups such as urban, economic, cultural, and political geography? Or, on the contrary, how could those topical geographies contribute to understanding contemporary transnationalism?

KM: I don't really like those divisions. I think they're kind of old-fashioned. If you look at the geography website of the University of Washington (http://depts.washington.edu/geog/), we've reworked it so that now instead of having the faculty listed under sub-fields, we have seven key words: globalization, citizenship, sustainability, movement, access, scale, and representation. We locate our entire faculty under these key words rather than locating ourselves within the old subdivisions of urban, economic, political, etc. I think it's preferable because instead of dividing us, it's linking us in all sorts of new ways. For example, one of our key words is "movement." Much of my work is located within this key theme, and so is that of our medical geographer because he studies the movement of disease. When we talk together in any official capacity, we have an automatic base interest that serves to hold us together. It's a kind of official recognition that the world doesn't have to be divided into certain kinds of categories. It's like how Foucault (1970) talked about the Chinese encyclopedia. There are all sorts of ways of arranging relationships and connections.

dC: There seems to be a terminological tension between diaspora (or diasporic) and transnationalism (or transnational). As such, definitions of
"transnationalism" can be seen as problematic. How do you understand the terminological tensions surrounding "transnational migrants," "transnationalism," and even diaspora?

KM: Perhaps it's useful to look at the way that Berman (1982) talks about modernity. He analyzes the term in a kind of tripartite scheme. Modernization includes processes such as industrialization, bureaucratization, and urbanization. These are processes through which change is occurring. And then he talks about modernism as the cultural fallout of these processes—how people are expressing these changes in art and culture, in literature and film. Modernity is the experience of that on the ground—how people understand their positions in the world as changing (and often alienating) because of the processes of modernization. I think that sort of tripartite scheme may be useful in discussing the concept of transnationalism as well. Transnationalism has become the dominant term in academic theory, and I use that word and am part of that etymological mistake if you will. But I actually think transnationalization is a better term because it describes the ongoing processes that involve other processes as well, such as globalization, neoliberalism, migration, and flexible accumulation—all those things together which are creating this shifting contemporary moment. I think transnationalization is a better term for describing some of the cultural changes of the last two decades. Then perhaps we can think of transnationality as the experience of tension, of living bi-nationally, of being in-between.

dC: Since transnationalism is a contemporary trend in migration, in what sense do you problematize new migration?

KM: Certainly other types of migration have not stopped. It's a mistake to say that transnational migration represents a total break. In fact, people like Roger Rouse have gone on about this at length, showing that circular and linear migration is continuing in all kinds of migration streams around the world, but we also need to think of different kinds of patterns. Whether or not this particular type of pattern in Roger's work is new is also highly debated. People like Waldering say this is absolutely nothing new. We could see this a hundred years ago with the cross-Atlantic movement and people still maintaining close ties with their "home" country of Ireland or wherever. The main response to this critique is that transnational migration nowadays is larger in scale, faster, and qualitatively different because of the almost simultaneity of contact with the old country. People can be politically and socio-culturally active in two places at the same time. I believe that this is something qualitatively different from the past—at least a different experience for those involved. People of course have always maintained ties with the home country and made return trips, but if you look at the actual travel—if you were taking a steamship, it took weeks longer and was much more expensive than travel today. Letters took much longer as well. The new types of technology have enabled very rapid transactions. In terms of economics, it's gotten to the point that you can now move huge amounts of money in nanoseconds; socially, you can call and talk with your child about her homework; politically, you can be mayor in your home country and vote in your current country at the same time. What really interests me in this regard are the ways that this has produced a different kind of cultural fallout in the host country for everyone. For example, in my own work I've seen how the Hong Kong migrants that have come into Vancouver have made some real political shifts in that culture. There is a strong reaction by those who consider themselves to be "rooted" to those who are perceived as living in more than one place at a time; there is a sense that they are coming in as economic bi-nationals, without so-called "allegiance" to a particular place—with their capital or anything else.

dC: Transnationalism is not only interdisciplinarily overlapped, but the topic is also ambiguously situated within the geographical sub-traditions such as urban, economic, social, population, and so on. For example, discussions on globalization seemed to stabilly sit in economic geography (global networks and relational economic geography), urban geography (global cities), and political geography (global-local politics). As a geographer, how do you situate "transnationalism studies" in the disciplinary tradition of human geography?

KM: I've argued that geography is the best discipline with which to approach transnationalism mainly as a rhetorical point. Up until the late 1990s much of the research that had been done was highly abstracted—examinations of global flows as if they were going from one place to another without people on either end and without linking those types of movements to the everyday lives of people on the ground. It is inherent in our discipline that we are always thinking theoretically, but constantly grounding those thoughts. The other thing I think is useful in geography is thinking about hegemony as something that is spatially secured and not just institutionally secured. So if you're going to look at the ways in which people come into a landscape, say transnational migrants, then you want to see how the narratives of the nation are affected by that group. They are affected not only by political and institutional changes but also by the movements of those people on the ground. The two are connected. I'll give an example of the Chinese in Vancouver. Historically, the Chinese were segregated into certain kinds of neighborhoods, and there was a sense of connection between race and place. Kay Anderson (1995) has outlined this in her work. Those kinds of naturalized narratives of where people belong in society become so much a part of the common sense that people no longer see and understand them as hegemonic norms or narratives. When a new group that is transnational comes in, their very movement into that landscape challenges norms, disrupts hegemonies that have been spatially secured for over a century. This spatial disruption has strong ramifications for all kinds of social and political institutions in society. That's the kind of spatial securing and disruption that I'm interested in. You need to look spatially and historically to see those kinds of shifts. That's where geography really plays in.

dC: In relation to that, do you have plans to study how transnational migrants are produced before they come to Canada or to wherever they are migrating? To look at how institutions have already produced classes of migrants before they arrive? Have you considered those types of contexts?

KM: I haven't done that as much in my own work, although I did examine a program called "Meet with Success" (see Mitchell 1997b), which attempted to inculcate Hong Kong migrants to the cultural norms of Canadian society before they...
left Hong Kong. I have a student who is looking at Chinese language shifts in Taiwan, and she says that there is a new interest in speaking "Englishized" Mandarin because it gives you cultural capital to be seen as transnational. Even the children of parents who are not, in fact, transnational migrants are developing a certain kind of shift in the usage of phonetics that sound as if they are having difficulty making the proper sound in Mandarin—as if they had been educated at least part of their lives in the United States or Canada or Australia. In some societies there is already a hierarchical division between those who can be mobile—or are perceived as having a possibility of being mobile—and those who cannot. It wouldn't be the same if they were living in America full-time. They have to be perceived as having that hybrid, in-between experience to get that cultural distinction at home.

**dC:** In your Society and Space article (1997), you suggested that "the contemporary celebration of the disruptive qualities of diasporic identity, hybridity and third space is "premature." However, quoting Bhabha works in 1990 and 1994, Young suggests that Bhabha's notion of hybridity has become shifted from radical politics to cultural critique. Bhabha (1990) also suggests that the notion of third space is not necessarily "disruptive." Rather, he suggests that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (211) to "redefine our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality" (1994 7). To Bhabha, especially in Location of Culture (1994), hybridity looks like a trope "to think through." Do you still find the "hype" in the studies of hybridity? Do you think that someday in the future those terms would be appropriate enough to celebrate their disruptive force?

**KM:** I think what I'm arguing against is the separation of the economic from the cultural. For me there is no separation; the material and the discursive are always connected. Adorno says that culture always bears the stigma of capitalism. I enjoy the cultural play and allocation of "site in-between" and the potential resistance in the superstructural sphere. As someone who has a political project myself, I feel the economic and the cultural have to be theorized together. And also, politically that's what we want to do. We want to bring them together.

**dC:** Many terms that deal with notions of hybridity are very political. Some people insist that they provide some resistance background, but as you've discussed in previous articles, there has been some disregard of socio-cultural contexts. The term "hybridity" stems out of hybrid in terms of the tension between the psychoanalytical and the cultural. In postcolonial studies there are a lot of studies about psychoanalysis, but others, like Anne McClintock, insist that psychoanalysis should be embedded.

**KM:** I agree with McClintock that both the psychoanalytic and the socio-cultural need to be brought together to be the most effective both theoretically and politically. But I don't think you have to get rid of the tensions. I think that's a mistake. You have to hold the tensions together and have them constantly playing off each other. There is no magic bullet in terms of overarching theory; everything is going to be contextual. When you look at a particular context, you're interested in looking at a specific case. Then you bring your theoretical understanding together with your empirical data, and your "psychoanalytic" understandings with your "cultural" or whatever, and you hold them in tension. That's good geography and that's also good anthropology and literary criticism. Unfortunately it's not often done. McClintock is one of the few people working in cultural studies who is always ground her work materially and contextually. I think she does great work, but I don't think she dissolves tensions at all. I think it's much more forcing them to confront each other. And that's a very Marxist notion, the idea that something is pregnant with its contrary, the dialectical idea of ongoing process rather than something that must lead to an end result. But I think what often happens is that this tension gets abstracted back into the discursive, and the work is no longer related to political economy or to the everyday practices and biographies of actors. I just insist on that; otherwise, for me, I don't find the work as good, rich, important, or useful as part of a larger intellectual and political project.
The tension between civility and incivility was played out. Are there any new understandings of democratic citizenship or the public sphere to be taken from the "Battle of Seattle"?

KM: First of all, there was an issue of Antipode that recently had a series of discussions on this question. And a lot of University of Washington students wrote about their experiences in the demonstrations. I think it's really important to think about civility and incivility at the scale of the city because the city is the place where citizenship grew from. If you look at the etymology of the terms, "civil," "civic," and "citizen," they all described people who managed to make it to the city and then were protected in various ways by becoming free from some of the constraints of the old order in Europe. It's the site—if you look at the Appadurai pieces in *Public Culture* (2000, 1998)—it's the site where most services are provided to the most people; it's the site for the consumption of goods; it's the site of modern surveillance by the government, local and state government, and it's the appropriate place for tensions around civility to play out. Now, Seattle is a particularly appropriate place because it has this self-image as being a very gentle city, a civil city. So, in a way, when you have this incredible struggle over hegemony— hegemony of globalization as discourse, as debate—the terrain is global, but it's at the scale of the city that it's fought out. Fascinating. And it's at the scale of the city that the types of social movements that I was talking about before can become manifest to the world. The struggles are in the city, about the city, but they are also about the globe and they are projected around the globe. There is this interesting funneling effect there that is important. The Battle of Seattle showed democracy in action. When I was there we were chanting, "This is what democracy looks like." I really believe that because it was this agonistic moment where people took the public space of the streets and were disruptive to business as usual, to the norms, to the hegemonic norms that have been developing around the issue of globalization. That's exactly the kind of public sphere, public spaces that we need in order for democracy to be able to happen. Yes, I agree with the new discussion that the internet can be a new site of a public sphere, but I think it also has to be literally, physically embodied for the message to be louder and heard in more places around the world. I think it was a really important moment for the struggle over the incivility of globalization in the civil space of the city.

dC: In your article, "Transnationalism, Neo-liberalism and the Rise of the Shadow State" (2001), you discuss the ideas of cultural citizenship and community networking as they relate to Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to Vancouver, BC. Post 9/11, do you think that similar strategies of philanthropy could be used to help ease racial friction and tension for Arab or Muslim immigrants to the United States? Or does the fear of terrorism override neoliberalism?

KM: Well, first of all I think it depends on what kind of philanthropy. There are many different kinds. The kind of philanthropy where someone gives a building to a campus I'm skeptical about whether that has any long-term effect on easing tensions. It also brings up the question why should a group have to ease racial tensions by giving money. That's a whole different question. You would think that it wouldn't be their responsibility to not be victimized because of their ethnicity. Given that, I am skeptical of the long-term beneficial effects of philanthropy in those kinds of ways. First of all, there's a class component to it. If you're giving money to a college campus, you are affecting a very small group of the population. It also looks a bit strategic, honestly. Giving money so that people think better of your ethnic group. It's kind of strange, I think. I don't think it really helps in the long term. But if the philanthropy is going to aid immigrant communities or to change discriminatory laws and behaviors, that might have a useful effect. In terms of the rhetoric of terrorism, in the US context, I think terrorism aligns very well with neoliberalism. First, it allows the state to consolidate its power—which is what has been done under the Bush administration—and allows them to ask for less oversight by civil society. Both of those things I think are harmful in the long term. I'm very cognizant of the need for security, and I think there is a balance between security and civil liberties. But that is a balance that has to be part of a discussion. It can't be the government who decides where to draw the line. For myself, they are drawing the line too far on the side of greater security and taking away the rights of immigrants particularly at this point in time. And that can easily link into the general rights of the population, the civil rights of the population. There have been all types of immigrants incarcerated without being charged. It's absolutely dispensing with the constitution as we know it and saying that immigrants are no longer covered in the same kinds of ways citizens are. Talk about the deteriorated state. You can be in the state territory and no longer be covered by the rules of the state. That's pretty horrific.

dC: Building on that, post 9/11, do you think discourses of hybridity and transnational identity will be muted by immigrant communities (in the US) in favor of discourses of assimilation and unity? If so, how will this affect research on transnationalism and notions of citizenship?

KM: In terms of the return to discourses of assimilation as opposed to multiculturalism and difference, there's the state government normalized rhetoric and there are the immigrants grooming themselves. In terms of the state rhetoric, I'd say that there is already a backlash against multiculturalism. I think we saw it before 9/11, a backlash against person-centered education, against bilingual education, against multiculturalism in classrooms, against centers on campuses (African American or Women Studies centers). There's been a strong push over the last 10 or 15 years toward the European-centric curriculum, both in K-12 and the university curriculums. These are always about incorporation of immigrants at the same time. Rhetoric around multiculturalism has to do with how immigrants are to be absorbed or integrated into society. I think the multiculturalism movement from the 1950s and 1960s to the 1980s was a movement that saw the integration of immigrants in mosaic mentality rather than straight assimilation. This rhetoric was the most efficient and most powerful way of legitimizing the state because it seemed to bring the most amount of people in with the least amount of friction. Everybody was included and the liberal state was a beneficent, munificent entity. I think a lot of that rhetoric has been dispensed within the last 10 years alongside
neoliberal kinds of moves by the government. In terms of the effect on the immigrant community as to whether they’ll dispense with some kind of hybridity notion for themselves and go back to a kind of “We’re assimilating to your nation,” I think it depends on the context. Some immigrant communities are much more powerful, much more established than others, and, frankly, since 9/11 some have been targeted to a greater extent than others. So, a lot will depend on how vulnerable different groups feel as to where they are going to draw the line for themselves.

dC: We were also wondering if you could talk about intellectual property rights and the appropriation of them by universities.

KM: I feel very strongly about that. I wrote an article about that in Environment and Planning A called “Scholarship Means Dollaraship” (1999), and I talk a lot about the corporatization of the academy. I think that it is something that is incremental, that is happening incrementally, and we really need to guard against it. As soon as our rights to our own teaching materials become no longer our rights, but the rights of the university, then those teaching materials can be altered in ways that we have no control over. I think the knock-on effects are multiple. First, it affects the pedagogy of self, what’s taught but also the de-professionalization of us as white-collar laborers. It’s part of our de-skilling, which can lead to backtracking.

You can have the high-flyer famous faculty producing their courseware and having that owned by the university corporation and packaged in easy to swallow educational McNuggets for undergraduates that are then disseminated by a host of low-paid lecturers. We are already seeing the rise of the two-tiered system with untenured contract laborers in the university system. In the last fifteen years, it has grown exponentially. It’s one of the things that people don’t talk about enough—the incredible exploitation of untenured faculty. Faculty are now being brought in to teach for one year or three year contracts or come in to teach one course, course by course. They don’t have benefits; they don’t have any security, and they are asked to teach more and more for less and less money. There has been incredible growth in that area around the country and that will increase as intellectual property rights are lost. So, the knock-on effects are in a number of different spheres and are really serious. That’s why I always password my syllabus. I’m not anti-technological—I think it’s really useful for students to be able to look up things on the web—but I just want my students to be on and I copyright it. This is my material, so not anyone can take this. I share my syllabus with my friends. I think the sharing of information on teaching is really important with people you know, but it’s my choice to share that and I don’t ever want that to be incrementally taken away, especially by a corporate body rather than another individual teacher. There is a danger if you don’t password your online material that it can appear as if you are giving up your rights. There is so little regulation regarding the Internet; it’s growing. People are starting to regulate it, but still it’s very unclear. If you put material up, who owns it? Especially if you leave material up for a couple of years. Is it your property or that of the people who own the site? Is it the people you work for? We can also see this in K-12, in terms of this corporatization problem. You now have in a lot of public schools companies advertising their products. Often these products aren’t good for children, but they pay for a gym or something. Under neoliberalism, the state is pulling away from direct provision of social services like education. They are going under and are looking to the private sphere for support. The result is that corporations like Coca-Cola are coming in and saying, “We’ll buy your textbooks as long as we get to have a machine outside every classroom and our stuff advertised on your ball field.” It’s the beginning of the end as far as I’m concerned. Talk about losing your public sphere. Children won’t even know what a public sphere is. It will always be penetrated by the market at the most fundamental level. In your textbook, you will have little glowing emblems that say, “Buy Wendy’s burgers.”

dC: This book provided by Pepsi?

KM: Exactly. This material, this information provided by Enron. Well, that one’s probably not very likely.

Works Cited


Christopher M. Duncan

Liberalism and the Challenge of *Fight Club*:

Notes Toward an American Theory of the Good Life

Here too the context seems to contaminate the form, only the misery here is the misery of happiness. . . an unhappiness that doesn't know its name, that has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfillment since it has presumably never encountered this last.

- Fredric Jameson

... if the moral force of liberalism is still stimulating, its sociological content is weak; it has no theory of society adequate to its moral aims.

- C. Wright Mills

I felt like destroying something beautiful.

- "Jack," the narrator of *Fight Club"

The banality of homo economicus produces homo brutalitas.

- Michael Gillespie

Introduction

In an episode of *Saturday Night Live*, the T.V. sensation *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* was treated satirically by replacing the usual middle class contestants with what were supposed to be poor peasants from some unnamed, developing country and having them compete for various food products rather than cash. As a female contestant answered the questions, she moved from a sack of rice to a block of cheese to a pile of meat while her husband rooted for her from the audience. She was finally stumped with a question that asked her to name a disease where young women intentionally starve themselves even though they have access to plentiful food. Incredulous, the contestant shook her head in disbelief and asked with genuine astonishment how there could be such a disease. The satire asked Americans to look at themselves through the eyes of people for whom deprivation...