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The Somatechnics of Transcultural Communication: Transcending Boundaries and Borders in *All in My Family* and *The Farewell*

Abstract: In this paper, we stage a critical discussion between somatechnics and transcultural communication studies to push the latter field beyond existing paradigms and illustrate the usefulness of somatechnics to think through (embodied) transculturality. By means of example, we analyze Hao Wu's short documentary *All in My Family* (2019) and Lulu Wang's feature film *The Farewell* (2019) through the lens of somatechnics and argue that these films offer an important opportunity to consider their protagonists' contextually specific lived experiences in relation to both Western and Chinese idea(l)s of the family, parenthood, and sexuality. This is not to suggest that we juxtapose the global with the local or the West with the non-West in our analysis as two separate, identifiable categories. Rather, following Natalie Oswin (2006), we wish to examine how these films, as contemporary popular forms of transcultural communication, enable a critical discussion of "the West and non-West in all their complexity as the transnational, transcultural spaces that they are" (2006, p. 788). Approached this way, we hope to show how the films under discussion exemplify a range of somatechnologies; that is, bodies, which in the process of transcultural (un) becoming-with, materialize in a glocalized space where the global and local, West and East mutually (in)form each other and have become inextricable. In other words, our analysis of these films demonstrates how somatechnics may provide a novel way to think through the varied ways in which transculturality is both embodied and bodied forth.

Keywords: somatechnics, transculturality, transcultural communication, China, embodiment, communicative ecology

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1 Introduction

This article seeks to make a critical and theoretical intervention in transcultural communication studies by introducing somatechnics to this nascent field. Somatechnics, as a philosophical orientation, is concerned with thinking through bodily being-in/of-the-world and foregrounds the notion that corporeality at once shapes and is shaped by a subject's relation to its environment. By bringing somatechnics to bear on transcultural communication studies, we not only hope to provide a theoretical framework that enables an investigation into the reciprocal interrelationship between embodied subjectivity and transcultural communication, but also, as per the call for submissions for this special issue, helps "move [the field of transcultural communication studies] beyond the limitations of existing paradigms, to open up a broader theoretical field and methodological approach that transcend normative de-Westernization and the North–South dichotomy" (Li & Wekesa, 2022). With critical discussion between somatechnics and transcultural communication studies, we argue, advancing the study of transculturality would simultaneously open up the theoretical space in which such studies usually take place. More specifically, we wish to suggest that somatechnics engenders an approach to transculturality that highlights the lived experiences and practices of embodied subjects and the communications between them. We provide an example of such an approach in this article by examining the protagonists in the short documentary *All in My Family* (2019) and the feature film *The Farewell* (2019). Tracing how some of the characters in these films move across, alongside, and through cultural and linguistic borders, as well as national boundaries, we demonstrate that they refuse to reinforce and reproduce a dichotomous logic of difference that often underpins East/West, North/South, China/USA, Modern/Traditional, and local/global binaries. Moreover, it is through the process of navigating different cultures, languages, and spaces that these characters find comfort in, are (trans)formed by, and, thus, start to embody a complex set of transcultural knowledges that cannot easily be placed within national borders or socio-cultural boundaries. This latter process of transcending borders and boundaries, we argue in this article, tells us as much about transculturality as it does about the somatechnics of transcultural communication.

The discussion in this article will first examine the notion of transcultural communication to consider what the "trans" in transcultural signifies. Then, we introduce somatechnics and argue that it provides a useful framework to think through how embodied subjects are constituted with/in varying transcultural contexts. Through an analysis of Will Baker's work (2022), we make the connection between somatechnics and transcultural communication studies explicit before

we analyze, by means of examples, a small selection of characters, dialogues, and visuality from *All in My Family* (2019) and *The Farewell* (2019).

2 Understanding Transcultural Communications

In his book, *Transcultural Communication* (2015), Andreas Hepp makes a distinction between intercultural and international communication on the one hand, and transcultural communication on the other. Hepp notes that "[u]nlike intercultural and international communication, which takes place between individuals or groups of individuals belonging to distinct cultures or nation states, the concept of transcultural communication involves processes of communication that transcend individual cultures" (2015, p. 3). While Hepp is right to argue that transcultural communication transcends individual cultures, it is peculiar that he continues his conceptualization of this term by noting that "developing a conception of transcultural communication involves the specification of particular national cultures, but also examines how these particularities are taken up in communication processes that transcend cultures" (2015, p. 3). His focus here on specifying "particular national cultures" and examining how such specifics then find their way into communication processes that transcend cultures is peculiar because it contrarily seems to depart from an intercultural exercise, meaning, an exercise that is focused on first identifying distinct cultures and then considering how those negotiate with others. Perhaps the issue here is that Hepp's articulation of transcultural communication is heavily dependent on the impression that transcultural communication processes are the effect of mediatization and globalization (2015, p. 3). After all, he argues that transcultural communication "typically takes place through the media" (Hepp, 2015, p. 3) and that it "affects us all when we are confronted with media products on television, in the cinema and the press that 'travel' beyond the bounds of different cultures" (Hepp, 2015, p. 2). While we agree with Hepp's observation that the continuing development of the global media industry increases "technically mediated communicative relationships" (2015, p. 5) and that, in this way, global media "affects us all", it is unclear how global media products effectuate *trans*cultural communication in Hepp's analysis, or, what is *trans*cultural about this process.

The issue with Hepp's argument is that it seemingly conflates transcultural with intercultural communication. This conflation is illustrated by the example Hepp provides in the introduction of his book, which, he argues, demonstrates that "media can themselves become driving forces in transcultural conflicts" (Hepp, 2015, p. 2). Describing the 2006 international controversy around the decision of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* to publish cartoons of the prophet of Islan

Mohammed, Hepp notes that "[t]his incident serves to illustrate the perspective of a certain media outlet on a 'foreign culture'" (2015, p. 2). He goes on to write that people in the Arab world found out about these cartoons through various forms of media circulating on the internet and coverage of this topic by networks like *Al Jazeera*, which led to protests that were, in turn, covered by European mass media (Hepp, 2015, p. 2). Hepp then makes the curious claim that "[t]he transcultural communication made possible by the globalization of media thus led to conflicts *between* religions and cultures, and did not necessarily enhance mutual understanding" (Hepp, 2015, p. 2). Hepp's use of the phrase "transcultural communication" in this last quotation seemingly refers to the cartoons circulating on the internet, the coverage of the Danish publication by *Al Jazeera*, and the coverage of the protests in the Arab world by European media. However, why and how all of this can be understood as *trans*cultural and not *inter*cultural communication is not altogether clear. Hepp's conflation between intercultural and transcultural communication is further underscored by his book's focus, which, he explains, "centers upon the relationship 'between' media cultures – a relationship that is characterized by transcultural communication" (2015, p. 6). The problem with this statement is that relationships between media cultures are not necessarily transcultural just because they cross cultural or national boundaries. The above mentioned 2006 controversy makes this crystal clear as this was, in our opinion at least, not a conflict that transcended countries, cultures, and religions but, instead, a conflict *between* them.

By briefly discussing some of Hepp's ideas, it is not our intention to suggest that his book is meritless. Neither do we wish to suggest that transcultural communication is against other forms of communication, such as cross-cultural or intercultural communication. This last point is underscored by Jiang et al. (2021) who aptly note in their editorial of this journal's inaugural issue that transcultural communication "aims to transcend [other kinds of communication processes] to imagine a deeper interconnected and more inclusive communicative ecology in which culture is not the barrier but the catalyst for good human relationship" (Jiang et al., 2021, p. 2). While Hepp undoubtedly sought to emphasize the point made by Jiang et al., his technological determinist focus on global media as the harbinger of transcultural communication forecloses a critical investigation into what exactly *trans* means in *trans*cultural communication, how transcultural communication transcends individual cultures, and in what ways transcultural communication (in)forms and, at the same time, is (in)formed by communicative ecologies.

Tacchi et al. (2003) argue that the idea of communicative ecologies can be useful in communication studies and explain the term by clarifying its origins in the biological sciences. They write:

"If you are studying the ecology of a forest or desert, you do not look at one or two animals or plants in isolation. You study how animals, plants, soil, climate and so on are interrelated, and may have impacts on many things simultaneously. The same applies to communications and information: there are many different people, media, activities, and relationships involved. For example, it makes little sense to separate 'internet' and 'poverty' when both are part of much more complicated ecologies" (Tacchi et al., 2003, p. 15).

The authors thus use the idea of a communicative ecology to accentuate the complex nature of communication processes in which singling out one or two elements may not be useful (and/or possible) in communication research. Building on the work of Tacchi et al. (2003), Foth and Hearn (2007) further argue that a communicative ecology has three layers. They elucidate that there is:

"A *technological* layer which consists of the devices and connecting media that enable communication and interaction. A *social layer* which consists of people and social modes of organizing those people – which might include, for example, everything from informal social networks to more formal community associations, as well as commercial or legal entities such as body corporates. In addition we can think of a *discursive* layer which is the content, that is, the ideas or themes that constitute the conversations and narratives of the ecology" (Foth & Hearn, 2007, p. 756, italics in original).

In each specific communicative ecology, then, people perform different roles that affect the social relationships they have with others (e.g., parent, friend, colleague, student, neighbor, and so on) and the relationship with their environment; use a variety of different media with particular platform affordances that both enable and constrain communication in particular ways (Bucher & Helmond, 2018); and, communicate about different topics in different ways depending on who the other person is, what medium technology is being used, and the socio-cultural context in which the communication process takes place. Thus, a communicative ecology could be broadly construed as "the context in which the communication process occurs" (Foth & Hearn, 2007, p. 756). Others have similarly written about media ecologies or ecosystems to underscore the inescapable interdependence of (media) technologies, the socio-cultural domain, and the ethico-political environment (Couldry, 2020, pp. 30–32; van Dijck, 2013, p. 21). It is not surprising, then, as Couldry notes, that "[t]hinking ecologically about media means considering not just what media technologies we use, but also what the consequences are of media over the longer term for how we interrelate to each other as human beings" (2020, p. 31). Such interrelations may very well, if we were to connect this last remark to the earlier observation by Jiang et al. (2021), shape, be shaped by, and take place in various transcultural and inclusive communicative ecologies.

This brief discussion of communicative ecologies highlights that it makes little sense to single out one element (such as the communication between media cultures) as the defining moment where we can observe cross- or intercultural communication becoming *trans*cultural. This does not mean that we cannot think through transculturality productively, but it does mean that we may have to change our attitude towards researching it. While it may be impossible to pinpoint exactly when intercultural communication changes into transcultural communication, which we have earlier suggested resembles an intercultural exercise, we wish to argue instead that transculturality should perhaps be thought of as a dynamic process that is both embodied and bodied forth in varying socio-political contexts. We further argue that these heterogeneous processes can, perhaps, be observed most clearly in the lived experiences and practices of embodied subjects and the communications between them. To put this last point differently, embodied subjectivity is an important site of transculturality because, as the discussion in this article will make clear in due course, it is through people that transculturality (as a somatechnology) materializes and, consequently, is bodied forth, becomes visible, and starts to matter in contextually specific ways. Before we provide a more detailed introduction to somatechnics, however, we wish to elaborate on our last point regarding embodied subjectivity by exploring the work of Will Baker in which we not only find a robust definition of transcultural communication, but also, implicitly perhaps, a prioritization of 'the body'.

In a recent article, "From Intercultural to Transcultural Communication" (2022), Baker notes that his research in the area of applied linguistics made him aware of "the limitations of current thinking around the 'inter' of intercultural communication" (2022, p. 281). More specifically, he observes in his research on "language and culture in interactions through English used as a lingua franca in multilingual scenarios", that "what such interactions showed was the frequency with which linguistic and cultural borders were crossed in a manner that was not adequality [*sic*] accounted for through notions such as code-switching, hybridity and third place" (Baker, 2022, p. 281). In other words, "in many cases it was not easy to identify the languages and cultures participants were supposedly 'switching' from or 'in-between'" (Baker, 2022, p. 281). Baker provides an interesting example to support his observations, namely, an exchange via text between two individuals – one born and raised in Japan, the other in the US – who are discussing breakfast plans in a mix of Japanese and English.[1] This particular conversation contains instances where language use is not easily identifiable as

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[1] We refer to Baker's work for a full transcript and detailed discussion of this chat (see: Baker, 2022, pp. 281–282; Baker & Ishikawa, 2021) but here wish to draw attention to a few notable moments in this chat.

either English or Japanese, such as the use of "lol"; the use of other semiotic signs in this exchange are not attributable to either one of the specified languages, such as the punctuation mark "~"; and, the discussion of what constitutes a proper Japanese breakfast is "considerably more complex than a national level comparison would suggest" (Baker, 2022, p. 282) as one of the participants in this exchange talks about egg on toast - a breakfast that is as common in Western contexts as it is in Japan (Baker, 2022, pp. 281–282; Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). In Baker's discussion of this text exchange, he makes the cogent observation that "[i]n examples such as this the 'inter' of intercultural communication becomes problematic, since participants are not necessarily 'in-between' easily distinguishable cultures and languages", rather, "we can view participants as drawing on repertoires of linguistic and other semiotic resources that do not, and need not, align with ideological categories of named languages" (Baker, 2022, p. 282). Baker's research thus demonstrates that intercultural communication research cannot account for all the complexity that is present in such communicative processes because interactants are not necessarily drawing on an easily identifiable language, culture, or identity. Instead, they *transcend* cultures, languages, and nations.

This last point is aptly captured by the definition Baker provides in an earlier book, written with Tomokazu Ishikawa. They write:

> "[T]ranscultural communication is characterized as communication where *interactants* move through and across, rather than in between, cultural and linguistic boundaries, and named languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted, and in the process cultural and linguistic borders become blurred, transgressed, and transcended" (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021, p. 182, emphasis added; see also: Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019, p. 472).

There are several points we wish to note regarding this definition. It, firstly, gives rise to a more philosophical consideration of the prefix trans. Note, for instance, how the authors draw attention to the fact that in the process of moving through and across boundaries, "cultural and linguistic borders become blurred, transgressed, and transcended". In his solo-authored article, Baker adds that through this process new spaces and identities are created. He writes, "through the processes of transgressing and transcending boundaries, those very boundaries themselves are transformed, potentially opening up new social spaces and identities" (2022, p. 288, pp. 198–199). These telling observations illustrate that the prefix trans in transcultural does not only signify a transcending and transgressing of boundaries, it also, we argue, signifies an ontologizing capacity, as new identities, cultures, and social spaces materialize in and through this process

(Hayward & Weinstein, 2015).[2] We thus wish to signal here that in the process of transgressing and transcending boundaries and, particularly, in the (trans)formation of those boundaries into new spaces and identities that ensues, we find a potential for the decolonization of dominant socio-politico systems, knowledges, and regimes. This is not because old boundaries completely dissolve but, rather, because the transformation and transcending of these boundaries signifies a dynamic relation between the old and the new, the past and present, that (in)forms a different future. This process is reminiscent of Bhabha's postcolonial concept of enunciation, which questions the "very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 51), resonates with more recent literature on decoloniality in which the concept of "interculturality" has been conceptualized in similar ways (See: Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pp. 57–80; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2020, pp. 64–70), and connects to recent attempts to rethink transcultural communication (Jiang et al., 2021). Secondly, we wish to note concerning Baker and Ishikawa's definition of transcultural communication that we have italicized *interactants* in their quotation. We have done so to accentuate that people move through and across cultures, identities, nations, and languages, which underscores that embodied subjects are the primary site where transcultural communication becomes visible or comes to be/matter. As such, they are the materialization of transculturality, which we may think of as the somatechnics of transcultural communication – a point we will elucidate next.

3 Understanding Somatechnics

The history of the term somatechnics can be traced back to Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, where in 2003 and 2005 the now defunct Department of Critical and Cultural Studies hosted two Body Modification conferences organized by Nikki Sullivan. The aim of these conferences, Sullivan explains, "was to articulate the diverse ways in which all bodies – not simply those that are tattooed or those that have undergone some sort of transformative surgical procedure - are always already modified" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 187). In the wake of these conferences, a group of academics (including Susan Stryker, Nikki Sullivan, and Joseph Pugliese) coined the term somatechnics to capture this aim and foreground what they saw as a "chiasmic interdependence of soma and techné: of bodily-being (or corporealities) as always already technologized and technologies as always already

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2 We draw here on the work of Eva Hayward and Jamie Weinstein who, in a different context, have argued that "if trans* is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness" (2015, p. 196).

enfleshed" (Sullivan, 2009a, p. 314). As such, the term reflects poststructuralist understandings of the body, which critique the idea that bodies are simply given by nature and, instead, see the body as a process of materialization of contextually specific regulatory discourses, knowledge and norms (cf. Butler, 1993), or, what we might think of here as technologies. Poststructuralist understandings of technology, likewise, have critiqued the notion of technology as "an object whose essence is innate and knowable … [or] a tool deployed by an already constituted subject who is separate from it and wields control over it" (Sullivan & Murray, 2011, p. vi; see also: Sullivan & Murray, 2009). In other words, the reciprocity of the co-constitutive relation between the body and technology is captured by the compound somatechnics, which merges the Greek words *sôma* (body) and *τέχνη* (art or craft) to underscore that "the body" and technologies (here conceived as both soft "epistemic" technologies and hard "machinic" technologies) are inextricable. Somatechnics thus denotes that the culturally intelligible body is irreducible to either an idealist construal or essentialist notion of a biological given and, instead, should be understood as a biotechnical fusion in which neither soma nor technics can be considered to precede the other.

The idea that bodies and technologies are inextricably entwined is not only critical to the philosophical idea the term somatechnics aims to capture, it is also what makes it a useful tool to analyze embodied being-in/of-the world. Consider, for instance, Sullivan's explication of techné, which, she argues, should be thought of as "the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted: that is, continuously engendered in relation to others and to a world" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 188).To put this point differently, corporeality, or embodied subjectivity, necessarily involves the embodiment of a range of contextually specific discourses, knowledge, and norms, in short, corporeality is re-thought as the embodiment of technologies of Power/Knowledge. Somatechnics thus "supplies a shorthand notation for the notion", Pugliese and Stryker explain, "that the body is not so much a naturally occurring object that becomes available for representation or cultural interpretation as it is the tangible outcome of historically and culturally specific techniques and modes of embodiment processes" (Pugliese & Stryker, 2009, p. 2). What this means is that the various categories of embodiment that populate our cultural grids of intelligibility, such as, white, Australian, Chinese, bisexual, trans, male, etc., are "somatechnological (rather than simply natural or cultural, internal or external to us, enabling or oppressive)" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 188). Importantly, as Sullivan and Murray state in the inaugural issue of the *Somatechnics* journal, "much of the research to date that falls under the rubric of somatechnics refers to the operations of power that are the subject of critical practice, thus foregrounding the 'doubleness' of techné as at once constitutive and critical, as the dynamic materialization of (un)becoming" (Sullivan & Murray, 2011,

p. vii). This doubleness of somatechnics is explained by Sullivan elsewhere as a productive tension, which consists of performing "the double-gesture of tracing the specificity of particular modes and practices of bodily (un)becoming thus invoked, and of troubling their alleged essence, their separateness and/or self-sameness" (Sullivan, 2009b, p. 276). Somatechnics, then, offers a way to analyze, and bring to light, the various ways in which technologies of Power/Knowledge continuously (trans)form practices of embodiment and the multiple ways in which these practices necessarily transcend or exceed their outcomes, as well as the in- and exclusions by which these practices operate. It shows, further, that culturally intelligible bodies are not, in an essentialist fashion, given by nature but, rather, are the outcome of what Donna Haraway would no doubt call a "conversation" between the world and human "knowledge projects" (Haraway, 1991, p. 198).

4 The Somatechnics of Transcultural Communication

Allow us to further explain some of these key features of somatechnics research by now connecting the somatechnics of transcultural communication to the work of Will Baker. Earlier we cited Baker and Ishakawa who defined transcultural communication as follows:

> "[T]ranscultural communication is characterized as communication where interactants move through and across, rather than in between, cultural and linguistic boundaries, and named languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted, and in the process cultural and linguistic borders become blurred, transgressed, and transcended" (2021, p. 182, 198–199).

We pointed out the importance of the word *interactants* in this passage because it accentuates that people move through and across cultures, identities, nations, and languages, and, thus, are the site where transcultural communication, or transculturality, materializes. This, we signaled, could be thought of as the somatechnics of transcultural communication. Importantly, in the passage above Baker and Ishikawa implicitly gesture toward the idea that identifying transculturality requires a double-gesture; that is, a recognition that interactants move across cultures, languages, and nations, yet, at the same time that these cultures, languages, and nations are named or acknowledged, it should be recognized that they "can no longer be taken for granted" (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021, p. 182, 198–199). In other words, the somatechnics of transcultural communication help us see in which ways transcultural (un)becoming materializes, how corporeality always transcends and exceeds the categories it instantiates, the in- and exclusions

by which it operates, and the (non-essentialist) ontologizing power of trans in *trans*culturality.

To further flesh out the somatechnics of transcultural communication, we now turn to *All in My Family* (Wu, 2019) and *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019). We have selected these movies because some of the main characters in these films provide a clear example of people who transcend and transgress various borders and boundaries. Before we analyze the films, however, we wish to point out that, as one of us has argued elsewhere, "every viewer will have a specific cultural grid of intelligibility through which they make sense of the events in a film" (Bruining, 2019b, p. 50). We draw attention to this to make clear that our analysis and interpretation of the events in these films is not intended as an ultimate truth claim about these films but, hopefully, as the beginning of a dialogue.

While *All In My Family* is a documentary and *The Farewell* a feature film (albeit "based on an actual lie" (Wang, 2019, 0:55)), the movies share a similar premise: to tell the truth or keep a secret. In the case of *The Farewell*, Chinese-born but US-raised Billi (Akwafina) reluctantly returns to China to attend and celebrate an expedited wedding of her cousin. The wedding is a ruse so the entire family can spend time with the family's matriarch, NaiNai (ZhaiShuzhen), who has been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. The family, however, has decided not to tell NaiNai about her terminal illness. When Billi asks her parents why the family thinks it is better to keep this a secret, as opposed to telling her the truth, Billi's mother, Lu Yuan (Diana Lin), explains: "Chinese people have saying. 'When people get cancer, they die'. It is not the cancer that kills them. It is the fear" (Wang, 2019, 11:47–11:55). Similar to *The Farewell*, *All In My Family* also revolves around telling the truth or keeping a secret; in fact, it revolves around two secrets. Chinese-born but US-based director Hao Wu is adamant about coming out to his grandfather about his sexuality and his two children, whom he has through surrogacy with his Asian–American partner, Eric. However, before the children are born, audiences are shown a conversation between Wu and his parents in which he tells his parents about his plans to have children with Eric. Wu's mother responds to this idea by suggesting they keep this "一个永远的秘密 (*a secret forever*)", and his father suggests they "我想尽量不要让亲戚朋友他们知道 (*should try our best to … Hide this from family and friends*)" (Wu, 2019, 18:22–18:35), presumably to save face of the family. Immediately, after this conversation we hear Wu in a voice-over saying:

> "I find it frustrating to have to go back into the closet whenever I see grandpa in Chengdu. But that's what my parents want. And I don't want to create any more drama before the kids arrive" (Wu, 2019, 19:18–19:40).

What the various responses to these secrets in both movies reveal is that Billi and Wu have adopted a position in relation to the rights and needs of the family and the individual that transcends any East/West, China/USA binaries.

Alberts, Nakayama, and Martin explain, while warning not to generalize, that "many North American and northern European cultural groups, particularly U.S. Whites, value individualism and independence, believing that one's primary responsibility is to one's self", while "many cultures in South America and Asia hold a more collectivistic orientation that stresses the needs of the group" (2013, p. 203). They continue to explain the collectivistic orientation as one in which, "the primary responsibility is to relationships with others; interdependence in family, work, and personal relationships is viewed positively. Collectivists value working toward relationship and group harmony over remaining independent and self-sufficient" (Alberts et al., 2012, p. 203). While we value the insights that Alberts et al. offer in terms of cultural values and how these vary in different contexts, we do not want to analyze these films through a dichotomy of difference. Instead, following Natalie Oswin, we are interested in "the potential of exploring both the West and non-West in all their complexity as the transnational, transcultural spaces that they are" (Oswin, 2006, p. 788). This complexity can be best observed in the embodied practices of the protagonists of these films because they are caught in a continuous process of negotiating their sense of self with their ideas about, as well as responsibility and obligations toward, their families and their environments, which we may think of here as complex communicative ecologies. Closely looking at such processes, we argue, tells us much about the ways in which transcultural communication materializes and becomes enmeshed in the lived practices and experiences of embodied subjects.

As the narrative unfolds in *All in My Family*, viewers learn more and more about Wu's inner struggle between coming out to his grandfather and, at the same time, negotiating his family's needs. Being the only son of his parents comes with particular responsibilities and expectancies, as a conversation between Wu and his sister makes clear. She explains that "你是大家族唯一的男孩儿，他们肯定更希望你是子女双全，找个好工作。 (*as the only boy in the clan, you were expected to have children and get a good job*)," in order to, "光宗耀祖 (*make the ancestors proud*)" (Wu, 2019, 3:10-3:25). This is not something only his parents expect of him, however, audiences are shown Wu's grandfather who, at his 90th birthday, says to Wu and others: "我百岁生日的时候，你们都要回来才行。你一定要把你爱人带回来。我不是说朋友，我说的是爱人，能带个孙娃子那更好。(*You all have to come back for my 100th birthday. You must bring back a spouse for my birthday. Not a friend. A spouse. A grandkid would be even better*)" (Wu, 2019, 3:57–4:15). In a similar vein, Wu's little aunt suggests he comes back to China to participate in Chinese dating shows to find a suitable wife. All of this shows how collectivist

attitudes are embodied by Wu's Chinese family, which puts a lot of pressure on him to live up to these Chinese ideals. However, things change when Wu returns to China for Chinese New Year because this time he returns with his partner Eric and their newborn kids.

At a big family lunch, many family members are slowly being clued in on the family situation Wu is in, namely, that Eric is not just a "family friend" and that the mother of Wu's kids did not stay at home for work-related reasons. The situation becomes a comedy of sorts, however, when Wu is clearly uncomfortable keeping up the lie with his grandfather who quizzes him about the hometown of the mother of his kids. Things get even crazier when Wu's mom suggests inviting Eric to this lunch, at which point some family members suggest bringing it out in the open, but Wu, in a voiceover, explains "I don't know what's holding me back. I don't remember being this indecisive when I came out for the first time" (Wu, 2019, 29:13–29:20). After the comedic family lunch situation, the documentary shows a serious side when Wu interviews his mother about his sexuality, and audiences see her reveal, while framed in a close-up shot, that it took her three years to get over his sexuality. With tears in her eyes, she confesses: "但是我从来没想到, 我的儿子会变成这个样子。我真的接受不了这种现象, 很痛苦, 所以我一直不敢跟你们的爷爷讲。(*but I never imagined that my son would change into that. I couldn't accept it. Very painful. So, I never dared to tell your grandpa*)" (Wu, 2019, 33:04–33:20). In response to his mother's heartfelt confession, audiences witness a change in Wu. He says "[o]nce I interviewed my family and learned how my coming out had hurt them, I no longer have the heart to come out to my grandpa, which would hurt them all over again" (Wu, 2019, 34:45–34:54). He remarks in both English and Mandarin Chinese,

> "其实有时候觉得很有意思, 因为年轻的时候, the truth is more important than anything else, 但现在年纪大了就觉得, what's important is not just truth but also there are other things that are as important. For example, other people's feelings. As long as I don't have to live in a lie, and also as long as I'm not being denied to live the way I want to live my life" (Wu, 2019, 37:45-38:20).

> (*It's funny how, when you were young, the truth is more important than anything else; now, as you get older, you feel that what's important is not just truth but also there are other things that are as important. For example, other people's feelings. As long as I don't have to live in a lie, and also as long as I'm not being denied to live the way I want to live my life*)

This is an important moment in the film because it signals a transition from Wu going back and forth between two different cultures and cultural values to embodying a position that, instead, transcends both. As one of us has argued elsewhere, this is not just a mix of Chinese and Western values. Rather, at this point audiences are shown how "Wu finds comfort in negotiating the complexity of a

transnational and transcultural (un)becoming-with: never fully one or the other but, rather, embodying a process in which different perspectives mutually (in) form each other and become inextricable" (Bruining, 2019a, p. 249). We wish to elaborate on this idea here by suggesting that Wu's confessional, which importantly is originally in a mix of both English and Mandarin Chinese, illustrates that he both exceeds and transcends a "traditional" Chinese or "modern" Western position. For instance, the realization that other people's feelings are important is hard to pinpoint as either a typically Chinese or Western characteristic. And while we could perhaps say that not living in a lie is particularly Western because it prioritizes the self, we cannot with great certainty determine whether the choice to not come out was made by Wu for his family (because of a Chinese collectivist mindset) or for himself because he did not want to hurt them (Western individualistic mindset). Rather, the decision "to live the life he wants" seems to be the outcome of a transcultural process that took place in a contextually specific communicative ecology. What audiences witness at this moment, then, is a somatechnics of transcultural communication in which Wu shows to embody and body forth both a decision that is not reducible to either East or West, US or China.

Analyzing the events in *The Farewell* is more complicated, not least because we are here dealing with a fictionalized story, told through the eyes of Lulu Wang, writer and director of this film. We thus want to point out an important difference here between *The Farewell* and *All in My Family*, which is, as already noted, that the former is a feature film and the latter is a documentary. While we do not wish to suggest that Hao Wu did not make any editorial choices in his documentary, a documentary filmmaker might nonetheless capture some scenes or conversations by chance, or, at least not fully knowing how things will play out once the camera starts recording. In feature films, on the other hand, nothing is left to chance. Smith aptly notes in this regard that "[a] Hollywood film is one of the most highly scrutinized, carefully constructed, least random works imaginable" (Smith, 2001, p. 128). We draw attention to this here because, it appears to us that Wang has tried to incorporate a range of scenes to emphatically show cultural differences between China and the US. One notable example here is when Billi checks into her hotel and the hotel staff carries her bags to her room. Once they enter Billi's room, they have the following conversation:

> Hotel staff: "你觉得在哪里更好, 中国还是美国? (*So what do you think is better? China or America?*)"

> Billi: "不一样, 不一样 (It's different)"

> Hotel staff: "哦, 那怎么会不一样呢?肯定是在美国会更好些吧? (*What do you mean different? It must be much nicer in America than here*?)"

Billi: "就是…不一样。(It's just … different)"

Hotel staff: "我觉得你肯定更习惯在美国的生活? (But I guess you are more used to America, right?)"

Billi: "可能, 可能。(I guess)."

(Wang, 2019, 24:20–24:41)

What we find interesting about this conversation is that the staff member is intent on confirming with Billi that living in the US is better than in China. Even after Billi told him "it is different", the staff member asks her again. Audiences can clearly tell that Billi is not interested in this conversation at all from her answers, as well as her body language, but the staff member seems to desperately seek confirmation from Billi that he is right to think that America is better than China. This is a peculiar choice in the movie because nowadays very few Chinese people will think the US is nicer than China, let alone try to confirm this with a foreigner. There are no secrets between China and America for Chinese citizens anymore due to the rise of social media and the spread of news and information on a variety of platforms. In addition, with the increase in income, it has become easier to travel around the world. Thus, the hotel staff member in this particular dialogue represents, we argue, an imaginary "Chinese" culture imposed by the director, presumably to emphasize the cultural difference. Yet, while some of the directorial decisions may demonstrate a forced emphasis and focus on cultural differences, we argue that the movie was written, directed, and produced in a transcultural communicative ecology and, therefore, transculturality unavoidably permeates the film as we discuss next.

Film scholar Bob Nicholls argues that, "[t]he audience's view of any film world comes filtered through the social attitude, political perspective, and *aesthetic sensibility* of that world's maker" (Nicholls, 2010, p. 17, emphasis added). We have highlighted aesthetic sensibility in this passage to accentuate that the visual language in the film (as they are in Wu's documentary), such as particular camera angles, cinematography, mise-en-scene, use of slow motion, and so on, are transcultural as these techniques may have originated in particular movies and/or cinematic movements, but they are by no means identifiable as either Chinese or American. Likewise, in *The Farewell's* wedding scene, audiences can see wedding guests sing karaoke. For instance, we see Billi and her dad sing along to a song by The Fugees, while Billi's cousin, who got married to a Japanese girl, sings a Japanese song with his new wife. The choice to include karaoke in the wedding scene is interesting because, while originally a Japanese activity, it has become a popular pastime around the world and is not necessarily used in this particular scene as

specifically signifying a Japanese tradition. Yet, it is not a common activity at a Chinese wedding.

The issue with *The Farewell*, as we have pointed out, is that there are some moments where cultural difference is specifically emphasized. Billi, for example, is clearly and visibly emotionally upset throughout the movie and questions her parents, other family members, and even a hospital doctor about the ethics of not disclosing to her grandmother that she has a terminal illness. Billi, then, is cinematically depicted as not wanting to lie, unlike the rest of her family, about NaiNai's illness, a decision the family has made collectively for the sake of NaiNai's final days. While Billi believes that her grandmother should be told the truth, she is contrarily seen lying to herself on multiple occasions in the film. In the opening sequence, Billi, out on the streets of New York City, lies to NaiNai when she asks if she is wearing a hat against the cold (Wang, 2019, 2:04-2:10), presumably to not unnecessarily make her grandmother feel worried. When Billi finds out she has not been successful in her application for a Guggenheim scholarship (Wang, 2019, 7:55), she does not immediately tell her parents or her grandmother when they ask her about it. In these instances, then, we see that for Billi it is acceptable to lie on some occasions. The film thus clearly tries to show that Billi and her Chinese family think differently as to what constitutes acceptable lies, which simultaneously depicts Billi and her family at culturally different ends of the spectrum. However, there are also moments where audiences can witness a transcultural (un) becoming, particularly in Billi, and so we now wish to discuss a conversation between her and her mother.

Moments before the wedding, Billi and her mother have an emotional conversation in which Billi tells her mother:

> "You know one of the few good memories of my childhood was one of those summers at Nai Nai's [her grandmother's], they had that garden. Ye Ye [her grandfather] and I would catch dragonflies. And then we just moved to the States. Everything was different, everyone was gone, and it was just the three of us" (Wang, 2019, 1:04:40-1:04:59).

Following this emotional outburst, Billi continues, "every time I came back to China, he just wasn't there anymore. And I come back, and he is just gone. The house is gone, A Die [her father] is gone, our Beijing home is gone, and soon she'll be gone too" (Wang, 2019, 1:05:55–1:06:12). What is striking about this confession is that Billi, who up until this scene has been characterized through her Americanized beliefs and attitudes, can now be seen to have a strong connection to China from her childhood. Yet, this is also a place she is estranged from. For instance, she has to ask what certain words mean on multiple occasions in the film, and her grandmother needs to tell her how to interact with the wedding guests at the wedding because she is unfamiliar with the customs and, thus, how she and the

family will be perceived if she doesn't act in a certain way. Seeing Billi interact with others and her environment throughout the film thus shows, as Davis argues, her "uncomfortable position of not quite belonging in either culture" (Davis, 2020, p. 1412). It is because of this discomfort, that audiences can ultimately see her navigate a complex set of cultural values, belongings, and attitudes in what we might think of as a transnational and transcultural (un)becoming-with. In other words, it is in moments like these that we see most clearly the somatechnics of transcultural communication.

5 Conclusion

To conclude this article, we wish to underscore that our viewing of these films is, as are all other research practices, not "free from social values, historical vicissitudes, and political contexts" (Bruining & Tack, 2022, p. 1). We thus want to acknowledge that our socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as our ethico-geopolitical positions, have helped constitute particular viewings of these films, which therefore should not be read as the ultimate analysis but instead as one amongst many possible analyses. We likewise acknowledge that our discussion of somatechnics and the way in which we have applied it to transcultural communication is one amongst many, and we invite others to continue and further the theoretical introduction of somatechnics into the field of transcultural communication studies. What we hope our discussion has demonstrated, however, is that deploying somatechnics in the field of transcultural communication opens up new ways of thinking through transculturality and pushes the field forward and beyond theorizing of a dichotomy of differences in unexpected ways. In particular, we hope to have shown how different transcultural practices of embodiment (in)form and are (in)formed by heterogeneous communicative ecologies. What a somatechnics framework helps us understand, then, particularly in the context of transcultural communication, is that all bodily being-in/of the world is always-already other and more than what we imagine to be homogenous, unified, and fixed subjectivities; in short, it helps us to see the somatechnics of transcultural communication.

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