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Comparative literary studies in the twenty-first century: towards a transcultural perspective?

Arianna Dagnino

Abstract

In an increasingly globalised and globalising world, ‘culture’ appears as ‘an important determinant of subjectivity’ and, consequently, of creative expression (Beautell 2000). With this in mind, Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999) prompted researchers to merge the comparative study of literature with that of cultural studies, embracing what he designated the new ‘comparative cultural studies’ approach. If we are to accept Tötösy de Zepetnek’s challenge, however, as I argue in this paper, it would be better to adopt a transcultural theoretical paradigm more apt to deal with the cultural complexities of the twenty-first century mobile age. Not only does ‘transculture/ality’ – the combined notion of ‘transculture’ (Epstein 1995, 2009) and ‘transculturality’ (Welsch 1999, 2009) – appear to be endowed with the kind of dynamic non-linear nature and flexibility most needed in dealing with the fast-changing patterns and transformations in cultures and literatures, but it also seems to promote a new ‘borderless’ comparative methodology. In doing so it marks an attempt to move away from nationalist stances and the insistence on the periphery–centre, colony–empire, ethnic–mainstream, pure–hybrid dichotomies with which comparative studies (especially within a postcolonial perspective) have been so far associated. It also offers the

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possibility of overcoming the nihilistic, self-defeating nature of anything ‘post-’ to embrace instead the ‘visionary power’ (Braidotti 2006), vitalist possibilities and new beginnings inherent in an approach that accepts the prefix prot- (starting from ‘protoglobal’: Epstein 2004) when dealing with our contemporaneity.

Contemporary globalisation and growing transnational mobility are fostering the emergence of writers and works of fiction that are no longer identifiable with only one cultural or national landscape. I argue that a comparative approach through a transcultural lens, which we might call ‘transcultural comparativism’, seems to be endowed with the kind of dynamic, open nature and flexibility most needed in dealing with the fast changes in cultures and literatures of our contemporary age.

Undoubtedly, in this age of transnational flows, multiple allegiances and ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007), culture and the influence of other cultures (Hannerz 1992) appear to be important elements in identity building, and consequently of creative expression and interpretation. While cultures become ever more fluid and intermingled (Hannerz 2001; Gunew 2003), a new generation of mobile writers, on the move across cultural and national boundaries, has started channelling and creatively expressing a ‘transcultural’ sensibility, fostered by a ‘process of self-distancing, self-estrangement, and self-criticism of one’s own cultural identities and assumptions’ (Berry and Epstein 1999: 307). Indeed these authors, who in many cases (but not always and not necessarily) use ‘global English/es’ or one of the variants of some other global idiom (be it French, Spanish, Mandarin or Hindi) as their preferred non-native language of creative expression, are more connected to the transnational

2 Rønning pointed out that ‘Our interpretations as readers and critics are always in some way determined by our own cultural and historical specificity, one that changes with time and circumstances’ (2011: 2)

3 In this paper I use ‘global English’ to refer to a form of literary English that lacks slang or locally connotated expressions in order to be understood by a worldwide readership, as for example in the works of JM Coetzee or Kazuo Ishiguro. Compare Walkowitz (2007). ‘Global Englishes’ refers instead to Pennycook’s (2007) discussion on the language mixes that result from the confluent processes between local and global idioms. Pennycook denied the connection of global Englishes both to linguistic imperialism and to nationalised forms of English (Indian English, Arab English, Singaporean English, etc), since in his opinion they are ‘both mired in a linguistics and a politics of the last century, focusing inexorably on languages and nations as given entities, and ill-equipped to deal with current modes of globalization’. In Pennycook’s view, the way global Englishes are used for creative expression by non-native speakers – and one might add also by native speakers who have been deeply exposed to other languages – is much more hybrid, eccentric, dynamic and transgressive than has been acknowledged so far.
patterns and literary modes of our contemporary globalised and ‘neo-nomadic’ (Dagnino 1996; D’Andrea 2006) condition than to the more conventionally intended migrant or postcolonial literature of the late twentieth century. Transcultural writers may have in their background a migrant, diasporic, exile, transnational or postcolonial experience of some sort but the way they have culturally and imaginatively metabolised it has led them (or is leading them, at this very moment) to branch off (or to flow from, without any implied evolutionary connotation) and adopt an innovative transcultural attitude. As Schulze-Engler pointed out, discussing the growing terrain of the new literatures in English, ‘the same idea of “locating” culture and literature exclusively in the context of ethnicities or nations is rapidly losing plausibility’ (2009: xvi).

With this social context in mind, one is induced to follow Tötösy de Zepetnek’s (1999) suggestion to merge the comparative study of literature(s) with that of cultural studies, embracing what he has designated the new ‘comparative cultural studies’ approach; namely, he proposed a way of studying literatures in a culture-sensitive environment, ‘with and in the context of culture and the discipline of cultural studies’ (1999: 2). At the same time, Tötösy de Zepetnek prompts us to incorporate methods and conceptual frameworks drawn from comparative literature into cultural studies, given comparative literature’s success in the ‘cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and culture’ (p 2).

But if, in this contemporary scenario, we are to accept Tötösy de Zepetnek’s challenge I argue we might do it by adopting a transcultural lens, that is ‘a perspective in which all cultures look decentred in relation to all other cultures, including one’s own’ (Epstein 1999: 31). What has been missing thus far, as Cuccioletta (2001) has pointed out, has been a ‘cultural concept of the world’ that could match its other conceptualisations in the realms of economy (global

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4 In the present study, neo-nomadism or global nomadism (Dagnino 1996) is understood as a contemporary social condition/lifestyle emerging from the transnational and deterritorialised patterns produced by global mobility and by the intense digitalisation of information and communication technologies. This, in its turn, inspires alternative forms of subjectivity (D’Andrea 2006), styles of critical thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Braidotti 1994, 2006) and ethical considerations based on the concepts of ‘reciprocal autonomy’ and/or responsible co-dependency (Malherbe 2000).

5 For a closer examination of transcultural writers’ identities and neo-nomadic specificities, see Dagnino (2012).
capitalism), politics (vernacular or rooted cosmopolitanism: see Beck 2006; Bhabha 2001) and socio-anthropology (transnationalism: see Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999; and neo-nomadism). The development of a transcultural model of analysis and debate, where cultures are read in their organic movements and mutual interactions against the backdrop of contemporary socioeconomic phenomena, thus opens up an opportunity to fill that gap. A transcultural perspective, in fact, sees cultures not as monolithic, self-sufficient and totalising entities but as metamorphic, confluent and intermingling processes where individuals constantly interfere with them, are transformed by them and, ultimately, imaginatively write about them (see Trojanow and Hoskoté 2012).

In this paper, I thus use the term ‘transcultural’ in two instances. In the first case it helps to describe a type of author and a kind of creative output, that is, those writers who do not belong in one place or one culture (and usually not even one language) and whose border-crossing creative works are occupied with a dialogue between cultures. Paraphrasing Pettersson (2006: 1), when talking about transcultural literary studies, we can already define a transcultural work of fiction as a work that transcends the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic, vision and scope and thus contributes to a wider global literary perspective. The second use of the term ‘transcultural’ qualifies the mode of inquiry, the set of critical tools and vocabularies that might be adopted to analyse transcultural literary texts and their creators’ ideas within a comparative paradigm, hence the suggestion of the term ‘transcultural comparativism’. It is through this combination of comparative literary studies and transcultural studies that researchers may be better able to distance themselves from the perspective that focuses too strictly (tightly) on national literatures, which ‘represents anew an entrapment in the national paradigm’ (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1999: 6).

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6 In the same way, scholars from the Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies (2011) use the concept of ‘transculturation’ not as a theory but as ‘a matrix through which a set of critical tools and vocabularies can be refined for the study of texts from a localized world, but institutionalized globally’. In this regard see also Rønning (2011).
Theorisations of the transcultural

Conceptualisations of the transcultural drawing on the concept of ‘transculturation’ originally devised by Ortíz (1995) have been around, especially in the Latin American regions, for at least three decades (Rama 1982; Pratt 1992; Spitta 1993; Canclini 1995). In this paper I draw primarily on concomitant or subsequent theories of ‘transculturality’ and ‘transculture’ respectively devised by the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (1992, 1999, 2009) and the Russian culturologist Mikhail Epstein (1995, 2009), thus my coining of the combined term transculture/ality. What follows is a brief explanation of the slightly different way in which the two theorists use their concept words.

According to Welsch, ‘transculturality’ is mainly a new conceptualisation of culture, where any separatist vision of cultures as distinct, self-enclosed and self-sufficient units is overcome by contemporary cultural conditions, which are now ‘largely characterized by mixes and permeations’ (1999: 197). For Epstein (2009), ‘transculture’ represents above all a mode of identity building, an existential dimension beyond any given culture, a way of being at the ‘crossroads of cultures’. He has defined it as ‘a model of cultural development’ that liberates the individual from the tyranny of one’s own culture, ‘from the “prison house of language”, from unconscious predispositions and prejudices of the “native”, naturalized cultures’ (2009: 330, 327). In Epstein’s (2009: 339) view, this process marks the next stage of a process of liberation: in the same way as culture liberates us from the constrictions of nature and its biological, preliminary, non-cultural world, transculture liberates us – mainly ‘through interference with other cultures’ – from the conditioning effects of culture, with its set of prefixed, imposed habits, customs, assumptions and dynamics of group identity formation.

One cannot fail to notice that here Epstein was not really talking like a post-structuralist but rather like a Romantic, which, according to Vladiv-Glover, can be ‘a little irritating to poststructuralist ears … In poststructuralism there is no Nature in discourse and identity issues, and there are no “origins”, since there is nothing outside the text’ (2003: 6, 5). For

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7 Welsch (1999: 195) traced back this monolithic vision of cultures to Herder’s view of folk-bound, uniform and exclusionary single cultures, with its focus on ‘inner homogenization and outer separation’.
8 Compare the position paper based on Epstein’s model by Vladiv-Glover (2003).
Epstein (2009: 341), however, origins are essential, but instead of insisting on their affirmation we should let them go, since the main purpose of culture is – through a creative and historical process of ‘disorigination and liberation’ – to make us human beings ‘a river and not a dam’:

I am willing to accept my identity at the beginning of my journey, but I do not agree to remain with it until the end of my life, to be an animal representing the tag on its cage. I do not agree to be determined in terms of race, nation, gender, or class. Culture has any sense only insofar as it makes us dissidents and fugitives from our nature, our sex, or race, or age. (2009: 341)

It is this ‘open-endedness’, this claim to ‘not belonging as the ultimately desirable cultural position’ proposed by Epstein that makes us accept his way of reasoning: ‘identification with our ‘native’ or ethnic culture turned into an ideology tends to reify us and essentialise us as “ethnics” instead of leaving us the ambience of being open subjects’ (Vladiv-Glover 2003: 5). Similarly, Welsch (2009) acknowledges that his same concept of transculturality can be applied not only at a macrocultural level but also at ‘the micro-level of individuals’: ‘For most of us, multiple cultural connections are decisive in terms of our cultural formation. We are cultural hybrids. Today’s writers, for example, are no longer shaped by a single homeland, but by different reference-countries. Their cultural formation is transcultural’ (2009: 8).

No more ‘prisoners’ of a single traditional culture, nor of any newly acquired one, transcultural consciousness and the transcultural individual can thus now live ‘diffused’ in a new dimension – a ‘continuum’, as Epstein called it, simultaneously ‘inside and outside of all existing cultures’ (2009: 333) – a way of being and perceiving oneself as highly complex and fluid, where apparent ambiguities and transitoriness are not shunned but espoused in favour of movement, mediation and ongoing transformation. This conceptualisation may resonate with Bhabha’s (2004) ‘third space’ of hybridisation as a means of identity and relationship
negotiation, but in many ways it expands it. The way I understand it, more than to a liminal, in-between or interstitial space, the transcultural continuum devised by Epstein refers rather to an all-inclusive, non-oppositional point of confluence, an overlapping of cultures, a ‘fusion of horizons’ in Gadamer’s (1994) terms, where one cannot really distinguish what belongs to one culture and what belongs to another, where ‘us’ finishes and ‘them’ starts.

I would also like to point out that, even though transcultural attitudes might at present be seen as a niche/middle-class phenomenon, they nonetheless imaginatively affect and at the same time reflect and express the specific sensitivities and collective imaginaries of increasingly wider sections of global societies.

The ‘location of transculture’ is not only to be found in realities outside texts or in the texts themselves, but also in audiences that make sense of them according to ‘new regimes of reference, norm, and value’ drawing upon several cultural backgrounds. (Schulze-Engler 2009: xiv)

Seen through this lens, transculture/ality opens up a new perspective towards the future. That is why Epstein proposed the use of the prefix proto- instead of post- to designate essential traits of new cultural formations and define new theoretical approaches. Proto-expresses a start, a generation, the early development of a new phase characterised by its open-endedness, by the unpredictability of the transformation; post- instead signals death, decline, the end of something, and it has a self-defeating connotation. Epstein therefore invited us to nurture a proto- instead of a post- mentality, which in its transformative agency would ‘reflect a Bakhtinian transition from finality to initiation as our dominant mode of thinking’ (2004: 46; see also Epstein 1995).

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9 In *The location of culture* Bhabha developed his concept of the ‘third space’ (or multiple third spaces) in this way: ‘These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated’ (2004: 2). On Bhabha’s ‘third space’ see also Rutherford (1990).
Beyond multiculturalism and postcolonialism

Both Epstein and Welsch invited us to replace multiculturalism (what Epstein called ‘the pride of minorities’) with transculture/ality\(^{10}\) as a model to address the specificities of cultural difference and alterity. In their view, it is possible to overcome, without denying its historical role and validity, the limitations that growing numbers of critics see in the self-enclosed, at times even racialised and racialising, model of multiculturalism (most often adopted by migrant literature) that, in Sardar’s (2004) words, fetishes difference. As Schulze-Engler pointed out,

> An important dimension of transculturality may be said to reside in a really existing ‘transcultural transformation’ of lifeworlds, experiences, and cultural practices … that challenges a compartmentalized understanding of ‘multicultural’ societies in terms of a ‘benign cultural apartheid’. (2009: xiii)

Epstein challenged the ‘mosaic multicultural’ model, which simply recognises the equal rights and value of self-enclosed cultures (‘the cocoonization of each culture within itself’), questioning its ability to address ‘the contemporary cross-cultural flows’ (2009: 329). Even if, in Epstein’s (2009) view, multiculturalism represents a necessary step in human cultural integration, (‘Multiculturalism paves the way from the dominance of one canon to the diversity of cultures’: p 349), he prompted us to go beyond it, ‘from the diversity of cultures to the even greater diversity of individuals’, in order to reach ‘a broader cultural model capable of appealing not only to specific minorities but to the universal potentials of human understanding’ (1995: 306) – what Appiah (2006) called ‘universality plus difference’. Hence, Epstein suggested a way to prevent the risk of cultural stagnation and, even worse, of global clashes between oppositional cultural allegiances: ‘Where there are stiff and “proud” identities, there are also oppositions fraught with violence’ (2009: 347).

It seems important to emphasise the fact, though, that assimilationism and multiculturalism, nationalism and local affiliations are the conditions, the forms of organisation of a society,

\(^{10}\) In this case Epstein (2009) also uses the term ‘transculturalism’.
while transculture/ality is an individual condition hardly applicable, for obvious pragmatic reasons, at a collective level. Evidently, transcultural policies cannot be imposed by government agencies. Perhaps transcultural societies may only exist if they are made up of increasing numbers of transcultural individuals who are able to reproduce a transcultural mode of being. That is why in my opinion transculture/ality should be understood neither as an ideology (as the term ‘transculturalism’ implies) nor as a political stance, but rather as a mode of identity building, as a critical tool and, at the most, as a concept for individual (and artistic) cultural opposition/resistance to the complex power dynamics expressed on the one hand by global capitalism and on the other by nation-states in this age of increasing mobility.

For this reason, I tend to view transculture/ality as a notion that directly stems from and can only be fostered by an increasingly neo-nomadic – that is, deterritorialised but at the same time ethically responsible and culturally engaged – approach to life at large:

This is an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical humanism. It is a nomadic eco-philosophy of multiple belongings … There is no doubt that ‘we’ are in this together. (Braidotti 2006: 35, emphasis original)

In the more specific domain of literary studies, the transcultural perspective may thus prove to be a viable alternative to the criticism of migrant/diasporic literature seen through the lens of multiculturalism. By overstressing the value of difference as well as of territorial nostalgia for lost geographies and broken identities (with ‘displacement’ as a main trope), this literary imaginary seems unable to foster togetherness and solidarity beyond ethnic/religious/national borders and to envision alternative modes of belonging for a new kind of derooted, denationalised or post-national generation of citizens (and writers). Migrant/diasporic literary expressions may thus be viewed as an initial step in the movement towards the complexity and multiplicity of cultures that might eventually lead to a transcultural mode of being, writing, reading and critiquing. ‘Cultural disinheritance becomes a stimulus for creativity: the border-crosser is the empowered free agent for whom the diaspora, with its binary concepts of centre and margin, no longer applies’ (Lindberg-Wada 2006: 3).
The transcultural perspective is also gaining increasing currency among those writers and literary scholars who feel the need, without denying its innovatory inputs, to supersede the problematic nature of the postcolonial paradigm, seen as far too attached either to an excessively reified vision of cultural/ethnic identities or to a political ideology ‘tied to notions of “Third World” liberation’ (Schulze-Engler 2007: 21). Paradoxically, in this respect, even the ‘loose’ use of the term ‘postcolonial’, as Ong has pointed out, ‘has had the bizarre effect of contributing to a Western tradition of othering the Rest’ (1999: 34). In the same vein, Grabovszki acknowledged that in the postcolonial discourse ‘we have the implicit and explicit differentiation between a “home” culture and a culture of the “Other”’ (2003: 53).

Postcolonial approaches tend to understand cultural dynamics ‘in terms of classical dichotomies such as colonizer vs. colonized or centres vs. peripheries’ (Schulze-Engler 2009: xi) and ‘obsessively remain tied’ to notions of cultural difference, dissidence, subalternity and marginality (Helff 2009: 78). This outlook is perhaps less appropriate in a world where the thus far perceived monocultural western imperialism is being replaced by a plurality of centres of techno-economic power, cultural creativity and extended knowledge. As Schulze-Engler pointed out, not only do ‘many postcolonial debates today seem increasingly irrelevant to literary studies’ but ‘some of the chief tenets of postcolonial theory now seem hard to reconcile with the literary and cultural dynamics of a rapidly globalising world’ (2007: 21). On the contrary, by highlighting cultural confluences and intermingling, the new transcultural paradigm in literary criticism appears more suitable for describing and analysing the kind of creative literature that stems from transforming societies in an increasingly globalised world. Which does not mean forgetting about the ever-present issues of mutual exploitation and subalternity, the machinations of power and renewed prejudices fostered by forced globalised proximity to which postcolonial thinking has contributed. But, as McLeod pointed out, ‘We are urged to think instead across and beyond the tidy, holistic entities of nations and cultures – transnationally, transculturally – if we hope to capture and critique the conditions of our contemporaneity’ (2011: 1).
To a certain extent, transcultural literature corresponds to the third moment of the migrant/ethnic/multicultural writer process of imaginative transformation proposed by Jurgensen (1999), the process that, starting from the native cultural perspective (first moment) and the need for cultural mediation (second moment), leads to the development of ‘a language of creative cultural transformation’ (Hopfer 2004: 27).

So, where does transcultural literature stand in relation to postcolonial and multicultural literature? We might say that to a certain extent transcultural fiction flows out from those previous domains/categorisations while still being permeated by them. In other words, it marks a further literary ‘wave’, in Moretti’s (2000) terms, in the cultural and geographical dislocation of narratives from the centre towards the periphery – or better still, it signals the nullification of the dichotomy between centres and peripheries. Potentially, every periphery can now become the centre and vice versa, in a constant game of construction and deconstruction where it is impossible to identify any longer a single, permanent and hegemonic centre. As Lindberg-Wada remarked: ‘The concept of transculturation, with its denial of centre–periphery binarism, is seen as a way of overcoming difficulties of linearities, or postcolonial reversed linearities’ (2006: 156).

Conclusions

In light of contemporary ‘cultural globalisation’ and at the dawn of what Burke saw as a ‘new global cultural order’ (2009: 115), what mostly matters is the need to find new interpretative keys and theoretical frameworks, together with a new terminology, that may prove better suited to the analysis of an emerging transcultural literature. In other words, there exists the premise for a critical perspective more attuned to the sensibilities not only of a new breed of mobile, denationalised (or ‘dispatrate’) transcultural writers but also of a growing culturally dislocated readership and scholarship (see Dagnino 2012). Undoubtedly in these liquid times of global mobility even the creative (literary) transnational and post-national outputs

11 On the other hand, Moretti (2000: 55) acknowledged that, if globalisation as an economic system within the framework of liberal capitalism has unequal effects, the same can be said for literature, which, despite having become (or being in the process of becoming) a truly ‘planetary system’ – that is, ‘one world literary system (of inter-related literatures)’ – is ‘profoundly unequal’.
connected to this most recent human condition ask to be read, studied and analysed through a new interpretive lens. As Helft remarked, ‘it seems problematic to approach transcultural texts with a narrative theory that does not consider the extratextual world and transcultural practices as their main sources of information’ (2007: 279).

With transculture/ality we now have a new perspective (with its reasoning and vocabulary) from which to critically address the cultural impact of global modernity and its creative expressions, away from the ‘continuing influence of the nation as a structure for the study of literature’ (Connell and Marsh 2011: 97). Through this lens it is thus possible to promote a type of ‘transcultural comparativism’ for the global age as a model to connect literary works produced in different countries and in multiple cultural and linguistic contexts. Transculture/ality appears to be endowed with the kind of dynamic non-linear nature and flexibility most needed in dealing with the fast-changing patterns and transformations in cultures and literatures. It also seems to foster the premise for a new ‘borderless’ – rather than simply border crossing – comparative methodology. In doing so, it marks an attempt to move away from nationalist stances and the insistence on the periphery–centre, colony–empire, ethnic–mainstream, pure–hybrid, self–other dichotomies with which comparative studies (especially within a postcolonial perspective) have been so far associated. It also offers the possibility of overcoming the nihilistic, self-defeating nature of anything ‘post-’ to embrace instead the ‘visionary power’ (Braidotti 2006), vitalist possibilities and new beginnings inherent in an approach that accepts the prefix proto- (starting from Epstein’s ‘protoglobal’) when dealing with our contemporaneity.

It is not just a question of literary genres, tropes, plots, technical solutions and devices; it is also, or rather more, a question of changing sensitivities, emerging mindsets, approaches and, subsequently, of the different imaginaries and literary expressions, more attuned to contemporary cosmopolitan/pluralistic outlooks, that are being created in the process, through the active interaction between the lived experiences of transcultural writers and their globalising – possibly, transcultural – readership. It is true that it is impossible to ‘measure’ and thus to quantify aspects such as ‘sensitivities’, ‘imaginaries’ and ‘outlooks’ but, possibly,
these can be made manifest (and thus detectable) in a literary work – for example in the choice of characters, of voice, of setting or in the use of language that is being made by individual authors.

As such, it becomes necessary to mark out a partially new territory of discourse that is by its own nature deterritorialised or, at least, denationalised and, most of all, extremely fluid and essentially transcultural. On the other hand, it is hard not to share Berry and Epstein’s point of view when they admitted that they are now ‘much less ready to believe that any one system of explanation – however subtle or powerful – can be the whole answer or can provide a fully useful model of analysis’ (1999: 303). By privileging a transcultural perspective, that is, ‘a movable praxis, a constantly shifting and dynamic approach’, as Pennycook (2007: 37) stated, we thus acknowledge also its ability to promote, emphasise and consider vital a flexible and fluid manner of enquiry particularly suitable to the present context of global mobility, global writing and global languages. It is in fact in this context more than anywhere else that ‘the constant process of borrowing, bending and blending of cultures … the communicative practices of people interacting across different linguistic and communicative codes, borrowing, bending and blending languages into new modes of expression’ is mostly felt and experienced (Pennycook 2007: 47).

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12 As Pennycook implied, this means treating languages (and among them, the more globalised ones) not as discreet entities as in the old categorisations where languages, as well as identities, ‘are assumed along lines of … location, ethnicity, culture’ but rather as social activities (practices) ‘always in translation … always under negotiation’ (2010: 682, 684–685).


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‘Us’ and ‘them’: violence and abjection in language

Tom Drahos

Abstract

In his reflections on violence, *Violence: six sideways reflections*, Slavoj Žižek articulated the difference between subjective, objective and symbolic violence. Subjective violence describes physical acts of violence: shootings, riots, wars. These are always startling events, captivating in their horror. However, such a fascination with subjective violence, Žižek argued, obscures an understanding of the second category, objective violence, which is systemic violence that creates the conditions for the manifestation of subjective violence. Objective violence describes the inherent violence of a system, not only the threat of physical violence but also ‘the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation’. A governing system or doctrine is indebted to the violence that established it, and is dependent upon the continuing violence of its imposition as a governing system. This imposition relies upon symbolic violence, the violence inherent in language. Symbolic violence demarcates the spaces of culture and the abject spaces understood as belonging to the Other. The price one pays to attain solidarity, the Other, is the by-product of language and ideology, a phantasmal support to social reality; less an abstraction than abjection. Julia Kristeva defined the abject as that which is radically and violently excluded from the self; tellingly, she also regarded it as a safeguard, ‘the primer of [a] culture’. When outbursts of subjective violence seem to disrupt the apparently peaceful norm, one must keep in mind that this violence that seems to burst from nowhere is reactionary and that a subtler form of violence operates as normalcy. Violence is the status quo, and societies and cultures depend on it to exist.

In cultural studies and in society in general we tend to associate the term ‘violence’ with visible displays of physical aggression. However, as researchers, we should not focus solely on

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clearly discernible physical acts of violence. There are subtler forms of violence in operation in our cultures and societies. In his reflections on violence, *Violence: six sideways reflections*, Slavoj Žižek (2008: 7) articulated the difference between subjective, objective and symbolic violence. Žižek’s theorising of violence is primarily concerned with the relationship between objective and subjective violence – that the latter obscures its own origin in the former. It is his theorising of symbolic violence that I want to tease out in greater detail in this paper, and its implications for language and culture. In many ways, the aphorism that the pen is mightier than the sword holds true; language is more divisive than the sword, more destructive. Language is the mechanism of violence and, as the medium of expression and communication, attention must be paid to its effects.

Subjective violence describes physical acts of intersubjective violence such as shootings, riots or wars. These are always startling events, captivating in their horror. However, such a fascination with subjective violence, Žižek argued, obscures an understanding of the second category, objective violence, which is systemic violence that creates the conditions for the manifestation of subjective violence. Objective violence describes the inherent violence of a system, not only the threat of physical violence but also ‘the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation’ (2008: 7). A governing system or doctrine is indebted to the violence that established it, and is dependent upon the continuing violence of its imposition as a governing system. Objective violence describes the consequences of the status quo. When outbursts of subjective violence seem to disrupt the peaceful norm, one must keep in mind that this violence that seems to burst from nowhere is reactionary and that a subtler form of violence operates as normalcy. Violence is the status quo, and societies and cultures depend on it to exist.

The third category of violence, symbolic violence, is embedded in the structure of language. It is worth noting that symbolic violence, aside from anything else, helps to define a culture through a demonstration of where its symbolic boundaries lie. According to semiotic logic, signification can only occur through the exclusion of that which is not signified. The signifier ‘dog’ signifies the abstract concept of a specific four-legged animal; this signification is
dependent upon the exclusion of every other four-legged animal, and in fact every other object, abstract concept and so on. Signification is dependent upon negation. A culture can only be signified through the exclusion of its antithesis. This signification goes on to become the definition of a culture. That which is excluded from signification, from the corresponding signified, is excluded from definition. Subsequently the definition of a culture simultaneously generates symbolic violence in the same instant that it is dependent upon that same symbolic violence to emphasise its boundaries. A celebration of cultural or societal values is instantaneously an omission of other values. The culture that celebrates heterosexual marriage performs symbolic violence against homosexual union. The culture that celebrates the notion of colonial settlement seeks to exclude the possibility of that same process of colonisation being considered as an invasion and subsequently it perpetuates a symbolic violence against the historic and contemporary victims of such an invasion. For a culture or society to exist (insofar as existence is co-dependent upon meaning, which depends upon definition) it is utterly dependent upon its shadow, that which it negates through the affirmation of its ‘positive’ attributes. Even the definition of subjective violence is a performance of symbolic violence, because, according to Žižek:

> When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the ‘normal’ non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as ‘violent’. (2008: 55)

When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the ‘normal’ non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as ‘violent’. (2008: 55)

Symbolic violence is the invisible obscurant of systemic violence; as the hidden product of language it masks its own trace, maintaining an implicit presence in the organisation of society and inevitably in the structuring of social reality. Social reality, or the symbolic order, produces this symbolic violence, which in turn demarcates social reality, and the conditions for the preservation of social reality are dependent upon its continued violent imposition. This continued imposition of social reality means that human lives, societies and cultures remain structured by language, and language performs an ‘inscription of difference’. Through this inscription, ‘language, the bearer of discourse and ideology, denies the specificity and
therefore commonality of the other person’s body’ (Marais 2011: 97). Language is the raw material of violence, its medium and its point of origin. As subjects we are inevitably and irrevocably born into violence through our inscription into the symbolic order. The function of the symbolic order is to structure the human universe and account for its every feature. Social reality is mapped through language, every object symbolised and imbued with meaning, drawn into the symbolic order as signs within a signifying system. To reduce the object to sign is a form of violence, the suffocation of reality through language. As Žižek suggested: ‘Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature … It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it’ (2008: 52). Humans are not born into reality per se, that is to say, social reality. The newborn must be inscribed into the symbolic order, installed within language and discourse; ‘to be fully human we are subjected to this symbolic order – the order of language’ (Homer 2005: 44). In this sense, in the same way that objects within the symbolic order are reduced through language to a single feature, subjects are violently inserted into an external field of meaning. The subject is reduced to symbolic function. The human belongs to language; language ‘marks us before our birth and will continue after our death’ (Homer 2005: 44). As symbolic function, the subject is the site of violence performed by social reality; violence upon reality, the violence of imposed structure. In its reduction of reality to language, the symbolic order ensures the production of violence through language’s reliance upon difference. Through its structure, language inevitably creates an implicit other; by extension, there is an implicit other lurking in social reality, and social reality defines itself against this other.

In the last decade, Australian Liberal Party politics have often seemed to depend almost entirely upon the invading presence of the fantasy other. The term ‘boat people’ has likely prevailed in pseudo–politically correct politics through its pseudo-neutrality – it does not technically infer either ‘asylum seeker’ nor ‘illegal immigrant’ – however its use places the people in question outside of the Australian social scene, attaching to their presence a perceived quality of invasiveness. The peoples attempting to reach Australia over water are violently reduced to a symbol of a single feature; that perceived quality of invading otherness. In the use of this term ‘boat people’ are positioned not as Australian but as would-be
trespassers, subjects hovering outside Australia, eager to penetrate. ‘Boat people’ are not really people per se, but a sub-class of subject, the barely visible transgressors, the threat to cultural hegemony. In a segment from a 2010 Australia Liberal Party election campaign video an image of open ocean water with a single small vessel is juxtaposed against a map image of Australia. Five bright red arrows arc out from the blue of the water, penetrating the coastline of Australia, and each bearing the name of a country: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. In the context of the election campaign, the five countries named are no longer functioning nations but merely staging grounds for attempts to enter Australia illegally. The heading for this segment reads ‘Immigration – Stop Illegals Now’ (LiberalPartyTV 2010). The image of invasion is not the image of a would-be ‘invader’, but simply a poorly focused photo of a boat, and the names of five countries that are not Australia. It is merely the ghost of the idea of invading otherness that is represented here, the suggestion that Australia as an organic whole is at risk, that its autonomy, or the notion of its autonomy, is under threat. The assertion of Australia’s autonomy and the subsequent symbolic violence towards ‘outsiders’ was made apparent in former Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s oft-quoted sentiment on immigration from his 2001 policy speech: ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ (Howard 2001). In this context, Australian solidarity is dependent upon the category of exclusion.

The imagined presence of the implicit and spectral other of language serves to re-establish ideological boundaries. In this sense, it is the imagined presence of the other that safeguards the operation of culture; the space beyond a given culture, the realm of the other, offers itself as antithesis against which society can define itself. The imagined threat of the other to culture is essential in establishing solidarity; there can be no ‘us’ without the inevitable presence of a ‘them’. ‘They’ are not always clearly defined but this is in a sense a clearer delineation of the boundary. The existence of ‘us’ is dependent upon a symbolic violence directed towards ‘them’, and it is due to this violence that ‘we’ can exist at all. The Australian ‘Us’ relies upon the existence, or at least the perceived existence, of a ‘Them’; in the case, the strange, invisible ‘boat people’. (They are perhaps the perfect ‘Them’, only ever landing on isolated stretches of shore, never meeting Australian citizens besides members of the navy –
in short, there could be a 100 per cent decrease in the number of ‘boat people’ sighted off Australian shores and in Australian waters, and the category of ‘otherness’ would remain undisturbed. The politics of solidarity are most effective with an invisible enemy.) ‘Boat people’ are not people, but a political mechanism, and this is pure symbolic violence, the reduction of people or peoples into the tools of rhetoric. In Australian politics, illegal immigration is not the concern – the presence of a threat, of ‘otherness’, whether real or imagined, is what is most vital to the successful functioning of political rhetoric. The spectral other offers itself as phantom sacrifice to this end; the implicit presence of opposition generates solidarity, a unity that perpetuates symbolic violence. Or, as Nietzsche described matters: ‘It is the distant man who pays for your love of your neighbour; and when there are five of you together, a sixth always has to die’ (2003: 87). The markers and symbols of hegemonic culture stand as testament to a mundane and ongoing symbolic violence, to which the subject may rapidly become de-sensitised following installation into the symbolic order. However, if it is the symbolic order that enables the conditions for violence, then ‘responsibility for violence is to be shared by all who participate in, generate, and are generated by, that order’ (Marais 2011: 100). But responsibility is difficult to assume when it is so easily displaced on to the other.

Through the symbolic violence of ‘other-ing’, acts of subjective violence can be made to appear as the work of an extra-social force. In his full statement on the 2011 UK riots, Prime Minister David Cameron denounced the ‘sickening scenes’ of the riots as acts of ‘criminality, pure and simple’ (2011). Notably, he then declared this ‘criminality’ as something to be ‘confronted and defeated’. For Cameron, outbreaks of subjective violence are readily solved problems, not reactionary manifestations of an underlying objective violence; of course, his position as prime minister is one of the more privileged positions accorded by the mechanics of systemic violence, and this is a clear example of the mystifying effect subjective violence has, concealing the presence of other forms of violence. Further in his statement he directly mentioned ‘law-abiding people’. Through his statement Cameron performed symbolic violence in his clear delineation between ‘us’ and ‘them’; the ‘law-abiding people’ and the ‘criminals’ who are to be ‘confronted and defeated’. Rioters can be labelled hooligans;
murderers can be ascribed alien political agendas; a plethora of labels exist to extricate the violent other from society, situating them at the limit of the social milieu or beyond. Perhaps the best term to isolate and distance the violent subject is ‘terrorist’. ‘Terrorist’ places the transgressor beyond the cultural and social spectrum, at the limits of the political sphere; it is a term that absolutely refuses sympathy, cannot engender empathy. In this manner the violent subject is disenfranchised, perceived as an outsider, not the product of society but its malevolent intruder. Of course, the so-called outsider is in fact a product of systemic violence, despite appearances; ‘social-symbolic violence at its purest appears as its opposite, as the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell’ (Žižek 2008: 31). This apparent spontaneity provides the necessary justification to respond with aggression and so re-affirm social reality. In responding to the agents of subjective violence, either through the symbolic violence of condemnation or the objective violence of authoritarian control, difference is re-inscribed in a violent re-establishment of ideological boundaries and social reality. The violence of this response ensures the ongoing conditions of systemic violence, which in turn assures the perpetuity of symbolic and subjective violence. These separate forms of violence arise from and produce each other, a cyclical violence.

The cyclical nature of these three forms of violence means that they obscure one another. The horror and dark fascination inherent to perceiving subjective violence makes it difficult to remain disengaged and critical, and so wary of objective violence. The very structure of language makes it difficult to consider either subjective or objective violence without performing symbolic violence; and the fact of language is dependent upon its symbolic violence against reality, the transmutation from thing-in-itself to sign and symbol. The simultaneous obfuscation of each form of violence likewise blinds one to the nature of the ‘other’. The price one pays to attain solidarity, the other is the by-product of language and ideology, a phantasmic support to social reality; less an abstraction than abjection. Julia Kristeva defined the abject as that which is radically and violently excluded from the self; tellingly, she also regarded it as a safeguard, ‘the primer of [a] culture’ (1982: 2). According to Kristeva the abject has ‘only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I’ (1982: 1). The abject does not attach to a specific, clearly defined object, and it is when the abject is
isolated from the self that the self is defined through its opposition, through its other. Similarly, the phantom other of language and social reality never attaches itself permanently to a clear-cut figure. It exists as a frightening projection that performs the function of clarifying the hegemonic borders of society and generating a degree of solidarity. For the abject to be embraced the boundaries of the self are challenged, the self becomes one with the abject, or rather the abject’s status as expelled other is illumined and, perhaps, meaning collapses. A similar risk exists on a societal level. The implicit other of language does not truly exist. However it persists in ideology, language and culture as the *imagined* undesirable. In this context, the abject is the ‘other-ed’ aspects of society, the elements perceived as alien and used as counter-definition. But the abject is intrinsic. The horrifying reality is that language generates the terrifying fantasy of the other, an ethereal pseudo-presence haunting the edges of consciousness and culture, a demon impossible to empathise with. This begs the following question: if the other does not exist then where are these forms of violence truly directed?

Symbolic violence operates as an implication at the heart of society. The subject is the site where this violence is inscribed, which is to say that where language leaves its trace, where it inscribes itself, symbolic violence deposits the necessary spores to proliferate. It is social reality that performs violence upon the subject, literally, figuratively and systemically. Systemic violence engrains its code into discursive subjectivities so that it is unknowingly copied and perpetuated through the subject. Language persists in generating the conditions for violence, and any escape from these conditions can only remain theoretical. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra never tired of reminding his disciples: ‘man is something that should be overcome’ (Nietzsche 2003: 41). Reading ‘man’ as ‘subject’ we could extrapolate ‘overcome’ to suggest a break from social reality, including its inherent vices. Perhaps the last violent act could be one of dissolution. To confront the abject in society would be to disrupt the symbolic tension between the societal ‘self’ and its ‘other’. The abject other is a silent apparition. The only move that can be made to embrace the abject in society is to embrace silence. Although even as non-participation in social reality silence constitutes an act of resistance, which in itself is a form of violent reaction, silence temporarily evades the violence of the symbolic
order. Silent critical reflection affords a revelation regarding the nature of symbolic violence; that it produces itself and, lacking a target, circulates endlessly. This abject encounter affords the subsequent revelation; if the abject other is fully realised as the product of language, of symbolic violence, and in being exposed as fantasy is subsequently obliterated, then culture would lose its definition. Theoretically, in the destruction of its values, in the loss of meaning, culture too would vanish, and with it the violent discursive products of its symbolic order. Outrageous as it sounds then, the only move to be made against symbolic violence is the radical upheaval of society, the erasure of culture. As researchers in cultural studies, perhaps the obliteration of culture is not the solution, nor a very tasteful one to suggest. But all our human processes of identification, identity and signification are tied up in processes that produce symbolic violence, and it may be that nothing short of a radical realigning of society and culture will completely do away with symbolic violence. In this context it is difficult to avoid the temptation of suggesting hyperbolic radicalised 'solutions'. As researchers and participants in social reality the only practical response to the living reality of symbolic violence is to adopt a practice of sustained critical reflection of the role language plays in our cultures and societies, and the potential effects that it has.

References


Self-orientalisation and reorientation: a glimpse at Iranian Muslim women’s memoirs

Sanaz Fotouhi

Abstract

For centuries people from the East and West have been interested in understanding each other’s cultures and way of life. Gender dichotomy in the Middle East and the historical exclusion of female members of society from the public sphere have shrouded Middle Eastern women’s lives in mystery for those in the West. Often orientalist tales emerging from the Middle East portray the Middle Eastern Muslim woman as silent, and an abused victim of the patriarchal culture. Those in the West have dreamed of unveiling and demystifying her existence. However, over the last several decades, particularly in the last ten years following 9/11, there has been an influx of narratives by Middle Eastern women themselves that promise to unravel and unveil the lives of Middle Eastern women. Among them, Muslim women of Arab, African and Iranian backgrounds have published hundreds of books recounting various aspects of their lives in the Middle East. Yet many of these narratives, despite aspiring to become a platform for the voices of Middle Eastern women, appear to be involved in further self-orientalisation. While the covers of many of these books, with the veiled woman peering out at the audience, invite the western reader to free her from her oppression by reading her tale, the content of these books confirm what the western reader already assumes about the oppression of Muslim women in the Middle East.

In this paper I consider the socio-political and historical context into which Middle Eastern women’s narratives are appearing. Taking Iranian women’s memoirs as an example, and considering the socio-political background of some of the authors, I examine the reasons

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why their narratives, despite claiming to be a platform to free them from orientalist stereotypes, are in fact leading to further self-reorientalisation.

Historically, people in the East and the West have always been interested in understanding each other’s culture and way of life. Gender issues, particularly gender dichotomy in the Middle East, have shrouded Middle Eastern women’s lives in mystery for the West. Many in the West have been fascinated by Middle Eastern women’s situation. Yet these veiled women have mostly remained and continue to remain an enigma. Consequently, this has led to overexaggeration of the situation of Muslim women, and over centuries many have constructed the assumption that ‘veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women’, leading to ‘exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in “the Orient”’ (Mabro 1991: 3).

Such gross exaggerations, however, can historically and partially be blamed on the position of Muslim women themselves, and their vehement absence as individuals with their own voice in the western world. Until recently Muslim women, particularly those in the Middle East, did not have the social and educational means to express themselves beyond the borders of their own countries. It has only been recently, as the result of revolutions, wars and disruptions in the region, and mass migrations from the Middle East to other countries, that some Middle Eastern women have, to a certain degree, gained the opportunity to narrate their own stories. Adding to their ability to express themselves has also been the conflict in and interest in the region. That is why over the last several decades, particularly since 9/11, there has been an influx of popular narratives in the West by Middle Eastern women, which promise to unravel the situation and unveil their life in their own voice in the West. Many of these accounts, as I examine elsewhere,² are a response to the author’s emotional experiences and act as healing devices for those who faced traumas of war, revolution and migration, forming sites for the reconstruction of their sense of identity. However, the production, reception and consumption of these books are also highly influenced by the socio-political and historical context of the author’s home country, as well as that of the host country, to the point that sometimes,

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Despite aspiring to become a platform for the voices of women, they appear to be involved in further self-orientalisation. In this paper I take diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs as an example of how such narratives can be read as a kind of self-orientalisation.

Iranian women’s memoirs have emerged in the English-speaking West in two waves. The first of the memoirs appeared immediately after the 1979 revolution, after the mass migrations of Iranians from Iran. The appearance and interest in these books not coincidentally coincided with western fascination with Iran, after the overthrow of the Shah and his replacement by the seemingly violent and fanatic Islamic regime, and after the dramatic American hostage crisis in Iran. At a time when Iranian borders were closed, and when restrictive Islamic laws forced women into veiling, any account that shed light, particularly on women’s situation, became of interest for western readers. The second wave of Iranian women’s memoirs appeared after 9/11 in light of Iran’s renewed conflict with the West, and the increasing human rights issues affecting Iranian citizens. Consequently, over the last three and half decades Iranian women have published nearly sixty memoirs.

While the first wave of memoirs was published by women who had recently experienced migration, the second wave has been mostly delayed narratives of the revolution, often told by women who migrated as children or as young adults, and who have now, after years, had a chance to contemplate their own stories and lives. For this reason, many of these narratives are accounts that act as a kind of therapy and offer closure for those who have had to struggle with various traumas in both Iran and abroad.

At the same time, these memoirs have also been particularly appealing for western readers, particularly Americans, because, as Gillian Whitlock observed, they ‘attract American readers again now, and … revisit and fold the events of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath into the present one more time’ (2007: 163). Emerging at the height of tensions between Iran and America, these narratives were received by ‘the curious and uninformed American readership eager to know about Iran and primed for the stories of disenchantment by exiles’ (p 65). Received in this kind of socio-political environment, and aimed at a readership with specific
expectations, often the production of these books also conveys and adheres to certain conventions expected of Middle Eastern women’s narratives. Titles and covers, blurbs and promotions for these books often draw on notions of silence, veiling and unveiling, oppression and imprisonment, highlighting the acute difference between women’s lives over ‘there’ and here. In fact so frequently have Iranian women’s memoirs been presented and published within a certain kind of prescribed framework that this has created what Catherine Burwell called ‘particular modes of reading’ (2007: 288).

Such modes of readings become clear as soon as we glance at some of the covers of books published by Iranian women. Of all the Iranian women’s memoirs over the past several decades, more than half are presented with a similar cover image of a sole woman with some sort of a veil. In some the women are bare headed and have the veil hanging around their necks; in others, they are shadowy and distant figures wearing an enclosing black Iranian-style veil called a chador. But the covers most commonly feature a woman’s half-veiled face, only her eyes showing, piercing and staring at the audience. The veiled women, with only their eyes peering out at the viewes, as in the covers of *Unveiled* (1995), *Prisoner of Tehran* (2008), *Journey from the land of no* (2004), *Rage against the veil* (1999), *In the house of my Bibi* (2008), and *Watch me* (2010), are inviting and yet challenging the viewer/reader to pick up the book to enter into their mysterious, hidden world. The eyes in these images, sharp in focus, distinguish each woman from the other under the veil, a humanising strategy suggesting that the woman behind the veil ‘can look back at the spectator mute but eloquent’ (Whitlock 2007: 59). However, what is interesting to note is that, despite this humanising strategy, there is a sense of generalisation, a kind of ‘one woman’s story is every woman’s story’ approach. If we look, for instance, at the covers of *Journey from the land of no* and *Prisoner of Tehran* the same set of eyes is peering back at us, hinting at the similarity of these two narratives. All of these images, despite their slight variations, tap ‘into a [western] fantasy of the illicit penetration of the hidden and gendered spaces of the “Islamic World”’ (2007: 58). They are ‘inviting’ and encouraging the Western imperial gaze, offering Westerners a glimpse into the presumably forbidden world beneath the veil’ (Whitlock 2008: 81).
This invitation is almost a call for acknowledgement by the western reader, an appeal for recognition, from women who have so far been silenced in their own country. However, the
fact that the western reader is involved in this act of unveiling and recognition operates on an acceptance of cultural dichotomy between the narrator and the reader, appealing, as Whitlock also reminds us, to the western tradition of benevolence. It is only by the book being picked up by the western reader that Iranian women can be recognised and thereby regain their sense of subjectivity. This recognition, however, operates on a presumption that Iranian women are oppressed, and imprisoned behind the veil, and that they need western readers/values to liberate them from their social imprisonment.

The titles too, add layers to and heighten these elements. Titles like Unveiled: life and death among the Ayatollahs, Out of Iran: one woman’s escape from the Ayatollahs, In the house of my Bibi: growing up in revolutionary Iran, Honeymoon in Tehran: two years of love and danger in Iran, and Rage against the veil: the courageous life and death of an Islamic dissident draw on the urgency of life, death and revolution, and debated issues of the veil and unveiling. They feed into orientalist perspectives and are, as Whitlock argued, ‘designed to grab the Western eye with a glimpse of absolute difference, of the exotic’ (2007: 59). At a time of America’s ‘war on terror’, and Iran’s presence in the axis of evil, these titles feed into this discourse and are ‘a way of positioning them for metropolitan markets’ (p 59).

However, while titles and covers are often constructed by publishers as selling points, sometimes with authors themselves having little control over them, it is not only the covers and titles that conform to a kind of orientalist vision. Interestingly enough, the content of some of these books, too, reaffirms the position of Iranian women as oppressed and lacking freedom. The question that arises is why are Iranian women, who claim to be the voices of oppressed women, describing Iranian women within predefined discursive spaces?

While this can be partially explained by the publishing industry’s marketing strategies, the reason for the description of Iranian women within certain frameworks in the content of these books can be explained in relation to the socio-historical and cultural background of some of the memoirists themselves. Indeed, the origin of this kind of representation has historical roots and dates back to the introduction of concepts of western modernity, including
feminism, in Iran. As Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, an Iranian historian, has proposed, much of what forms the modern narrative of Iranian history is influenced by western and Eurocentric notions of modernity and concepts of ‘occidental rationality’ (2001: 4). He believes that, ‘whereas Europeans reconstituted the modern self in relation to their non-Western Others, Asians and Africans [and Middle Easterners] began to redefine their self in relation to Europe, their new significant Other’ (p. 4). At the heart of this definition was a sort of ‘binary opposition’ influenced heavily by colonial and orientalist language that defined what was constituted as modern – western – and what was not. Although there were a few markers of difference that distinguished Iranian society from the modernised West, one of the biggest signs of difference was the condition of Iranian women. This was clearly marked in how Iranian women dressed, which immediately became a sign of Iran’s backwardness not only in the eyes of the West but also from the perspective of certain groups of western educated Iranian modernists. These ideas constructed a specific class within Iranian society in which women were given new forms of freedom. Consequently, some women gained the opportunity for education and entrance into the public domain. This not only exposed women to alternative concepts of gender relationships, particularly those driven by newly imported concepts of western feminism, but also gave them the ability to comment on and challenge social norms. This, as Nasrine Rahimieh has argued, has ‘informed [much of] Iran’s understanding of its own history’ (2003: 148). This influence on Iranian society, steeped in orientalist notions and dichotomies that were carried across with western notions of modernity, as Rahimieh argued, ‘underwrite the history of modern Iran’ (p. 148). Furthermore, the revolution, which re-emphasised the East–West and gender dichotomies, created unresolved contradictions, not only between Iran and the West but also between Iranians themselves. As Said told us, ‘the modern Orient … participates in its own Orientalizing’ (Said 1978: 325). This means that Iranians themselves, as pro-government writers from Iran, as educated diasporic writers, or even in defending women’s rights, are involved in the politics of what Rahimieh calls ‘self-orientalisation’. It is on this basis that I argue that diasporic Iranian women memoirists are involved in self-orientalisation. As Nima Naghibi put it, ‘in representing Persian women, [many] draw on what Foucault has called the “already-said,” or rather the repressed “never-said” of manifest discourse’ (2007: xvii). Many Iranian women
writers, coming from that privileged and educated class of Iranian society, to some degree identify with this discourse. As Naghibi reminded us

privileged Iranian women in the nineteenth century … participated in the discursive subjugation of their working-class Persian counterparts. By positioning the Persian woman as the embodiment of oppressed womanhood, Western and elite Iranian women represented themselves as epitomical of modernity and progress. (p xvii)

I believe that this approach operates to date, particularly among diasporic western-educated women. One can argue that this has contributed to the somewhat limited descriptions and frameworks in their memoirs.

We only have to glance at the list of women who have been writing to prove this point. Most of the women who have written memoirs about their experiences can be traced to new modern Iranian elite families. Just to name a few, Azar Nafisi, the author of Reading Lolita in Tehran (2004), is the daughter of one of Tehran’s mayors during the Shah’s regime; her mother was one of the first women members of parliament during the Shah’s regime. Nafisi is always proud of her mother’s role, as well as of the fact that her grandmother attended university when other women barely left their homes. Sattareh Farman-Farmaian, the narrator of Daughter of Persia (1996), is a Qajar princess with a father who insisted on his daughter’s education, even letting her go to America as one of the first women to travel outside Iran by herself in the early 1900s, at a time when her friends were being plucked out of middle school to get married. Lily Monadjemi, who wrote Blood and carnations (1993), and more recently A matter of survival (2010), is the descendent of Nasser-Al-Din Shah, one of the Iranian Shahs responsible for Iranians’ encounter with modernity. Marjan Satrapi, the creator of Persepolis (2003) comic series, is a descendent of a Qajar monarch. Davar Ardalan, the author of My name is Iran (2008), is the daughter of Laleh Bakhtiar, one of the most prominent Iranian/American women scholars, and one of the only women who has translated the Koran from a feminist perspective. She traces her family tree back to Fath-Ali-Shah Qajar. Similarly, Shusha Guppy, the author of many books including The blindfold horse (1988), also a songwriter, singer and
filmmaker, was the daughter of a famous Iranian theologian who sent her to Paris in 1952 to study oriental languages and philosophy when she was only seventeen.

Although the above list is not inclusive of all writers with similar backgrounds, and excludes women of equal calibre in other areas, such as in sciences, politics, humanitarian work and so forth, as contributors to western (and Iranian) society, it is inclusive enough to demonstrate that most of what is being written about Iran outside Iran presently is informed by a specific class of Iranian society. This is not to deny or ignore the fact that women of non-aristocratic background, like Marina Nemat, Firoozeh Dumas, Gina Nahai and Susan Pari, are also contributing to this discourse. However, they too, though not carrying royal blood, by virtue of living outside Iran and writing in English could be considered within this privileged class of Iranian society.

This is not to say that all Iranian writers are oblivious to this ironic self-orientalisation. Some have tried to defy these predefined modes of reading and representation. Fatemeh Keshavarz, for instance, in her memoir *Jasmine and stars* (2007) tried to reframe this position, starting even from the cover of her book. Instead of using the conventional cover of passive veiled exotic women, her book has two modern Iranian girls with sunglasses, actively holding up signs, one reading ‘We women want equal rights’, and the other, ‘violence against women equals violence against humanity’. In the content of her book, too, Keshavarz was very self-conscious. She clearly announced that her memoir is a critique of what she calls ‘New Orientalist’ narratives emerging from Iran by Iranian women, which are ‘exaggerated and oversimplified at best and fully distorted at worst’ (p 111). She compared the popularity of these memoirs to Rumi’s elephant in the dark tale, where an elephant is brought into a city at night where no-one has seen one before. As each person touches each part of the elephant, they reduce their understanding to the partial encounter. She believes recently people in the West, as a ‘matter of life or death’ (p 7), want to know about the Middle East. Like the townspeople, they reach out to anyone with the hope of learning anything they can. But the problem is that most of these views, like each person’s interpretation of the elephant, are
limited and partial. In her memoir Keshavarz hopes to create ‘an alternative approach for learning about an unfamiliar culture’ (p 2).

Although there is much more to say about this, my conclusion is partially hopeful. Following the controversial 2009 elections a shift occurred in the way Iran and Iranians were viewed in the West. With the rapid circulation of clips from protests, a different Iran came into view. Here, women were no longer silent, passive and domestic. Rather, they could be seen alongside the men in opposition to the government. As the world witnessed, women like Neda Agha Sultan, who was shot in the street and died on camera, suffered the violation of their rights as humans at the hands of the Islamic government. Out of the ashes of these protests, a new interest emerged in narratives emerging from Iran. The world was no longer interested in delayed stories by silenced and oppressed diasporic women. Rather, people wanted to hear stories about what was happening in Iran at the moment. Consequently, we are now seeing the beginnings of a third wave of memoirs from Iran, not only from Iranian women but more so from Iranian men. My partial hopefulness only considers the fact Iranian women are now being seen in a new light; yet what I am not so hopeful about is the modes of readings surrounding the production, reception and consumption of this newly emerging third wave of Iranian memoirs.

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Entangled love and hatred? Reading postcolonialism through the cinematic text of *Good men, good women*

Christine Yu-Ting Hung

**Abstract**

Using the famous cinematic text *Good men, good women* from Taiwan allows me to discover the unseen love and hatred of colonised people in their pursuit of a new identity. In *Good men, good women*, a group of Taiwanese under Japanese rule insist on helping China in the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s. Their motherland dream is shattered when they go to China and are seen as Japanese collaborators. The language barrier between the Chinese and Taiwanese makes the Taiwanese realise their imagined motherland is different from what they expected. Meanwhile, the Japanisation movement (Kominka movement) in Taiwan also influenced the colonised Taiwanese, not by making the Taiwanese like the Japanese but resulting in the Taiwanese being less similar to the Chinese. In Hou Hsiao-hsien’s film, we can sense the conflict, love and hatred of the people for the colonising power very clearly and then how people find their way and dignity as Taiwanese.

Taiwan has a heavy historical burden which has not been noticed and clarified carefully in academia, especially in the study of films. In this paper, I intend to portray Taiwanese people’s life during and after Japanese colonisation in the film *Good men, good women* (1995) and

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contrast it with my family story. Some Taiwanese have a sense of belonging to their imagined motherlands of Japan or China, but in fact their experiences of being questioned and rejected by people in their motherlands will be one of the focuses of this paper. I focus on the idea of oppressed people during the colonial period later trying to seek their identity in their motherland or striving for a new identity.

Taiwan’s colonial history resulted in its becoming a hybrid space outside of the centre of China. I intend to discuss the love and hatred of postcolonialism in *Good men, good women*. I focus on the Japanese postcolonial influence on the local Taiwanese’s view of their motherland, China.

**Synopsis of *Good men, good women***

Taiwan was colonised by Japan from 1895 to 1945. *Good men, good women* focuses on the reconstruction of terror and memories in the past in Taiwan. The terror of remembering the past is represented clearly in the lead actress Liang Jing’s monologue. *Good men, good women* highlights two different eras in Taiwan: the political movement in the 1950s and popular culture in the 1990s. Liang Jing, who plays an actress in *Good men, good women*, details the saga of her character Jiang Bi-yu and her husband, Zhong Hao-dong, who refuses to support the Japanese army and so volunteers to join the Chinese army to fight against the Japanese. Such volunteers become national heroes in the Sino-Japanese War during the 1940s after returning to Taiwan. This parallel of one modern and one traditional woman’s stories also reflects the cultural and political transformation of Taiwan because their stories cover the social and cultural phenomena of the 1950s and 1990s.

Using the famous cinematic text *Good men, good women* from Taiwan allows me to discover the unseen love and hatred of the colonised people and their struggle to pursue a new national identity. However, the pursuit might not be romantic but could instead be a disaster. In *Good men, good women* a group of Taiwanese under Japanese rule insisted on helping China in the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s. Their motherland dream was shattered when they went to China and were seen as Japanese collaborators. The language barrier between the Chinese and
Taiwanese made the Taiwanese realise their motherland was different from what they imagined.

Chris Berry stated in ‘A nation t(w/o)o: Chinese cinema and nationhood(s)’ that,

> Writing from Australia, another site which has plenty of potential to be a post-colonial hybrid space outside the metropolitan centres of Europe, I find the possibilities of contemporary Taiwanese cinema and especially Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films very pertinent … adopt the language of nationalism to mark themselves out from the ‘mother country’. (1994: 60–61)

Berry implies that Hou Hsiao-hsien is quite pertinent in describing the hybrid situation in Taiwan outside of the centre of China and the Taiwanese use of nationalism to create themselves out of the motherland, China.

**Memory in Hou’s national trilogy**

According to Andreas Huyssen,

> The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity. (1995: 3)

This quotation explains what some film directors are doing, much like Hou Hsiao-hsien. Hou is aware of what happened in the past in Taiwan and turns the history into the text of his own creative artwork. To illustrate the significance of memory in Hou’s films, I will use a few examples. The film *The eternal sunshine of the spotless mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) was inspired by the poem *Eloisa to Abelard*.
How happy is the blameless vestal’s lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each pray’r accepted, and each wish resign’d;
Labour and rest, that equal periods keep;
‘Obedient slumbers that can wake and weep;’
Desires compos’d, affections ever ev’n …²

The theme of the film is that if memory is traumatic, and there is a procedure that can help you to remove the bad memories, would you be willing to have it? At first people found it was worth undergoing the procedure. However, eventually the realisation emerges that if we keep deleting all bad memories we will never learn from our mistakes and we will keep making the same mistakes over and over again. There is a parallel between this theme and Liang Jing’s story, and the representation of history.

Representations of history in cinema can help us to ‘remember’ what happened, even though the memory may be traumatic. However, if history is like a traumatic memory, the best way to heal it is not to hide it, but to acknowledge it and talk about it; otherwise, the wound may never heal. The longer people hide or ignore the pain, the longer they have to ‘trace back’ to heal it. By shooting his Taiwan trilogy just after the lifting of martial law, Hou Hsiao-hsien has provided people with a ‘discussion board’. It is not difficult to understand his intention to reconstruct people’s memory of political events. In A city of sadness (1989) Hou chose a housewife, Kuan-mei, to represent the February 28 incident indirectly. Some criticise this technique as a misinterpretation of history, but Hou claimed that his job was to make the film, and he does not care much about such criticism (Mi and Liang 1991). In The puppetmaster (1993), Hou used an 80-year-old puppet master, Li Tian-lu, to ‘narrate’ Li’s life, which spanned from 1895 to 1945. The film ends when the Nationalists take over Taiwan. In Good men, good women, which is a film within a film, Hou utilised actress Liang Jing to portray a

² This is from the poem Eloisa to Abelard by Alexander Pope. It was published in 1717. Lines 207–210 were spoken in the film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, which borrowed line 209 as its title.
character, Jiang Bi-yu, whose life is influenced by the political witch-hunt, or the White Terror, as her husband was executed by the KMT authorities. As such, *Good men, good women* completes the Taiwanese trilogy in the twentieth century.

**Hou’s ‘play’ with memory in *Good men, good women***

‘Play’ here has multiple meanings; one refers to a script, the other refers to a trick. From the beginning to the end of *Good men, good women*, the viewer learns the stories of Liang Jing and Jiang Bi-yu through Liang’s narration. Throughout the film, the viewer learns about Taiwan’s history, gaining an insight not only into the sadness of the characters’ lives but also the sadness of the nation. Although the remaking of history may differ from actual events, in the 1990s Hou was brave enough to incorporate different voices and criticism into his artwork regarding Taiwan’s macro-history. In addition, he was also aware that the reinterpretation of history is never completely accurate and, as such, he used a ‘film within a film’ to remind the spectators that they were watching a ‘film’ and not a ‘documentary’. This is a necessary strategy to avoid criticism and the strict film censorship criteria.

In *Good men, good women*, we see a group of young Taiwanese volunteers (in the Sino-Japanese War) walking in a rural area in Guangdong Province in China, singing ‘Why don’t we sing? (我們為什麼不歌唱?)’. The images are in black and white. At the end, we again see these images of those volunteers walking forward, this time in colour, accompanied by Liang’s voiceover: ‘It is a pity that Jiang Bi-yu died one day before the shooting of *Good men, good women*, and that she was not able to watch a film about her life when she was alive.’ The final caption says: ‘This film is for Mrs Zhong Hao-dong, Mrs Jiang Bi-yu and political victims in the 1950s.’ This is a reminder that it is not just a film about two women, but a film made to honour the memory of political victims of the 1950s. The ending raises the question of whether what is shown in the film is just ‘a film of Mrs Jiang Bi-yu’ or more like a national allegory of all Taiwanese people who suffered during the White Terror, as I will discuss later in this paper. It also opens a dialogue for viewers, because events in the film have deeper meanings than they appear to. A similar example can be found in *A city of sadness*. Even though it is a story about a family’s experience of the February 28 incident, at the end of the credits it
says, 'In December, 1949, China was taken over by the Communist Party so the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan', but it does not go on to state the real political significance explicitly. Hou conveys his political agenda in his films through a combination of fictional and true stories.

The patriotism of Taiwanese ideology during the Sino-Japanese War

The 1940s were a difficult time for Taiwan, as Japan and China were at war. In response to Japanese colonisation, a group of Taiwanese decided to join China in its fight against the Japanese in China. After China won the war in 1945, they returned to Taiwan with honour and as national heroes. Those people had therefore reached a high position in society, equal to that of a principal in a high school or an announcer in a radio station. With the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek, however, their patriotism was distorted and they were seen as Chinese Communist collaborators. Some of them were executed. During that period there were many such political victims, and so it became known as the White Terror. With the making of *Good men, good women*, Hou skilfully represented a political victim’s story as ‘a film within a film’, to make the audience reflect on the question of patriotism. Hou posed two questions: what would happen if the political party in power were to change? And what are the colonised people’s reactions in terms of the macro-history? Hou wanted to depict the Taiwanese people’s dilemma and the bitter fate of being caught in between the Japanese and Chinese. While some Taiwanese wanted to escape the rule of Japan and to support China during the war, their patriotism was misunderstood and many were killed by the Chinese Nationalists later.

In *Good men, good women* Liang Jing, a film actress of the 1990s, plays the role of the national heroine, Jiang Bi-yu, in the 1950s. As a nurse at that time, Jiang went to China to help wounded Chinese soldiers in the Sino-Japanese War. The role of the nurse symbolises the comfort offered to the wounded during World War II and conveys the sentiments of anti-war and peace. To this end, Hou used the end credits to honour the political victims depicted in the film.³

³ This is similar to *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), which is not just about a French actress’s one-night stand with a local Japanese man in Hiroshima, but also about the cruelty of war and the idea of peace.
Language and cultural barriers between Taiwan and China

Language can be used to suggest cultural differences, and this is done to good effect in Good men, good women. During Japan’s 51 years of colonisation, not only the way the Taiwanese used their language, but also their culture and lifestyle, were strongly influenced by the Japanese. The ensuing bitterness about the period 1895–1950 confuses the issue of loyalty. First and foremost, how do we define nationality? What might Good men, good women say about identity politics? In Good men, good women, multiple languages are used, which underlines the cultural barriers. Jiang Bi-yu, her husband Zhong Hao-dong and the other Taiwanese volunteers went to Guangdong Province to help the Chinese soldiers. They were investigated by Chinese officers regarding their real intentions, because they appeared to be Japanese collaborators. In the film, the questions were asked in Cantonese, which required an interpreter to translate them into Hokkien. The investigations created a feeling of alienation, even though China was Taiwan’s motherland. The language barrier made the Japan-colonised Taiwanese volunteers realise that their patriotic dream and belief in their ‘motherland’ were shattered.

During the war, Jiang Bi-yu was due to give birth and needed someone to adopt her son. A relative in China was willing to help her and addressed her in the Hakka dialect. The use of different languages in Good men, good women foreshadows the cultural barriers that would arise later in Taiwan under Nationalist rule. After the war, Jiang and her husband returned to Taiwan as national heroes and reached high positions in their careers. Because of the climate of anti-communism, however, they were suspected by the Nationalists of being Chinese communist collaborators. Eventually, Jiang’s husband was executed.

This sequence of events induces the viewer to consider the relationship between language and issues of ethnicity in self-definition. Good men, good women raises the question of what defines a nation, and whether a nation should be defined merely by boundaries. It also makes the audience think about where people will end up if they sacrifice morality to nationalism, and suggests that identity politics are a minefield: if you become involved in them, you will be
lucky to get out alive. Hou used different languages in Taiwan and China to suggest the irony of Taiwanese patriotism; because of this language barrier, the Taiwanese begin to realise that there is an invisible wall (a cultural and language difference) between Taiwan and China, which is beyond their imagination.

During the 1970s the KMT government made Mandarin compulsory in all the schools in Taiwan, which had political implications. The following is an example of my uncle’s diary when he was in the fifth grade in primary school in Taiwan in 1972.

Basically, my uncle wrote that his father had bought two bonsais of begonia. The begonia leaf reminded him of the map of China. During that time, the people of mainland China were suffering under Communist rule, and he hoped one day they would be liberated from it. In the end, he wrote in the Taiwanese dialect: zero. According to my uncle, Mandarin was the only language that could be used in school. If anyone used Hokkien or any other dialect in class, he or she would be punished, being made to stand in front of everyone in the school, and also fined NT$ 5 (approximately AUD 20 cents) each time.
From the diary, we can see two interesting things. First, in 1972 China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and the KMT education in Taiwan profoundly influenced the idea of
‘save our own people in China’, as seen in my uncle’s diary. As an 11-year-old school student, even the bonsais remind him of the map of the motherland, China, and induced him to think about saving people in China; the KMT cultural hegemony influenced the people of Taiwan. Second, it is significant that, at the end of the diary, the student has to write that there is no Taiwanese dialect, which underscores KMT’s policy of making Mandarin Taiwan’s official language. In 1972 the Taiwanese dialect was banned by the KMT for political purposes. Compare this with 1940s Taiwan when people could speak both Japanese and Taiwanese most of the time. My paternal grandfather’s Japanese transcript on the cover of the family album presents a strong contrast to my uncle’s diary, demonstrating that the cultural hegemony left ordinary people with different impressions of the government of the day.

Figure 2: My grandfather’s transcript of a Japanese poem, Nostalgia
(Photo: the author)
I believe my grandfather had a strong nostalgia for the period when Japan ruled Taiwan, as evidenced by his writing a Japanese poem, *Nostalgia*, in the album. Unlike Hokkien, which was banned under KMT rule in the 1970s, Taiwanese were ‘encouraged’ to speak Japanese during the Kominka movement. However, my grandparents’ nostalgia for colonial Japan may not be understood by today’s Japanese, as their history of colonising Taiwan and then being forced to relinquish Taiwan is not regarded as honourable. The isolation of local Taiwanese sentiments is similar to the feeling evoked in the investigation scene of Jiang Bi-yu and her other friends, in that their sense of belonging is suppressed, which shows the KMT’s insensitivity to local Taiwanese sentiments.

Returning to the issues of language and nationalism in *Good men, good women*, Wu Jia-qi argued that the investigation scene in the film demonstrates the language barrier between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese (Wu 2000: 313). When the volunteers are investigated, they cannot even understand the officer’s language and an interpreter is needed. This reflects the left-wing Taiwanese fantasy that the Taiwanese embrace the same-language-and-same-race China or the Chinese nation. Yet the left-wing Taiwanese desired to fight Japanese colonisation, autocracy and the feudal system, rather than identifying themselves with Chinese culture or thinking of themselves as Chinese (Wu 2000: 313). This alienation between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese was a result of the Kominka movement. Even though the Kominka movement did not achieve its goal of ‘Japanising’ the Taiwanese people, it did increase the difference between the Taiwanese and mainland Chinese.

The film also explores the politics of collaboration. Here, we face the question of how collaboration is defined. We must question whether we can call an act ‘collaboration’ if a significant portion of the population goes along with it. And if political parties change, the issue becomes even more complex. How do we define a ‘traitor’ and a ‘patriot’ when everything depends on the ruling party? Nationality, after all, is not simply what is shown on

4 The Kominka movement was a Japanese war strategy (between 1937 and 1945) designed to seek Taiwanese help in the war with China. In order to achieve this goal, Taiwanese needed to be Japanised, such as learning Japanese and respecting the Japanese emperor. They were recruited as navy personnel for the sake of honour.
a map or passport. What counts is how we see ourselves, which means that the ‘motherland’ is what we hold within our minds.

The national heroes in *Good men, good women* are intellectuals who are involved in politics. This raises the question of the role education plays in collaboration and resistance. Under Japan’s cultural hegemony, the Taiwanese were supposed to have been Japanised by the Kominka movement during the Sino-Japanese War, but a number of Taiwanese retained their Chinese way of thinking and chose to resist the pressures of the coloniser. The controversy in *Good men, good women* leads us to question the definition of faithfulness, patriotism and loyalty. Does the fact that the Taiwanese of the 1940s shared an ethnic background with mainland China mean that they should have been patriotic to China, or should they have identified with the Japanese government? Hou sought to provide the answers to such vexed questions indirectly, as I will explore in the next section.

**Family stories versus political history**

The reason I address my own family stories and political history is because *Good men, good women* is composed of two women’s stories, taking place in the 1940s and in the 1990s. During those fifty years, Taiwan changed a great deal. In the stories of Jiang Bi-yu and Liang Jing, we feel the huge gap between them, much like the huge gap between Taiwan and China after fifty years of colonisation. In a way, my family stories are also concerned with political history and are worthy of close analysis.

I always remember my grandfather saying that before he was twenty years old he was Japanese. This kind of nostalgia for Japan might be difficult for his children to understand, as they grew up under the KMT’s rule. It might also be difficult for Japanese people to understand, as the Japanese history of colonising Taiwan and leaving Taiwan after its surrender in World War II is condensed in Japanese history textbooks. My grandfather’s situation is similar to that of Jiang Bi-yu, as the complex sense of belonging is hard for mainland Chinese to understand, as shown in *Good men, good women*. 
Conclusion

Hou has succeeded in utilising Liang Jing’s narration to describe the terror not only of a woman but also the terror of many Taiwanese in that era. With the use of Liang Jing’s diary, which holds her story and memory, Hou was able to prompt the audience to revisit history with Liang’s guidance. With a comparison with my family story, we realise that Hou dealt with postcolonial issues carefully and observantly, and meanwhile stimulated the audience to think about what the next step is for Taiwan, which might need redefinition. His intention was not to lick the historical wound but to lift the veil of terror and encourage people to face it, deal with it and put it away.

Hou has not made Taiwanese people puzzled but more clear about their national identity. After knowing history, we know where we come from and who we are as Taiwanese.

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Zulu cultural villages and their political economy: a decolonial perspective

Morgan Ndlovu

Abstract

Zulu cultural villages in South Africa seek to represent, through physical structures and stage plays, a set of what are supposedly ‘real’ material and socio-cultural practices of actual lived experience of a ‘Zulu’ identity. The cultural villages are quite popular with both local and international tourists but, in spite of their popularity, the villages currently face a barrage of criticisms that range from accusations that they represent myth instead of culture to accusations that their exploitative political economy serves as a modern medium of neo-colonial relations. These scathing criticisms are not without merit in reality but their major problem is that they treat cultural representation of ‘Zulu-ness’ in the villages and their political economy as exclusive of one another. In this paper I seek to reveal how the imaginations of Zulu identities through both physical portrayals of ‘Zulu-ness’ and the associated narratives are inseparably intertwined with the exploitative political economy of the villages and reproduce one another within what Grosfoguel (2007) referred to as an entangled package of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation of non-European peoples by western colonisers and/or their descendants. I deploy the case study of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park to reveal how the images of ‘Zulu-ness’ and the political economy of the villages are two sides of the same coin as well as part of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of colonial forms of domination and exploitation.

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Introduction
The political economy of Zulu cultural villages in post-apartheid South Africa represents a microcosmic picture of the interplay of politics, economics, culture and race within what Grosfoguel (2007) referred to as an ‘entanglement’ of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of colonial forms of domination and exploitation. Thus, in spite of the advent of postcolonial dispensations in the developing world, it is quite disturbing that many of the indigenous peoples of the Third World are still languishing in abject poverty due to neo-colonial forms of domination. Indeed, in many postcolonial states of the developing world, the problem of poverty among indigenous African communities is not merely a product of failing economies but of unequal distribution of wealth. Thus, for instance, in the case of South Africa, the problem of inequalities of distribution within the economy was characterised by former South African President Thabo Mbeki as ‘two nations’ in one country. He was describing how the minority white population that constitute a mere 20 per cent of the total population of the country control at least 80 per cent of the economy while the remaining majority black population own just below 20 per cent of the national economy. Such situations provoke the fundamental question of whether the anti-colonial struggles that were waged against colonial domination during the period that was popularly referred to as the ‘colonial era’ really brought about a truly postcolonial world or whether they merely ushered the peoples of the Third World into what Spivak viewed as ‘a post-colonial neo-colonialized world’ (1990: 166). I argue that business entities such as Zulu cultural villages microcosmically represent – through their political economy and constructions of identity – neo-colonial relations of power that were historically justified on the grounds of cultural differences and projected as a natural given.

Representations of African identities and their political economy in the colonial power matrix
The symbiotic relationship between the imagined of Zulu identities through the constructed cultural villages and the political economy of the villages can be articulated through Quijano’s

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(1991, 1998, 2000) conceptual framework of the ‘colonial power matrix’. According to this conceptual lens, the present world system is a historical-structural heterogeneous totality with a specific power matrix that affects all dimensions of social existence such as sexuality, authority, subjectivity and labour. This means that the present forms of colonial domination in fields such as identity construction of subalternised communities and distribution of economic resources are part of what Grosfoguel referred to as an

entanglement … of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (‘heterarchies’) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures. (2007: 217)

Zulu cultural villages are a microcosmic picture of these heterogeneous and multiple global hierarchies mentioned above; they reproduce the colonial power matrix as much as they are produced through it. The skewed political economy of the cultural villages that favours the ‘white race’ and the negative imaginations of Zulu identities in the constructed images of the villages are not only part and parcel of the ‘entangled package’ of racialised multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies but are also two sides of the same coin.

To those scholars who have sought to diagnose the problem of enduring colonial domination in its various guises in the Third World in the age dubbed the ‘postcolonial dispensation’, the main problem is that the true nature of colonial domination was misunderstood by the very people who waged struggles against the system. According to Grosfoguel, ‘the most powerful myth of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world’ (2007: 219). This mistake of reducing the problem of colonial domination to an issue of power contestation over juridical-political boundaries of states in national liberation and socialist strategies of anti-colonial struggles has led to the myth of a ‘postcolonial’ world. Thus it is within this false premise of a ‘postcolonial’ world that, though ‘colonial administrations’ have been entirely eradicated in developing states and independent statehood celebrated throughout the Third World, the non-European
people are still living under what Grosfoguel refers to as 'crude European/Euro-American exploitation and domination' (2007: 219). This means that the concept of colonialism, which became the basic template of anti-colonial struggles throughout the Third World, was from the outset too simplistic to deal with the complexity of colonial domination whose architecture boasted heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years (Grosfoguel 2007). Rather than remain trapped within purviews of colonial domination that were espoused in the limiting critique of 'classical colonialism' that tended to underpin the ideology of nationalist and socialist anti-colonial struggles throughout the Third World, progressive scholarship by Latin American scholars such as Quijano (1989, 1993, 2000; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992) and Grosfoguel (2002, 2007) has called for an understanding of colonial domination through the conceptual lens of 'coloniality'.

The concept of coloniality, unlike the critique that underpinned classical colonialism, unveils the mystery of why, after the end of colonial administrations in the juridical-political sphere of state administration, there is still continuity of colonial forms of domination. This is mainly because the concept of coloniality addresses the issue of colonial domination not from an isolated and singular point of departure such as the juridical-political administrative point of view but from a vantage point of a variety of 'colonial situations' that include cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression of subordinate racialised/ethnic groups by dominant racialised/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations (Grosfoguel 2007: 220). This holistic approach to the problem of colonial domination allows us to visualise other dynamics of the colonial process which include among them 'colonization of imagination' (Quijano 2007), 'colonization of the mind' (Dascal 2009), and colonisation of knowledge and power. These dynamics of colonial domination enable us to grapple with longstanding patterns of power that were and are 'maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspiration of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). Thus, Maldonado-Torres’s position concurs with that of Quijano, who states that 'coloniality operates on every level, in every arena and dimension (both material and subjective) of everyday social existence, and does so on a societal scale'
These conceptual lenses are quite useful in revealing ‘coloniality’ in its various forms in the images of Zulu-ness that are displayed in the cultural villages and the making of the political economy of the villages in many ways.


Re-living colonial domination at the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park

During the period of my field study at the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park, I noted that the signpost located about 4 km from the site of the village was inscribed with the words: ‘Phezulu Safari Park’ but next to these words was a picture of a crocodile (see Figure 1). As I

Figure 1: A signpost for Phezulu Safari Park depicting a crocodile

(Photo: the author)
already knew from the literature on Zulu cultural villages that there are members of Zulu communities who perform Zulu culture before an audience at Phezulu Safari Park, it was surprising that in this signpost there was no hint that human beings are part of the tourism package. The signpost and many others gave the impression that Phezulu Safari Park, which undeniably began only as a crocodile farm, has more to do with animals than human beings.

Near the gate by the entrance to the farm where the cultural village is located, I noted that the wall was decorated with pictures of animals and birds, and again there was no hint of the existence of humans in the cultural village (see Figure 2). It was only at the entrance of the village itself, where I encountered a display of craft objects depicting ‘nude’ human beings together with animals (see Figure 3), that I began to have a hint that, indeed, there might be a cultural village with live human beings on the farm. What became significant about these initial observations – from the signposts by the side of the road to paintings by the gate of the farm and craft displays at the entrance of the village itself – is the story that one can deduce about the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park. One could not resist the feeling that animals were placed above human beings in the construction of Phezulu Safari Park.

By displaying what are supposedly Zulu identities alongside animals, both in pictures and in the actual lived experience of human beings and animals that are found side by side in the establishment, Phezulu Safari Park can be seen as primarily intending to appease those tourists who are steeped in myths about Africa as a place of savage animals and primitive peoples who, in the context of Victorian prudence, were stereotyped as undressed and bare-breasted. Thus, as Pieterse (1992: 113) asserts, in constructions of Africans as savages in nineteenth-century European iconography, Africans were sometimes represented both as animals and with animals, brought together in a single picture.
The construction of Phezulu Safari Park can also be seen in the context of a safari perspective on Africa which tends to marginalise people and make wild animals the centre of attention. According to Pieterse (1992: 113), the safari perspective on Africa, as displayed and advertised in western iconography, creates an image of Africa as a world of nature, not as a cultural or human-made world. Thus, the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park is based on those structural orders of dominant imperial and colonial knowledge about African identities and, as such, the village can be read as perpetuating stereotyped images of Africans as ‘noble savages’ with nothing, living harmoniously with nature and accumulating no material goods.
The cultural side of the story of Phezulu Safari Park has implications for the political economy as much as the political economy of the village sustains the continuity of these negative cultural displays of Zulu identities. According to Pieterse, ‘in cognitive psychology stereotypes are taken to be schemas or sets which play a part in cognition, perception, memory and communication’ and ‘though they may have no basis in reality, stereotypes are real in their social consequences, notably with regard to the allocation of roles’ (1992: 11). What this means is that stereotypes tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies whereby social reality ends up endorsing the stereotype by modelling itself upon the stereotypical social representations – a kind of typecasting from which it can be difficult to escape.

Figure 3: Sculptures depicting traditional Zulu men along reptiles and wild animals at the entrance to the village

(Photo: the author)
In the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park, members of Zulu communities perform Zulu culture before tourists dressed in animal skins which leave their bodies half naked. These cultural performers are poor members of the indigenous Zulu communities who are employed by the ‘white’ owner of the cultural village to provide cheap labour by entertaining predominantly white tourists. As the poor members of Zulu communities play the role of workers and entertainers in the construction of Phezulu Safari Park, the lion’s share of the tourism income goes to the ‘white owner’ of ‘Zulu culture’. Members of Zulu communities are forced to display ‘Zulu culture’ as a result of dire socioeconomic circumstances that were caused by white imperial and colonial practices in the motherland. This means that the members of the Zulu communities who perform what is supposedly Zulu culture continue to remain poor and, therefore, perpetually compelled to perform negative and stereotyped images of their ‘self’ identities.

The selection of objects and themes for display in the construction of Zulu cultural villages also perpetuates the cultural order and reproduces racially stereotyped images of black African identities. Thus, for instance, the brief appearance of a traditional diviner (sangoma) in the cultural displays of the villages is deliberately conducted to cater for western tourists who are fascinated by ‘witchdoctors’ and ‘black magic’ in the ‘dark continent’, whereas the performance of warrior dances and displays of traditional weapons are meant to nurture the popular image of the Zulu as a ‘savage people’, both feared and admired (Marschall 2003: 113). These images of black African identities can be seen to be translated into a racialised hierarchical division of labour. According to Pieterse (1992) the characteristic roles that were assigned to blacks in western society during the construction of stereotyped racial images in the past were those of servants, workers and entertainers. These occupational role allocations, which formed in America around the seventeenth century and were transferred to Africa, have been in existence for so long that they now seem to reflect a ‘natural’ order. Thus, the stereotyped racial role allocations of the past are now shared by many black people themselves and, as such, they are no longer contestable.
The performers in the cultural villages can be seen to embrace this construction of the black race as entertainers in discourses of racial identities. In an interview a performer in one of the cultural villages vehemently argued that ‘there is no Zulu who does not know how to sing and dance. Singing and dancing is in our blood’ (performer, 2011). What the performer did not realise was that beyond their grounding in the notion of race (or ethnicity), what is common in all racialised stereotyped roles is what Pieterse refers to as a ‘pathos of inequality’ (1992: 51). Thus, while performers are playing their role as entertainers, the white entrepreneurs also take their positions as owners of cultural tourism businesses and the tourists also take the position of victors of civilisation who enjoy the exoticism of the ‘spectacle’ of the Other. As ‘noble savages’ these black entertainers, who at some cultural villages are represented with animals in a single space, tend to be satisfied with ‘nothing’ or tips as they are perceived to be living harmoniously with nature and accumulating no material goods.

As coloniality affects the modern subject at every level and every day, at the level of knowledge production its most destructive strategy for its victims is the epistemic strategy of hiding the ‘locus of enunciation’ of the speaker by claiming non-situated-ness, universality and a God-eyed perspective of knowledge. This ‘point zero’ (Castro-Gomez 2003) strategy, according to Grosfoguel (2007: 214), enables coloniality or western modernity to conceal itself as being beyond a particular point of view, that is, the point of view represents itself as being without a point of view. This strategy is very effective simply because one can be socially located on the oppressed side of power relations but be epistemically thinking like those in the dominant positions. In such a scenario, the oppressed people can be found directing much of their energies to propping up structural orders that perpetuate their own oppression. In Phezulu Safari Park, the modestly educated tour guide from the Zulu communities whose role was that of ‘cultural broker’, interpreting what is being performed by his colleagues before the tourists, seemed quite convinced by the negative portrayals of pre-colonial Zulu people as witches. Thus in one of the tours, the ‘Zulu’ guide ‘thanked’ the colonialists for bringing light to the ‘Zulu witches’. He claimed ‘colonialism has transformed them into peace-loving people who humbly believe in Christ’. The performances of Zulu culture also featured an acting ‘Zulu boy’ eating raw meat before the tourists. These examples
illustrate that some members of Zulu communities, particularly those who have attained western education, have come to view their culture through the eyes of their colonisers.

Members of Zulu communities who have come to view their past in a negative light are now suppressing any positive suggestions about the search for equality between races. This connects well with their lack of ambition, as they view their economic exploitation in the villages as naturally given and therefore beyond contestation. In this way, the inferiority that the Zulu performers display in the cultural field is transferred to the inferiority that they have come to experience and accept in the economic sphere. Thus, when I teased one of the performers about how he feels to be an actor of his culture but earn less that his white manager, he argued that he does not have a problem with the status quo because whites are natural managers and blacks are naturally workers. He argued that even in the Bible there were slaves and masters so all these roles were God-given. This clearly shows that cultural representations such as Zulu cultural villages can be used as rituals of dominance where the cultural displays serve to remind the blacks that they are inferior to the white race.

References


Community radio and the notion of value: a divergent and contested theoretical terrain

Simon Order

Abstract

The community radio sector in Australia is under-funded and under-resourced. Many of the 270-plus stations in Australia (CBAA 2012) struggle to maintain long-term viability and manage their day-to-day financial operations. Practitioners in the sector use a range of strategies to attract funding; however, there are no magic formulas for keeping their heads above water. Approximately 10 per cent of funding comes from government grants (Forde et al 2002: 98–99), most of which are one-off grants for specific projects. If the value of a community radio station could be determined, then surely it would be easier to attract funding from government or other sources. In this paper I examine the concept of value in the context of the community radio station. I explain why the assessment of value is important. Since the value of community radio is a divergent and contested theoretical terrain, a clearer understanding of value would most likely enable stations to attract more funding. I explore the notion of value in relation to community radio through four theoretical lenses. The first lens is the lens of definitions, where the value of community radio can be determined by how it is defined. As a medium, community radio can sit under various umbrella ‘alternative media’–type definitions. The definitions can also be entwined with notions of value, obfuscating the theoretical territory. The second lens is the lens of oppositional power. Community radio as a type of alternative media has long been associated with ‘oppositional’ stances to mainstream media themes. The value of this oppositional power is questionable and may be overstated. The third lens is the lens of social power. Community radio as alternative media has the potential to empower participants personally or politically. The fourth lens is the lens of participation in media production, where community radio encourages participation in media content production and administration.

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The value of participation has been celebrated; however more research is necessary to establish the true value. These four lenses corral areas of critical debate and offer avenues for future enquiry into the community radio sector. Overall I conclude that more work needs to be done before community radio stations are able to measure their value against clear standards towards a better funded future.

Introduction

Why is measuring the value of community radio important? According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the sector globally has always faced challenges of financial sustainability that distract community radio practitioners from their primary tasks. AMARC proposes that unconditional public funding is one way to ensure financial sustainability while allowing the sector to concentrate on the community participation and creative programming that make it an alternative to commercial and public broadcasting (AMARC 2007: 7, 23). Whether funding is public or private, AMARC argue that ‘donors need to know if their money has been put to good use’ (2007: 51). What value will donors and other stakeholders receive from community radio as a result of their funding? AMARC discusses the ‘social impact of community radio’, the ‘effectiveness of community radio’ and ‘evidence that community radio works’ (AMARC 2007: 50). Some accountability is sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the sector. Some measure of community radio’s value is required.

During their 2006 conference in Amman, AMARC asked members to assess their community radio station by focusing on two aspects. Firstly, members were asked to assess the effectiveness of the process of delivering community radio (station management, operation and programming) (AMARC 2007: 51). While global communications technology offers such a varied platter of available media, community radio practitioners need to consider why consumers would listen to their station. There is no room for complacency in an ever-shifting mediascape, especially, as others have commented, when community radio has historically been branded a second-class or ‘ghetto’ radio (Griffiths 1975: 7) or perceived as an amateur-sounding medium (Meadows et al 2007: 33). Shedding this legacy will mean producing a credible, professional-sounding alternative to commercial and public broadcasting (AMARC
2007: 52). Value in this context relates to the effective delivery of community radio for the benefit of both the community and the participants.

Secondly, AMARC suggested an assessment of the effectiveness of community radio stations in contributing to the social progress of communities in their broadcasting area and an analysis of the impact of such contributions (AMARC 2007: 51). AMARC believe that their evaluation uncovered a need to demonstrate the richness and positive experiences of the community radio movement. They stated: ‘Community radio practitioners and stakeholders have not taken the time and efforts to present systematically the achievements of community radio worldwide’ (2007: 8). There is a need to develop assessment tools and quality indicators that highlight the value of the social impact of community radio on individuals and communities, on both the producers and the listeners. Concise and clear assessments demonstrating the social impacts of community radio would be vital tools for aspiring broadcasters. Such assessments would show regulators and legislators the value of community radio. Broadcasting that offers evidence of community values, public opinions, diverse cultures and languages, which are important to a society, can only be useful to governments (AMARC 2007: 52). Without evaluative tools for the sector, the value of social impact will remain an intangible notion. More research in this area is long overdue.

Atton has maintained that in the short period since 2000 research into alternative media² has expanded. Atton cited media journals that have dedicated whole issues to alternative media research (Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism, 2003; Media, Culture and Society, 2003; Media History, 2001; Media International Australia, 2002). Significantly though, he believed the theory is still highly contested with much work to be done (Atton 2007b: 17), especially since alternative media rarely appears in ‘dominant theoretical traditions of media research’ (Atton 2002: 7). He suggested that the dominant Marxist and Gramscian ideas of alternative media are of counter-hegemonic, radical and anti-capitalist publications which, although they

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² Community radio is a medium that has variously been described as community media, alternative media, citizen’s media, radical alternative media, democratic media, emancipatory media, independent media, participatory media, citizen’s journalism and social movement media. I discuss this in the next section on the lens of definitions. In this paper I use ‘alternative media’ as a generic term to identify the theoretical field.
provide some theoretical space, may be limited in scope. He asserted that there is a dearth of developed theoretical frameworks for alternative media (ibid).

Kitty Van Vuuren in ‘The value and purpose of community broadcasting’ (2009) similarly suggested that the ‘discourse of community broadcasting is a highly contested terrain’ (2009: 175) where dominant themes are transient. The principles that emerged during the inception of the Australian sector in the 1970s are wide and represent the diverse ideas of interest groups and government departments of the time (Barlow 1998: 43; Thornley 1999: 131). These have endured and still offer no easily identifiable framework of value. Widely divergent views from practitioners, the government, media and society at large all have an impact on the sector, and in Van Vuuren’s view (2009) contribute to ideological tensions within Australian community broadcasting. Because of this plurality, she believes that it would be wiser to identify who decides on the objectives for the sector initially rather than what those objectives are.

There is some agreement among these theorists that the value of community radio is not clearly understood. The following lenses of discussion examine areas of uncertainty or debate, suggesting a need to evaluate community radio more precisely.

**The lens of definitions**

While my focus in this paper is community radio, I will draw upon relevant theory from subject areas that include community radio under their own umbrella terms to explore notions of value. The range of umbrella terms in common usage includes: community media, alternative media, citizen’s media, radical alternative media, democratic media, emancipatory media, independent media, participatory media, citizen’s journalism and social movement media. Focusing on the definitions of these key terms provides one powerful insight into the understanding of value for community radio. The definitions reveal much about how practitioners and theorists conceptualise the raison d’être for their particular media and thus where they perceive value. All of these terms could be applied to community radio and thus
are pertinent to the discussion. In this section I will explore the definitions of four terms and their entwinement with notions of value.

The first term that needs to be discussed in relation to the value of community radio is ‘alternative media’. Alternative media is an oft-used umbrella term to describe community radio yet it is also entwined with the notion of ‘alternative’ as a value intrinsic to community radio. The definition and the value are indelibly linked. When considering whether to use the term ‘alternative media’, Chris Atton has suggested that ‘we shall find that their differences lie less in the definitions they imply and more in the emphasis they place on how to conceptualise “media” and “communication”, and how the terms relate to social and cultural practices’ (2007b: 18). While in much of his work Atton opts for the term ‘alternative media’, his concern is that the term is overloaded with meaning because it encompasses a large range of media forms including newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, blogs and other websites, pamphlets and posters, fanzines and zines, graffiti and street theatre, songs and music, independent book publishing, and independent record production. Atton’s definition of alternative media refers to services that exist outside of the mainstream media. They may include ‘media of protest groups, dissidents, fringe political organizations, even fans and hobbyists’ (Atton 2002: 3). The producers are often amateurs, writing or broadcasting as citizens, activists or members of a community and may be concerned with representing the views, interests and opinions of those not adequately represented by the mainstream media. Such producers may offer some media access to those marginalised or demonised by mainstream media. The tendency to operate from a non-commercial standpoint offers a notion of independence from the market and commercial pressures on their content (Atton 2007b: 18). The definition of community radio and the determination of its value in this context refer to an alternative free space for community participants to produce their own media without the normal constraints of the mainstream.

John Downing and his co-authors in Radical media understand the notion of ‘alternative’ quite differently to Atton. Downing and his co-authors believe that ‘to speak of alternative is almost oxymoronic. Everything, at some point, is alternative to something else … [And] to some
extent, the extra designation *radical* helps firm up the definition of alternative media’ (Downing et al. 2001: ix, emphasis added). Downing’s analysis of radical alternative media focused on the media of the left and its ability to oppose and sublimate dominant capitalist messages. He argued that it is impossible for socialist left media successfully to oppose the dominant media hegemony of capitalist bourgeois ideology. It will always be a David versus Goliath battle, doomed to failure. Rather, Downing suggested that the emphasis on ‘radical’ is about progressive politics and participation in a progressively structured media production organisation. Alternative media and community radio stations often adopt a democratic mode of internal governance, rejecting traditional hierarchical corporate governance structures. This kind of organisation takes the radical action of prioritising collective decision making as an important value (Downing 1984: 23–25).

The definition and value in this context of radical alternative media refers to two ideas. Firstly, there is the value of a democratic opportunity that community radio affords to radical politics or other alternative marginalised groups, giving them some voice on the airwaves. Secondly, it is an organisational prefigurative political3 stance (Breines 1989: 46; Downing et al 2001: 71) that is valuable as a democratizing agent in society (Downing 1988: 169). Downing and Atton proposed different understandings of the definition of ‘alternative media’ and by default the value of ‘alternative’ for community radio. Indeed, Downing changed the terminology to ‘radical alternative media’ to enhance his particular understanding.

Clemencia Rodríguez’s preference is for the term ‘citizen’s media’. Similar to Downing, she believed that value and empowerment lies less in a battle with the mainstream and more in the power that comes from quotidian citizen participation in restating and reshaping of participants’ cultural codes. Rodríguez believed that citizenship is not a passive legal right but something to be enacted on a daily basis via participation in media production. Definition and value in this context refer to the participation that shapes the participants’ identities and

3 ‘Prefigurative politics’ is a term first used by Wini Brienes (1989) to describe the organisational structures of activist movements of the left in the 1960s that rejected hierarchical structures of organisational governance and practiced participatory democracy in their decision making. For some it is an embodiment in their organisation of what they would like to see in a future society.
results in empowerment or an active cultural citizenship (Rodríguez 2001: 19–22). Thus the term ‘citizen’s media’ is more resonant with Rodríguez’s understanding of the value of participation and cultural practice. While Rodríguez and Downing speak a similar language, their different definitions emphasise where they place any notion of value. Rodríguez’s citizen’s media emphasises value through citizenship while Downing’s radical alternative media emphasises the progressive nature of the participants and the organisational structure.

In the Australian context, Forde et al prefer the terms independent or community media. They argued that such terms demonstrate a clear ‘alternative to the mainstream’ (Forde et al 2003: 316). They drew on Nancy Fraser, who used the term ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (Fraser 1992: 123) to describe the formation of alternative public spheres of discourse to the mainstream. The interaction and sharing of experiences of community media participants within these subaltern counterpublics, as Forde et al suggested, could be considered ‘a form of alternative media literacy’ (Forde et al 2003: 316). They also suggested that Australia, in comparison to other countries, contains a diverse range of community radio cultures (political, religious, ethnic, musical, youth) (2003: 316). Thus, in comparison to ‘citizen’s media’ or ‘alternative media’, the terms ‘independent’ or ‘community media’ are more inclusive and appropriate to a diverse Australian society. Value in this context is determined by notions of independence. Firstly, this value suggests an independence of personal thought which in turn enables a critique of the dominant mainstream media messages. Secondly, this value suggests a sense of an independent community enabling and generating independent media messages of their own. Forde et al used similar language to Downing and Rodríguez yet the subtleties found in their definitions of independent, community or radical alternative media point to where they believe value may be emphasised for them.

Rather than adopting a different definition, Peter Lewis (1993) opted for a more inclusive term. The publication resulting from Peter Lewis’s work with UNESCO, *Alternative media: linking global and local* (1993), explored the impact of alternative media. During the data

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4 This study is not concerned with “impact” only in the limited sense of “effects studies”. The answer to the question “what impact did project X have?” may in any case not even be recoverable in terms of quantitative
gathering stage of the study, the guidelines below were sent to potential contributors (sites of alternative media). The guidelines indicate the range of possible definitions and thus value for the term ‘alternative media’. As general objectives, Lewis suggested these guidelines may imply that alternative media seek to ‘supplant’ mainstream media (1993: 12). In his earlier 1984 UNESCO study of urban community media he proposed that alternative media ‘expand the services of mass media’ by ‘doing things which mass media systems cannot do’ (Lewis 1984: 1). According to Lewis, alternative media differ from the mainstream media in the following ways:

a) motive or purpose, eg rejection of commercial motives, assertion of human, cultural, educational ends

b) sources of funding, eg in different places state or municipal grants are rejected or, in others, advertising revenue

c) regulatory dispensation, eg alternative media may be supervised by agencies different from those usually concerned (Ministry of Communications or Culture) or be autonomous, or local

d) organisational structure, eg the media may be consciously alternative in their way of operating

e) alternative in criticising professional practices, encouraging the use of volunteers or production, participation and/or control by ‘ordinary’ people; trying to adopt different criteria for selection of news stories for instance

f) message content may be alternative to what is usually available or permitted. An established medium (eg satellite channel) may be used for this purpose.

g) the relationship with audience/consumers may be different. This might relate to the degree of user/consumer control, or to a policy of allowing media ‘needs’ and goals to be articulated by the audience/consumers themselves.

h) the composition of the audience may be alternative, eg young people, women, rural populations, etc

data. There may still, however, be answers at the level of social, political and cultural analysis’ (UNESCO 1993: 13).
i) the range of diffusion may be alternative, eg local rather than regional or national

j) the alternative nature of research methodology may even construct a picture of media provision or use that can qualify as alternative (Lewis 1993: 12).

These aspects provided potential contributors to the study with plenty of scope to define alternative media for themselves. Lewis’s guidelines are a telling indication that the field is far from unified in its objectives. Value in the context of this definition of alternative media accommodates the full range of notions, including those of Atton, Downing, Rodríguez, Forde et al and others.

While the definitions discussed in this lens trace similar ground to each other, the perceptions of value in relation to community radio are different. There seems little agreement on terminology. Subsequently, the definitions say more about how practitioners conceptualise their media practice as a valuable activity, rather than the explicit value of that activity. The following lenses may offer more specific notions of value for the community radio sector.

The lens of oppositional power

Chris Atton in ‘Alternative media theory and journalism practice’ (2008) argued that media theorists traditionally overemphasise the oppositional value of alternative media as challenging the mainstream. In this simplistic binary model alternative media cannot hope to compete with the mainstream media’s resources. This model also encourages alternative media to judge itself by mainstream values of success, such as audience reach and production quality. Atton (2008: 215) outlined two main approaches within this model of alternative media studies and argued they are of limited use.

The first approach to alternative media is to paint the mainstream media as ‘monolithic and unchanging’ where ‘the power of the mass media marginalizes ordinary citizens: not only are they denied access to its production, they are marginalized by its reports’ (Atton 2008: 215).

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5 Atton (2008) gave the example of Glasgow University Media Group (Eldrige 1995), who have analysed BBC texts such as news and current affairs to show bias towards certain groups in the community, namely
Although Atton’s primary interest is in alternative print journalism, his theorisation of alternative media is relevant to community radio. He argued that the independent media provides an alternative framing of news. This stands in contrast to the dominant media’s inbuilt bias against social movement groups. This bias is manifest in the selection of stories, treatment of stories and general delegitimisation of their causes. He believed that ‘independent accounts can provide a powerful counter to the enduring frames of social movement coverage in mainstream media’ (Atton 2007a: 74). However, the concern is that alternative media coverage largely speaks only to its own community. Part of the reason for this view is that they lack the resources to reach a wider audience.

Furthermore, Atton cited Ashley and Olsen’s study *Print media’s framing of the women’s movement, 1966 to 1986*. The study examined print media coverage and argued that the mainstream media portrays ideological groups such as the women’s movement as homogenised social deviants bordering society’s fringes, and as disorganised ‘bra burners, angries, radicals, libbers and militants’ (Ashley and Olsen 1998: 273). This homogenisation of dissenting voices by the mainstream media reduces the credibility of protest and social movements to small media bites. Atton exemplified this point by referring to a photograph of a masked anti-globalisation protester at the G8 Genoa riots in 2001 standing proudly on a riot-damaged car. The mainstream media reduced the whole social movement to this single moment (Atton 2007a: 74). Arguably when the mainstream media reduces social movements to this low level of credibility, their accompanying alternative media outlets are similarly branded, subsequently limiting their media reach.

The second approach to alternative media studies that Atton outlined is the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (1988). This model reflects the way media commercialisation and market concentration have reduced citizens to mere consumers incapable of contributing to genuine public discourse. Some in the American right actually believe that citizens’ contributions and alternative media hamper democracy (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 2–19).
Hackett and Carroll (2006) termed this a ‘democratic deficit’. This deficit includes a general under-representation of people in relation to ethnicity, indigenous descent, gender and class in the mainstream media. The democratic deficit also portrays a trend towards media tabloidisation, thrill-seeking controversy and shallow reporting. There has also been a move towards homogenisation of content across media networks, where local content is reduced because it is cheaper to use networked content (2006: 3–10). The hope in this approach to media studies is that alternative media can balance this deficit (Splichal 1993: 12–13). For Atton, alternative media studies have mostly been reduced to approaches that paint a picture of conflict/separation between citizens and the media. Steve Macek in ‘From the weapon of criticism to criticism by weapons’ was critical of this brand of media studies however. He argued that

At its worst, it [this brand of media studies] is overly polemical, shrill and dogmatic. At its best, it consists of careful empirical documentation of, and empirically-grounded theorizing about, the deficiencies and contradictions of capitalist or state-run media systems (seen as instrumental in propping up the hierarchies and oppressive power relations in which they are embedded). (Macek 2006: 232)

Downing, in his analysis of European alternative media in the 1970s and early 80s, was also sceptical of oppositional notions of power. He stated that ‘The various alternative movements of the latter part of the 20th century know much more clearly what they did not want (nuclear holocaust, nuclear pollution, militaristic budgets, capitalism, Sovietism) than what they propose to put in their place’ (Downing 1988: 169, emphasis added).

With these approaches to oppositional value, it is obvious why alternative media are celebrated. They provide a space for those disillusioned with the mainstream. As Atton stated, ‘They appear more democratic and socially inclusive’ (2008: 216). They construct an alternative reality, often in contrast to the mass media’s messages. They are attractive to those disillusioned with the mainstream.
Value in this context sees community radio as a place to broadcast messages that are alternative or oppositional to the mainstream. The value of this comes with some caveats though. How effective is that oppositional stance? Are viable alternative policies being proposed or is it purely oppositional? Is the audience reach wide enough to make a difference? Are the production values of the broadcast professional enough to compete with the mainstream? Why would the consumer tune in? These caveats mediate the value of oppositional power in a real world context, however, and mean that the value is unclear.

The lens of social power

In *Fissures in the mediascape* (2001), Clemencia Rodríguez stated that the discovery of three startling global communication trends in the late twentieth century has hastened scholarship around the democratisation of communications. This scholarship focuses on the emergence of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The first trend is that the amount of media flowing from First World countries to Third World countries was ten times stronger than from Third World to First World countries. Secondly, there was little or no communication moving from Third World countries to other Third World countries. The third trend is that the content from First World countries about First World countries was far greater than any content about Third World countries (Rodríguez 2001: 2–7). In the 1970s Third World UNESCO representatives protested these dramatic global communication trends because the balance of global media ownership and information flow was unevenly skewed towards the power of the dominant western media corporations. The MacBride Report® (UNESCO 1980) addressed these issues, suggesting a revision of international communication policies to redistribute communicative power. Alternative media production was seen as an important part of the solution to bring about a more democratic media landscape.

Alternative media have traditionally been valued for their perceived ability to undermine the power of large media corporations (Rodríguez 2001: 5–7). As discussed earlier with Downing and Atton, Rodríguez also considered this to be a flawed model. Rodríguez described

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For more see http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000400/040066eb.pdf
alternative media as a ‘heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups’ (2001: 12–13). She suggested that theorists should look at alternative media for what it is, rather than what it is not. In her detailed alternative media case studies, including citizens’ journalism in revolutionary Nicaragua, community television in Catalonia, participatory video production for Columbian women and Latino community radio in the United States, she examined cultural identity and political and social empowerment of marginalised groups. Instead of researching political intention and perceived media power, she suggested that more research is needed into the social phenomena of participation. This focus on participation will increase the understanding of alternative media’s real value (2001: 4).

Researching alternative media at the social grassroots level reveals more about value than the binary approach of mainstream media versus the alternative media. Rodríguez discussed how ‘multiple streams of power relationships are disrupted in the everyday lives of alternative media participants’ (Rodríguez 2001: 16–17). The power of personal and community identities is constantly in flux as media participants move between participation and their everyday lives. For example, Rodríguez suggested that because an individual is part of a historically marginalised or minority group, this does not mean they symbolically become a member of this specific under-represented interest group and accordingly take on that group’s homogenous characteristics or experiences. Their identity and empowerment is more complex because it is based on other variables including gender, social class and age. Power is not a fixed notion in any part of our lives; however social involvement in alternative media can, as Rodríguez suggested, ‘Facilitate the fermentation of identities and power positions … alternative media spin transformative processes that alter people’s senses of self, their subjective positioning, and therefore access to power’ (2001: 18).

Her notions of value theorise less about where power is situated and more in terms of how personal power emerges from grassroots action. Value in this context relates to a sense of empowerment at the personal, political and cultural level. The social power that emerges from involvement with alternative media determines its value. The value of this participation, however, has its detractors.
The lens of participation

In contrast to Rodríguez’s theory, Atton is wary of the celebratory approach to alternative media that assigns a lot of value to participation, access, self-management and alternative working practices (Atton 2008: 218–219). Atton argued that there is a gap in value assessments that ignore other aspects of alternative media practices. These other aspects include broadcasting production skills, broadcaster ideology development and their relationship with the audience. To Atton, this underexplored dimension is a weakness of alternative media studies, where ‘in its rush to praise and support alternative media, critical research appears reluctant to examine them too closely’ (2008: 218–219).

To illustrate his concern about the lack of close examination of alternative media practices, Atton focused on the website SchNEWS (schnews.org.uk). Atton dissected their news framing, representation, discourse, ethics and reporting norms. The website’s news sources are ‘ordinary people’ rather than elite experts. SchNEWS does not ignore mainstream news sources such as government officials; rather it tends to focus on their failings. SchNEWS is suspicious of the elite expert sources used by mainstream media; subsequently its reporting tends to ‘betray its own politicized discourse’ (Atton 2008: 224), leading Atton to ask whether the news sources are chosen because they share a similar ideology to the site. SchNEWS has turned media access upside down, ensuring the opinions of ordinary people are the dominant voices. However, do the media producers dominate the expression of those ordinary voices? Atton drew no conclusions on this example; however he suggested a step away from an assumed celebration of alternative media to consider future research that is ‘multiperspectival’. As Atton stated, ‘the position of the researcher as ideological advocate needs to be sacrificed for the sake of properly critical media research’ (2008: 224).

Atton’s arguments about the benefits of participation are shared by other researchers in the media studies field. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) presented their own vision of an ideal alternative media that can change society into a truly participatory environment. Firstly, they stated that alternative media should be critical media if it is to have maximum effect.
Participation in media production alone does not bring balance to a mediascape dominated by corporate power (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010: 142). Secondly, they were critical of participatory, not-for-profit, collectively governed media who operate on a shoestring and tend to dispense with professional organisational practice and production values (2010: 143). As AMARC has suggested (2007: 52), community media must be competitive in the mediascape if they are to be effective.

If alternative media are to produce critical content that truly challenges the mainstream, they must improve their public visibility and audience reach. Critical media should use the media production techniques of the capitalist mainstream media to reach a wider audience and thus be politically effective (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010: 143). Giving people a voice in participatory media is not enough if it means their message is not heard (2010: 146). Value in this context of participation is distinctly contested.

Conclusion
Overall, I have argued that there is no unified understanding of the value of community radio; however there is a need to demonstrate the positive outcomes of community radio while the sector struggles to be financially sustainable in a competitive mediascape (AMARC 2007: 50–51).

I have explored the notion of ‘value’ through four main lenses: the lens of definition, the lens of oppositional power, the lens of social power and the lens of participation. Through the lens of definition Atton offered value in the notion of ‘free space’, an environment unencumbered by the constraints of the mainstream media, where citizens can produce their own alternative content (Atton 2002: 3, 2007b: 18). Downing believed there is democratic value in firstly giving radical or marginalised groups space on the airwaves (Downing 1984: 23–25) and secondly there is value in organisational prefigurative politics as a democratising agent in society (Downing et al 2001: 71). Rodríguez proposed that value lies in participation in media production that subsequently produces personal or political empowerment or an ‘active cultural citizenship’ (2001: 19–22). Forde et al (2003: 316) suggested participation in
Community radio offers the notions of personal and community independence and alternative media literacy. Peter Lewis (1993: 12) dispensed with concern for definitions and suggested a much wider scope for the term ‘alternative media’. While these theorists tread similar ground, there is little agreement on the definitions or perceptions of value.

The lens of social power examines involvement in grassroots media production, offering a more subtle democratisation of the communications role for community media. Rodríguez (2001: 16–17) valued the personal and political empowerment that emerges through participation. In stark contrast, the lens of participation suggests that celebrating this participation as value is insufficient when the content of alternative media is skewed to its own politics (Atton 2008: 218–219) and is heard only by its community. As Sandoval and Fuchs argued (2010: 146), alternative media needs to adopt professional practices if they are to make a real difference to the community.

Notions of the value of community radio at this juncture seem unlikely to fall under any unified model of evaluation. It may be, in following the work of Rodríguez (2001), that detailed case studies of community radio stations reveal more about their own heterogeneous or unique notions of value. Unique notions of value require unique frameworks of evaluation.

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Women’s sexual lives in the new millennium: insights from their daydreams

Margaret Rowntree

Abstract

In this paper I explore the extent to which women have the freedom to express their sexual desires and pleasures at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. The paper is informed by a study that analyses the sexual daydreams of nineteen women from a university setting who responded to an anonymous online survey. Following Frigga Haug’s (1992) work on daydreams the study, which originally collected data on women’s utopic visions of feminine sexuality, also provides unexpected insights into women’s current sexual lives. I discuss these findings in the light of current public debates about the meaning of an increasingly visible sexually explicit feminine culture.

The freedom for women to express their sexual desires and pleasures has long been on the feminist agenda. Feminists have drawn attention to, and challenged, the way that double standards of sexual conduct, far more censorious for women than men, have undermined women’s expression of sexual desire, their experience of sexual pleasure and even eradicated discourses of feminine sexual desire (Fine 1988; Greer 1971; Koedt 1968). Yet, bell hooks

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(1984) also made the critical point that women’s sexual freedom is not just about the expression of sexual desires and pleasures, but is also about the right for women to abstain from such expression as well. But to what extent is sexual freedom still a relevant feminist item in a time characterised by an increasingly hyper-sexualised western culture? Can this ostensible shift towards sexually confident public representations and self-presentations be traced in the private spaces of women’s lived sexual experiences? To what extent can women in the new millennium express or abstain from expressing their sexual desires and pleasures?

In this paper I discuss these questions by analysing data from a study that originally collected data on how women would like to express their sexualities in an ideal world, but that also reveals insights into their current sexual lives. I have previously analysed this data in another paper to explore what they say about the changing feminine subject of feminism (see Rowntree forthcoming). In this study I seek to explore what they say about women’s contemporary sexual experiences. This is one component of a wider study that investigates the sexual representations, sexual lives and sexual daydreams of women in Australia at the end of the first decade of the new millennium.

**Current feminist debates about the sexualisation of culture**

Since the beginning of the new millennium feminists have offered highly contested readings of whether an increasingly explicit sexualised feminine culture is progressive or regressive of women’s interests in feminist terms. Some feminists have viewed the visibility of feminine sexual subjectivities as evidence of women’s increased agency over the sexual dimension of their lives (Attwood 2006; Johnson 2002; McNair 2002; C Siegel 2000; D Siegel 2007), while others consider them more posturing than reflective of progressive material changes (Gill 2003, 2008; Levy 2005; McRobbie 2004, 2007, 2009). These debates about whether ostensible shifts in women’s sexuality are more empowering or enslaving are, arguably, taking up where other arguments were left suspended in the bitter conflict of the 1980s sex wars. Described by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott as being about ‘sex as pleasure versus sex as power’ (1996: 6), the polemic polarisation of views between libertarian and non-libertarian feminists during the sex
wars effectively closed down any space for exploring ‘both power and pleasure and their interconnections’ (p 20).

During the hiatus in exchanges over the intervening years, feminist scholars became increasingly interested in symbolic representations. Known as the ‘cultural turn’, Michèle Barrett described this phenomenon as ‘the ambition to dispense with “things” – and to value “words” more’ (1992: 201). Textual studies of representations have tended to dominate feminist studies of women’s sexualities (Attwood 2006, 2009; Genz 2009; Genz and Brabon 2009; Gill 2008; Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006; McRobbie 2005, 2007). Recently, however, calls for a return in attention to the everyday embodied and socially embedded reality of women’s sexual experiences have become increasingly insistent (Hines 2008; Jackson 1998, 2001, 2006; Probyn and Caluya 2008; Richardson, McLaughlin and Casey 2006; Woodward 2008). The appeal for a re-materialisation of studies in sexuality is found in the following observation:

attention to the lived materialities and textures of life allows us to begin to appreciate the ways in which sex and culture intermingle and change each other. It also compels more empirical studies about how people do cope and use sexuality as they try to forge a life, or even more ambitiously an art of existence. (Probyn and Caluya 2008: 546)

As Probyn and Caluya went on to note, ‘sexuality returns to remind us that it is how cultures are lived that is or should be the objective of our studies’ (2008: 548). It would seem that in the new millennium the pendulum may be swinging back from ‘words’ to ‘things’, or at least to a point midway between the two.

Contributing to the resurgence of feminist debates about the meaning of apparent shifts in women’s sexualities this time round is the significance of the internet. While the potential of cyberspace to provide women a safe space to explore sexuality critically has been understood since around the turn of the new millennium (Garrison 2000; Harris 2001), feminists are increasingly attending to its potential as space for women to express their sexualities
Certainly, interest in ‘the net’ for sexual matters is clearly shown in Audacia Ray’s (2007) ethnographic study of online women. However, she found that the virtual world is not necessarily a safe world, but rather one that reflects the gendered sexual biases of the non-virtual world. Feona Attwood (2009), though, took an optimistic stance, arguing that women’s sexual narrations online show them forging an ethical space that tries to balance autonomous sexual desire with the need for emotional intimacy. The extent to which the exploration and expression of these more confident feminine ‘net’ sexualities have filtered through to women’s everyday lived experiences is unclear.

**Daydream methodology**

The utilisation of daydreams as a method of enquiry was originally designed to collect data for the imaginary component of a larger study investigating multi-dimensions of women’s sexualities, as mentioned previously. The design closely followed the work of Frigga Haug, who described daydreams as ‘deliberate and conscious constructions of the imaginary’ (1992: 56). Haug simply asked women to write down one of their common daydreams. Rather than utilising hard copy written daydreams as per Haug’s (1992) methodology, I employed the anonymous online survey method, anticipating that it would provide similar conditions of safety that enable women to write freely about their sexualities in cyberspace. Women were asked to respond to the following question: Could you write down a daydream about how you would like to express your sexuality in an ideal world?

Nineteen women, of whom thirteen were under and six were over 35 years, responded to the survey. Eleven women described themselves as heterosexual, four as bisexual, three as lesbian and one as other. The women in this sample are either professional or in the process of gaining professional qualifications, with nine of them describing their occupation as university study, seven as professional, and one each as community service work, sales and clerical work. While the homogeneity of the highly educated sample of respondents, some of whom have good understandings of feminism or even espouse feminist identities, has merits for
investigating the changing feminist subject, it poses limitations for investigating the sexual experiences of a broader class and racial base.

I analysed each daydream as a whole narrative, and coded it according to whether the narrative focused mainly on the desire for emotionally intimate, safe or flexible sex. The data within these three narrative clusters were then analysed for what they reveal about women’s current sexual lives. While I discuss the findings under the separate headings ‘Emotionally impoverished sexual lives’, ‘Fearful sexual lives’ and ‘Straightjacketed sexual lives’, the daydreams clearly illustrate the overlapping of these experiential themes in women’s lives.

**Emotionally impoverished sexual lives**

Women’s sexual daydreams commonly conjure up images of emotional intimacy. These utopias often focus on an emotional connection between two lovers. As such they resemble Giddens’ notion of the pure relationship as ‘one of sexual and emotional equality’ (1992: 2). However, in stark contrast to Giddens’ thesis about an assumed current transformation in intimacy in current relationships, these daydreams emerge primarily from an absence of emotional intimacy in women’s everyday lives. To illustrate this absence, I refer to the heterosexual daydream of Judy, a professional woman in her late thirties. Judy’s daydream draws directly from her lived experience:

> Because I am in a marriage I am unhappy in, I find monogamy difficult. When I daydream about my sexual desires, I am having an affair with a man I like and respect but am not necessarily in love with. We are two people who have similar emotional and physical needs and are drawn to each other for this reason. The relationship is respectful, equal and honest. The sex is always amazing and we make the most of the infrequent moments together. I like to daydream about being together more often than we are. We sometimes take the opportunity to engage in phone sex together. There is a lot of intimacy in the relationship. We have a lot of trust with each other and enjoy keeping the secrets that we have together. I am not afraid to ask for what I want in the relationship both physically and emotionally and despite my poor body image am not inhibited sexually because of the strength of the friendship. The whole relationship
helps me to sustain the things in my life I am less happy with and is an opportunity for fun and gratification. It makes me feel happy, affirmed and sexy and helps with my confidence in all areas of my life. The delicious torture of the relationship helps me to feel alive.

While it is unclear whether this daydream is purely conjecture or reveals elements of a secret relationship, its impetus comes directly from the everyday experiences of her emotionally impoverished marriage. In her daydream, Judy is free to imagine a heterosexual relationship that is equal, respectful, trusting and emotionally intimate, one in which she feels safe enough to express herself sexually, without fear. In intimating that she has sexual inhibitions associated with a poor body image, she gives the impression that safety is not part of her lived sexual experiences. Yet the images Judy conjures up so enthral her that they actually empower her to cope with the discontent in her life. The sustenance Judy derives from her daydreaming is clearly life-sustaining. Thus daydreaming appears to perform utopic functions similar to escapist entertainment:

Entertainment offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something that we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and may be realised. (Dyer 1981: 177)

According to Richard Dyer, what is important about utopianism is ‘the feeling it embodies … what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised’ (1981: 177). For Judy, it feels like ‘delicious torture’.

**Fearful sexual lives**

In eleven of the nineteen daydreams in this survey, that ‘something that [women] want deeply that [their] day-to-day lives don’t provide’ (Dyer 1981: 177) is sexual safety. The desire to feel safe enough to express her sexuality without fear of how she looks can already be seen in Judy’s daydream. Certainly, the gap between women’s hopes and the social reality
of their lived sexual experiences is brought into sharp focus through these daydreams. This juxtaposition is revealed in stark detail in Molly’s daydream:

In an ideal world, it is simple things that I would wish to be able to do. I am a female with a female partner who works as a teacher. I would like to be able to have a picture of my family on my desk at work. I would like to be able to talk freely with colleagues and not have to watch which pronouns I use around certain people. I wish I didn’t have to blatantly lie to students when they ask me questions that heterosexual teachers can answer, without fear of being told off for it. I wish I could get married and plan a family. I wish I could have access to IVF and adoption. I wish we could walk through the shopping centre holding hands, not getting glared at, not worrying who we might run into. Pretty simple really. Nothing fancy.

As Molly, a professional woman in her late twenties who describes herself as bisexual, elucidates, her daydream is simply about having the same civil liberties as heterosexual couples. She imagines spaces and places where she need not lie, fear being told off or glared at, or worry about running into someone who is unaware that her partner is a woman. The daydream is not a flight into some delectably exciting sexual utopia but rather a flight from quotidian sexual prejudice and injustice. Arguably it tells more, or at least as much, about the lived spaces in Molly’s current social world than it does about her ideal world. The same desire for a space to feel sexually safe is found in Tiffany’s daydream:

In an ideal world, I would express my sexuality by never being uncomfortable. No awkward silences, glances at other people, no questioning faces as you try and decide what others are thinking. My daydream is of sitting around with friends and family and not feeling or doing any of those things.

Tiffany is a woman in her late twenties working in the community service sector who describes her sexuality as lesbian. Like Molly, her daydream is about the mundane. Both Molly and Tiffany’s daydreams are articulations of the reversal of social life as they live it; they involve blow-by-blow descriptions of the opposite of their lived experiences: ‘not feeling
or doing any of those things’. Despite signs of queering in some cultural and social sites (Roseneil 2000), these daydreams show the power of heteronormative behaviours and attitudes to stymy alternative expressions of women’s sexuality.

The desire to express one’s sexuality safely, free of gendered double standards of sexual conduct, also runs through women’s heterosexual daydreams, as Kylie, a student under the age of 25, illustrated:

In an ideal world I would like to express my sexuality wherever and whenever I wanted to without the fear of persecution from society as well as without thinking if my actions were ‘acceptable’ or not. Society has many double standards, allowing men to be more open and provocative about their sexuality and sexual fantasies without being judged unfairly. If a man goes out to a party and sleeps with multiple women he is deemed a ‘legend’ while if a woman does the same thing in exactly the same situation she is deemed a ‘slut’. In an ideal world these double standards should not exist and a woman, who is just as sexual as a man, should be able to express this sexuality in whichever way she likes.

In Kylie’s utopia, gender differences would cease; a woman’s reputation as a sexual being would not be at stake. Thus, despite current visual signs of feminine sexual agency in an increasingly sexualised culture (Attwood 2006, 2009), this daydream shows deeply entrenched sexist attitudes and behaviours still subjugating a woman’s lived sexual experiences.

Although the survey question asks, in the affirmative, how women would like to express their sexuality, the majority of their replies are in the negative. By this, I mean that women’s descriptions of their ideal world are couched in language that particularly highlights how they do not want to feel. Specifically, women imagine safe spaces where they feel no fear of: being judged, persecuted from society, told off, called a slut, what others thought of them, asking for what they want sexually, or what they look like. These reveries reveal as much, if not more, about the fears and realities in women’s current sexual lived experiences as they do about their sexual aspirations. Certainly, these revelations do not provide support for Giddens’
(1992) claim of increasing democratisation and intimacy in personal relationships, but rather are more consistent with empirical research that shows the continuation of gendered inequities (Connell 1995), emotion work inequities (Duncombe and Marsden 1993) and women’s dissatisfaction about the level of emotional intimacy in their heterosexual relationships (Hite 1991; Langford 1999).

**Straightjacketed sexual lives**

The last theme speaks of a desire by some of the women to express one’s sexuality in more flexible ways. This yearning emerges from the sexual straightjacket in which many women feel they live. For Lorna, a student in her late thirties who describes herself as heterosexual, this straightjacket prevents her from having sex with more of the men she desires:

> If men and women were equal, eg so that you weren’t judged for being a slut or so that you were equally physically strong, then I would have sex with a lot more men that I find attractive, that is if they wanted to have sex with me. I would also feel more confident about being naked if women were not judged so harshly on their bodies.

What gets in the way of Lorna expressing her sexuality with more men, as expressed consistently throughout women’s daydreams, is fear of the social consequences of not complying with the double standards of gendered sexual conduct. For Anna, the straightjacket involves heteronormative behaviours and attitudes. Anna is a professional woman in her late twenties who describes her sexuality as bisexual, and who, like so many women in this study, longs for more flexible sexual arrangements:

> In an ideal world I would be able to express my thoughts about sex and sexuality more openly, without worrying about what people thought of me. I think we live in a society where people are too restricted into different categories/labels according to their sexuality, and this can be limiting. For example, I’m in a long-term heterosexual relationship, but that doesn’t mean I don’t fantasise about being with another woman or that I don’t want to have sex with anyone except my partner. Ideally, we should be able to share intimacy with anyone we like (as long as it’s legal and consensual) without
necessarily fitting into rigid categories like ‘straight’, ‘bi’ or ‘gay’. I think sexuality is very fluid. I daydream about being able to flirt with whoever I like, pash anyone who takes my fancy, and have sex with anyone. Perhaps I am imagining a polygamous space here. I think this sort of openness would require everyone to be much more in touch with their emotions and their desires. I wish we didn’t have to censor our sexual thoughts and appetites based on what is considered ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’. In an ideal world, some of these barriers would be broken down.

Anna understands sexuality, when freed from public normative discourses, as fluid. Her vision is one in which sexuality can be expressed more fluidly across genders, less hindered by the spoken and unspoken heteronormative social rules. Yet both Lorna’s and Anna’s longing to break free of the social rules of sexual engagement is not without regard to ethical sexual conduct. Both women explicitly name consensual sex as a critical component of more flexibility.

Nor does Anna’s vision of sexual fluidity dispense with emotional intimacy. Indeed, the accent is on emotional openness within more fluid sexual forms and arrangements. Arguably a daydream that provides an alternative sexual paradigm, it is also one that, as Anna acknowledges, has many barriers in front of it before it can be realised. This daydream has remarkable similarities with those of a number of other women in this survey. The value of these imaginings, however, is not so much in the visions they offer as in the illumination of the sexually constrictive everyday spaces of women’s sexual lives.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Struggling to come to terms with the discrepancy between what they desire and what is socially acceptable sexually, the women in this study gave voice through their daydreams to the repression in their lived experiences. They were well aware of the costs of transgressing the material constraints of a social life structured by compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy. What is noteworthy about their sexual daydreams is how almost all of them referred to their lived experiences. The ideal spaces that women imagine for expressing their sexualities are contrasted with their everyday lived spaces, drawing attention to the sexual
constraints within them. Despite these real life legacies, women daydream of emotionally intimate relationships, and the flexibility to express themselves sexually beyond heteronormative practices in spaces that are free of socially produced fears.

This paper provides a snapshot of the sexualities of a group of women in this place, Australia, and in this time, at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. I have sought to show that what is present in women's daydreams is absent in their everyday sexual lives. They desire emotionally intimate sexual spaces because their sexual lives are emotionally impoverished, and they desire safe sexual spaces because their sexual lives are fearful and their safety jeopardised. While some women imagine emotional intimacy and safety in monogamous heterosexual relationships and others in monogamous homosexual relationships, there is a groundswell of interest by women in more flexible and fluid sexual practices and arrangements, indicating that their current sexual lives are narrow and constrained. I conclude that the sexually confident feminine imagery of western culture has not filtered down to the socially embedded sexual realities of this group of women. They do not have the freedom to express or abstain from expressing their sexualities. Yet they dream, as Gillian Rose puts it, ‘of a space that is not the territory of phallocentrism’ (1995: 345). The inspiration for these new ways of becoming sexual is, nevertheless, born out of what Teresa de Lauretis has called ‘the trauma of gender’ (1987: 21).

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Modernities in dispute: the debates on marriage equality in Colombia

Fernando Serrano-Amaya

Abstract

In this paper I analyse the debates on same-sex marriage in Colombia during the 2000s using concepts from decolonial thought developed in Latin America or by Latin American scholars. Decolonial thought has a different genealogy than postcolonial theories. While the first is based on critiques of modernity and coloniality in the Americas, the second was born from the crisis of the colonial perspective in countries like India or in the Middle East. In spite of having different origins, postmodern, postcolonial and post-occidental thought share their dissatisfaction with globalised technological development and their scepticism about the project of modernity.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the ways in which modernity appears in the debates around same-sex couples’ rights in Colombia. I argue that modernity acts in those debates as a ‘straightening device’ (Ahmed 2006), a rhetorical device that orients discussions on sexual politics towards straight directions of citizenship, nation and rights. However, as I will describe, such orientations happen in more than one way. In these debates, the articulation between modernity and sexual rights actualises not only evolutionary narratives (Hoad 2000) but also

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hierarchies of difference that constitute Latin American social and racial orders (Quijano 2000). My intention is to define those debates about sexual politics as sites of struggles that are not easily explained in logics of linear or universal development and progress.

I will begin with some background information. Then I will present three perspectives in the debates and consider the ways they connect modernity and sexual rights. In order to reconstruct the debates, I look at the editorials and editorial notes of the two main newspapers in Colombia, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. In them, I identify the different actors involved and the way they articulate the notion of modernity with marriage equality. I use the notion of ‘articulation’ developed by Stuart Hall (Grossberg 1986) to understand that relation. For Hall, articulation allows us to identify how ideological elements come to cohere in a discourse and how they do or do not become articulated with certain political subjects (Grossberg 1986: 53). In this short paper I focus on the early 2000s, when the topic entered the Colombian public sphere as a significant matter of debate.

The reflection I present here is part of a wider project on sexual politics in contexts of protracted conflict and the sexualisation of collective violence and transitions to democracy. That project includes the discussion of some ‘critical events’ (Das 1995) in the history of sexual rights in Colombia, interrogating activists’ strategies, public policies and knowledge production. In the early 2000s I was involved as an activist and supporter of the struggles around rights, gender identity and sexual orientation. Later I developed an academic reflection on these events, which I intend will be useful for the history of social mobilisations and initiatives of social transformation. In my case, ‘outsiderness’ and ‘insiderness’ are not fixed or static positions in research but fluid, permeable and ever-shifting social locations (Naples 1997).

This paper is not a discussion about modernity as a historical event but about modernity as a way to understand change in relation to sexual politics. However it is important to mention that discussions of modernity in Latin America are extensive and have a long history that is impossible to condense into a short paper. For nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals,
modernity was what differentiated civilised cities from barbarian hinterlands, white elites from African or native subordinates, and virile forces of progress from their feminine burdens (Cancino 2008). Sociologists of culture in the 1980s, trying to trace paths towards democratisation, criticised the incompleteness of modernity in the region (Vidal 2000). Others emphasised the differences between European/United States’ modernity and Latin American modernity (Quijano 1993). Critics of modernity have expressed their scepticism about the project of change that underlies modernisation and how it actualises colonial relations (Castro-Gómez 1998). Modernity in Latin America has been a division marker, an orientation, a way to measure transformations.

**Sexual politics and sexual citizenship in Colombia**

Colombia is considered one of the oldest democracies in Latin America. However, Colombia has suffered the most protracted conflict in the area (Pearce 1990; Sánchez 1995; Valencia 2001). In around 50 years of conflict, it has witnessed changes in dynamics, actors involved, areas of control and effects on society. At the same time, there is an important activism around social transformation, justice and peace led by civil society and grassroots organisations (García-Durán 2004). Since the 1980s there have been successive initiatives to demobilise and reintegrate illegal armed actors (Jones 2004). In the struggles between left-wing guerrilla groups (FARC, ELN)² and state forces and right-wing paramilitaries (former AUC), the country faces one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the world (Acnur 2012; UNDP 2003).

In this context, Colombia has formulated an extensive legal system to protect sexual orientation and gender identity (Serrano-Amaya 2009). Currently, same-sex couples in Colombia are recognised as de facto couples. They are granted similar rights to married or de facto heterosexual couples, such as social security, inheritance and immigration rights. In 2011 a new ruling by the Constitutional Court defined same-sex couples as a form of family protected by the Constitution (Sentence C-577, 2011). However, adoption by same-sex

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² FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia; ELN: Ejercito de Liberación Nacional; AUC: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia.
couples is still under discussion. The granting of these rights started in 2007 with rulings by the Colombian Constitutional Court. Those rulings were in response to legal mobilisations of activists, lawyers, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender organisations. Between 1999 and 2010 nine bills to regulate the situation of same-sex couples were discussed in the parliament (the Congress and Senate). None of them has been successful. The last ruling by the Constitutional Court gave the legislature two years to regulate the topic (Sentence C-577, 2011). The ruling on the legal situation of same-sex couples in Colombia follows a pattern identified in countries such as South Africa, where Constitutional Courts lead legal changes. It differs from countries such as Argentina, where marriage equality was promoted by the legislature.

Sexual politics in Colombia has been the space of several struggles (Serrano-Amaya et al. 2010): the development of notions of equity, citizenship and rights in a context of state multiculturalism; the increasing conversion of the grievances of social movements to a language of rights and to litigation strategies; the coexistence of parallel tendencies towards the rule of law and the rule of para-institutional and informal ways of governance; the increasing privatisation of the economy with the rise of neo-liberal policies; and in general, a dispute between a variety of legal, illegal and para-legal actors over state control. I situate the debates that will be described next in this context.

**Modernising authority**

On 10 November 2002, *El Espectador*, the second Colombian national newspaper, published a full-page open letter to the Colombian Senate entitled ‘Homosexual marriage? A bill against family, marriage and human nature is discussed in the Senate’. Signed by an ex-president, several high-ranking military officials, politicians and academics, the open letter was intended to draw attention to a bill to recognise same-sex couples as de facto couples. The bill in question was Bill 43, promoted by Senator Piedad Cordoba, and the third attempt to legislate

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3 For detailed descriptions of same-sex couples’ rights and the legal situation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Colombia see Azuero and Albarracín (2009); and Serrano-Amaya, Pinilla, Martínez and Rodríguez (2010).
on the topic. Alarmed, the signatories of the letter considered that the bill was against the national Constitution, human nature, public health, family, culture, education, morality and natural law. In the following weeks three different versions of the letter were published in the same newspaper and in the other national newspaper, *El Tiempo*.4

These open letters articulated ideas of modernity, sexuality and rights in different ways. The first sustains that society has already reached a level of tolerance towards homosexuals that does not need additional legal measures. In it, change is not required and the current arrangements on gender and sexuality should be preserved as they are. This is, for example, the explanation that the ex-president who signed the first open letter gave for his position. For him, society should not go back to previous times of intolerance against homosexuals but there is no reason to ‘fall for misleading ideas about modernism’ that pursue unnecessary changes (Turbay 2002). Modernism and the granting of rights to same-sex couples are associated with temporary fashions that disorient adequate lines of change. That position characterised the perspectives of those who opposed marriage equality in the 2000s because they considered such legislation unnecessary since homosexuals were already protected by non-discrimination measures in the Constitution (Rubiano 2002; Serrano-Amaya, Albarracín, Pulecio and Sánchez 2012).

The second articulation connects ideas of nation and society to demand the protection of a certain space from what is perceived as foreign and non-Colombian. In the first open letter, the legal initiative was defined as the result of international pressures in favour of family planning and abortion coming from an ‘anti-demographic imperialism’ that, pretending to protect a minority, harmed core values of Colombian society. Again, this idea also permeated the debates throughout the decade. In July 2011 a coalition of Christian churches with a presence in the country signed a letter to the Constitutional Court stating that homosexual marriage was not only against the wellbeing of Colombian families but also against the core

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4 The open letters were published in *El Espectador* on 10 and 17 November and 1 December 2002 and in *El Tiempo* on 18 November 2002.
ethical values of the nation (Redacción 2011). The fight against sexual rights has produced what years of calls for ecumenism could not.

Both narratives – of a change that should not be proceeding and a national space that needs to be protected – are reinforced by the representation of homosexuals and marriage equality as a menace. In the first and second letters, homosexuality in general and same-sex marriage in particular were associated with the transmission of illnesses, non-reproduction and the decay of societies, since, it was stated, homosexuality was the cause of the collapse of the Greek and Roman empires. In this way, same-sex couples were positioned as a threat to the core of society, as if they were an alien ‘other’ attacking a clearly established ‘us’. This association between homosexuality, decadence and degeneracy is not new and can be associated with the developmental tropes that persist in the construction of homosexuality (Hoad 2000). However, I suggest that they also have particular meanings in the context of these debates.

At the same time that these debates over sexual rights were occurring, Colombia lived through a complex process of reshaping of the state. Such change was caused by the increased influence in public administration of non-state actors such as left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug barons. This model of governability combined private violent coercion with capture of public resources, restrictions in public life, and alliances between political, economic and social elites (Gutierrez Sanin 2010). It was also supported by the presence of an authoritarian and vertical project of change and the fast social mobility secured by drug dealing. From 2002 this type of governability gained presence and influence in the political alliance that governed the country until recently, using strategies of intimidation and manipulation of political elections (Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos 2009). I argue that the public irruption of the perspective against same-sex couples described above was a useful way to reinforce such an authoritarian project of change. Sexual politics were the arena in which to redefine hierarchies of difference between some citizens and others, to increase ideas of threat and menace, and to strengthen divisions between ‘us’ and ‘others’.
The representation of marriage equality as being in opposition to national identity follows a pattern of associations between nationalism, tradition and heteronormativity presented in discussions over sexual rights in countries such as Mexico, Brazil (De la Dehesa 2010) and the United States (Sullivan-Blum 2009). Just as in the transition from colonialism to democracy in countries like Zimbabwe (Epprecht 2005), or in transitions toward economic integration as in Poland (Graff 2006), homophobic discourses in Colombia have been incorporated in new ideas of fatherland that trigger processes of political and economic change.

**Modernising elitism**

The last idea should not lead to the conclusion that non-homophobic perspectives or narratives in favour of same-sex rights are separated from other nationalisms or other evolutionary narratives. Recent scholarship shows that certain representations of homosexuality and citizenship in European and North American societies reproduce ideas of ‘good citizenship’ (Clarke 2000), normalcy (Richardson 2004) and nationalism (Puar 2007). The two other forms of articulation between modernity and sexual rights that I will explore in the following paragraphs show that it is not possible to create sharp separations between evolutionary narratives and sexual rights. They also raise the need to locate the debates around sexual rights in the specific contexts of citizenship and ways to understand modernity.

The ideas expressed in the 2002 open letters and press releases against marriage equality created an unexpected debate. In the days after their publication, almost all main media and a diverse set of editorialists, commentators and academics criticised those positions for their intolerance and resistance to the ‘reality’ of same-sex couples and ‘their rights’. From this point in the debate, led by intellectuals, academics and editorialists, the recognition of same-sex couples’ rights was posited as an expression of the modernisation of Colombia and a way to measure how modern the country was. The idea that it was also the recognition of a reality implied a definition of same-sex couples as a unified subject in need of visibility.

As in the previous case, the positioning of the debate in time and space was fundamental. Sometimes using humour and sarcasm, media commentators in favour of same-sex marriage
used a variety of terms to describe the antagonist position as an anachronism: they were represented as ‘inquisitors’ (García-Valdivieso 2002), protecting faith and tradition, remembering the Spanish Tribunal of the Holy Office of Inquisition. They were ‘primitive humans living in caves’, anchored in past centuries and acting against the ‘triumph of European civilisation’ represented by the recognition of rights for gays and lesbians (Rentería 2002). They were also ‘Victorians’ who thought that homosexuality was a perversion but who should not expect the state to legislate in the same way (Redacción 2001). For others, these new regulations were just challenges of modern societies that the country needed to face in order to ‘advance’ towards a more equalitarian society (La Patria 2011).

For those with this perspective, the recognition of same-sex couples’ rights would include Colombia in the list of those few countries that legally protect homosexuals (Redacción 2001). This reference to other countries where similar laws existed was used to argue that no social catastrophe happened once the rights of same-sex couples were recognised. However, that reference could be seen not just as a factual recitation of countries with legal developments, but a way to orient the debate towards a certain imagined community of nations. As some editorialists said, same-sex marriage was an expression of pluralistic and modern societies (Redacción 2002).

This perspective follows an idea of the modern as civilised and opposed to barbaric and obscure attachments to traditions. It uses a narrative of progress based on inclusion in ‘another’ history, the history of European countries, and on distance from the past. It is not coincidental that much of this side of the debate was voiced by editorialists in leading national newspapers. They followed a Latin American tradition coming from the nineteenth century of enlightened and liberal elites interested in modernity as an expression of separation from the colonial past, and oriented towards Europe as model of the modern (Larraín 2000). This tradition permeated intellectuals throughout the twentieth century (Cancino 2008). For Ahmed (2006) orientation is a way to reside in space, a starting point from where the world unfolds and is aligned. Orienting this side of the debate towards countries that have already recognised same-sex marriage reinforces that intention to live in the modern. It also creates
an alignment not just between straight and non-straight lines (2006: 563) but between modern and non-modern processes of change. If orientation is not only a matter of space but also of temporality (Ahmed 2006: 554), for these modernising elites their endorsement of such rights is a way to jump into a desired modernity.

**Modernising rights**

Going back to 2002, almost immediately after the publication of the open letters gay and lesbian activists and their supporters reacted. Three weeks later, an alliance between civil society organisations, academics and activists published a press release in the national newspaper *El Tiempo* entitled ‘In pursuit of an inclusive Colombia’. Using a legal frame and a language of rights, they described the bill under discussion as a development of democracy and a promotion of the cultural changes required for peaceful coexistence. They presented the development of constitutional principles such as equity, non-discrimination and free development of personality as a reason to approve the bill. In this logic, granting rights to same-sex couples was a duty of the state in order to dismantle exclusions and the permanence of ‘second class citizenship’.

This position needs to be considered in the discourses of activisms and grassroots organisations working on sexual rights. Discussions of heterosexuality, normativity and the regulatory practices of gender and sexuality have a long and distinctive history in Latin America, in the struggles against dictatorships, political exclusion and liberatory practices (De la Dehesa 2010; Viteri, Serrano-Amaya and Vidal-Ortiz 2011). The connection between a language of rights and citizenship also has a long tradition in Latin America, dating from the processes of democratisation started in the 1980s. Women’s organisations have been fundamental in that association and in linking it with reproductive and sexual rights (Craske and Molyneux 2002). Since the early 1980s Latin American gay and lesbian organisations have framed their grievances in the language of rights rather than liberation discourses, following both the challenges and needs of the particular political situation of the region and global trends (Brown 2002). As De la Dehesa (2010) stated, in the cases of Mexico or Brazil
considering gay and lesbian politics as a copy or globalisation of international trends would be reductive and would deny a long history of local debates.

However, the narrative developed by activists in the debates around marriage equality in Colombia also has a resonance with global trends that needs to be explored. There have been important exercises to compare and theorise the similarities and simultaneities in transnational gay and lesbian mobilisations and, in particular, the framing of grievances in a language of international human rights. Adam, Duyvendak and Krouwel (1999), for example, provided an overview of 16 countries and demonstrated the importance of national politics in the constitution of transnational gay and lesbian movements. However, this does not explain sufficiently what is global in such ‘worldwide’ mobilisation, its causes and consequences, giving the impression that those local expressions are some kind of variations on the same theme. Globalisation tends to be assumed as a fact, a phenomenon resulting from international declarations (Kollman and Waites 2009) and a variety of cultural and political events (Altman 2001).

The narrative oriented towards ‘pursuing an inclusive Colombia’ uses some elements of this global trend. Lesbian and gay Colombian activists have developed a complex network of communications, alliances and contacts to obtain national and international support for their grievances, which was at the base of their presence in the above debate. Their efforts, as they were expressed in the mentioned narrative, demand the realisation of concrete processes of change, using the space of transnational activism and international human rights organisations. They also brought into play elements that became an important political argument in a country struggling to develop democracy in the context of protracted conflicts, such as the reference to exclusion, peace and equal citizenship. Even more, looking for inclusion in the nation was a reaction to the other narrative that represented gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights as foreign impositions and therefore as non-Colombian.

However, claiming same-sex couples’ rights as part of the development of democracy, inclusion and citizenship implies the recognition of the normative nature of human rights
narratives in which activists frame their demands. The modernity they look for is one oriented by the rule of law and the realisation of universal human rights. This struggle to be included in the idea of nation could explain the sometimes disrupting presence of Colombian flags in gay pride parades in cities like Bogota, and reminds us of the melancholic desire to belong to the norm mentioned by Crimp (2002). In this case, following Spivak’s famous phrase, if the subaltern wants to speak, it has to be in the language of rights, in the space of litigation and towards the modern liberal myth of rights.

Conclusion

One possible reaction on reading the open letters and press releases, especially for those familiar with the language and strategies of activism and identity politics, is to label these arguments as expressions of homophobia and to associate them with representations of Latin American societies as driven by church influence, tradition and conservatism. However, with the previous description I tried to show that just looking at the homophobic references in these narratives reduces their complexity, hides the persistence of evolutionary narratives in social and cultural debates, and renders invisible their connection with projects of modernity and nationalism. It also positions other actors in the debate, such as editorialists, academics and activists, in a positive or progressive side. The associations homophobia=pre-modern and gay rights=modern reinforces representations of countries such as Colombia in which lacking human rights in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity reproduce global racisms, new forms of orientalism and cultural hierarchies (Waites 2008). Even more, the positioning of such narratives as vestigial or as part of a dark past that needs to be overcome denies the coexistence of different ways to produce knowledge about sexuality. In the introduction to a book about sexualities in Eastern Europe, Mizielinska and Kulpa (2011) stated that, while in the West change in culture and sexual politics is experienced in a ‘time of sequences’, a straight time, in the East it is a ‘time of coincidences’, a queer time. They use that difference to explain how in post-communist European countries in a short period of time there was a simultaneous presence of homophile, LGBT and queer politics and knowledge. I suggest that the three perspectives in the debate are examples of such temporal coincidences in sexual politics.
Here the discussion introduced by decolonial scholars can be useful. Decolonial thought has a different genealogy than postcolonial theories. While the former was born from the crisis of the colonial perspective in places like India and the Middle East, the latter is based on critiques of modernity and coloniality in the Americas (Mignolo 2007). In spite of having different origins, decolonial and postcolonial thought share their dissatisfaction with globalised technological development and their scepticism about the project of modernity (Castro-Gómez 1998). While decolonial thought offers a radical critique of Eurocentric ideologies of development, postcolonial scholarship criticises the orientalism that positions non-Europeans as inferior others (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007). According to Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007), Eurocentric ideologies produced the dichotomies civilisation–barbarism, development–underdevelopment and western–non-western. I suggest that the actualisation of such ideologies in the debates around same-sex marriage add another dichotomy: homophilia–homophobia.

The three perspectives in the debate around marriage equality in Colombia share the rule of law as the key element of social transformation. However the idea of what law should be considered differs. While critics of same-sex rights still claim the pre-eminence of natural law, activists claim the rule of human rights and liberal law. For decolonial thought, the first decolonisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was incomplete because it was limited to juridical and political events (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007). For them, the decoloniality required in the twenty-first century needs to target the racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, epistemic and economic hierarchical relations that are still acting in the global world (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007: 17). In this way, the rule of law in this debate represents its own limit to change. Both perspectives restrict the possibilities for other alternatives to produce change in gender and sexual orders that are not directed to gaining legal reforms. In the debate there is no reference to a repressive use of the law. However, despite the different perspectives here, law operates in the disciplinary sense mentioned by Stychin (2003): a way to construct proper behaviours.
The three narratives identified in the debate also have in common a call for universalistic approaches to the relations among rights, modernity, gender and sexuality. However, they differ in their understandings of those relations. In the first narrative, there is a unified ‘us’ defined by traditional ideas of nationhood and fatherland that resists the challenge presented by diverse ‘others’. In the second, there is the need to orient the country towards a Eurocentric modernity that acts as a universal ideal. In the third, in the frame of universal human rights marriage equality and the rights of gender and sexually diverse communities can be realised. The three also share evolutionary tropes that are used to participate in the debate. However, the kinds of tropes they employ are different. In the first narrative, the opposition to marriage equality is used to reinforce hierarchies of difference in which ‘others’ are menaces of degeneration. In the second narrative, the trope is progress as a unidirectional movement towards civilisation. In the third, it is also progress but in terms of democratisation, inclusion and equality. In that way, what is in the debate is not just a dislike of homosexuals but a different project of change, citizenship and nation.

The debates around marriage equality have changed in the last ten years because of the fragmented recognition of rights. Gay characters are now common in the Colombian mass media. Several cities in the country have developed public policies to target the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens and national institutions have been forced to do the same (Serrano-Amaya 2011). Some of these representations follow the homonormative logic described in US politics (Clarke 2000; Duggan 2003; Puar 2007). For Puar (2007) ‘homonationalism’ is a national homosexuality emerging in national politics of recognition and inclusion that not only regulates it but also its racial and sexual norms. For her, liberal politics have incorporated queer subjects, depending on the production of orientalised terrorist bodies and in new ‘homonormative ideologies’ that reproduce gender, class, national and sexual systems of exclusion. This critique follows other analysis of the development of European sexual democracies against the reinforcement of anti-Muslim stereotypes and immigration restrictions on Muslim subjects (Graff 2010). However, the political context, state structures and democratic styles of the United States or European countries are neither
the same as Latin American countries nor do they necessarily produce the same kind of others.

While what I described here shares with Puar’s analysis the connection between sexual politics and war politics, in particular the war on terror, the case of Colombia offers a different situation. The Colombian government in the last decade was one of most well-known regional allies of the war on terror led by the United States. In Colombia Muslims, Arabs or Sikhs could not be positioned as the terrorist others required to justify the war on terrorism and the reinforcement of nationalist ideas, among other reasons because of the limited presence of such communities in the country. This does not imply that gender, sexuality and race are not connected in social and racial orderings (Serrano-Amaya and Viveros 2006). That place of otherness that supported the securitisation of society was already occupied by a diverse set of subjects defined by a meticulous range of hierarchies of difference: guerrillas and their supporters as the enemies of society; internally displaced people as the ones who did not adjust to modernisation; Indigenous and Afrocolombian communities as those who resist modernisation; marginalised urban young men as actors of violence in need of adult control; impoverished homosexuals and travesties as social threats. In these hierarchies of difference, racial, class, gender, sexual and generational orders merge with ambiguous moral categories such as the division ‘good citizens’ versus ‘bad citizens’, often repeated by the previous Colombian government. Such categories resonate with the ‘coloniality of power’ mentioned by Quijano (2000) and with traditional colonial divisions based on ideas of decency. However, they were actualised as part of strategies for pacification that extended the war on terror.

During the last ten years opponents of same-sex marriage have also incorporated a language of rights in order to avoid associations with homophobic statements and to modernise their positions (Serrano-Amaya et al. 2012). This use of a language of rights by antagonist actors raises questions about the meaning of rights in contemporary debates around citizenship and identity. The increasing presence of gender and sexual orientation in global human rights also creates new geopolitical arrangements. In December 2011, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a speech to the United Nations in Geneva declaring that ‘gay rights are
human rights. Her declaration was based on a long tradition of activism and lobbying by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender organisations to frame their grievances in a human rights perspective and in a global context. In an international arena of human rights diplomats, Clinton’s declaration challenged the idea that gay rights were a western invention, defining them as a ‘human reality’. Her statement was seen as an important step in the global recognition of sexual minorities as a collective group requiring particular protection. It was also a confirmation of the connections between identity politics, global activism and new cultural hierarchies.

From a decolonial perspective, human rights implies a global design articulated with the production of international divisions and hierarchies of labour and race (Grosfoguel 2007: 214). The inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in human rights discourses can be seen as an extension of such design, by the reproduction of an androcentric (MacKinnon 2006) and heterosexual matrix (Butler 2009), as feminist and queer theorists argue. In this way, the three narratives described above have in common being ‘straightening devices’ (Ahmed 2006) that need to be decolonised.

Homophobia was explicit as never before in the recent political campaign in Colombia. Nowadays the public debate around marriage equality fluctuates between a highly technical legal discussion, the media’s contradictory inclusion of gay men in soap operas, and fears about adoption. The result of these debates is a ‘heterarchy’ (Kontopoulos 1993) of powers, powers that are pursued in hegemonies presenting different projects of modernity. This dispute does not mean that hierarchical relations of class, race, sexuality and nationality disappear, but that they are realigned according with the needs of such projects of change.

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Adventures in *One land*: reorienting colonial relations in reality-history television

Amy West

Abstract

Popular television reality-history series, of which New Zealand’s *One land* (2010) is a recent example, exemplify the extent to which new ‘media technologies [are] reorientating everyday epistemologies, ontologies and cultural practices’ (CSAA conference call for papers). In these formats, contemporary family groups are immersed in the social and material conditions of everyday life from a nominated period in the past. Rather than a formal re-enactment of times past, these productions take history to task, encouraging participants to critique and even challenge the ‘rule book’ – regarding gender relations, social etiquette, domestic practices, dress and behavioural codes – handed down by the period in question. Nevertheless, these formats also seek to produce narratives of national history, both through the particularisation and fetishisation of culturally specific domestic details, and a generalised affect of nostalgia (literally, an aching for home), making place at least as important on these shows as time.

This relationship with both history and nation accrues new and more complex significations within a postcolonial context. Rather than confirming national history through the commemorative reification of past domestic experiences (an effect that might characterise British examples of this trend), reality-history series in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa approach and/or attempt to represent a colonial history that is both emergent and contested. As scholarly responses to Australian examples of the genre (Arrow 2007; Schwarz 2010) suggest, the re-presentation of colonial settlement in these programs re-imagines a bloodless history, not as it once was but how we might wish it to

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have been. As I will discuss in this paper, the representation of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s settler history on One land was similarly both idealised and self-evidently problematic. Firstly, One land attempted to enact a symbolic and retroactive appeasement of relations between European settlers and indigenous Maori, even as it marshalled cultural distinctions between the two through the careful alternation and explication of sites of ethnic identity, including skin colour, language, social behaviour and material objects (dinghy/waka, cabin/whare, bread/kumera). Secondly, a series of disagreements between participating families, which culminated in a violent altercation and the expulsion of one family from the group (but not from the production), told precisely the story the series might wish to disavow.

Thus, while the generic evolution of a reality format developed in Great Britain (1900 house, 2000) and re-modelled for production in the United States (Frontier house, 2002), Australia (Outback house, 2005 and The colony, 2005) and New Zealand/Aotearoa tells its own story of cultural dis-/re-orientation and spatio-temporal transferrals, the representation of race relations in recent postcolonial reality television productions actively, if somewhat brutally, seeks to reinvent cultural history.

In this paper I consider a New Zealand television production entitled One land, a reality-history series that screened over the summer of 2009–2010, and which depicted Maori–European settler relations circa 1850 in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I am interested, broadly speaking, in the ways in which the genre of television reality-history produces an alternate model for historiography, presenting the past as a series of affective and visceral experiences wrought upon the bodies of contemporary subjects. More specifically, and with reference to the themes of this conference, I am interested in the particular ways in which One land, as a program that represented early relations between European settlers and indigenous Maori, sought to re-cast the history of colonial settlement in light of contemporary fantasies of an idealised biculturalism. Thus, the reality-history show might exemplify the extent to which ‘media technologies [are] reorientating everyday epistemologies, ontologies and cultural practices’ (as noted by the CSAA conference call for papers), as they generate narratives of national identity through the re-enactment and re-embodiment of everyday social histories.

I would like to start by briefly indicating the genre characteristics of the reality-history show, and the evolution of the format, in order to draw attention to the particular affective and discursive potentialities of reality television as a medium. The first of these productions was the British series 1900 house, produced in 1999 and broadcast in 2000 as part of the UK’s commemoration of the turn of the millennium. The immediate popularity of the series, both in
Britain and elsewhere, generated a succession of similar productions in the UK, and locally produced versions of the format (which were, at least initially, made under licence to the UK) subsequently appeared in America, Australia and New Zealand. The premise of the genre, which requires a ‘modern day’ family to live according to the social mores and material conditions of an earlier period in history, offers a hybrid of the docu-soap (observational documentary/extended duration/domestic setting/everyday life) and the competitive survival or isolation gamedoc (challenging or harsh living conditions/isolation from media/intimate living quarters) all wrapped up nicely by the trimmings of a costume drama.

As much as these programs may make ‘history’ their mise en scène, however, the participants’ experiences are located very much in the present. The central conflict offered up by this format is, indeed, the critical collision between past and present; the disjunction between the contemporary sensibilities frequently asserted by the participating families and the historically located behavioural codes to which they are obliged to conform. Writing on an Australian example of the format, Michelle Arrow noted that ‘It focuses on the material conditions of the past at the expense of politics; it gazes at the past through the prism of personal relationships and conflict, and it reproduces popular social memory of the past’ (2007: 64). This emphasis led her to propose an equation: history minus politics = nostalgia. Similarly, Scott Diffrient, writing on the British 1940s house, suggested that reality-history is all about ‘tactalizing’ the past (2007: 43). Thus, the mode of history telling offered up by reality television is personal rather than political, grounded in the everyday and the domestic, based on feelings rather than factual information, and embrocated by the vagaries of nostalgia.

While this emphasis – typical of reality television as a genre – has led to the cultural devaluation of such programs, I would argue that it is precisely their sentimentality, and their investment in affect, intimacy and embodiment, that makes them such revealing barometers of contemporary culture.

Recent scholarship on reality television format transfer, by which a successful show is sold to other territories as a format shell and reproduced with local participants and cultural inflections, has considered the degree of cultural transference the format rubric might
perpetuate. As noted, the paradigm established by the British *1900 house*, and its immediate successor *1940s house*, was reproduced in New Zealand as *Pioneer house* and *Colonial house*, in America as *Frontier house* and then *Colonial house*, and in Australia as *Outback house* and *The colony*. As this list indicates, the eponymous ‘house’ of the original series has been used repeatedly as a genre marker, linking subsequent reality-history series to their British progenitor. Thus, *1900 house* effectively supplied a template for the telling of national, social history, and its export to postcolonial nations bears with it an ideological charge.

While the first of the New Zealand productions – *Pioneer house* (2001) – adhered so closely to the format shell provided by *1900 house* that the history of Victorian domesticity that it supplied appeared, disconcertingly, like a re-enactment of someone else’s history, the American productions were the first to coopt the formula of the reality-history show for the purposes of establishing a culturally specific history beyond the British paradigm. In *Frontier house*, set in 1893, and subsequently and more decisively in *Colonial house*, set much earlier in 1628, participants enacted historically significant rites of arrival and settlement, literally breaking ground, building homes and founding small communities, in the apparently unoccupied landscapes of Midwest America.

Similarly, the two Australian shows – *Outback house* (set in 1861) and *The colony* (set circa 1800) – have worked to specify national history through an engagement with issues of race relations, class hierarchies, land ownership and convict history. Like *The colony*, the most recent New Zealand production, *One land*, broke with the genre-marking title construction of ‘house’, indicating both a pull away from the European template, and a discursive and thematic shift from the insularity of a private domestic dwelling to the land and its political status. Furthermore, *One land* addressed, at least in the sense of rendering visible, both Maori and Pakeha cultural identities, language and behavioural codes or Tikanga, as well as acknowledging and dramatising the anterior claim to the land by Maori and the disruption caused by the arrival of Europeans.
Thus, the televisual re-presentation of both history and nation accrues new and more complex significations within a postcolonial context. Rather than confirming national history through the commemorative reification of past domestic experiences (an effect that might characterise British examples of this trend), reality-history series in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand approach and/or attempt to represent a colonial history that is both emergent and contested. As scholarly responses to Australian examples of the genre (Arrow 2007; Schwarz 2010) suggest, the re-presentation of colonial settlement in these programs re-imagines a bloodless history, not as it once was but how we might wish it to have been.

The three-minute sequence that introduced the series to viewers illustrates the often contradictory impulses of the program’s relationship with both history and culture:

Voice Over [Rachel House]: What would happen if you went back in time? ... to live here, New Zealand as it was in the 1850s; a land where our Maori and European ancestors lived side by side. Three modern-day families – two Maori and one Pakeha – travel back in time to live together, as they did in the mid-19th century. The Smiths will live as a European working-class settler family; their only possessions what they can carry. On the Pa, two very different Maori families will live together: the Ririnui family are deeply immersed in their own culture and will only speak Te Reo Maori, while the Dalrymples have long ago turned their backs on their Maori heritage. No electricity, no toilet, no running water, not even the basics of modern day life. Instead, they must struggle with whale bone corsets, waka, and depending on each other for their survival. In this social and cultural experiment, 21st century families will attempt to live a 19th century life. Three families, but two very different cultures, sharing One Land.

This introductory sequence, and particularly the scripted voice-over, pointed to a number of critical contentions, both typical of the reality-history television production as a genre and specific to this series and its rather audacious attempt to ‘do’ the origins of New Zealand biculturalism as a reality show. Firstly, the voice-over drew on the now established rhetoric of the genre, which promises to take audiences ‘back in time’, or conversely to bring history ‘here’ into the present. The concept of ‘living history’ has become a standard trope of the
reality-history genre, one that posits an oxymoron and promises the potential disruption of linear conceptions of historical temporality. Secondly, the introduction reminded us that austerity, deprivation and survival would be key challenges posited by the experience of immersion in the ‘past’, an emphasis that linked the format (as I have suggested) with other reality challenge shows – from *Survivor* to *Outback Jack* – which have nothing to do with history, and everything to do with social isolation and the absence of technologies of modernity. This strategy in and of itself, enhances the format’s reality claim via tropes of authenticity, naturalism, realism and even primitivism.

Thirdly, in its use of the collective pronoun (‘*our* Maori and Pakeha ancestors’), its designation of ‘here’ as New Zealand both past and present, and its will to situate Maori and Pakeha as living ‘side by side’, the rhetoric of the introduction laboured to incorporate the television audience into a shared experience of national biculturalism. The closing statement, which was repeated at the beginning of each episode thereafter and became the series’ by-line – ‘Three families, but two very different cultures, sharing *One Land*’ – further articulated the dubious ideological ambitions of the project. As this introduction delineated, the challenges presented within this curious format were multi-layered. Participants had to contend with the irritations of history (the stiff corsets, the lack of plumbing), with each other (indeed, inter-family squabbling became the focal point of drama within the show), with their ascribed cultural identity (something with which the Dalrymples had a particularly antagonistic relationship from the start) and with, more profoundly, the diminishing effect of the program’s mantra, which insisted on funnelling three families into two cultures, and thereafter into *One land*.

I would like to highlight three aspects of the *One land* narrative that might explicate the problematic representation of land and culture. Firstly, I will discuss the representation of arrival and home making; secondly, the symbolic function of trade between the two cultures; and, finally, the repudiation of the Dalrymple family and the consequences of their departure from the Pa. Respectively, a close reading of these moments in the text reveal, firstly, the extent to which the series worked in the service of settler fantasies of belonging, as it actualised and naturalised the act of settlement, perpetuating settler mythologies of hard
work and ingenuity in ways that indicated that settlers earned their right to occupy the land. Secondly, ritualised exchanges between the settler and Pa families established an idealised biculturalism founded upon cooperation, reciprocity, mutual benefit and respect for difference. Thirdly, a series of disagreements between participating families, which culminate in a violent altercation and the expulsion of one family from the group (but not from the production), told precisely the story the series might wish to disavow.

The arrival of the three families at the site of the production was stage managed in a number of ways. Firstly, the Dalrymples and the Heke-Ririnuis were set up at the Pa site several days before the Smith family joined the production. Secondly, when the two Maori families arrived for the first time at the gates of the Pa, the home fires were already burning, vegetables were growing in the garden, fresh-laid eggs awaited discovery in the hen house. In this way, the Pa families were inducted into a place where they already lived and had been living for some time. In contrast, when the Smiths set foot on land several days later, it was for the first time both within the framework of an imagined historicity and in the present. This is when reality-history programming is at its most affective – when the enactment of experiences that are located in the past are authentically ‘doubled’ in the present. Their shack was bare and dilapidated, and, as the voice-over intoned, they had ‘only what they can carry’, including livestock, food and utensils, with which to set up home. Thirdly, while the magic of television cut straight from the coastal arrival of the Maori families by waka to a shot of them entering the Pa gates, the Smith family took two days to travel the same distance to their cabin, camping overnight on the beach, and trekking through bush with trunks on their backs. While these three aspects of the constructed arrival sequence served to establish the anteriority of Maori as prior occupants of the land, the extended narrative surrounding the arrival of the Smiths exhibited what Anja Schwarz has discussed as ‘the fixation with the moment of colonisation and an underlying sense of unease about belonging’ (McCalman and Pickering 2010: 10) and underscored the labour of settlement in ways that gratified popular mythologies of settler hardiness and perseverance. By making the Smith’s journey more of a pilgrimage, the ‘home’ they created by the river bank appeared more deserved, because it had been harder won.
Thenceforth, in its representation of Maori–Pakeha relations, the program enacted both a merger between two cultures and the emergence of new cultural identities. The ‘journey’ of the Smith family from Christchurch enacted the emergence of the Pakeha New Zealander as resident of the land. They arrived as Europeans – hopeful and determined, yet ill at ease with the landscape, unable to fish with a line, cook on an open fire, or milk a goat. After six weeks in the bush they left as Pakeha – sunburnt, calloused, relaxed, ‘at home’ on the land, and even speaking a few words of Te Reo.

More critically, the ‘temporal doubling’ (Schwarz 2010: 34) effected by reality-history productions enables a more complex positioning of contemporary New Zealanders within their own history. Writing on a major documentary series about New Zealand’s history, Stephen Turner suggested that the docudrama of European settlement involves ‘The hollowing-out of a fully Maori place and the embedding within it of a settler place’ (2009: 251). Unlike the formal re-enactments of historically significant events, such as the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, to which Turner was referring, the embodied enactment of settlement in One land is all about establishing a home (literally and metaphorically) for European settlers in the New Zealand landscape. It is also about inserting (contemporary) Pakeha into the fabric of the country’s history, allowing them to be both there and here at once, both anterior and fully present. To quote Turner again, ‘While Pakeha in the first instance stepped ashore in somebody else’s country, the re-enactment of this moment has them stepping ashore in their own country – the new country of New Zealand. In re-enactment scenarios, settlers are already at home’ (2009: 245). Taking this even further, Turner suggested that within these re-enactments ‘Today’s second settlers appear fully present in the past, and therefore as if they are indigenous’ (p 247), as ‘Their homeland turns out to have been here all along’ (p 245).

As suggested, the title of the series, One land, presupposed or insisted upon the merging of ‘two very different cultures’. There cannot be ‘two’ New Zealands, the title suggested, and so both cultural identities, diametrically positioned at the outset, had to move towards the other
for the implied narrative of the series’ title to come to fruition. According to such a reading, moments of cultural and commercial exchange took on a special significance. The first meeting between the two parties was both an official welcome from the resident group to the newcomer and an eager commercial exchange. The Maori families brought fish, kumera and (European) onions to the bartering table; organic produce that asserted their affinity with the land. In return, the settler family offered inorganic articles that signified their relationship with an industrialised alterity: a candle in a glass bottle, a teapot and a mirror.

While the Smiths and the Ririnui families sustained a complementary patterning of cultural identity through an ongoing reciprocation of food/labour/advice, the third family – the Dalrymples – were caught on the cusp of the Maori–Pakeha binary in all the wrong ways. As the voice-over intoned: ‘This family were so out of touch with their Maori roots that they actually applied to be on the show as the Pakeha family’. This apparent error in personal identity formation was never forgiven and, I would go so far as to say, actively punished throughout the series. Required to live on the Pa with the Heke-Ririnui family, speak Te Reo Maori (of which they have not a single word), respect Tikanga Maori (protocol of which they have no understanding), and adopt culturally specific attitudes to gender, tapu, child rearing and communal living, the Dalrymples were set up to fail. When simmering inter-family tensions regarding the division of labour and responsibilities on the Pa erupted in a violent altercation between Evan (Dalrymple) and Aramahou (Ririnui), the Dalrymple clan staged a dramatic exodus from the Pa site, only to find themselves in a cultural no-man’s-land, repudiated in turn by the Ririnui family of the Pa and the Smiths in their settler encampment. One land concluded, then, with an uncomfortable portrait of cultural disaffection. The cabin on the hill (hastily constructed by the production team to house the Dalrymples) ideologically and geographically triangulated a determinedly binary relationship and the bicultural project was rent asunder. While I agree with Michelle Arrow, who suggested that these formats manifest ‘a settler fantasy of a colonisation without violence’ (2007: 64), the repressed narrative of conflict, cultural subjugation and an apology that never comes was acted out via the ‘problem’ of the Dalrymple family, in ways that the series was unable either to contain or resolve.
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Cultural reorientations: how Indian mothers and daughters in Canberra are renegotiating their ‘hyphenated’ identities

Aruna Manuelrayan

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to get a sense of the current profile of Indian mothers and daughters in Australia by analysing data collected from a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews undertaken in July 2009. This preliminary analysis is the first step in a nationwide study of the migration experience and lifestyle of Indian women in Australia and the impact of migration on their culture and identity. The analysis I present here forms part of my doctoral study, for which I draw inspiration not only from the lived experiences of the Indian mothers and daughters but also from my own migration experiences.

Introduction

The Indian diaspora has in the past three decades comprised more than 20 million people spread all over the world. Although that figure is small compared to the more than a billion inhabitants in the homeland, it has reached a critical mass in various host countries. (Safran, Sahoo and Lal 2008)

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Very little is known about women’s migration and their lived experiences of leaving their homelands to settle in another country. Several questions can be asked about their experiences, but the one that is most pertinent to this study is whether migration leads to improvements in the status of women. For example, do they think their experiences of migration and Australian society dilute Indian patriarchal structures to some degree and enhance women’s autonomy or do they perpetuate dependency (UN-INSTRAW 1994: 1)? In my doctoral study I intend to begin to answer this question and more about the experiences of Indian mothers and daughters in diaspora communities.

Some researchers who study migration experiences claim that ‘women in the diaspora remain attached to, and [are] empowered by, a “home” culture and a tradition … as strategies for survival in a new context’ (Clifford 1994: 314) and ‘the challenge for these women … is to evolve an outlook more consistent with modern city survival – without seeming to lose anything of their essential “Indianness”’ (Mitter 1991: 54). Further research suggests that the challenges that confront mothers are not very different from those faced by their daughters (Joshi 2000).

In 2007 I embarked on a project to study the trials and triumphs of the Indian diaspora in South Australia, which provided me with first-hand evidence about the views of Indian migrants on their migration experience and their life in Australia. The evidence, though anecdotal, prompted me to explore further through a doctoral study how Indian mothers and daughters in different states in Australia are coping with or embracing the impact of migration. Given that the male-to-female ratio of the 120,000 Indian-born in Australia (ABS 2006) is 1:1, it is significant to research women in the Indian diaspora and their experiences as migrants in Australia. As a woman and migrant myself, with an adult daughter and a migrant mother, I am personally aware of the impact that migration has on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of our lives and thus chose to investigate this further.

In this paper I present an overview of the literature on the Indian diaspora, outlining previous studies and research on migration, and shedding light on the experience of Indian women
migrants in Australia. I will also outline my study plan, discussing my research method, explaining the challenges and efforts to minimise or overcome obstacles, and taking into consideration the limitations of my method. I will then analyse the data collected from a sample of Indian mothers and daughters in Canberra. I will draw only a preliminary conclusion on the basis of my findings so far.

**Literature review**

As Indians move from their home country to settle in many parts of the world, they have cause to re-evaluate their traditional roles as practised in India and the socio-cultural adjustments that may be required in their new homeland. It is inevitable that some foreign values and beliefs have been accepted by traditional world cultures. Although western and non-western cultures should not be viewed as dichotomous, they do differ in some aspects and history shows that subtly prevailing traditions can lose their significance under the guise of modernisation (Sundaram 2006). However, culture is dynamic, a way of living in a given community. It is the amalgamation of one’s language, literature, religion and way of life. Therefore by its very nature culture is adaptable and to be adapted. One of the aims of my doctoral study is to explore this dynamic culture through the lived experiences of Indian mothers and daughters in Australia.

Although extensive research has been conducted on migrant communities and their experiences, it is still lacking with respect to women as strongly evidenced by the scarcity of literature on Indian women in Australia. Mukherjee confirmed that ‘not much is known about these women [and] their experiences while establishing themselves in the Australian environment’ (1992: 51). Anderson and Jack added that one of the reasons is that Indian women ‘often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions’ (1991: 11). As an ethnic entity they are a very close-knit group and as such are threatened by outsiders. This means that personal or lived experiences are not made public, as Mukherjee affirmed:
Stories are private and personal and, according to their cultural traditions, should normally remain in their family and not be published in the wider community, especially not in an adopted country ... Matters related to their family and their kin which have been expressed in their life stories may become available to the public and ... be a source of ‘gossip’ which may threaten their family status and respectability. (1992: 55)

Further, men have higher status than women in traditional Indian society, where ‘Indian men retained the authority accorded to them by a patriarchal, extended family structure’ (Ramusack and Sievers 1999: 43). This means that, by the very nature of Indian culture and society, women are presumed subordinate to men and therefore may be ‘muted’ to some extent in expressing their views.

Kannan and Joshi did seminal work in the 1970s and 1980s on Indian mothers and daughters in Victoria (Kannan 2002; Joshi 2000). They conducted interviews with one specific generation; Kannan focused on mothers while Joshi’s study was on daughters. Their findings show that mothers and daughters had dissimilar experiences of migration and living in a diasporic community. What is notable in these two studies is the evidence of the issues that second-generation Indian women faced within the process of settling and living in Australia; these included identity, career, language and religion.

Methodology
Given the nature of getting information about the experiences of Indian mothers and daughters and the personal and privacy issues interwoven into their lives and that of their family, it is imperative that the methodology used is sensitive and appropriate for collection of such data.

I used a qualitative research methodology with auto-ethnography as a participatory research tool. Auto-ethnography is the study of the awareness of the self within a culture and as such the intent of auto-ethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural. It is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the
cultural, placing the self within a social context, often written in the first person and featuring dialogue, emotion and self-consciousness, telling relational and institutional stories that are affected by history, social structure and culture (Ellis and Bochner 2000, cited in Holt 2003: 2; Reed-Danahay 1997a). When the dual nature of auto-ethnography is apprehended, it is a useful term with which to pose the binary conventions of a self–society split, as well as the boundary between objective and subjective (Reed-Danahay 1997b: 2). Auto-ethnographers, as insiders, ‘possess the qualities of often permanent identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognised both by themselves and the people of whom they are part’ (Hayano 1997: 100). They therefore challenge conventional wisdom about silent authorship, where the researcher’s voice is not included in the presentation of the findings (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997). As a ‘boundary crosser’ the auto-ethnographer assumes a dual identity of researcher and the researched, thus exploring new ways of writing about the multiple, shifting identities of participants (researcher included), bearing in mind that questions of voice and authenticity are not to be overlooked.

Wall (2006: 1) claimed that auto-ethnography as an emerging qualitative research method grounded in postmodern philosophy allows the researcher to draw on her experience and write in a personalised style about socio-cultural phenomenon that have hitherto only been addressed in conventional academic terms or from anthropological perspectives. The stories narrated and presented here are women’s stories of migration and, to understand them, I who have gone through migration have a vantage point and have taken into consideration the ‘indigenous’ method of storytelling and construction of self, as a result of the shared experience. By juxtaposing my experiences, therefore, I am able to show how our stories are similar or different and why, thereby authenticating the accounts (Brettell 1997: 226–228).

The researcher’s voice is only validated when the question of who speaks on whose behalf and under what authority is answered satisfactorily. So while an ethnographer studies and systematically records human cultures that she is not part of, as an outsider, an auto-ethnographer does the same as an insider and practitioner of that culture. I want to be the ethnographer of my own culture by telling my story along with those of other Indian women
migrants in Australia. This genre of writing allows me to include myself as the narrator of my story and the stories of the participants. As can be seen from the above, auto-ethnography differs from ethnography in that it is an insider’s view, and as such it takes into account socio-cultural overtones when analysing and telling the stories of the participants. Therefore I am in a position to foreground the lived experiences of the researcher and the researched. I was willing to be a vulnerable participant-observer. I was ready to focus on my experience as a means to access knowledge that will shed light on the experiences of Indian women migrants in Australia.

In this study I document the stories and perceptions of Indian mothers and their daughters about being an Indian migrant in Australia and their continual ties and relationship with their homeland. I recorded their stories through interviews which were based on a semi-structured questionnaire on issues such as the challenges they face in their newly adopted country, their coping mechanisms, their achievements as well as ways of maintaining their ties with their homeland. This study consists of five sets of mothers and daughters. I capture and analyse their stories here as they were told to me to look at the differences of perceptions between the first and second generations of Indian women in Australia.

The women interviewed do not represent a cross-section of Indian migrants. They are all upper middle class. They are south Indians of Hindu background. They were friends of an acquaintance.

I began each session by explaining the aim of the interview. I chose to open with a summary of my migration story as I had invaded their homes not only as a guest but also as a researcher and it was only right and fair that they got to hear my story before I got to hear theirs. I treated each set as one case (one mother and at least one daughter). This paper is based on the preliminary findings of five cases of Indian mothers and daughters residing in Canberra. In total, 15 participants were interviewed in their family homes. I asked the following questions of each case:
1. What were/are the push and pull factors?
2. What challenges did/do you face in terms of practising and transmitting your culture such as language and religion?
3. What challenges did/do you face in terms of settlement and employment?
4. How did/do you cope with or overcome the above challenges?
5. What achievements and/or contributions have you made since migrating?
6. Were you able to fulfill your aspirations?

In this paper I will address and develop the first three questions.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed; and were then sent to each case for approval of what they said in the interview. It was only after their approval was given that I began to analyse the interview data.

**Preliminary findings**

*Setting the scene: general observations*

Even before the front door was opened, in nearly 80 per cent of the cases I was made aware that I was about to enter an Indian home. The tell-tale signs were either an icon, a picture of a deity or the smell of Indian incense. In 100 per cent of the cases I also noticed an altar or Indian paintings or decor or heard *bhajan* (Indian chants) playing as I entered the house. I offered a clasped palm greeting to the recipient at the door, the mother and daughter, who were awaiting my arrival. In 80 per cent of the cases it was reciprocated by the mothers. None of the daughters returned my Indian greeting. Sixty per cent of the mothers were dressed in *salwar khamis* (traditional Indian dress) and had a *bindi* (dot on the forehead). One hundred per cent of the daughters were in jeans or pants but 10 per cent of the daughters also had a *bindi*. In all cases the husband was within sight when I entered the house. They were introduced to me and in 80 per cent of the cases my presence was acknowledged with a nod and a smile.
Characteristics of all cases

All cases were practising Hindus and regularly visited the temple to pray. All the mothers had a bindi on their forehead and all participants could speak at least one Indian language. All five of the mothers had Indian husbands, as well as 40 per cent of the daughters, with the remaining 60 per cent stating that they would prefer to marry Indians in the future.

Religion: All of the cases professed to be born Hindus, with 10 per cent practising Christianity as well and 10 per cent taking an interest in Buddhism.

Language: In terms of languages spoken at home and in the diasporic community, 80 per cent of the mothers could speak at least two Indian languages and 60 per cent of the daughters could speak at least two Indian languages.

Profession: The mothers had professions ranging from teaching to working for the government to being a homemaker and a carer. Of the mothers with a profession, all said that they did not have too much trouble getting a job in their field or in a related area when they came to Australia. The exception was Case 5 who was a practising doctor in India. She chose not to pursue her profession as she found the pathway to gaining recognition to practice in Australia too rigorous at her age, so she chose to become a carer. The daughters have either studied or were studying a tertiary course in Australia. Those who were working were working in the civil service.

Table 1 summarises additional characteristics of the cases.
Table 1: Characteristics of the cases

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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
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<th>Case 3</th>
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<td>Doctor/dentist</td>
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Push/pull factors

For the purposes of this research, ‘push factors’ refer to what was happening in India that led them to leave, and ‘pull factors’ are the reasons for deciding to migrate to Australia and not America or England, the other two traditional destinations. Traditionally Indian women do not leave their parents’ home until the day they marry, and they have rarely been the instigator of an overseas move. So it was no surprise that 60 per cent of the women migrated to Australia because their ‘spouses wanted to’, and 100 per cent of them said the move was also to give their children a ‘better life’. Eighty per cent of them were career women and did not see the need to leave India, and 40 per cent reported that unfavourable conditions in India made them leave. Eighty per cent have lived in Australia for at least 20 years and 20 per cent migrated first to the UK and then decided to settle in Australia. All five cases said that the main reason for migration to Australia was to provide a better future for their children and family.
Case 1’s husband wanted a new experience. Her ‘husband was adamant’, so she took unpaid leave from her job as a vice-principal. Within two months she got a job as a teacher. Her husband could not find a job in his field, so he went to university to pursue a course that eventually secured him a job.

Case 2’s husband, a practising doctor, wanted to go to UK, where they had settled first, to continue his studies. Then he wanted to achieve his dream of having the ‘letter MRCP behind his name’, so the family had to re-migrate, this time to Australia.

Case 3 came to be with her husband who was already working in Australia. She also said that in India it was a trend to go overseas to live and work.

Case 4 came to Australia to give her children a better future. She confessed that, because of the ‘quota system’ in India that privileged the ‘untouchables’, she feared her children might not have the chance to get a place in university and/or a profession such as medicine. She had also gone for a briefing at the Australian High Commission in India which led her to decide to migrate. One other account she narrated that she strongly believes was the final reason for their migration was an incidental meeting. She happened to be sitting next to a girl in the bus when the girl started sobbing. When ask why, the girl had responded that she did not get a place in college (university) to study commerce. This led Case 4 to think of her daughters who had ambitions to study medicine.

Case 5 said that, although her ‘husband had plans to migrate’, he did not impose. She left because of unfavourable conditions in India. She wanted her family to have a better quality of life and to give their children a better education.

In my case I, too, came for a better life for my daughter. I knew that she was unlikely to get a place in university because of her average grades, which would in turn lead to dim career prospects. Therefore my husband and I thought it best to leave Singapore after she had finished Year 12 and to enrol her in tertiary education in Australia. Besides, we also were aware that life after retirement in Singapore
would be boring and unfulfilling. Although my husband and I were doing well in our careers and had family in Singapore, in our late 40s we felt that Singapore was not the place to retire. So my husband opted for early retirement and I resigned in anticipation of a more enjoyable and productive post-retirement. We had travelled to England and New Zealand wanting to migrate there but found these countries to be rather cold and the former too crowded and the latter too sparsely populated.

**Indian culture and continuity**

A heterogeneous race like the Indians is bound to have cultural variations within the diaspora that reflect different origins, for example Indians from India and Indians from Fiji and so on. However, in this paper I do not dwell on the differences. It is indeed a challenge to label this rather diverse community of people accurately. For the purposes of this research, the term diaspora means

any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding. However, what constitutes ethnic identity is fluid and changes over time. It means different things to different people at different points of time, place and circumstance. (Sharma, Pal and Chakrabathi 2004: xi)

However, there is evidence to suggest that a group-ethnic consciousness is emerging, sustained by a sense of a common history and the belief in a common fate, forging the unity of a divided people as a ‘diasporic discourse’ in the construction of ‘otherness’ in a white-dominated democracy like Australia (Parekh, Singh and Vertovec 2003). The elements that provide this commonality are ‘the markers of identity – food, clothes, language retention, religion, music, dance … customs of the individual community … and the impact of the culture of the adopted country’ (Sharma, Pal and Chakrabathi 2004: xi).

When asked to comment on what Indian culture meant to them, all of the participants concluded that Indian culture is synonymous with universal values such as being honest, respectful and showing kindness to people regardless of their colour, creed or age. When
asked whether they thought they had passed on their religious heritage, 100 per cent of the
mothers felt that they had indeed made an attempt to keep their religion alive. This, they said,
was done by performing *poojas* or prayers or taking their children to the temple or to India for
short holidays. Although the daughters either came to Australia at a very young age or were
born here, from my observation and conversation with them they seemed to have a good
balance of traditional Indian and Australian values. All of them could speak or understand at
least one Indian language; they were able to sing traditional *carnatic* songs or dance the
*baratha natiyam* or the *kuchi pudi* (classical music and dance).

About 40 per cent of the daughters were already married to Indian men from their language
group. One of the two was expecting her second child. Two of the three unmarried daughters
said they would prefer to marry an Indian or at least a man who would not stop them from
practising their religion and upholding their tradition and values. The reason for preferring to
marry an Indian was, according to them, it would be easier for their spouses to understand
them and in turn help to pass on their culture and identity to their children. One hundred per
cent of the daughters wanted their children to learn their language and tradition. All
bemoaned the fact that they were not as well versed or steeped in their culture as their
mothers were and they were afraid that they would not be effective at imparting it to their
children. However, 60 per cent said that there was nothing wrong in partying late or
engaging in social drinking, as long as they did not go overboard.

When questioned about their identity, without reservation all cases stated they were Indian
Australians or, for those born here, Australian Indians. To them their heritage was as
important as their nationality. In my observation and their responses to the interviews, it is
obvious that all cases have, to a large extent, maintained their cultural heritage, including
religion, language and the arts.

*Case 1* was concerned about cultural conflict, although she believed that all cultures are
‘welcome’ in Australia. She pointed out that even in India there is resistance and even
rejection of cultures within states. She is a trained carnatic musician and teaches it as a hobby.
She goes to the temple on a regular basis. She had organised ‘Friendship Fair’, a nine-day event in which cultural groups from interstate were invited to participate. Her daughter had an arranged marriage to an Indian man from their language group. The daughter said she prays at home and performs Indian dances. She was keen to pass on her culture to her own daughter and the yet-to-be-born child. She also wanted to impart the significance of the key Indian festivals to her children. She believed that ‘children should be open to other cultural patterns’.

Case 2 confessed that she is not a ‘zealous Hindu’. She went to an Anglo-Indian school where she attended bhajan classes while the Christian girls went to scripture classes. She sneaked into scripture classes as she was attracted to them. She said she grew up reciting the rosary and still prays to St Anthony. She has an altar where she has her Hindu deities and the Christian god. According to her, ‘all gods are one’. She recalled a time when her children, who went to Catholic schools in Australia, made the sign of the cross in front of her altar. She told them it was not wrong but Hindus do not do it. She proudly claimed that her husband and children often request that she pray to St Anthony on their behalf. She has observed a ‘double standard in the social norms’ between [Indian] boys and girls. This she says has been ‘instilled from young’. She has always encouraged her children to speak her mother tongue. One of her daughters wanted to be introduced to a suitor from her language group and has since married him. She thanks her parents for taking her back to India every two years. This, she says, has helped her to keep her language and religion alive. She did admit that she struggled with what her culture was when she was younger, but soon realised that the curfews that her parents imposed were nothing to do with culture but their way of ensuring her safety. She said social drinking and clubbing are very Australian but these were not against Indian culture. She said young people should know their limit. She left home to go interstate to do a degree in Medicine but did not lose her identity. She is proud of her origin and says she is an ‘Indian plus an Australian’. She was concerned that she might not be able to teach her children her language well because she does not speak it well. But she was steadfast about passing on her language and religion to her children. She says this can be done more
easily now that she is married to an Indian than if she married an Australian or someone from another religious or language group.

**Case 3** is sceptical about religion. She is a Hindu by birth, knows the philosophy behind her religion, and speaks Hindi and Punjabi. She has taken an interest in Buddhism. She strongly believes that ‘we [meaning those in the diaspora]’ are the guardians of our culture [more] than those in India’. She calls herself an ‘Indian-born Australian’. Her daughter would prefer to marry an Indian as she believes it will be easier to pass down her language, culture and religion. She is steeped culturally; she does a couple of Indian dances, sings and plays the piano. She admitted that she has a fascination with western ways but is very grounded in her Indian ways. So she claimed she is a product of two cultures.

**Case 4** believed that one should be ‘comfortable in one’s own skin’ and therefore one does not have to renounce one’s culture, language or religion in order to live in Australia. She says in Australia ‘you can be what you want to be’. Both her daughters left home to study medicine interstate. They do not have boyfriends. They speak their language. They practise their religion by doing *poojas* and going to the temple. They therefore do not think they have lost their culture but are happy that they have the opportunity to live in two cultures.

**Case 5** equates the values and ethos of Hinduism to universal values. She says she keeps the religion alive by doing *poojas* and going to the temple once a week. She explained that, while her elder daughter has internalised Indian values because she is older, the younger one who is 8 ‘goes to school here [Australia]’, enjoys attending Indian religious classes and likes to wear Indian outfits.

**In my case** I am a practising Catholic but I grew up in a predominately Hindu neighbourhood. As such, I was aware of my dual identity from a young age, and later appreciated and now cherish it. Given that my daughter and I are bilingual in my mother language Tamil and English, we are able to appreciate culturally steeped practices that hail from Indian tradition as well as those of ‘western’ Christian practices. We are proud of our heritage and new nationality. Thus we call ourselves
Singapore-born Indian Australians. I have a passion to sustain and, where possible, promote my language and religion, so I have been instrumental in starting a monthly Tamil Catholic mass.

**Professional development**

For the purposes of this study, professional development refers to both professional (meaning career-related) progress, and personal or self-fulfilment type of development. This can be formal learning requiring ability and commitment or a practical process of learning, adapting and succeeding in something other than a career-oriented goal. In this respect, all the mothers have succeeded in the area of professional development.

From the Canberra data, 40 per cent of the mothers seem to have had a smooth transition into their profession. They have also found ways to contribute to their host nation as well as the Indian community. They seem to have created a better Australia by striking a balance.

**Case 1** is a high school teacher. She works as an English tutor and teaches carnatic music from home. Her daughter studied and is an auditor in Australia.

**Case 2** has always been a homemaker. After her children grew up, she decided to do some voluntary work with St Vincent de Paul. She said this was something she would never have been able to do in India as her husband was a doctor and she was not ‘allowed’ to do any form of work. Both of her daughters have an Australian degree. Both are practising doctors.

**Case 3** took up a part-time job in a bank and soon got a full-time position. Then she became pregnant and could not go back to her bank job, so she sat the entrance test for an Australian Taxation Office position. She got the job but had to give it up as they had to move to Darwin where her husband was posted. She had a ‘laid-back life’, taking care of her children until she felt the need to do something to ‘stimulate her mind’. So she became interested in IT. Soon her husband was posted to their present state where she applied for a position as a research assistant and her application was rejected. This led her to do a degree in IT and since then she
has been employed as a director in a government department. Her elder daughter is a practising doctor while the second is finishing Year 12.

Case 4 was working in a manufacturing industry that dealt with fabrics. However, she could not get a job in her field because of the recession in Australia. So she worked as a volunteer with a government research agency for some time. Having proven herself, she was offered a job and later she was promoted to Executive Officer. Both her daughters have an Australian degree. One is a practising doctor while the second is studying dentistry.

Case 5 came to Australia as a practising doctor but was told that she had to sit for the Australian Medical Council Examination in order to qualify to practice. While finding out how to go about doing it, she got a voluntary job in an aged care facility which soon recognised her potential and encouraged her to take up a certificate in aged care and provided her with free aged care training. This led her to realise that she was good with the elderly and she found satisfaction. So she has given up her plans to sit the medical examination. Her daughter is studying a degree in psychology. She is also working part-time in a supermarket.

In my case Although I was a high school teacher for more than 20 years when I resigned to migrate to Australia, I had to apply to be registered with the Teacher’s Registration Board to be eligible to teach in South Australia. As soon as my application was processed, I applied to the Department of Education and Children’s Services for a teaching position. I was told that I was unlikely to secure a job in the immediate future as they ‘were inundated with 12,000 applications which had been lodged 6 months’ prior to my application’. So I enrolled to do a Master of Education in TESOL. Just as I was about to start my studies, I was offered a six-month contract to teach in a high school. I accepted it as I was afraid that I might not be offered another job should I decline it. Thus I had to balance my job, family and studies. On completion of the contract and my studies, I was successful in getting a job teaching adult migrants. I tried it for six months and realised that it was not what I wanted to do, so I resigned. Then I got a job teaching international students in a private tertiary college. While teaching there, I applied to do a PhD, which I am currently pursuing. My daughter completed Year 12 and went on to do a degree in psychology. Within two years of that, she decided to leave home. She went to Tasmania
to work and study. **After two years she returned, started a business from home and is now undertaking another course of study.**

**Discussion**

In Indian culture, traditionally men were the sole breadwinners and decision makers and what they said had to be accepted unconditionally by the female members of the family and the children. Women were conditioned and expected to be submissive and at times subservient to the male members of their family and community. However, the situation changed when women were given the opportunity to go to school, have an education and the choice to seek employment. An increasing number of Indian women sought employment within ‘women’s domains’ such as teaching or nursing. Moreover, Indian women had the freedom to become professionals in formerly male-only domains such as medicine and engineering. This is evidenced by the women who were interviewed. Women who had no choice but to leave their homeland because their husbands wanted to pursue their career or follow their dream in Australia soon found an avenue to assert their identity. They did not remain at home as homemakers and caregivers only, but also became breadwinners. Their unflinching loyalty to and support for their husbands did not stop them from showing their incredible strength and resilience in a foreign land. The sacrifices they made were out of the boundless love and affection they had for their family, particularly for their children. The courage and vision of these women should not go unnoticed.

My interviews confirm that the values parents imbibe in their children when they are young help mould them. Indian society has deep-rooted values, such as respecting elders, having faith in God, caring for the extended family, and so on. Both mothers and daughters seem to believe that these values should be preserved in a foreign society. At the same time mothers are willing to allow their daughters to adopt Australian values which encourage independence, freedom of expression and a ‘fair go’ for all. While 40 per cent of the daughters resented ‘curfews’, they realised in hindsight that it was for their own good. Forty per cent of the daughters also spoke about drinking alcohol and ‘partying till the late hours’ as an accepted Australian way of life, which has to be done in moderation. As for the mothers, only
10 per cent admitted that they did not drink alcohol but added that it was a choice. All of the mothers were steeped in their language, religion and culture while all of the daughters admitted that they were not competent enough to pass on all they have learnt from their mothers as they live in a dual culture. However, they were confident that they would not let their culture die as the long-practised values would ensure its survival in Australia.

The women and their daughters who were my interviewees were not very different from my mother, my daughter and myself. My mother passed down our language, culture and tradition to me and I have passed them on to my daughter. Since coming to Australia she has learnt that in order to survive here she has to learn to be more sociable than an Indian girl was expected to. I was a school teacher and still am but since coming to Australia I have done a postgraduate degree to work in academia. I have also taken the opportunity to stand for local government. It was my initiative to migrate and my family had no objections. My husband was so supportive that he resigned from his job and, when we came to Australia, went to university to get a degree in IT. I vividly remember being told that there were three Indian groceries, two in the city and one in the east. Six years later there are more than three of them in my suburb. In the last three years I have witnessed the formation of Indian community-based organisations and an increase in the number of Indian magazines. There is no denying that there are likely to be some differences between the first and second generations. While the mothers had to work harder and had a steep learning curve, the daughters have different challenges and opportunities.

**Conclusion**

In my observation, both the first and second generation women came across as strong willed, fiercely independent, extremely intelligent and very well integrated. They thought that there was no such thing as ‘Indian’ culture, although they were quick to give examples of Indian cultural manifestations in the form of classical music and dance and going to the temple. One of the most interesting ideas they had for maintaining their tradition is frequent visits to India, where they get to meet up with their relatives and mingle with the locals. They foresaw the day Indian culture will be subsumed by a universal culture or perhaps a hybrid culture,
but said it was not a bad thing. The reason was they were in agreement that Australia is the ‘lucky country’ and will give everyone ‘a fair go’; and as such their children will have freedom of expression and ample opportunities to practise or keep their tradition alive, even if it were to be watered down. These women, both mothers and daughters, have also have found ways to contribute to all communities, not just the Indian community. Therefore, they seem to have created a better Australia for themselves and future generations by balancing their Indian ancestry and their Australian citizenry.

The women are the unsung heroes, the champions of their culture; for it is they who are instrumental in passing it down and at the same time embracing and instilling the importance of respecting the culture of the host country. From the experiences of the women interviewed, the role, status and aspirations of Indians, in particular Indian women, have changed dramatically since their arrival in Australia. However, in the words of a famous Afro-American writer, when it comes to migrant women, ‘at each arrival … we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions’ (Davies 1994: 5). Thus the migration experience and lifestyle of Indian women in Australia and the impact of migration on their culture and identity will continue to change.

References


Researching minority culture women’s standpoint and experiences of rights
Snjezana Bilic

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the methodology that I have employed to examine some of the issues that stemmed from conducting my doctoral research on Liberian and Afghan women in South Australia. I argue that a feminist approach is the most suitable to situate the representations of newly arrived women from minority cultures, since it challenges the invisibility and distortion of women’s experiences. I examine some of the dilemmas associated with representation within the feminist framework and acknowledge that, to implement the most adequate strategies of representation, a feminist researcher must be mindful of the ways that the differences between others are invoked and relied upon. I argue that feminist standpoint theory provides an invaluable basis from which to commence theorising about women’s lives. Finally, I address some of the ethical issues within my research and also, in the context of managing some of the challenges when conducting cross-cultural research, I discuss my own position as an insider/outsider.

My PhD research explored the theoretical parameters of the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism. In order to scrutinise the validity and the practical

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implications of these theoretical contributions I consulted the standpoint of those discerned by theorists as vulnerable under multicultural accommodation, namely, certain women from minority cultural groups. Accordingly, in this paper I discuss the theoretical framework that influenced my research methodology and I also address the dilemmas arising when researching women from different cultures.

In this paper I pursue two arguments. Firstly, I argue that a feminist approach is the most suitable to situate the representations of newly arrived women from minority cultures, since it challenges the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences. Secondly, I argue that feminist standpoint theory provides an invaluable basis from which to commence theorising about women's lives.

**On the dilemmas of representation within the feminist framework**

In my PhD research I sought to do the work of excavation, shifting the focus from the theoretical concerns in the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism to the voices of the women rendered vulnerable by these debates. I did this in order to reveal the locations and perspectives of minority culture women. This is where the feminist paradigm becomes particularly useful as its aim is to include women’s perspectives and experiences. The value of a feminist framework lies in its attention to the complexities of the differentiation and

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2 My dissertation was based on a qualitative research project that addressed the multifaceted issues of experiences of rights of Liberian and Afghan women in their countries of origin and in Australia. I examined how these women negotiate the multiplicity of rights experiences in the areas of education, work and family in their countries of origin and in Australia.

3 The extensive literature from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States warns about the tensions between women’s rights and cultural rights amongst minority cultural groups in multicultural contexts. A feminist concern in the debates on these tensions is that the preservation of cultural laws and traditions accommodated under cultural rights impacts mainly, but not solely, on the female members of the cultural groups in question. Women are the most affected by the preservation of traditional laws, particularly those who are mothers and wives, as they are considered to be bearers of culture. In my dissertation I outlined the main arguments that emerged at an early stage of the debates which involved theoretical arguments between the mainly liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin (1999) and the liberal culturalist Will Kymlicka (1999). The debates have since involved feminist theorists like Ayelet Shachar (2001) and (briefly) Martha Nussbaum (1999) and liberal culturalists Jeff Spinner-Halev (2001) and Chandran Kukathas (2001).
the affiliated fading of the concept of ‘universalised “woman” or “women”’ (Olesen, 2000: 221).^3

Considering the numerous complexities pertinent to researching the differences amongst women I recognise that a framework within which to facilitate an analysis of the effects of feminist/multiculturalist tensions under diasporic conditions in Australia demands particular sensitivity to issues of Eurocentrism, essentialisation and homogenisation of women’s experience. Thus, I aimed to avoid the fixations on culturalisation that characterise the debates about representation (Hinterberger, 2007).

I was mindful of how to consider and utilise difference. I pursued this in the light of works such as those of Gayatri Spivak (1988: 271 and 1999: 269), who in her famous thesis ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ reminded us of the dangers involved in assuming to know and to speak on behalf of others (specifically the subaltern woman). In discussing and speaking about others, Spivak (1999: 265) argued that the ways that some intellectuals deconstruct and claim to know ‘oppressed people’ with simplicity and transparency are problematic. A detrimental effect of this is that,

between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development. (Spivak, 1999: 304)^4

Furthermore, in the debates on the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism culture is too often invoked and represented as a monolithic concept, and the basis for differentiating (and often stereotyping) between groups and individuals. This adds difficulty to the task of representing others who are culturally different from oneself. This complexity was

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^3 Notwithstanding the challenges, it can be argued that diverse feminist contributions are triumphing in their endeavours to create a more inclusive form of human rights discourse.

^4 It is interesting to note that the original sentence in Spivak’s 1988 essay did not include the phrase ‘culturalism and development’. This phrase was added in Spivak’s 1999 revision and it highlights ways the new discourses of the ‘Third World woman’ leave the subaltern silent.
highlighted in my research, since I endeavoured to speak with the other who was culturally different to me. As Schutte contended, such communication is ‘one of the greatest challenges facing North–South relations and interaction’ (2000: 47). Schutte (2000: 50) argued that there will always be a ‘residue of meaning’ that will not be overcome in cross-cultural endeavours and that this produces a level of cultural incommensurability.5

In seeking the most appropriate ethical practice of representation, I have been mindful of the ‘(im)possible perspective of the native informant’ in order to evade getting lost in some ‘identity forever’ (Spivak 1999: 352). This difficulty with advocacy would not be alleviated even if I possessed more commonalities with the participants in my research. ‘The general idea of mirror representation’ is, as Kymlicka wrote, ‘untenable’ (1995: 139). Young concurred, arguing that ‘having such a relation of identity or similarity with constituents says nothing about what the representative does’ (1997: 354).6 Nevertheless, despite the awareness that my feminist strategies of representation were going to imply a difficult and frustrating mission, I maintained my interest ‘in recovering subaltern voices because … [of my] investment in changing contemporary power relations’ (Loomba 1998: 243). Thus, rather than speak on behalf of, I aimed to hear the different voice of the other (Spivak 1988, 1999).

The position I endorse throughout my research is that ‘there are almost always possibilities for congenial or at least tolerable personal, social and political engagements’ (Pettman 1992: 157). I do not assume that these engagements are without boundaries and that each conflict of interest is reconcilable (Yuval-Davis 2006). Instead, I recognise that my search for specific forms of knowledge in the participants (on concepts like human rights, community and belonging) does not include the possibility of ever fully knowing others (Ahmed 2000). Nevertheless I maintain that, as long as the differences between women are considered

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5 Similarly Australian feminist Ien Ang (1995) advocated the ‘politics of partiality’ in her proposals for feminism to stop acting like it is a nation, always ‘managing difference’ within it.

6 I discuss this further in the section on ‘Negotiating insider/outsider status’.
thoroughly via relationality\textsuperscript{7} and intersectionality,\textsuperscript{8} the feminist common goals of empowerment and gender equality can be achieved (Ang 1995).

I advocate that feminist methods of representation also need to be self-critical of the selective ways cultural differences are employed as unquestionably incommensurable (see Hinterberger 2007).\textsuperscript{9} The fluid and changing nature of culture adds to the ambiguity in identifying and defining cultural differences. Complete dependence on notions of incommensurability as the only and inevitable cultural capacity can reify a western–non-western dichotomy (Didur and Heffernan 2003: 11). The issue with such a dichotomy is that it is entrenched in the idea of irreconcilable cultural differences that are left unconsidered and uncontested.

Presuming inability to discuss and contest women’s rights issues due to irreconcilable differences is problematic because the question of essentialist representation by feminists (in the feminism and multiculturalism debates and elsewhere) is not the only problem afflicting women in immigrant or Third World communities. There are a number of oppressions that women from minority cultures face that, therefore, necessitate a critical feminist engagement.\textsuperscript{10} Although I recognise that we need to attend to essentialist representations, I

\begin{footnotes}
\item[7] In my dissertation I pursued a multicultural feminist perspective according to the claim that feminism is reconcilable with multiculturalism. Relationality, in the context of a multicultural feminism and in the context that I utilised it throughout my thesis, relies on dialogistic and historical analyses. As Shohat argued, ‘Although the concept of relationality goes back to structural linguistics, I am using it here in a translinguistic dialogic and historicized sense. The project of multicultural feminism has to be situated historically as a set of contested practices, mediated by conflictual discourses, which themselves have repercussions and reverberations in the world’ (2002: 72)
\item[8] I employ intersectionality as a concept that ‘highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed’ (Crenshaw 2003: 176).
\item[9] As Yuval-Davis (2006) argued, compatible values can cut across differences in positioning and identities. Her position is that ‘the struggle against oppression and discriminations might and mostly does have specific categorical focus but it is never confined to just that category’ (1999: 96). Also, irrespective of the differentiating accounts, women’s rights are, nevertheless, utilised by many diverse women’s rights movements all over the world.
\item[10] My findings reveal that in the diaspora Afghan and Liberian women, as refugees from war-torn countries, often live with their experiences of wars, of life in the refugee camps, and of the unnatural deaths of numerous family members including children, husbands and parents. As a result many suffer a number of physical and psychological problems (Mehraby 2007). In their new settings, these women are expected to build new lives and integrate quickly into their host society. This integration is complicated by a number of factors and the women experience a range of vulnerabilities within both private and public spheres. In the private sphere, refugee women lack the traditional social support provided by extended families and social
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also argue that the anxiety inherent in assumptions of incommensurability should not cause a lack of critical engagement with issues affecting minority culture communities or communities in the Third World. Feminists can present local empirical accounts without universalising and ahistoricising (see Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Empiricism without objectivist foundations requires us to extend self-reflexivity to recognise that ‘our analyses, as well as their objects, are culturally specific’ (Alldred 1998: 157).

In order to conduct research within a theoretical framework that is inclusive of differences between women and of the specificities of the contexts that produce and reproduce those differences, I utilise feminist standpoint theory. I endorse standpoint theorising that only by starting from women’s lives can we understand women’s heterogeneous experiences, as their positions, resulting in double consciousness, provide for a more objective interpretation of social reality. I examine standpoint theory next.

**Standpoint theory**

The theories, concepts, methods and goals of inquiry inherited from dominant discourses consist of an abundant collection of facts about women and their lives. However these add up to a partial and distorted understanding of the patterns of such lives. In order to understand women’s lives we need to consider the standpoints of the women in question. For this reason I adopt the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint epistemologies (hereafter referred to as standpoint theory) (Harding 1983: 43). Standpoint theory scholars aim to give voice to gatherings. Irrespective of their relationship status, these women struggle. If they are married, they have to deal with their husband’s traumas and their integration into the host settings; if widowed or a single parent, the settlement problems that they have to face on their own often leave these women feeling overwhelmed. In the public sphere, women’s experiences of discrimination due to differences of race, culture and religion significantly impacts on their feelings of exclusion from mainstream society.

11 For instance, I started my research in blind reliance on the claims of feminists from the debates on the multicultural/feminist dilemma. Then, as I commenced my writing, I had to learn not to focus exclusively on the misrepresentations and cultural stereotypes of minority culture women, as this resulted in me almost denying that there were problems that needed to be addressed. The standpoints of the women interviewed in my research kept me on the path of critical engagement; my journey equipped me with both the awareness that particular fixations are likely to be connected with particular locations and the enthusiasm to challenge this situation critically.
members of oppressed groups and to reveal the knowledge that members of such groups have cultivated from living life on the margins.

Standpoint theory is an appropriate framework in which to consider the issues that stem from the debates on the tensions between multiculturalism and feminism and the impact of these tensions on minority culture women. Standpoint theory, as an approach, is committed to knowledge building, and as such it breaks down boundaries between academia and activism; between theory and practice (Harding 2004a; Longino 2001). A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world; a point of view of social reality that begins with and is developed directly from women’s experiences (to improve conditions for women and to create social change). More importantly, standpoint theory is of particular relevance for my research that considers groups of women from different cultural, political and social backgrounds who have quite different lived experiences. Standpoint theory commences from the standpoint of the subject. The subject is conceived as the situated, embodied person who actually lives and acts rather than the de-materialised subject produced by certain technologies of research12 (see Haraway 1988; Smith 1987).

I have, therefore, sought to hear what women say about their experiences of the conflict between women’s rights and cultural rights. I do so with the conviction that the ‘complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. [The experience] is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know’ (hooks 1991: 183).

Standpoint theory offers an alternative theory of knowledge and seeks less distorted, less partial accounts of social reality, and its inequalities and hierarchies (Harding 1992: 583). It does this by undermining the claims of the dominant and powerful forms of social inquiry (such as positivism and empiricism); by exposing their epistemological and politically

12 The ‘certain technologies of research’ or ‘relations of ruling’ is the apparatus of social power that organises practices (Smith 1990: 144). Smith (1990) argued that certain technologies of research have been formed by men reproducing the values and preferences that they have historically propagated. Smith concluded that specific kinds of subjects are historically marginalised (Haraway 1988) and that their ways of life are not legitimised in relations of ruling. Thus women’s standpoints are situated outside of these relations of ruling.
unacknowledged and systemic biases and by starting from the standpoint of women, and particularly marginalised women. Donna Haraway, a feminist standpoint theorist whose work in the history of science has been foundational and influential, summarised standpoints as ‘cognitive-emotional-political achievements, crafted out of located socio-historical-bodily experience – itself always constituted through fraught, non-innocent, discursive, material, collective practices’ (1997: 304).

I propose standpoint theory as a helpful framework within which to start researching the issue of the tensions between women’s rights and cultural rights of some Afghan and Liberian women for three reasons. Firstly, women’s different social location creates knowing subjects since feminist research yields ‘empirically and theoretically’ more adequate science (Harding 1991: 1, 48, 74). Secondly, standpoint investigations start from the women’s standpoint (Harding 1991: 128, 150). Cultural factors influence women to be more likely than those in the dominant social group to produce less distorted science (Harding 1991: 48, 56, 121); the system of knowledge of the standpoint epistemologies, which draws on women’s insights and starts from their predicaments, will be richer than the one that draws only on the insights and starts from the predicaments of privileged groups alone (Harding 1998, 2004b). Thirdly, by starting from women’s standpoint, I endeavour to challenge the dominant and privileged views in the debates on tensions between feminism and multiculturalism and thus expose the multiple oppressions that minority culture women face. As Alison Jaggar (1997) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argue, standpoint theory research demonstrates that women’s experiences and the knowledge acquired from these experiences can be used as a means to

13 Alison Jaggar’s (1997) work also shows how women’s everyday experience, together with the knowledge that accompanies that experience, can be helpful in comprehending women’s social world. Thus she argued that women’s responsibilities in daily household activities and compliance with some socially normative women’s roles (for example, a caretaker) result in an authentic set of skills coinciding with them.

14 Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) research on African-American mothering explored the everyday lives of African-American women. A practice that Collins called ‘other mothering’ involves women caring for children of friends, neighbours and family members whose biological mothers work away from home. Collins accentuated the practice of other mothering as indicative of the creativity of African-American women and as an authentic and useful ability developed for and by women. African-American women’s daily experience of other mothering, and their dependence on it, also points towards bigger problems these women face in social and economic spheres: unequal gender relations as well as unaffordable child care in the United States.
highlight the inequalities and injustices in society as a whole. Understanding society through the lens of women’s experiences leads towards constructing a feminist standpoint.

Women’s experiences not only point us to flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws. Considering that women’s experiences and the feminist standpoints that evolve from them offer us a deep understanding of the ‘mechanisms of domination’, they also help us ‘envision freer ways to live’ (Jaggar 1997: 193). As Nielsen explained: ‘without the conscious effort to reinterpret reality from one’s own lived experience – that is, without political consciousness – the disadvantaged [women] are likely to accept their society’s dominant world view’ (1990: 11).

My inquiry is more than just research about women, by a woman and for women; it is about linking theory with the study of women and of gender, and about recognising the participants as the experts and authorities on their own experiences as the starting point of research. By starting research from the lives of the marginalised I do not intend to interpret those lives; I endeavour to offer ‘a causal, critical account of the regularities of the natural and social worlds and their underlying causal tendencies’ (Harding 1991: 385).

**Influences from standpoint theory**

The usefulness of standpoint theory to my research resides in its attention to women’s lives which results in a feminist standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory reflects heterogeneous women’s experiences and as such consists of **strong objectivity** and **double consciousness**. Standpoint theory is also appropriate for my research since it addresses issues with the representation of the **other**. I scrutinise these aspects in the following paragraphs.

**Strong objectivity**

I adopt the feminist framework of standpoint theory to interpret my research findings in reliance on its main premise according to which women as knowers produce more objective accounts of reality (Harding 1995: 331). As Alison Jaggar (2004: 56, 57) explained, women’s ‘distinctive social position’ makes possible a ‘view of the world that is more reliable and less
distorted’ than either ‘the ruling class’ or men possess. Research that begins from women’s everyday lives as members of an oppressed group will lead to knowledge claims that are ‘less partial and distorted’ than research that begins ‘from the lives of men in the dominant groups’ (Harding 1991: 185).

Because women can know and understand the dominant groups’ behaviours and ideologies as well as their own, starting research from women’s lives means that ‘certain areas or aspects of the world are not excluded’ (Jaggar 2004: 62). As Sandra Harding put it: ‘starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order’ (2004b: 128).

Analysing my research findings within the standpoint theory framework is crucial in my aims to establish whether minority culture women experience tensions between their commitment to maintain their cultural heritage and their rights as women; and, if there are tensions, to understand how these are manifested in the lives of women. By uncovering the problems experienced by minority culture women we can begin to understand the multiple oppressions that these women face.15 Feminist standpoint theorising is useful in understanding some of the facets of marginalisation that some cultural groups and their members face. The understanding of the marginalisation that stems from the ‘social order’ (Harding 2004b: 128) of multicultural societies is of particular importance to the themes examined in my research since we are continually warned by theorists that, in the immigration context, the exclusion of and discrimination against minority culture groups by host societies increases the risk of members of ethnic communities who hold conservative patriarchal values turning inwards and continuing to exert pressure on women by holding onto the patriarchal values of their culture (Shachar 2001; Deveaux 2000; Parekh 2000). In my PhD dissertation I considered some

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15 My examinations suggest that in their countries of origin minority culture women have experienced a number of vulnerabilities due to patriarchal relations (which are not structured monolithically and thus differ between cultural contexts). They are also survivors of wars, witnesses to loss of life and destruction, and refugees. Notwithstanding these oppressions and great difficulties, these women have demonstrated agency and made positive gains. In diasporic settings in Australia, although women are re-negotiating their identities and reconstructing their lives, they are still marginalised; they face a number of vulnerabilities as women, as ex-refugees, and as members of different ethnic and religious minorities.
segments of mainstream exclusion that are particularly associated with the tightening of patriarchal control over some women.

**Double consciousness**

Double consciousness is another aspect of standpoint theory that is particularly important in my analysis of Afghan and Liberian women’s cultural and women’s rights. Standpoint theory scholars argue that women, as members of an oppressed group, have cultivated a double consciousness – a heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group (which is mainly constituted of men). Women are tuned in to the ‘dominant worldview of the society and their own minority perspective’ (Nielsen 1990: 10). As a result, women have a ‘working, active consciousness’ of both perspectives (Smith 1990: 19). In some cases, women’s capacity for double consciousness occurs as a result of their compliance with socially dictated roles (eg wife, mother). In other cases, women attain a double consciousness in order to secure their own and their family’s survival (hooks 2004; Smith 1990).

Marginalised – in the context of this research – Afghan and Liberian women may develop double consciousness in accordance with the gender roles in their countries of origin, whilst in diasporas this double consciousness may be supplemented by other means of survival.

Women’s capacity for double consciousness enables them to see and understand ‘certain features of reality … from which others are obscured’ (Jaggar 2004: 60). This distinct mode of seeing and knowing the dominant group’s attitudes and behaviours as well as their own places women in an advantageous position from which to change society for the better. It is necessary to become familiar with dominant approaches (examined in the multiculturalism and feminism debates), but also the standpoint of those deemed oppressed in the debates, in order to understand the extent of the impact that those dominant approaches have on the women in question. The knowledge gathered from women’s double consciousness can be

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16 bell hooks’s (2004) account of growing up poor and black in Southern Kentucky provides another example of how double consciousness can develop as individuals fight for survival, in particular material survival. hooks and her neighbours would work in the white section of town (as maids, janitors and prostitutes) but they were not allowed to live there: ‘There were laws to ensure our return. Not to return was to risk being punished’ (2004: 156). Through their work experience, hooks and her neighbours developed ‘a working consciousness’ of the white world as well as of their own.
applied in detecting social inequalities and injustices and in building and implementing solutions. In the words of bell hooks, double consciousness serves both as a powerful ‘space of resistance’ and a ‘site of radical possibility’ (2004: 156).

*Heterogeneous women’s experiences*

The experiences of diverse women are not homogeneous. Standpoint theorising maintains that there is a distinctive women’s ‘perspective’ that is ‘privileged’ because it possesses heightened insights into the nature of reality (Harding 1991). However, theorists like Hawkesworth (1989) argue that to claim that women possess such knowledge about reality is to suggest that there is some uniform experience common to all women that generates this vision. Addressing the issue of the absence of a homogeneous women’s experience is particularly important for the purposes of my research since my theoretical framework, in its aim to recognise difference, employs a relational multicultural feminist view yet aims to add to ‘broader, richer, more complex and multilayered feminist [global] solidarity’ (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 35).

Within my research, I justify this absence of a homogeneous women’s experience on the grounds that, as Harding (1991) argued, women’s diversity is compatible with standpoint theory. This is clearer when we recall the distinction between women’s experience and a standpoint – namely, that a standpoint does not reflect mere experience but must be forged. Standpoint theorists do not emphasise that one needs to be female or that all women experience the same things but rather that knowledge ‘starts from women’s lives’, including the diversity therein (Harding 1991: 180). In my research I do not utilise standpoint theory as a simple theory that claims that some people (i.e., the women participants in my research) have privileged access to truth; rather I rely on it as a starting point.

As Collins for example argued, ‘it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black woman’s standpoint exists’ (2000: 28). However, living a life as a black woman should provide some core premises or issues with other black women so that ‘a Black women’s collective standpoint does exist’; this standpoint is ‘characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses
to common challenges’ (Collins 2000: 28). These tensions between common challenges and diverse responses are recognised by a black women’s epistemology which thus produces a sensibility that black women, because of their gendered and racial identity, ‘may be victimized by racism, misogyny, and poverty’ (Collins 2000: 26). Hence, whilst the responses of individual black women may differ based on different intersectional interests ‘there are themes or core issues that all black women can recognise and integrate into their self-identity’ (Collins 2000: 26). Finally, I note that standpoint theory is necessary for the analysis of my data as it recognises that the subject/agent of feminist knowledge is multiple and sometimes even contradictory, in that women are located in every class, race, culture and society (Harding 1991: 311).

**Representation of the other**

I found the framework of standpoint epistemologies very helpful for addressing the challenges of cultural relativism that I encountered. Before gaining approval for this research from the university’s Ethics Committee, the committee insisted that I provide the women with the option of gaining the consent of male members of their family, thus, arguably, reifying cultural gender relations and women’s position within their respective cultural groups.17

This reification confirms my argument that a belief in the absolute incommensurability between diverse women reinforces a western–non-western binary that results in not addressing and not challenging what are seen as fundamental cultural differences. Spivak (1999), relying on her assertion that there is a radical un-translatability (or incommensurability) of the subaltern voice into dominant discourse, warned that feminist strategies of representation need to be wary of the unmediated power of assumed cultural differences. Given this, I concur with Didur and Heffernan (2003) that an ethics of representation must guard against reifying notions of cultural difference, which can too easily become the basis for incommensurability. The harm in assuming absolute incommensurability

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17 This request was made irrespective of the fact that all of the participants would be legally consenting adults in their countries of origin and in Australia.
resides in the possibility of reinforcing ‘cultural relativism as cultural absolutism’ (Didur and Heffernan 2003: 11).

Standpoint theories, in an attempt not to ignore the theoretical grounds of all perception and experience and consequently devolve into either authoritarian assertion or uncritical relativism, have carefully attempted to open up an epistemological space beyond absolutist and relativist stances. In this respect, their arguments suggest diverse and contrary intuitions about the essential nature of social reality premised on an immediate understanding of that reality (Gergen 1998: 33, cited in Harding 1998: 132). Standpoint theories identify the historical or sociological relativism of all knowledge claims: that different social activities lead to different interactions with social relations, and thus to different representations of the world. However, standpoint theorists refuse epistemological or cognitive relativism, arguing that not all historically determinate interactions are equally revealing (Harding 1993: 52). Rather they highlight that marginal lives are more revealing than the lives of those who do not live on the margins. In this process, their concern is with the positive scientific and epistemic value of marginality irrespective of whether or not their lives are such marginalised ones (Harding 1993: 55).

I start my research from the lives of the marginalised. The importance of marginal lives should not be underestimated, as these are determinate, objective locations in the social structure. Their exclusion by dominant discourses is not accidental. The exclusivist dominant discourses benefit from binaries and dichotomies. The material and symbolic existence of the oppositional margins keep the centre in place (for example, masculinity can only be an ideal if it is continuously contrasted with the devalued other: femininity) (Harding 2000). Standpoint theorising does not only interpret marginal lives; instead the research should start from this point to produce knowledge. In my research starting from women’s standpoints generated some answers to the many questions raised in the debates about the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism.
The feminist standpoint framework adopted here emphasises women’s experiences as critical and that these are best understood through finding ways for women to articulate their experiences in their own words. However gathering the words and experiences of others is not a simple matter, nor one to be underestimated. I address some of the challenges of conducting cross-cultural research in the following section.

On doing cross-cultural research: some challenges

On reflexivity

The perspective of the observer is always partial and determines what can be seen (Haraway 1991: 183). In recognition of this, social researchers are becoming more attentive to how the ‘researcher’s self’ is part of the research process (Seibold 2000: 148). An acknowledgment of the researcher’s position and the knowledge gathered in the research process are means toward attaining objectivity. Objectivity, redefined by Haraway (1991), means to recognise that knowledge is partial and situated, but also to consider effects of the positioned researcher. The question then is not whether the researcher affects the research process, nor how this can be prevented, but rather on how to turn ‘this methodological [concern] … into a commitment to reflexivity’ (Malterud 2001: 484).

My subjectivity as a researcher, consequently, cannot be avoided in this discussion. Not only was it significant in the conceptualisation and formulation of the research questions and methodology, but it was also present during the data-gathering process. I acknowledge with Kleinman and Copp (1993) in their work Emotions and fieldwork that the self is part of the research process and thus I cannot separate myself from the research that I undertook.

18 My research participants comprised 27 women from Liberian and 19 women from Afghani cultural backgrounds. These women had recently arrived in Australia and were members of their community women’s groups at the Migrant Resource Centre, South Australia (MRCSA). Their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years. The method for the case study included focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information on the impact that their cultural communities have on the women interviewed and on women’s experiences of their human rights entitlements. Individual interviews were conducted in order to allow the participants to single out the issues that they considered to be the most important (since the research was designed so that the issues emerged from the women themselves). The questions in individual interviews were about women’s experiences of work, education and family, and understandings of human rights.
Accordingly, as a feminist researcher, I have adopted the practices of reflexivity and praxis. By ‘praxis’ and ‘reflexivity’, I mean an ‘understanding how one’s own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world, including acts of inquiry’ (Patton 2002: 268–269). Practising explicit reflexive self-examination helps to create an awareness of conscious and subjective knowledge about what is known and how we happen to know it (Schram 2003; Patton 2002). This knowledge is revealed implicitly and explicitly through research assumptions, language and context. In my utilisation of praxis I highlight the significance of the participants in the research, hence my endeavours to communicate their perspectives authentically. In this process I also sought to consider the impact of the inquiry on those being researched. This entails the potential for the knowledge provided by the participants to be used in a way that can be empowering and that can have an ongoing impact (Patton 2002), which were the initial reasons for conducting this research.

*Negotiating outsider/insider status within research*

During the course of my study I was both an external-outsider and an insider. I was an external-outsider as a researcher who is ‘socialized within a community different from the one in which he or she is doing research’ (Merriam et al 2001: 408). The outsider’s advantage lies in curiosity about the unfamiliar, the ability to ask taboo questions and being seen as non-aligned with subgroups, thus often getting more information. My outsider status became an asset with regard to eliciting fuller explanations than would have been given to an insider who was assumed to ‘already know’ (see Merriam et al 2001: 408).

I began my research with an understanding of my outsider position, aware of the benefits and disadvantages within it. I rested my assumptions about the benefits associated with my outsider position on the feminist work of Susan Greenhalgh and Jiali Li (1995: 605), who advocated collaboration on political as well as intellectual grounds with other cultures in the belief that feminists working in other traditions have much to contribute theoretically and often have ‘more political space’ in which to offer critical interpretations of demographic findings. It can be argued that my role as an outsider researcher into African and South Asian
cultural values can be observed positively as I, due to having no ties with the communities, had less anxiety about revealing my findings in the political space (of the university or the academic community) and thus could promote potential resolutions. However I was also aware that my feminist criticism (of some cultural practices or traditions) could be perceived negatively by the respective cultural groups that might seek to deflect such criticism. In addition, my position as an outsider might be seen to prevent true understanding of the cultural groups, gender relations within them or the women that belong to these groups. My research could also be perceived (by the respective cultural groups of the participants) as having imperialist intentions since human rights might be perceived as a primarily western construct. This could also lead to perceptions (by the cultural group and the women in question) of bias in favour of establishing universalising western rights parallels, despite my aim to recognise difference.

My status as an outsider also posed obstacles in terms of accessing the participants and understanding the dynamics inside women’s groups, dynamics within their respective cultural groups (only available to an insider), as well as more factual information (such as their arrival and visa details). There were a number of aspects that the university Ethics Committee enquired about prior to granting me permission to conduct research with these women, including issues concerning the women’s visa status, and enquiring whether women needed a male family member to approve their participation. These issues caused a ten-month delay in gaining the university Ethics Committee’s approval to conduct research.

My status as a former non-English speaker and a woman who comes from a collectivist culture also characterised my participation in the research on cultural rights and women’s rights, positioning me, to some degree, as an insider. I consider that from a multicultural perspective I was also a partial insider. As Banks suggested, from a multicultural perspective ‘we are all members of cultural communities where the interpretation of our life experiences is mediated by the interaction of a complex set of status variables, such as gender, social class, age, political affiliation, religion, and region’ (1998: 5). Thus, notwithstanding the differences between the groups of participants and myself, the mere analogies of gender, non-mainstream
ethnicity and of refugee and war experiences made me both an insider and an outsider within my research. In the words of Kath Weston, ‘A single body cannot bridge the mythical divide between outsider and insider, researcher and researched. I am neither, in any simple way, and yet I am both’ (1996: 275, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 352).

**Conclusion**

I have discussed the methodology for this research and the theoretical assumptions that inform the research. While feminist theorising in general informed the research methodology, the specific theoretical influences come from standpoint theory. This theoretical approach emphasises not only the importance of moving away from essentialist and categorical tendencies (present in some claims within the debates about the tensions between feminism and multiculturalism) and understanding women’s life stories as situated knowledges but also understanding specific issues relevant to Afghan and Liberian women’s lived realities.

In this paper I have also detailed the range of ethical issues that arose in the course of the research process such as the issues of reflexivity and negotiating an outsider/insider position within feminist research.

**References**


Performing governance: 
*Dragons’ den* and the practice of judgement

David Nolan

Abstract

In this paper I analyse the role played by a particular reality TV format, the popular UK ‘business pitch’ program *Dragons’ den,* to consider the work of television in not only valorising a culture of enterprise, but serving as an effective governmental technology. In doing so, I argue for the need to move beyond both the question of realism versus artifice, on one hand, and a mere focus on the work of ‘representation’ on the other. To do so, I draw on arguments regarding how forms of neo-liberalism not only accept, but embrace, the constructed nature of social life. Similarly, like other entrepreneurial formats, *Dragon’s den* not only erases both the boundaries between external reality and television’s games, but also largely disregards traditional concerns for naturalism in favour of a self-conscious display of performance as a characteristic of both television and reality. However, while this can be (and has been) read as providing representational support for neo-liberal ideology, it can also be read as merely one aspect of its performance as a neo-liberal technology. I focus on *Dragons’ den* as a text that becomes both intelligible and pleasurable through the organisation of a particular mode of normative judgement. In this respect, it is one among many neo-liberal technologies that position individuals as both bearers of, and constantly subject to, a disciplinary gaze that both produces and rationalises an economy of reward and punishment as a mundane feature of contemporary socio-political relations.

Introduction

*Dragons’ den* is a ‘business pitch’–based reality TV format, in which budding entrepreneurs seek to convince a group of businesspeople (the ‘dragons’) that their particular venture is marketable and thereby worthy of investment. Originating in Japan under the title *Tiger of...*
Money (Manē no tora), versions of the format have been produced in 22 countries including, briefly, an Australian version that was trialled by Channel 7 in 2005 (before being dropped because of low ratings). In this paper I focus on the UK version of the program which, at the time of writing, is currently being re-broadcast for Australian audiences via ABC2 and ABC iView. In contrast to its failed Australian counterpart, the UK version has been phenomenally popular, with BBC2 commissioning nine series since the program’s launch in late 2005, along with a number of spin-off programs. These have included How to win in the den, Dragon’s den: where are they now? and Business nightmares, a program focusing on costly mistakes made by otherwise successful brands and companies hosted by Dragons’ den presenter (and BBC economics editor) Evan Davis.

In this paper I draw on other work that has considered how reality TV formats operate as governmental technologies to focus in particular on how Dragon’s den relies upon and extends its audiences’ literacy in the language and techniques of business to produce a spectacle that is both intelligible and pleasurable for viewers. However, rather than merely operating as a pedagogic technology or a means by which audiences are afforded opportunities to refine their knowledge of how to conduct themselves to achieve business success, I focus in particular on how the program both promotes an awareness of, and extends an effective disciplinary gaze into, everyday social relations. To this end, I focus on three areas. Firstly, I address the particular form of realism embodied in reality TV formats. While its relation to ‘reality’ is a rather familiar theme in discussions of reality TV, my concern is less to revisit this for its own sake than to highlight the affinity between the realism of reality TV and forms of social constructivism that characterise certain articulations of neo-liberalism themselves. Secondly, I draw on other work that has focused on the manner in which related reality TV formats provide representational models (and thereby ideological support) that naturalise a neo-liberal ethos. While such analyses are insightful, however, a focus on the ‘representational’ work of such programs is insufficient, in that these tend to focus on the forms of knowledge produced by these programs at the expense of a consideration of the significance of emotional engagement. Thus, in my analysis, I draw on previous analyses of reality TV and neo-liberalism and work that has considered the role of media in processes of governing to
consider how, in its performative aspect, *Dragons’ Den* can be read as a technology that positions its audience as both bearers and, ultimately, subjects of an effective disciplinary gaze.

### Making up reality

As Montemurro noted, ‘one of the most contested issues related to reality television has to do with the possibility of producing reality’ (2008: 93). While the relationship between the constructed scenarios presented by these programs and extra-textual reality is itself invited by these programs, however, discussions of whether reality TV is ‘real’ or not tend to founder upon the inevitability of textual construction. In this sense, discussions of reality TV have inherited a set of epistemological problems that have also dogged discussions of documentary forms (Winston 1995; Nichols 1991). While discussion of the ‘reality’ of actuality genres tends to be compromised by an implicit positivism, more sophisticated approaches have preferred to consider differences in generic conventions and expectations separating actuality from fictional forms, which demark different perspectives of viewing (such that documentary presents an account, albeit constructed, of existent reality rather than purely imagined, fictional scenarios).\(^2\) Generic conventions, in this way, not only demarcate distinct forms, but also rely upon different expectations of producers as the basis of an ethical contract: that producers should not present excessively distorted, misleading or purely fabricated accounts. Of course, actuality forms also bring attendant and distinctive ethical problems regarding the treatment of subjects, as well as whether the intrusion and publicity involved in representing real people is justified, a problem that producers have traditionally responded to through the invocation of an ethic of ‘public service’.

Part of the interest and novelty of ‘reality TV’ lies in its simultaneous relation to and departure from such traditions of representing actuality. It is on this basis that John Corner (2002), for example, situated reality TV as a ‘post-documentary’ form that is both informed by

\(^2\) Following Nichols, I use the term ‘actuality’ here to refer to genres that depict footage, actors and/or scenarios that have an existence beyond the space of textuality, while acknowledging that any representation inevitably involves a process of textual construction. The term ‘actuality’ is preferred to ‘reality’, which involves a stronger ontological claim, in order to distinguish this basic distinction from claims to ‘the real’ that may be mobilised by texts or genres themselves.
and involves a significant departure from a tradition of observational documentary. Thus, in a passage referring to *Big Brother* that insightfully captures the particular paradox that underpins reality TV, Corner argued that the program


consciously and openly gives up on the kinds of ‘field naturalism’ that have driven the documentary tradition into so many contradictions and conundrums over the last eighty years, most especially in its various modes of observational filming (cinema verite, direct cinema and the various bastardized ‘fly-on-the-wall’ recipes of television). Instead, *Big Brother* operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality, in which almost everything that might be deemed to be true is necessarily and obviously predicated on their being there in front of the camera in the first place. (2002: 256)

The value of this analysis is its shift from the epistemological dead end of the ‘reality value’ of the form to a focus on what is particular about the form of ‘realism’ it presents. This theme has also been pursued by others. Justin Lewis (2004), for example, has considered the complexity of media realism in a world in which media portrayals are an intrinsic part of our everyday knowledge, and in which viewers do not necessarily privilege extra-textual reality. Jonathan Bignell, by contrast, extended Corner’s analysis by suggesting that what is particular to reality TV realism is that ‘realisms are possible inasmuch as they admit that they are objectively false and do not claim to be real’ (2004: 86). While this appears initially nonsensical, this analysis nevertheless finds support in Annette Hill’s analyses of viewer responses to reality TV, in which she finds that, while viewers are overtly conscious that they are watching a highly constructed (indeed, manipulated) scenario and sceptical about the authenticity of contestants’ behaviour, an attraction of reality TV nevertheless lies in a perception that it offers ‘moments of truth’ that reveal the ‘true person’ behind the performance (2005: 74).

While this is valuable, questions have been raised about the adequacy of approaches to the realism of reality TV that are excessively generalising and rely too heavily on tracing a lineage with documentary genres. Wesley Metham (2006), for example, has argued not only that more attention needs to be paid to the prevalence of games in reality TV ‘gamedoc’
formats, but that the nature of the contract may depend upon the game. Thus, for example, while *Big brother* performances are always predicated on a performance of authenticity that is key to achieving popularity among audiences, other formats may encourage contestants to purely adapt themselves to the internal world of the game and to become the person that winning demands. Metham illustrated this point by reference to *Paradise hotel*, in which the winning contestant justified their duplicity by clearly separating their game playing from their real persona. While this might suggest that such a genre does not invoke realism at all, Metham argued that significance of games in reality TV genres is that they blur the distinction between ‘the social’, as an extent domain outside the game space, and the game:

The elements of the social and the game are at work in all reality TV programs. In reality television the faces of the social and of the game continually shift places, the social is undermined through the game, but the social re-emerges. Though the genre undermines the social, it also cannot exist without the social … reality TV is caught in a vacillation between the social as-it-is and the social as a game. (Metham 2006: 243, 245)

While one might again question the generality of this analysis, it marks an important departure from Corner’s more linear framework of judgement. Indeed, having situated reality TV as a continuation and departure from documentary, Corner judged it negatively by comparison to the latter. While Corner identified documentary as belonging to a ‘civic’, Griersonian tradition of social realist filmmaking that sought to produce ‘alternative’ and critical perspectives on social and political life, he suggested that reality TV formats exist primarily as entertaining forms of diversion that are ‘far less clear in terms of their use value’ (2002: 262).

Corner here invoked a rather familiar diagnosis that is akin to many critiques of tabloidisation, wherein another idealised ‘civic’ form (news) is diagnosed as having been displaced by entertainment and trivia. Others, however, suggest that the ‘use value’ of reality TV is an ideological one, extending the characteristic inequalities of contemporary capitalism. Mark Andrejevic, for example, suggested that reality TV’s realism parallels, while working to extend, contemporary capitalist relations. Thus, he asked rhetorically: ‘Why is reality TV
pretending that it’s real, so that we can cannily believe it’s phony, when it accurately portrays the reality of contrivance in contemporary society?” (2004: 17)

Andrejevic suggested that reality TV extends the logic of capitalism in two particular ways. Firstly, it serves as a means by which, through interactivity, the work performed by audiences in the service of advertisers (as originally analysed by Dallas Smythe) is extended through an ‘interactivity’ that is an extension of a process of enclosing traditional spaces of leisure. Secondly, as indicated above, it presents contrived scenarios that mirror, and thereby naturalise, the contrivances of contemporary capitalist relations. Nick Couldry and Jo Littler proposed a similar analysis in their analyses of Big brother (Couldry 2008) and The apprentice (Couldry and Littler 2011). They suggested that reality TV games bear a particular affinity with, and serve to naturalise, a neo-liberal ethos that has increasingly come to govern everyday workplaces. Thus, Couldry and Littler focused on how both programs naturalise and legitimise surveillance; rely on an acceptance that contestants must conform to the requirements of an absolute external authority; and negotiate the performance of team-based work tasks while continuing to operate on the basis of self-interested individuality. Equally, the terms of each game rest upon a performance of authenticity that rests upon a successful re-modelling of the self, such that success becomes premised upon the marketable authenticity borne of ‘being yourself’, with the significant proviso that this self must have internalised the values of an external authority (whether that be the employer or the market) against which individuals come to be judged.

Such examples of ‘self-work’ are clearly also relevant to other ‘lifestyle’ genres in which ‘self-work’ constitutes a central theme. Indeed, in contrast to Corner’s dismissal of the ‘use value’ of reality TV and ideological analyses that suggest that reality TV naturalises values that ultimately serve others’ interests, Hay and Ouellette (2008), drawing explicitly on Foucault, focused on the pedagogic value of reality TV, and the ‘use value’ it offers audiences in its provision of recipes for negotiating the demands of contemporary life. In reframing reality TV as a ‘technology of government’ and mode of ‘responsibilisation’ that works through the exercise and rehearsal of normative judgement, Hay and Ouellette’s work shifts attention
beyond representational aspects of such programs to consider the processes through which subjective refashioning is facilitated through viewing formats. It is with this focus in mind that I now turn to analysing the ‘reality game’ of Dragon’s den.

The game of life: neo-liberal constructivism and Dragon’s den

Following Metham’s point regarding the characteristic blurring between the social and games, it is notable that an aspect shared in common by otherwise distinct forms of neo-liberal government is an eschewing of ‘naturalistic’ in favour of a ‘cultural’ view of markets. Mitchell Dean (1999: 55–59, 149–175) has emphasised this point by reference to two distinctive styles of neo-liberal thought, articulated by the postwar German ‘ordoliberal’ movement, on one hand, and the influential arguments of Frederick Hayek on the other. Both the ordoliberals and Hayekian liberalism depart from classical liberalism in that they no longer regard markets as natural entities inhabited by rational calculating individuals, but they do so in rather different ways. The ordoliberal view of markets is ‘profoundly anti-naturalistic and “constructivist”: it is no longer a domain of quasi-autonomous processes but a reality to be secured by an appropriate juridical, institutional and cultural framework’ (Dean 1999: 56). While it is not the role of the state to direct the market, it does perform a vital role in securing the conditions within which markets can operate, protecting markets against potentially ‘distorting’ social forces, and extending market forms to non-economic areas of life, such that these might be governed through the operation of both enterprise and individual choice. Hayek’s perspective, by contrast, sees the market not as something that has or can be contrived by forms of state rule. Rather, both markets and the rule of law that enables markets to operate stand as products of a ‘cultural evolution conceived as the development of civilisation and its discipline’, through which ‘rules of conduct are selected that help human groups adapt to their social environment, prosper and expand’ (quoted in Dean 1999: 156). Within Hayekian liberalism, markets themselves, forms of individuality that are adapted to and shaped within market environments, and forms of regulation that provide the political and legal conditions upon which markets can operate are all outcomes of a civilising process that is necessarily independent of the constructive work of any particular governmental agency.
Neo-liberalism cannot merely be reduced to two of its articulations, however influential these may have been, any more than it is best understood as a translation of theory into practice. Nevertheless, we may note that these distinctive forms of neo-liberal thought serve as rationales for rather different forms of neo-liberal government (since the former regards markets as themselves constructed through effective practices of state rule, while the latter positions them as a product of an independent cultural process against which the role of government is defined). Notwithstanding such difference, however, both are ‘anti-naturalistic’ – though not ‘anti-realist’. On the contrary, not only do both regard markets as real entities with their own properties and effects that must be respected, but they also each position markets as the primary reality around which the role of government is to be defined and delimited. In this respect, neo-liberalism also partakes in the paradoxical realism that is characteristic of reality TV, in which ‘reality’ is unambiguously presented as the product of a practice of construction, a fact that does not diminish, and may enhance, its realist status.

Such realism may be seen to be particularly strongly enacted in market-based programs like Dragons’ den and The apprentice, which each contain elements that further blur the distinction between ‘game’ and ‘reality’. Firstly, unlike the imaginatively contrived scenarios of, say, Survivor or Big brother, the premises of both shows are grounded in verisimilitude (relating to, respectively, the market phenomena of the business pitch and the long-form interview). Likewise, rather than offering cash prizes that serve to differentiate the world of television from that of everyday life, in both of these programs the prize is the offer of a partnership that extends beyond the world of television into the ‘real world’, in the form of a business partnership or a job that will involve a continuation of, rather than departure from, the work performed on television. Indeed, in both cases, the ‘prize’ is yet to be earned in a corporate environment that will depend on the successful performance of business acumen.

In this analysis, I am particularly concerned to consider how the structure of the engagement performed by the program positions viewers as bearers of an effective disciplinary gaze. Here, I seek to respond to Couldry and Littler’s critique of analyses that suggest programs serve as
pedagogical technologies that extend neo-liberal norms to viewerships for their failure to address how ‘processes of power are inherently unstable and always rely on people’s participation in their own subjectivisation’ (2011: 266). Rather than viewing pedagogy as passive, on the one hand, or assuming that ‘participation’ necessarily destabilises it, on the other, I focus on how Dragons’ den constructs a means through which audiences may be recruited to participate in a certain pleasurable performance of judgement that may be carried beyond the program. Given this focus, I will touch on representational aspects of the program, albeit briefly since I wish to argue that the significance of Dragons’ den moves beyond its textual construction of reality. Thus, I suggest how the program might be seen to function as an effective disciplinary mechanism that rests not only on its provision of knowledge, but its emotional exhortation for viewers to apply that knowledge in a process of judging – and reforming – themselves and others.

In representational terms, Dragons’ den also has attributes that construct the market in ways that parallel those highlighted in work discussed above. In particular, the dragons, like the figure of Donald Trump and Alan Sugar in The apprentice, are represented as possessors of a charismatic and individualised authority, such that their business success is associated with their personal qualities. Indeed, their attributes are explicitly mythologised, both through the connotations of their status as superhuman ‘dragons’, and by reference to their representation as ‘self-made’ men and women. Indeed, all references to other social factors that might have contributed to their success are erased, with the exception of a reference in the program’s introduction to how one of the dragons ‘left school with only three O-levels’, reinforcing a myth that the market is a ‘level playing field’. This authority is bolstered through the use of BBC economics editor Evan Davis as the show’s presenter. Davis performs a crucial role in the mise en scène of the program, in that he performs an impartial role (narrating and explaining aspects of the dragons’ judgement to viewers, without directly passing judgement himself). Greenfield and Williams (2007) have traced the historical emergence of such commentators as part of a broader ‘financialisation’ of news that has contributed to the production of a ‘financialised we’, translating the somewhat esoteric language of the market into compelling dramatic narratives, while constructing its audience as ‘possessors of an
identity as shareholders or would-be shareholders, characterised by financial independence (or the struggle to attain it), seized by aspirations and disposed to consider events as opportunities for investment’ (2007: 419). Davis provides an intertextual seriousness to Dragons’ den in his role of translating economic knowledge into ‘common sense’, while bolstering the credentials of the program as a bona fide representation of the market.

The use of Davis also signifies the program’s desire to incorporate a pedagogic dimension. Dragons’ den offers an entertaining means through which audiences gain access to forms of expert commentary regarding the necessity of business planning, market testing, gaining entrepreneurial experience and, not insignificantly, drawing on relevant forms of expertise. Both Davis and the dragons themselves frequently emphasise that what the achievement of an investment involves is not only an investment of capital, but also the opportunity to gain from the benefit of the dragons’ expertise in establishing and growing a business. Viewers also gain indirect access to such expertise through the program, and viewers’ postings on the BBC website frequently emphasise the value they place on what they have learned from the program. In this respect, Dragons’ den reproduces the broader promise of self-improvement that Hay and Ouellette (2008) located as key to the genre’s appeal. If this pedagogic dimension locates the program as a source of disciplinary training for viewers, however, the program is not without a punitive dimension: indeed, the two are mutually supportive.

**Discipline and humiliation**

Couldry argued that reality TV operates as a ‘theatre of cruelty’, offering ritual enactments of the ‘truths’ of neo-liberalism, which ‘would be unacceptable if stated openly, even if their consequences unfold before our eyes every day’ (2008: 3). This description appears particularly relevant to Dragons’ den, a program in which humiliation forms a key part of the program’s spectacle. Indeed, both in its introduction, and in previews for subsequent episodes at its close, the program continuously centres on the harsh criticisms made by the dragons, highlighting lines such as ‘I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life’, ‘I think this has all the ingredients of the classic business disaster’, and ‘I just question why you’ve turned up today’. Although not all would approve of such humiliation, it remains a central aspect of
the spectacle enacted for the viewer’s pleasure. Furthermore, whether we approve or disapprove of it, the use of humiliation on the program is not presented as arbitrary but rationalised: that is, the program operates an economy of reward and humiliation which rests on the market logics articulated and embodied by the dragons themselves.

Dragons’ den not only offers a means by which audiences gain access to forms of television-accredited market expertise, but operates as a spectacle of public humiliation, such that the failings of a proposal are treated as moral failings for which the subject is morally admonished. Indeed, an important aspect of the show’s realism relies on the premise that both failure and success are not arbitrary, but rest upon a system of objectively existing rules of conduct defined by the market itself. As the dragons lambast the shortcomings of proposals, these are presented as a failure to conform to the norms of marketability, demand and planning that are presented as emanating from the market as an objectively existing reality. In this way, Dragons’ den constructs a position wherein the viewer takes a (sadistic) pleasure in a process of public judgement, in which the dissemination of expertise provides an apparently transparent means of inviting spectators to participate vicariously in a process of normative assessment. Thus, though viewers may disapprove of the manner in which judgements are made, it is the process through which the viewer becomes party to the process of judgement (which is made, for the purposes of television, on the viewer’s behalf) that makes the program both intelligible and pleasurable. While we might disapprove of how individual applicants are treated, this treatment is nevertheless made comprehensible as deriving from a failure to conduct themselves according to norms whose basis is not subjective, but produced by the given reality of the market itself. These ‘rules of the game’ are presented as deriving both from ‘real life’ and from the conditions upon which the program is intelligible for viewers.

Whether viewers agree with the treatment of particular individuals may, in this respect, ultimately be irrelevant to its operation as a disciplinary mechanism, which locates the individual as both bearer and subject of an effective governmental gaze. Several authors who have investigated such disciplinary aspects of reality TV (Trottier 2006; Andrejevic 2004;
Palmer 2003) have drawn not upon Foucault’s model of ‘panopticism’, but also upon the discussion of ‘synopticism’ developed by Thomas Mathiesen (1997). While Foucault’s discussion of ‘panopticism’ needs no introduction, Mathiesen disputed the trajectory of Foucault’s account of a shift away from a form of power (associated with both public celebrations and executions) in which the many witness the power of the few, to one in which the few observe and act upon the conduct of the many. The major problem with this account, he suggested, is that it ignores the rise of the mass media during exactly the period at which Foucault posited such a transition occurs. The media, Mathiesen argued, is not primarily ‘panoptic’ but ‘synoptic’: rather than an ‘all-seeing’ (pan-optic) power, the prefix ‘syn’ means ‘together’ or ‘at the same time’ (Mathiesen 1997: 219). Mathiesen argued this appears more apt to describe mass media, which typically produce a situation in which the many see the few (whether these are politicians, journalists or celebrities). Here, his concern is not to deny that panopticism plays a major role in modern power relations. However, not only is the growth of its opposite, the synopticon, also evident over the course of the same historical period but, he suggested, ‘they together, precisely together, serve decisive control functions in modern society’ (1997: 219).

This perspective on the joint functioning of panopticism and synopticism provides an illuminating perspective on the operations of Dragons’ den. Clearly, the program performs synoptically, as a form of mass spectacle in which the few are presented before the many. Clearly, too, it provides a means by which an elite, privileged few (the multimillionaire ‘dragons’) are placed in a position in which they can make their pronouncements, and communicate their perspectives, to the many. This power to articulate the terms of normative business judgement is, in addition, enhanced by the fact that it is presented as an accessible, ‘common sense’ perspective, rather than in the esoteric language of economics. This connection between the judgements of the dragons and the judgements of viewers flatters the audience into the belief that such judgements, indeed the entire spectacle of the program, are made on their behalf. Like other ‘spectacles of shame’ discussed by Gareth Palmer, the program operates as an instrument of discipline in which ‘the power of the norm is vested in
the audience’ (2003: 132). The subject who departs from market-based norms is both provided with advice (discipline) and/or subjected to ridicule (punishment).

However, this process also incorporates panoptic dimensions. Most obviously, such programs come into being through the operation of a whole machinery of audience research, which seeks to deploy ever more sophisticated techniques to survey viewing habits and preferences as a basis for constructing further programs they will watch. Regardless of whether the object is to generate ratings and revenue, to ‘educate’ audiences, or both, the goal is to deploy techniques of surveillance to act upon how viewers regulate their own conduct. Thus, the technique of shaming, featured on previous successful examples of reality programming, is redeployed as a disciplinary means to persuade viewers to watch Dragons’ den. More significant, however, is the manner in which the entrepreneurs featured are also ‘ordinary people’ that are likely to be socially familiar (if not personally known) to members of the audience. In this respect, the position of ‘observer’ of its synoptic spectacle is strictly temporary, coinciding only with the actual duration of the program (and even then rather ambiguously). At the moment they turn away from the program, the audience members return to a position in which they, like those they have watched, must concern themselves with the problem of adapting themselves to a market environment. The peculiar effect of reality TV, in this respect, is to construct a third position, neither strictly panoptical (the few watching the many) or synoptical (the many watching the few), but which merges the two functions to produce a mechanism through which the many come to watch the many, such that each audience member becomes both the bearer of, and is made subject to, the normative gaze of market rationality.

**Conclusion**

I have engaged with Dragons’ den not only to analyse how it might be seen to operate as a neo-liberal technology of government, but also to consider the particular affinity between the rise of such formats of reality television and neo-liberalism itself. Unlike earlier forms of liberalism that positioned markets as deriving from natural processes of exchange and subsistence, neo-liberal thought has tended to view markets as particularly valorised cultural
phenomena associated with effective state action and/or a ‘civilising process’. In this respect, Dragons’ den’s realism, achieved through its effective erasure of the distinction between the entertaining spectacle enacted for the purposes of attracting and engaging viewers and a wider market environment, both mirrors and reproduces a social constructivist epistemology characteristic of neo-liberalism as an approach to governing. However, while the manner in which the ‘market games’ that form a particular sub-genre of reality television ideologically mirror (and thereby naturalise) the forms of knowledge and world views characteristic of forms of neo-liberal governing undertaken elsewhere, my concern in this paper has been to extend a focus beyond the ‘representational’ work of television to consider how it might be seen to operate as a technology of government in its own right, and in particular how processes of self-fashioning might be tied to processes of emotional engagement with television’s games. No doubt many viewers feel highly ambivalent about the punitive rituals of humiliation performed on Dragons’ den, and in this respect the program may open up a space within which the neo-liberal conduct and its cruelties can be critically engaged with. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily diminish the program’s effectiveness as a neo-liberal technology that shapes subjects’ identities and conducts both directly, through its provision of pedagogic instruction, and indirectly through its contribution to a social environment in which particular imperatives of conduct form the basis of everyday practices of judging selves and others.

References
Reconciliation literacy: understanding the relationship between reconciliation contact zones and Aboriginal policy

Kelsey Brannan

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relationship between reconciliation media, ranging from Indigenous creative expression to government-sponsored Indigenous monuments, and the formation of Australian Indigenous identity. Rethinking contemporary definitions of Indigenous identity means looking beyond the ideological and visual agendas of reconciliation and at the way in which the definition of ‘Aboriginality’ is being redefined by the quest for reconciliation between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Australia.

Aboriginal Australians have been objectified based on their skin colour and ‘blood’, by their culture and connection to the land. Today, Indigenous Australians are (de)aboriginalised by discourses of reconciliation to justify Aboriginal land as a space of belonging for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This (de)aboriginalisation process, however, perpetuates three problems within Australian Aboriginal affairs: (i) it reproduces oppositional binaries between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Australia, (ii) it restricts the Indigenous right to self-determination, and (iii) it centres on visualising Aboriginal culture in the mainstream rather than mediating the human rights conflict occurring between remote and urban Indigenous communities.

By analysing reconciliation media campaigns, such as ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’, I argue that Reconciliation Australia’s original intention to create unity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians using newer visual mediums, such as the internet, in turn assimilates the Aboriginal person within ‘white’ Australian culture. In other words, rather than reconciling the relationship between Indigenous and non-
Indigenous Australians, the visualisation of Aboriginality reconciles the ‘white’ person’s anxiety over his/her past atrocities.

In this paper I call for reconciliation literacy: the ability to read, comprehend and identify the implications that reconciliation language, visual and/or oral, has on Australia’s national identity.

Introduction

As a foreigner, it has been hard to locate Aborigines on any level, least of all in person. Yet, when one becomes aware of their absence, suddenly in a way they are present. (Langton 2003: 114)

At Reconciliation Place in Canberra, Australia, voices sing and Aboriginal songs play when people walk past motion-sensor sandstone monuments. As a visitor from the United States, I find that other tourists like myself visit these sites of commemoration and leave with the impression that Indigenous reconciliation is set in stone. Up the road from these commemorative sites, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy remains a historical site of protest for Indigenous communities. The visual and ideological disparity between the celebration of a shared journey at Reconciliation Place and the lingering anger that remains at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy reveals the gaps in Australia’s official recuperative rhetoric. There is a need to re-examine the relationship between these cultural reconciliation sites and the larger socio-political inequalities that still exist in Australia today (Sears and Henry 2002). Rethinking healthy futures for Indigenous populations in Australia means locating and critiquing significant ‘contact zones’ of reconciliation in contemporary Australia. Contact zones are public spaces, both physical and virtual, that re-establish and reconcile a relationship with the Australian past, the land and the Indigenous populations (Healy 2008). Australia’s cultural reconciliation campaign is a type of contact zone, one that, I argue, cuts out the larger discriminatory policies, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), from the picture frame. In this paper I show that, although reconciliation contact zones are important ways of acknowledging Indigenous culture in contemporary Australia, they often ‘cover up images we want to forget’, and contemporary policies such as the NTER that should not be ignored (Healy 2008).
According to Marcia Langton (2003: 120), the definition of Aboriginality has been negotiated by: (i) local Indigenous Australians, (ii) the symbolic and fictional constructions created by mainstream media, and (iii) the dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Reconciliation art projects, such as Reconciliation Place, follow the third method of defining Aboriginality proposed by Langton. In the effort to reconcile the relationship, however, the definition of Aboriginality inscribed in ‘contact zones’ like Reconciliation Place monumentalises and redeems Indigenous culture for the tourist gaze and further distances spectators from the current conditions in which Indigenous Australians reside (Dodson 2003: 34). There is a need to examine how contact zones – spaces of remembrance – also force people to forget (Rigby 1996: 3).

The examples of reconciliation contact zones I describe in this paper utilise a rhetoric of sameness, popularly known as ‘closing the gap’, to forgive and forget the past in order to build and promote equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This rhetoric gives the Australian population a preferential meaning of reconciliation, that is, the utopian ideal that forgiveness and equality will heal past violence and guarantee an equal future for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This preferential visualisation of reconciliation in urban areas, however, is only a fragment of the larger issues at hand (Freud 1962). Reconciliation rhetoric represses past and present contemporary human rights conflicts and ignores the diversity within the Indigenous population (Price and Price 2011). One has to question why tourists do not hear about the Northern Territory Emergency Response when visiting reconciliation contact zones.

I do not intend to say that the reconciliation campaign is harmful, as the campaign for reconciliation in Australia has helped produce cultural awareness about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Instead, I hope to call attention to the important reconciliation contact zones that displace past injustices and ignore current controversies. In this way, I call for reconciliation literacy, the ability to think critically about what these contact zones add to reconciliation discourse and how it relates to the current
lived lives of Indigenous Australians. Moreover, I show that the historical narratives of imperialism, mourning, myth and forgetting have not left Australia’s public memory, but have resurfaced in various contact zones created by Australia’s reconciliation campaign.

**Staging Aboriginality: campaigns directed by white Australia**

It is as if we [ Indigenous Australians] have been ushered onto a stage to play in a drama where the parts have already been written. (Dodson 2003: 37)

The contemporary mediations of Aboriginality produced by Reconciliation Australia, a non-profit organisation established in 2000 to build and promote harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, function as audiovisual extensions of the ‘local’ identity crisis that began when European settlers first migrated to Australia in 1788. Although the events and media projects created by Reconciliation Australia seek to create harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the symbolic and cultural projects do little to re-establish a new relationship between the two (Reconciliation Australia 2010b).

In 1995 National Reconciliation Week was established to fund events and projects that seek to ‘repair’ and close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The 2011 theme, ‘Let’s Talk Recognition’, encouraged Australian citizens to vote ‘Yes!’ on the proposed 2012 referendum on recognition of Indigenous people in the Australian constitution (Reconciliation Australia 2011). These reconciliation campaigns, however, turn Australia’s reconciliation process into a stage where various reconciliation actants, ranging from media campaigns that educate non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal culture to businesses that adjust their structure according to Reconciliation Action Plans, perform idealised forms of ‘Aboriginality’ for a non-Indigenous audience. In other words, the reconciliation campaign has resulted in an explosion of contact zones. These contact zones appear in almost every sector of public life. They appear as advertisements inside trams, as videos on reconciliation websites (eg Unfinished Oz), as art magnified on Qantas planes and more. Although the ubiquity of these contact zones makes the importance of Indigenous heritage visible, they also
perform idealised and non-realistic versions of Indigenous experiences for the Australian population.

In 2009 the programmers for National Reconciliation Week created various posters and videos to address the week’s theme ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’. The poster depicts two faces, one Indigenous and the other appearing to be non-Indigenous, with a statement that forces the viewer to confront racial prejudice: ‘Which one of these men is in a gang?’ And the end line reads, ‘We’re hoping you couldn’t answer that’ (Dodson 2009). The actors used in the ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’ advertisement are also placed into an oppositional template that turns them into racial objects, not individual subjects (Langton 2003). The image of the seemingly urban Indigenous person lacks specificity and heterogeneity, which denies Indigenous diversity and assumes that Indigenous experience is the same for all Indigenous Australians. By equating the two ‘different races’ with the same social status, this advertisement underscores the government’s assumed failure of Indigenous self-determination from the Howard era and accepts the inevitable assimilation of Indigenous culture into mainstream ‘white’ culture (Behrendt 2011). Although this advertisement gives the public visual ‘contact’ with reconciliation, its form erases cultural difference.

Unfinished Oz, an Indigenous literacy project created by Reconciliation Australia, launched a video and radio advertisement called the ‘Fresh Eyes Campaign’ on the tenth anniversary of the Bridge Walk for Reconciliation. The audiovisual contact zone featured familiar Australian faces and eyes, such as Ernie Dingo, Paul McDermott and Jack Thompson. Similarly to ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’, the video intercuts between extreme close-up shots of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians talking about how the ‘true’ project of reconciliation is about ‘moving forward’ and celebrating the similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (‘Reconciliation Australia fresh eyes’ 2010).

The dialogue in the video encourages a future of idealised ‘unity’ and represses past and current violence. It is also important to note that each person in the advertisement wears a pair of ‘coloured’ contact lenses different from their ‘natural’ eye colour in order to underscore
the way that people must see things ‘differently’, that is from the ‘other’s’ perspective. By switching the eye colours, however, the advertisement superimposes the colonisers’ gaze over Indigenous perspectives and reveals how the subtlest gestures perpetuate racial differences. It also underscores the inherent contradiction present within reconciliation contact zones: on the one hand they celebrate a future of equality and, on the other, they confirm racial binaries.

Reconciliation Australia’s goal to educate the public about Indigenous Australians has also encouraged businesses to adopt Reconciliation Action Plans in order to restructure the way Indigenous culture is visualised to the public. For example, in May of 2009, Qantas refreshed their Reconciliation Action Plan and added a new section to their business called ‘The Spirit of Reconciliation’ (Qantas nd b). This section focused on bringing ‘Aboriginal culture on board’ through Indigenous employment, partnerships, the *Australian Way* magazine, and inflight entertainment. Unlike Reconciliation Australia’s advertisement, ‘See the Person, Not the Stereotype’, which sought to assimilate the image of the traditional Aboriginal Australian into ‘white’ Australia, Qantas’s ‘Spirit of Reconciliation’ preserves Australia’s oldest culture through tourism art (Qantas 2009). The organisation responsible for promoting Indigenous ‘culture’ on Qantas airlines, however, is Corporate Communications, a department in the ‘Tourism Australia’ sector of the Australian government. By putting Indigenous culture in the hands of Corporate Communications, Qantas Airlines’ reconciliation contact zone perpetuates Marcia Langton’s second definition of Aboriginality, the stereotypical construction of Indigenous people by mainstream media, and further distances spectators from understanding the present-day experiences of Australia’s diverse Indigenous population.

Qantas has also added traditional Indigenous art to the exterior aesthetic of its latest aviation technology. The cover of the 2009 Qantas Reconciliation Australia Action Plan features the ‘Yananyi Dreaming’ Boeing 737-800 aircraft, decorated with Indigenous designs by Rene Kulitja (Qantas nd a). Rene describes her dreamtime as embodying her ‘traditional place’ in the land. She says, ‘my picture tells about the landscape, the animals and the ants of Uluru’ (Qantas nd a). Her art was magnified ‘100 times’ and transposed on the exterior of the Qantas Boeing, and is now called what Qantas refers to as a ‘Flying Dreamtime’. The translation of
traditional artwork onto a modern plane, however, commodifies Rene’s spiritual connection to the land for the tourist gaze. Felicity Wright explains, ‘whereas settlers see an empty wilderness, Aboriginal people see a busy spiritual landscape, peopled by ancestors and the evidence of their creative feats. These divergent visions produce a tension, one that spills over into the world of Aboriginal art’ (Wright 2000: 42). Thus, in an effort to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, this contact zone, Qantas’s ‘Flying Dreamtime’, becomes subject to the ‘fictionalisation’ that occurs in mainstream tourism – it loses cultural meaning. As a result, tourists and airport dwellers misrecognise Rene’s dreamtime as a ‘general’ signifier of Aboriginality, rather than her personal and intimate connection to the land. These reconciliation ‘contact zones’ are misrecognised.

In 2010 Reconciliation Australia released the first Australian Reconciliation barometer, which measures the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Reconciliation Australia 2010a). The barometer’s website notes, ‘the barometer explores how we see and feel about each other, and how these perceptions affect progress towards reconciliation and closing the gap’ (2010a). According to the barometer report, however, trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has not improved since Prime Minister Rudd’s national apology in 2008. Why is this? The study’s approach to measuring reconciliation was flawed and asymmetrical. For instance, the barometer asked what non-Indigenous Australians are willing to do for Indigenous Australians, but it did not ask Indigenous Australians what they are willing to do for non-Indigenous Australians. People were asked whether or not they agreed that ‘Indigenous people are open to sharing their culture with other Australians’. The barometer did not ask, however, whether or not non-Indigenous Australians were open to sharing their culture with Indigenous Australians. The barometer’s rhetoric speaks to the flaws of the barometer report itself, which is a tool used to measure Aboriginality in relation to ‘white’ Australia, rather than asking questions about what needs to be done to improve relations.

Reconciliation contact zones have not significantly changed or altered the Australian national consciousness. One of my respondents said, ‘Frankly, reconciliation, although symbolically
important, is considered a lot of hot air by some people when put alongside more pressing problems of Aboriginal people’ (anonymous professor, La Trobe University, email interview, 28 April 2011). Perhaps, if these contact zones did not embed themselves within existing postcolonial infrastructure, such as tramlines and tourist outlines, their underlying intentions could be put under closer scrutiny.

**Reconciliation contact zones as sites of misrecognition**

My purpose in this paper is to examine the misrecognition that occurs at reconciliation contact zones. To take us back to the beginning of the paper I would like to reiterate the way western strategies of remembrance, such as the creation of monuments and statues, have influenced inaccurate interpretations of Indigenous events. For example, Reconciliation Place, a permanent art installation consisting of seventeen Indigenous sculptures, acknowledges and commemorates positive and important events that commemorate ‘white’ Australia’s contribution to Indigenous reconciliation. For example, Referendum sculpture at Reconciliation Place memorialises the 1967 referendum, the decision that gave Indigenous Australians the right to vote (Lampart 2007: 3). The statue, however, creates a perspective that hides the failed implementation of the referendum shortly after its passage (Short 2008: 5). When the 1967 referendum was passed, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians were convinced that it would secure equality and self-determination for Indigenous Australians, but in fact it only gave the Australian government the right to regulate and impose ‘white’ law on Aboriginal history and culture (Short 2008: 20). Kevin Gilbert, an Aboriginal activist, said at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1967 referendum, ‘If the Referendum hadn’t been passed, we would have been further advanced because “white” Australia would not have fooled the world into thinking that something positive was being done’ (quoted in Lampart 2007: 3). This sculpture underscores what a blunt instrument western law can be when representing Indigenous issues. Referendum sculpture as well as the other sculptures at Reconciliation Place thus cover up and cause visitors to forget the way Australia’s government continues to legislate policy that assimilates Indigenous people with mainstream culture (Dodson 2003: 38).
While reconciliation contact zones portray a harmonious picture of Indigenous Australians, government policy paints a picture of Indigenous Australia as pathological (Waterford et al. 2007). The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which is a series of law enforcements and social welfare provisions implemented by the government in August 2007 to protect women and children from the sexual abuse reported in the *Little children are sacred* report (NT Board of Inquiry 2007), has done more harm than good (Australian Human Rights Commission 2007). In 2007 the Australian Human Rights Commission produced a *Social justice report* conveying the controversial form of the intervention. It stated:

The most significant problem with the new arrangements identified by the Little Children are Sacred Report is the lack of capacity for engagement and participation of Indigenous peoples. This manifests as a lack of connection between the local and regional level, up to the state and national level; and as a disconnect between the making of policy and its implementation. (Australian Human Rights Commission 2007)

The NTER ignores the fact that many successful bottom-up community and network-based enterprises, which have grown in reaction to substance abuse, have helped support and improve the arts, tourism and natural resource management industries in the Northern Territory. If the government continues to enforce a top-down model that seeks to ‘stabilise, normalise and exit Aboriginal Australia’, Indigenous communities in Australia will lose their culture and kinship structures, which are crucial to their existence (Waterford et al. 2007). What about the communities that are not violent in the region? Why do they have to suffer from top-down regulations?

Language enables and also disempowers (Foucault 1980: 11). If the language uttered within Reconciliation Australia’s contact zones gives agency to ‘white’ Australians or ‘Balanda’s’ world only, how will the fictionalisation of reconciliation’s progress end? How will people know that things are still wrong? Although the subtle visualisation of ‘Aboriginality’ in urban Australia promotes Indigenous culture as being valuable for all Australians, the art and discourse displayed within the contact zones paint over the continued violence. Instead of trying to translate, measure (eg the barometer), or superimpose ‘white’ language and law over
Indigenous culture, Reconciliation Australia should focus on funding campaigns that promote the positive community-based enterprises created by Indigenous Australians that address and have fixed problems such as substance abuse (Pascale, Sternin and Sternin 2010). Reconciliation literacy demands a recognition and remembrance of difference and heterogeneity; without it, the reconciliation campaign will continue to fictionalise progress and force people to forget. Thinking critically about the depiction of reconciliation at various contact zones does not mean debunking its cultural intentions, but understanding how even the most harmless depictions designed to help us remember can cause us to forget that new policies that support Indigenous diversity are greatly needed. The politics of reconciliation exist far beyond the picture frame, into the way we, as humans, choose to create, preserve and archive aspects of society’s culture and repress others.

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Negotiating difference: Islamic identity on display

Louise Ryan

Abstract
In this paper I explore the capacity of museums to promote cross-cultural understanding through displays of Islamic art and culture. The intensity and prevalence of Islamophobia in Australia often radicalises western Muslims and reinforces the East–West divide affecting notions of nation, Islamic identity and citizenship. I question the ‘Art of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection’ travelling exhibition’s impact on and interrelations with resulting institutional and societal tensions. In illustration, I will discuss preliminary findings from interviews and focus groups in relation to this exhibition event. I will position this case study in the wider context of the politics of display in terms of how non-western cultures are portrayed by western institutions and whether these exhibitions contribute to developing greater understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities specifically, and present alternative local and global images of the Arab/Muslim world generally.

Introduction
As researchers we are often asked why we investigate certain cultural phenomena, what relevance our research outcomes will have and whether our findings can have any impact upon societal problems. When I first began this project in 2007, events such as the Cronulla

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riots and a preoccupation with the Islamic ‘problem’ were affecting our country’s psyche and our image internationally. Therefore, research attempting to improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities was seen as not only topical but essential to moving forward in such a culturally diverse and sometimes volatile nation as Australia. Fast track to the present day and statistical findings such as those from the MyPeace group in 2011 confirm that the issue of understanding Islam and Islamic communities is as controversial a topic as ever:

the rise of Islam is the second biggest issue facing Australian society (17%) ahead of climate change (12%) and refugees and boat people (7%), it’s evident that there’s a great divide between what people understand to be the principles of our religion and the principles in reality. (vinienco.com 2011)

In this paper I draw upon empirical research from a larger study investigating the capacity of art museums to encourage cross-cultural understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim audiences through displays of Islamic artefacts and culture. Institutions such as museums have traditionally been viewed as bastions of culture and civilisation, educating and guiding their diverse audiences by providing quiet spaces for contemplation and reflection, removed from the outside world. However, contemporary museums are ‘contested terrain’ (Lavine and Karp 1991: 1), with hot debates raging over their function, viability and relevance to modern audiences and society in general.

The focus of this paper is the travelling exhibition Art of Islam: Treasures from the Khalili Collections, first shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney, in 2007 (from here on referred to as the AoIE). I will analyse particular practices and policies of display and the success of the exhibition in the eyes of institutions, organisers, community groups and audiences (both Muslim and non-Muslim). My analysis will be informed by textual documentation and empirical findings from 22 interviews, 4 focus groups, conversations and observational studies.
The case study: powerful spaces, significant stories

The Khalili Collection had lent objects to over 50 museums and been part of more than 35 exhibitions in America and Europe prior to 2007, but this travelling show (from 2007 to 2011) was the first example of the Khalili Trust itself touring a substantial number of the collection’s works. The AoIE attracted over 75,000 visitors to the AGNSW from 22 June – 23 September 2007 and was transnational, including works from Spain, Turkey, North Africa, India, Syria, Iran and China and spanning the seventh to twentieth centuries. The display was accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue, extensive lecture series, film screenings, musical performances, educational programs, celebrity talks and events such as an international symposium, conference and community day.

The major sponsor was Professor Nasser D Khalili, whose collection of Islamic art is one of the most thoroughly researched and published in the world. Khalili is passionate about collecting Islamic art, not because it is Islamic but because these objects are ‘the most beautiful’ creations in the art world. He defines Islamic art as ‘works produced by Muslim artists for Muslim patrons ... [that is not] exclusively religious’ (Khalili Family Trust 2011). Khalili describes his role as a collector as fulfilling four criteria:

1. to purchase art, to conserve art, to research art, and to exhibit art. When you have done this, you have done something for humanity ... I consider myself a mere custodian and responsible for the well-being of these objects ... ownership is a myth. (Arabian Knight 2008: 61, 64)

The Independent newspaper in the UK has described Khalili’s motives for collecting as ‘idealistic and educational. He wants the world to understand these things better and value them more highly’ (Gayford 2004).

The wider social imperatives of the AoIE, which various media detailed, were clearly articulated by Edmund Capon, director of AGNSW, when he stated:
The very word Islam casts both light and shadow over our contemporary world. I believe there has never been a greater need for the wealth and imagination of Islamic cultures and artistic heritage to be revealed ... to both Islamic and non-Islamic communities. (AGNSW 2007)

Khalili added to this sentiment by maintaining that

All truly great art has a way of transcending political and religious boundaries, and the arts of this land are no exception ... Religion and politics have their own languages, but the language of art is universal ... I use my collection as a language for building bridges ... [Beyond their beauty the objects show that] the arts can help remove misunderstandings between Jews and Muslims, or Christians and Muslims ... the greatest weapon of mass destruction is ignorance. (Khalili 2007)

The AoIE was opened by Minister Barbara Perry of the government of New South Wales on Friday 22 June 2007. Her speech echoed Capon and Khalili’s socio-cultural aims and confirmed the government’s commitment to sponsoring multicultural events. Perry was the MP for Western Sydney and Auburn; therefore her responsibility for representing some of Australia’s largest Islamic communities was evident:

in this post-September 11 and post-Bali era, every Australian of Islamic background should come and see this exhibition ... It is an invitation for engagement between civilisations. An engagement based on mutual respect. An engagement written in the humane and unifying language of art. It is – above all other things – simply beautiful. (AGNSW 2007)

The AoIE was in fact part of the AGNSW Principles of Multiculturalism and Ethnic Affairs priority outcomes 2007–08, as outlined in section 3 of the Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000. In working to achieve the objectives of their policy, the gallery had a mandate to present exhibitions and education programs promoting ‘respectful
intercultural community relations: leadership, community harmony, access and equality, and economic and cultural opportunities’ (AGNSW 2008).

The organisers emphasised many times that over 95 per cent of the works on display were secular, drawing attention to the aesthetic nature of the exhibition rather any political or religious context. However, both Capon and Khalili conceded that in Islam ‘every aspect of life is dedicated to the almighty’ (McLeod 2007a). The exhibited objects were diverse, both culturally and aesthetically, including illuminated manuscripts and Qur’ans, colourful ceramics and enamel objects, lustre-painted glass, lacquer ware and finely woven textiles. Media reports of the AoIE were overwhelmingly positive but, rather than highlighting their differences, it was the artefacts’ similarities that were repeatedly emphasised. Many articles supported the view that, though the works on display revealed the nature and range of the Khalili collection, the main aim of the exhibition was to promote peace and understanding by demonstrating the shared cultural heritage of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Several reports contained the statement by Khalili that the artworks ‘tell us that Islamic religion was a religion of tolerance, and the three religions lived side by side in harmony for centuries’. It was a ‘fact’ that it was not unusual for Muslim and Jewish artists to work together on art commissioned by Muslim rulers and Christian patrons during the golden age of Islamic art (from 750 to the sixteenth century). In addition, Muslim and Moorish weavers worked alongside Jewish dyers in Central Asia and Andalusia (McLeod 2007a).

Examples cited to illustrate this perspective included: a fifteenth-century manuscript depicting Mohammed encircled by his relatives as well as depictions of Moses, Mary and Jesus, illustrating the connections between the three religions; an Iranian flask not unlike objects from the Ming dynasty; several decorations that were noticeably Buddhist; and the Jonah and the whale tale (which is told in both the Bible and Qur’an) that appears in Rashid-Al Din’s History of the world on display, the first survey of Muslim history written from the viewpoint of the Mongol conquerors in 1314–15. This manuscript came from the Asiatic Society’s collection and for a decade was the most valuable work of art ever sold at auction (McLeod 2007a, 2007b).
There were four general groups of key stakeholders in the AoIE: institutional agencies (AGNSW curators, community and exhibition programmers, exhibition registrar, exhibition and catalogue designers); entrepreneurial philanthropists/private sponsors (collection owner and curatorial staff, Westfield, National Australian Bank, AGNSW Presidents Council, VisAsia); federal, state and local government involvement (Australian Arabic Relations under the Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, NSW Department for Arts, Sports and Recreation, Minister Barbara Perry); and participating community groups (the Affinity Intercultural Foundation, Al-ghazzali Centre for Islamic Sciences and Human Development and the Islamic Friendship Association of Australia).

All stakeholders viewed the AoIE as a highly successful collaborative venture. When referring to the AoIE in the AGNSW Annual report 2007-08 Edmund Capon reflected that,

in retrospect, I think this was one of the most significant exhibitions that this gallery has ever undertaken ... the exhibition was particularly timely, for the non-Muslim world congress to know more of the great histories and cultures of the countries that comprise the Muslim world. (AGNSW 2008: 31)

The financial success of the exhibition was evident in the record ticket sales. The AoIE attracted more than double the number of visitors of any other exhibition that year, drawing crowds comparable to those visiting the annual Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Prize Exhibition 2007, one of the most visited exhibits in the country (AGNSW 2008).

Other related exhibition activities were also lucrative endeavours. The Ages of Islam, a series of 14 lectures from May to July, was sold out by May 2007; as was the 13-week film screening of the movie Shiraz. The lecture series was advertised as an ‘introduction to one of the world’s great religions, as it is probably the least understood and most often misrepresented in the West today ... to show how a multi-faith, tolerant and ideas-laden civilisation could develop’.
The special event ‘David Khalili in conversation with Bob Carr’, former Premier of New South Wales, was fully booked, attracting 320 participants.

Education programs ran in conjunction with the exhibition, targeting student from kindergarten through to Year 12, including teachers’ exhibition previews and Years K-6 teachers’ holiday workshops offering free education kits. These programs were a great success with both teachers and students, with one art teacher, Evelyn Tomazos of Bankstown West Public School, using the AoIE as stimulus for a complete unit of work for her Year 5 and 6 students. As 50 per cent of her pupils were Muslims, she considered that ‘These children need to feel there’s something very positive about their art and background’ (NSW Public Schools 2008). As part of the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP), an initiative of the federal, state and territory governments, transport and entry to the Arts of Islam exhibition was provided for approximately 600 primary and high school students in the Western Sydney region. Other educational activities included Islamic storytelling and workshops, scheduled twice a week over three weeks in the 2007 July school holiday period (AGNSW 2007).

Muslim community involvement was an important social and cultural focus of the activities related to the exhibition. Khalili commented: ‘the Muslim community in Australia needs a bit of support of seeing their own culture. I’m happy to bring these artworks here. It is a good move’ (Australian Jewish News 2007). Participants included the Affinity Intercultural Foundation (AIF), established in 2001 by young Australian Muslims, with the mission ‘to create and sustain enduring affinity and relationships with people through inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and understanding’. Their presence at the AoIE ‘101 Questions Day’ and Wednesday ‘After Dark’ evening events was considered an important part of both the AGNSW and AIF’s educational and informative community programs, aimed at encouraging dialogue and interaction between Australians of different backgrounds and faiths. Importantly, Mehmet Ozalp, author and president of AIF, gave a celebrity talk on 1 August 2007 focusing on intercultural and interfaith dialogue from his two books, 101 questions you asked about Islam (which the AGNSW session was named after) and Islam in the modern world.
Two other community events were the Art of Islam Symposium on Friday 22 June and the Community Day on Saturday 23 June 2007. Speakers included Edmund Capon, Prof Nasser Khalili, Nahla Nasser (acting curator and registrar of the Khalili collection), JM Rogers (honorary curator of the Khalili collection), with Qur’an recitations by Sheikh Ahmad Abu Ghazaleh, workshops with calligrapher Salem Mansour, and question time with volunteers from the Al-Ghazzali Centre (AGNSW 2007).

In the eyes of the sponsors the AoIE was clearly a success. The Council for Australian-Arab Relations (CAAR), an initiative of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DEFAT), was one of the major government sponsors, funding a symposium and a fundraising dinner which raised approximately $50,000 for AGNSW acquisitions. The council stated in its annual report of 2006-07 that its sponsorship of the AoIE had been ‘an outstanding promotion for the work of the CAAR’ (CAAR 2007).

For Khalili there were some obvious benefits from his sponsorship of the AoIE. As art critic John McDonald commented,

> Even though no one doubts the sincerity of his interest in Islamic art, or his desire to reconcile the Muslim, Jewish and Christian worlds, Khalili’s philanthropy has helped boost the presumed value of his collection, which is now believed to be worth billions of pounds. Perhaps a few of our own billionaires should take note: by helping others in an apparently disinterested fashion you can also help yourself. (McDonald 2007)

**Social-political context: unrest in Australia**

Museums often consider themselves removed from the concerns of the world outside their doors but consistent political and social unrest in Australia and a barrage of associated media images concerning Muslims and Islam inevitably would have affected the attitudes and opinions of their visitors. This was especially the case with the series of riots in December 2005 at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla, and later Maroubra, instigated by Anglo-Celtic factions against Lebanese Muslims, which received high levels of media coverage and
led to further inquiry into ethnic relations and multiculturalism in Australia within political and media discourses.

In addition to the Cronulla riots, there had been a range of media reports and ‘images’ that had fuelled cultural tensions. Instances included: NSW MP, the Reverend Fred Nile, in 2002 who urged the government to consider ‘banning the wearing of the hijab in public places as a security precaution, because it could be used by terrorists to conceal weapons and explosives’ (The Age, 4 Dec 2002); the Sydney Morning Herald’s article on 4 February 2006 titled ‘Riot order: avoid Middle Eastern men’; Sheik el Hilaly’s comments in late 2006 comparing ‘ scantily clad women to raw meat left out for cats’ (Kerbaj 2006); and the fear that extremists were seeking local Somali recruits in Melbourne in 2007 (The Age, 13 April 2007).

Furthermore, intense opposition to a proposed Islamic school in Camden, Sydney involved a local residents’ campaign of strategically stereotyping Muslims as ‘fanatical, intolerant, militant, fundamentalist, misogynist and alien’, culminating in protesters ramming two pigs’ heads on to metal stakes, with an Australian flag between them. This was similar to a previous incident in 2004, when a severed pig’s head was impaled in front of a Muslim prayer centre in Annangrove, Sydney (K Dunn, ABC News, 28 November 2007).

**Understanding, desire and the transforming power of art**

Considering the social, racial and political tensions existing in Australia prior to 2007, what strategies did the promoters of the exhibition employ to counteract ‘negative’ images and how can the degree of success of this common desire for cross-cultural understanding be measured?

Exhibition organisers and curators hoped to actualise their desire to promote cross-cultural understanding through their own knowledge of how spaces work, how art affects audiences and how the visual and sensory experience can be harnessed to produce desired effects. Through the practices and policies of display, museums transform the cultural object into a transmitter of new meanings and values, altering and disrupting cultural, social and political
nuances associated with its creation. This process seeks to deploy the art object and aesthetic experiences as a function of government, having the power to civilise, to produce self-regulating citizens through what Foucault (1988) described as the ‘technologies of the self’.

Exhibitions are therefore never ‘neutral’; they are ‘constructed’ and ‘motivated’ by their ‘cultural producers’. They are ‘spaces of representation’, places of translation and meaning construction where the viewer encounters objects, visual representations, textual information, reconstructions and sounds creating ‘an intricate and bounded representational system’ (Lidchi 1995: 168). The visitor may consciously and physically travel through this highly mediated exhibition space but unconsciously and conceptually opinions, viewpoints and mindsets may or may not be altered. As Stuart Hall explained, positive experiences cannot be guaranteed to occur as during this process of engagement ‘competing, conflicting and contested meanings and interpretations’ can be experienced by the viewer (1995a: 9). This is because meaning in terms of objects, people and events in themselves do not possess fixed, constant, final or true meaning but are slippery, ‘changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances’ (Hall 1995a: 10). Societies and the people within them make meaning, and these meanings can alter from one culture to another as cultural codes (the classification systems that assign meaning to the world). Thus, the mental images and concepts people ‘carry around in their heads’ differ, so the world can be decoded and translated in a variety of ways according to individual and community norms, customs and belief systems (Hall 1995b: 62).

There are also varying limits among people in terms of levels of perception. How many engage beyond the surface properties of the ‘beautiful object’, confident they possess what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’, the ability to ‘see through’ objects on display to uncover the concealed order of art which underlies their arrangement, the ‘politics of the invisible’ (1984: 172). Additionally, glass display cases, enclosed spaces and technological innovations that are designed to enhance the visitor experience also act as barriers, creating distance between the viewer and the ‘real’ object. Descriptive and didactic textual panels and labels that allow for individual interpretation are decoded and translated via individual and cultural codes of
understanding. Not everyone comes to an exhibition for the same reasons and with similar expectations of the experience they will have.

The opinion of others

Organisers saw the exhibition as a resounding success but what did visitors see and think? What were their perceptions, attitudes and interests? Was there any evidence that this display created a greater awareness of Islam and Islamic communities and encouraged cross-cultural understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim audiences?

Data obtained from individual interviews, focus groups, conversations and observational studies revealed that, while many visitors did want to be more informed about Islam and Islamic culture and learn something from the objects and their labels, many others regarded the exhibition as a social outing and not necessarily an educational event. Some Muslim interviewees viewed all the artworks on display as appropriate and tasteful, while other Muslims (particularly Sunni Muslims) were offended by the statement that the exhibition was 95 per cent secular, as they believed all art was made for God and therefore religious. In addition, some interviewees considered that the use of images depicting the prophet Mohammad (especially his face) was inappropriate and offensive. One participant stated that her family left the exhibition because of depictions of Mohammad and that there should have been a warning sign at the exhibition entrance. Several interviewees were surprised, and some suspicious, of why a Jewish person was displaying Islamic art and, despite most focus group participants agreeing that a beautiful work of art can transcend political, religious and cultural boundaries, several believed dialogue was essential to understanding another perspective. As one participant commented, ‘when you look at an artwork from another culture you have questions and then you want to ask someone or at least talk to someone about it’.

So far this research has failed to locate any Muslim who attended the community day arranged by the gallery (many commented that they prefer to go to locally organised events) and I have found no Muslims who attended the lectures, as they were seen by Muslim focus group participants as too expensive and were sold out well in advance anyway. It appears that
unless they had free tickets and transport, Muslim community groups interviewed said not many of their members would ever travel into the city or to a gallery there. Despite lectures, talks, Q and A sessions and access to Muslim volunteers at information counters, most interviewees did not report engaging in or observing conversations between culturally different groups. Several female volunteers believed that wearing the hijab probably ‘put non-Muslim people off’ asking them questions. Many of the focus group participants felt other events like mosque open days and guided tours, Iftar dinners during Ramadan where Muslims and non-Muslims eat together, local festivals like ones at shopping malls, advertisements like the MyPeace ones on TV, and billboards and movies like the British comedy film about Muslim suicide bombers, Four Lions, did more to address misconceptions about Islam and Muslims and break down barriers (interview/focus group transcripts, 2010–2011).
Conclusion

I have discussed an exhibition space showcasing spectacular visual displays designed to lead visitors on a physical and conceptual journey. Stakeholders unanimously agreed that their aim to contribute to a greater understanding of Islam and Islamic communities was achieved through practices and policies of display aiming to disrupt and re-configure knowledges and social issues in the minds of their audiences by harnessing the reforming power of the cultural artefact and the aesthetic experience.

However, my research findings reveal that this perception of success was not shared equally between exhibition organisers and their viewing public, with many barriers standing in the way of their stated goal. With an array of societal tensions and negative ‘images’ of Muslims and Islam circulating, with differences in coding and decoding by culturally diverse audiences viewing these ‘systems of representation’, and limitations on individual perception and motivation, this exhibition site was required to perform a variety of often contradictory functions to meet the expectations of stakeholders and audiences. It was simultaneously a place of leisure and pleasure for many, as well as educational and transformative experiences for some.

My larger research question is whether aesthetic experiences reform, inform and change people or are they simply interventions in the representational machinery and discursive landscape that may or may not impact upon anyone other than those already ‘converted’, those wedded to a liberal-humanist vision of tolerance and harmonious co-existence? My empirical research suggests that for displays of cultural objects to achieve their goals they need to be complemented by other activities that engage different communities in dialogue at communal events in ‘ordinary spaces’ on the level of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ which have the potential to become arenas where cross-cultural understanding can occur and more meaningful and permanent bridges can be built across cultures and within communities.
As Kwame Appiah reminds us,

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else ... [are] hardly guaranteed to lead to agreement about what to think and feel ... but [they are] a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others ... Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another. (Appiah 2006: 85)

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Not different enough: coloniality, regionality and cultural difference in visual art of the Tasman-Pacific

Pamela Zeplin

Abstract

As large and small islands in/bordering the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia appear to share much in common. While a ‘special’ or familial relationship connecting the two predominantly ‘Anglo’ countries is habitually assumed because of geographical proximity, history and apparently similar cultural heritage, both non-indigenous visual arts communities have nevertheless been ‘profoundly uncomfortable in their apparent “sameness”’ (Broker 2000). Not unlike a dysfunctional family, they share a long history of virtually ignoring one another’s art and cultural differences while striving for endorsement by northern hemisphere metropoles.

However, this has not always been the case and it seems almost unimaginable that inter-colonial connections between Australia and New Zealand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were regularly undertaken within an identifiable trans-Tasman region known as ‘Australasia’. Again in the 1970s and 1980s the two national Labor governments re-discovered trans-Tasman solidarity within the Pacific region, and the re-evaluation of regionalism was epitomised in a number of significant artist exchanges. Following some inevitable débâcles around unacknowledged cultural differences, especially

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with regard to indigenous and Pacific cultures, by 1985 the art worlds of these two countries again resumed divergent trajectories when Australian desire was directed towards the Asia-Pacific and New Zealand embraced its identity within the ‘other end’ of that hyphen.

In this paper I explore this historical context in response to an immanent cultural trans-Tasman ‘reunion’ now glimmering on Australian art institutional horizons in the form of contemporary Pacific art. This raises the questions: To what extent do Australian curators now rely on New Zealand expertise – particularly focused around ‘Polynesian’ art – for curatorial and acquisitions policies? Where is the ‘Melanesian’ Pacific, so closely associated with Australia’s history? And why do Pacific-Australian artists continue to remain invisible in their own country?

Introduction

When we look outside our cultural space in which direction do we look? Up, down, to the side? ... At home it never occurred to us that more benefit could be found by thinking sideways – towards other ‘Southern Spaces’. (Papastergiadis 2003: 1)

As large and small islands bordering/in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand appear to share much in common. Habitually, political and economic rhetoric concerning trans-Tasman relations in both countries assumes closeness, similarity and, in particular, familiarity, through geographical proximity, settler histories (predominantly colonial and Anglo-Celtic), language and culture. Indeed, the countries share many pasts but, as Mein Smith et al (2008: 13–14) suggest, not necessarily a shared history. Separate national histories of both nations abound and comparative studies exist in the domains of economics, trade, defence, health and science (Sinclair 1987a), but more than 150 years of densely entangled trans-Tasman inter-relationships go largely unremarked. In particular, cultural comparisons between these countries remain surprisingly unexamined and this is nowhere more evident than in the Australian visual arts sector and Pacific/Oceanic studies, two fields of research that rarely intersect.

In examining the intertwined aesthetic histories of Australia and New Zealand, it is imperative to situate both countries within their surrounding Tasman and Oceanic regions.
Such geo-cultural positioning provides an appropriate context for understanding how profound differences have shaped notions of national culture and identity, particularly over the past three decades. New Zealand is an officially decreed Pacific nation, albeit within prescribed bi-cultural and bi-lingual policies (Goff 2007). The Treaty of Waitangi formally acknowledges the Indigenous Māori population (tangata whenua) as first people. At the 2006 census these people of the Pacific represented 14.6 per cent of (Aotearoa) New Zealand’s population while first and second generation immigrant Islanders indigenous to other Pacific countries accounted for 6.9 per cent (Statistics New Zealand 2011). Both Pacific communities enjoy high cultural visibility across the country, including prominence throughout the contemporary visual art sector.

In contrast, Australia’s cultural, political and economic relations within this shared geographical region have taken a very different stance, even though two and a half per cent of this country’s (officially multicultural) population claims Pacific/Oceanic heritage, in addition to half a million New Zealand-born immigrants, including one sixth of all Māori (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011; Rose et al 2009). Australia’s broader Pacific sector is similar in size to populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, whose Indigenous land rights are yet to be comprehensively legislated (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation nd). Unlike New Zealand’s cultural profile, Australian artists of Pacific heritage comprise a ‘vibrant but consistently untapped and overlooked dimension of the Australian art scene’ (O’Riordan 2009). In 1985 Simon During described these divergent situations as New Zealand ‘coming to “know itself in Maori terms [sic]”, while in Australia he discerned a “crisis of emptiness” caused by the continual silencing of indigenous voices’ (in Williams 2004: 739).

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2 Maori is an older spelling for indigenous New Zealanders. Māori is now the accepted spelling of Indigenous New Zealanders in the official Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand (2011).

3 Aotearoa New Zealand is an increasingly used, if contested, term, referring to the country’s indigenous heritage and bi-cultural policy. Government sites are officially titled New Zealand, with a secondary title, such as Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa. Some Māori, particularly those in/from the South Island, are divided on the use of Aotearoa as ‘the Maori name for New Zealand, though it seems at first to have been used for the North Island only. Many meanings have been given for the name’ (Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand 2011).

4 The terms Pacific and Oceania are subject to changing interpretations. In this paper they are used interchangeably when referring to the southern Pacific region.
However, these significant dissimilarities between indigenous cultures and between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures in each country are, along with other major differences such as population, size, climate, topography and sporting cultures, rarely acknowledged in trans-Tasman parlance (Docker and Fischer 2000). Instead, official government and much academic discourse continues to draw upon a long tradition of celebrating both countries’ close ties in terms of regional proximity, predominant Anglo-Celtic heritage and language, military pacts such as ANZAC, ANZUS (Holdich, Johnson and Andre 2001) and, since 1983, a comprehensive free trade agreement appropriately named Closer Economic Relations (Templeton 2001). In other words, the historical narratives undergirding trans-Tasman relations, particularly those propounded by Australian political leaders, privilege the myth of a common ‘white tribes’ culture. Beyond their immediate region both countries are frequently viewed as culturally interchangeable (Hardjono 1993). The perception of a shared monoculture, then, has persisted despite the smaller country’s long-held attitudes towards indigenous Māori that differ radically from its larger neighbour’s constitutional stance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Notwithstanding this divergence, a majority white cultural perspective prevailed for more than a century. In this way both countries’ discomforting settler histories, which precluded a sense of being at home in the indigenous global South, could be elided. With cultural understandings of homeland firmly fixed in the northern Atlantic until at least the 1970s (Connell 2007; Murray 2010), a shared sense of cultural inferiority hindered deeper investigations of cultural difference within and between Tasman-Pacific locales. Meanjin editor Judith Brett noted that both countries have ‘look(ed) steadfastly back to the northern hemisphere with scarcely a sideways glance’ (1985: 328). As a result, she observed, ‘Australians’ neurotic superciliousness towards and guiltless ignorance of New Zealand help to preserve us from acknowledging our own smallness and insignificance’ (1985: 328).

Australians’ distinctive lack of curiosity about and often patronising attitude towards its smaller and ostensibly similar neighbour has not only played out within the context of familiarity, but of family *per se*, and more specifically the model of a happy family. Framed
within a domestic understanding of trans-Tasman relations, divergences and disagreements can thus be subsumed, masked and disregarded in a way that foreign relations between two sovereign nations may not; in a geo-political sense these require more effort. Positioned within a bland and benign kinship category, New Zealand poses no real threat and is often taken for granted by Australians as a lesser version of itself, creating ceaseless currents of slippage between domestic and foreign relations.

Brabazon observed that this awkward partnership in the south-west quadrant of the Pacific often resembles ‘an old married couple [with] nothing left to say ... staring past each other, [and] making assumptions that are not confirmed through conversation’ (2000: 33–34). Indeed this has often been the case in visual arts, where three decades ago New Zealand poet and critic Wystan Curnow noted: ‘All things considered Australia and New Zealand have quite a record for ignoring one another’s art’ (quoted in Hunter 1980: 20). Indeed, negligible information about or interest in New Zealand art has been evident in Australian art institutions until very recently and then, in a limited capacity, through the Gallery of Modern Art/Queensland Art Gallery (QAGOMA). Assumed to be too subtle, too beige and too bland, New Zealand and trans-Tasman cultural histories as ‘a family thing’ have not constituted attractive terrain for contemporary Australian curators and writers, even though distinctive cultural tensions underlie surface appearances and assumptions. Related to this historical omission, neither New Zealand per se or its visual culture have been identified as valid fields of research within Pacific studies in Australian academia, even though issues of Pacific indigeneity have infused New Zealand’s social, political and cultural identity since the mid-nineteenth century, not to mention the ‘Pasifika’ transformation that has taken place during the past three decades (Goff 2007).

While genteel familial indifference in Australian art and academia has rendered all but invisible the cultural, racial and political realities distinguishing the smaller sibling country, a few instances of intense trans-Tasman interest and exchange may be discerned through what Mein Smith et al referred to as ‘hidden histories’ and ‘repressed [family] memories’ (2008: 16). The Tasman region may have experienced countless individual cultural flows and
crossings but three distinct and short-lived periods of consciously intertwined art exchange may also be identified: these are late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interchanges within Australasia; collaborative trans-Tasman visual art programs in the 1970s and 1980s; and early twenty-first-century glimmers of Australian interest in recent New Zealand visual culture now self-consciously branded as Pasifika. This latest development has been initiated almost entirely by Brisbane’s QAGOMA collections and its APTs (Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art) (1993–), which followed Sydney’s modest and short-lived Pacific Wave Festivals in 1996 and 1998 introducing Polynesian/New Zealand art to Australian audiences.

In each example of enthusiastic trans-Tasman aesthetic accord, however, the dormant volcano of national differences and unexamined attitudes has rumbled across or erupted through the thin surface of assumed kinship to reveal deep fissures of misunderstanding and/or discord. Invariably, as in family dynamics, well-intentioned relations eventually became strained and sometimes hostile after a time, and the core of most trans-Tasman tensions has involved national attitudes and policies concerned with indigeneity, Pacific regionality and more recently exoticisation. In these encounters, white Australia, even with its later multicultural policies, is consistently revealed as a darker sheep within the Tasman-Pacific family.

While detailed analysis of these cultural, ethnic and racial minefields lie beyond this paper’s scope, I hope to offer Australian visual arts research a reorientation towards an ‘undiscovered’ region, literally and metaphorically close to home. In particular, I argue for more considered awareness of cultural and political differences distinguishing Australian and New Zealand art histories and the role of indigenous and Pacific issues and policies in shaping these distinctive narratives.

The family way

The Australia–New Zealand relation is a strange, complex one. Historically, no two countries on the face of the earth have had more in common – language, Anglo-Saxon
heritage, a pioneering push to the edge of the world, white skins on a brown frontier, colonial experience, very similar political and legal systems …

New Zealand and Australia have gone to war together; citizens of each country shuttle back and forth chasing the sun, opportunity or peace and quiet … the two countries are major trading partners. Yet few countries bicker and grizzle about each other more without actually going to war. (Grant 2001: 9)

Official Australian rhetoric concerning relations with New Zealand has long drawn upon tropes of family and war in order to maintain close political and economic connections. Repeated declarations of sameness and kinship, however, often belie numerous unacknowledged differences between a large and economically dominant country and its smaller neighbour within cordial and occasionally sentimental trans-Tasman discourse. The most recent example was during Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s 2011 visit to New Zealand’s parliament in Wellington, where, paying tribute to the two nations’ ‘shared defence history’, she proclaimed: ‘Australia has many alliances and friendships around the world … but New Zealand alone is family’ (Woodley 2011).

For all ANZAC’s apparent mutual accord, however, its legendary blood bonding has been challenged by numerous New Zealand diggers whose accounts of Gallipoli and Egypt chronicled deeper differences – including off-battlefield conflict – between the 1915 allies than the distinctive shapes of their hats (Gammage 1974; Brabazon 2000: 23–25). Notwithstanding this ‘bickering family model’ (Broker 2000), the ANZAC legend was cherished and elevated to foundational national myth by former Prime Minister John Howard (Basarin 2011: 42), a leader not otherwise at home in Tasman Pacific regions where his coalition government (1996–2007) was widely viewed as ‘deputy sheriff’ for US foreign policy (Kerr 2008). Unlike its Tasman neighbour’s increasingly more fluid position within Oceania during the 1980s and 1990s, Australia’s regional reputation with its island neighbours became one of benevolent but patronising ‘big brother’ (Kelsey, in Braddock 2004) as it instead sought economic acceptance within the Asian sector of a booming Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, as late as 2000 New Zealand was considered ‘outgrown’ as an Australian regional priority when Gregson
Edwards, Director of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Cultural Relations Branch, remarked that New Zealand was regarded ‘almost like Tasmania’ and quoted former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s warning that the Australian government should ‘mend our ... relations with Asia [or] Asia would soon look at Australia like Australia looked at New Zealand’ (Helen Stacey, personal communication, 11 November 2000). In the same year expatriate New Zealand curator David Broker noted similar attitudes prevailing on the mainstream art front where non-indigenous Tasman cultures were ‘profoundly uncomfortable in their apparent sameness’ and subject to ‘sibling rivalry, with petty jealousies and meaningless competition ... sum[ming] up the relationship’ (2000).

**The family and the cultural neighbourhood**

Since the time of colonial settlement the overwhelming emphasis of the (white) Australian and New Zealand art worlds has been on Euramerican and British models of production and distribution, consistently seeking affirmation from northern hemisphere metropolitan centres and major events such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta (Murray 2009a, 2010). These locales, rather than antipodean places and relations, have defined and continue to dominate notions of international aesthetic value for both countries’ art cognoscenti. Only in the last two decades have Asian cultures been introduced to the aesthetic mainstream of both countries’ art institutions, while Oceanic/Pacific art has experienced considerably later and less impact upon Australian culture than in New Zealand where, over the past three decades, it has contributed significantly to shaping the national imaginary (Goff 2007). For most of both countries’ art histories, cultural identification with northern metropoles, including Britain as ‘home’, created a vertical rather than lateral understanding of internationalism. In 1987 expatriate New Zealand writer John Salmond commented on his birth country’s recent embrace of the Pacific region:

> Forty years ago the fact that New Zealand is geographically part of the Polynesian chain was not something to be stressed but ignored. Linked to Britain, as we were by chains of cultural heritage, economic dependence, and imperial sentiment, geographic location seemed irrelevant. (1987: 310–311)
This was not so in Australia. Three years earlier distinguished Indian theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1984) reminded a large Futur-fall audience of intellectuals in Sydney of Australia’s responsibility to ‘re-invent its place on the map’, rather than ‘manufacturing the voice of Atlantic Europe’. This plea came sixteen years after another Indian visitor, Indira Gandhi, ‘urged Australians to see themselves as bridging the East–West gap between South Asia and the new world of the Pacific’ (Spivak 1984). In fact, Australia’s art mainstream embraced Asian culture only from the 1990s (Asialink 2012), while Pacific Island cultures are still widely regarded as happening somewhere offshore to the east of Brisbane, not as a vibrant fact of Australia’s artistic life.

Complex relations between Pākehā New Zealanders, Indigenous Māori and Pacific Islanders have been significantly different to those experienced between white Australian settlers and Indigenes (Brady and Carey 2000; Schech and Haggis 2000; McIntyre 2000) and until the last decade infrequent instances of trans-Tasman artistic connections overwhelmingly featured non-Indigenous artists from Australia. Whereas artists of Māori (and more recently Pacific Island) heritage have been embraced as integral to New Zealand’s identity, Australian Indigenous culture was only acknowledged within national art institutions as contemporary art – as distinct from ethnography – from the later 1980s – after its value was affirmed by (western) international art markets (Berrell 2009). Moreover, beyond art world and/or sporting success, Indigenous Australia remains ‘other’ to mainstream society where a condition of forgetting Indigenous dispossession has resulted in profound cultural and psychic dislocation in terms of Australia’s literal and metaphorical place in the world. Schech and Haggis explained:

The resonance of migrancy is compounded in Australia by the twinning of the always having arrived with the wilful forgetting of the nature of that arrival – such that a sense of belonging and being at home was always reliant on a tension between awareness of arrival and skating over the nature of that arrival and its consequences. This need to actively cover up the story of arrival and conquest reinforced the need to have an external point of reference, Britain, for constructing a sense of being here. (2000: 232)
In this way the construction of a monocultural family chronicle connecting the settler societies of Australia and New Zealand allowed both white tribes, to some extent, to elide any literal skeletons in metaphorical family closets. Inevitably, however, each society’s different and complex historical experiences of race relations within the Tasman-Pacific region and the consequent effects upon cultural and artistic attitudes were exposed during a few sustained – or even brief – encounters. Living in an ‘unhomely’ region at the bottom of the world for most of their histories, New Zealand and Australia as two small and insignificant western settler societies have been, in a sense, uncomfortably yoked together, distanced not only from northern ethnic and cultural peers but from Indigenous inhabitants of the region, at least during colonial times and in varying degrees thereafter. In these circumstances where cultural foci remain ‘elsewhere’ (Murphy 1982: 47), it is not surprising the issue of size – which is common in familial transactions – comes to determine relative power relations between large and little Tasman relations. With historical, economic, ethnic, social and topographical differences regularly subsumed under the aegis of kin, mutual interest in each other’s cultural and artistic domains has rarely been evident, particularly from the western side of the Tasman. As in sibling rivalry, dominance and/or indifference and resentment have thus oscillated as persistent tensions beneath apparent family resemblances.

Such anxieties tend to go unnoticed by the larger (read senior) partner so that, in short, little in the way of New Zealand culture as a distinctive entity is seen or validated in the larger society. Consequently, the Kiwi cousins’ cultural efforts have been assumed similar but necessarily inferior, given their relative size within a partnership based on mutual inferiority and in thrall to Atlantic paradigms. By 1986, for example, following an exceptional series of Australia–New Zealand art exchanges between 1970 and 1985, New Zealand was declared ‘the last place of exile’ for Australian artists craving international affirmation (Ewington 1986: 30). It may be no coincidence that the year before saw New Zealand exiled from the 1951 ANZUS defence alliance by its partners, Australia and the US, when it denied that latter’s navy entry into Auckland’s nuclear-free harbour (Holdich, Johnson and Andre 2001).
Without regular opportunities to test regional assumptions, non-indigenous New Zealand art has remained virtually unshown and unknown in Australia, with the following major exceptions: regular cultural crossings in *fin de siècle Australasia* (my emphasis); the aforementioned 1970s and 1980s art exchanges; and occasional acknowledgement of internationally renowned Kiwi filmmakers and artists such as Jane Campion, Colin McCahon (Murphy, in Smith nd) and more recently Len Lye, who have been identified as ‘exceptional Antipodeans’ rather than New Zealanders (Zeplin 2004a: 410). By the new millennium New Zealand’s burgeoning film industry had stirred international re-evaluation of this small country’s cultural value, although Australia’s budding re-assessment of New Zealand art has been confined to an exoticised Pasifika principally generated by QAGOMA’s Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane.

Meanwhile, apart from the relatively modest Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992 and the Unnerved exhibition from the QAGOMA art collection touring to the National Gallery of Victoria in 2010–11, no major New Zealand survey exhibition has appeared in an Australian state gallery – notwithstanding regular historical, contemporary and thematic Australian exhibitions being regularly featured in New Zealand state and private galleries. Such imbalance is not so surprising, as critic Johanna Mendelssohn explained in her review of Headlands: ‘The terrible truth is that most Australians’ concept of New Zealand is as a place for cheap skiing holidays and aggressive football where the locals can’t pronounce the difference between “sex” and “six”’ (1992).

Tara Brabazon observed in 2000: ‘there is not one Australian tertiary institution that teaches New Zealand studies’ (2000: 34), a situation almost unchanged in 2011, despite the fact that a number of Australian studies courses, including art history, are taught throughout New Zealand. With rare exceptions, neither is contemporary art studied in Australian Asia-Pacific studies. In recent years a number of southerly publications have explored various domains of antipodean culture, such as Raewyn Connell’s *Southern theory* (2007) and various writings by Margaret Jolly (2001, 2007) and Kevin Murray (2009a, 2009b), as well as the journal
Southpaw. Australia–New Zealand relations, however, are barely addressed, apart from two trans-Tasman studies: Brabazon’s Tracking the Jack (2000) and Mein Smith et al’s Remaking the Tasman world (2008). Even here, mention of visual culture is cursory and limited to cartoons, photographs and maps.

An Australasian world
Mapping, nevertheless, was an important aspect of the Tasman world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Australasia was experienced as an identifiable region incorporating New Zealand, Australia and, optionally, Pacific Oceania. Today it is hard to imagine thickly entwined flows of cultural traffic across the Tasman during this period, rendering both countries highly permeable within a ‘cohesive region’ (Mein Smith et al 2008: 16). With large numbers of Australians residing in New Zealand relative to the situation today (Salmond 1987: 302–303), this ‘perennial interchange’ (Arnold 1987: 53, 64) demonstrated that ‘together Australia and New Zealand once [proudly] wore the name “Australasia”’ (Mein Smith and Hempenstall 2003: 1) at a time when, according to artist Colin McCahon (1964), no New Zealand or Australian artist stayed at home. This now amorphous term Australasia was not only located as a significant regional identifier of the Tasman region and beyond, but was celebrated by writers, poets, performers and artists, even if its definitive contours had receded by the early twenty-first century to New Zealand and Australia and, at times, the western Pacific. The term is no longer acceptable to many New Zealanders (Arnold 1987; Salmond 1987; Mein Smith et al 2008).

This period saw intercolonial connections facilitated by inexpensive steamship travel, allowing regular exchange of ideas between writers, artists and others. Pivotal in these 1880s and 1890s currents was Bulletin magazine, described by Salmond as a ‘progenitor of shared Antipodean culture’ (1987: 302–303). Iconic Australian painter of bush nationalism Tom Roberts worked as an illustrator on equally popular journals The picturesque atlas of Australasia and The Australasian sketcher at a time when regional images, particularly cartoons, packed significant political punch. Artists plying trans-Tasman and Pacific routes included Eugene Von Guerard, Augustus Earle, William Strutt, Nicholas Chevalier, Edward Fristrom, Tom
Roberts, Girolamo Nerli, Elioth Gruner, Charles Goldie, Henry Grant Lloyd, James R Jackson and Frances Hodgkins – all but the last four claimed within Australia’s art history canon.

Regional cartography held special significance during the 1890s when the ‘seven colonies of Australasia’ (Coghlan 1904) envisioned Australia and New Zealand united within a federated Commonwealth by 1901. By this time Australasia’s parameters had shrunk from de Brosses’ 1756 cartography inclusive of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific to the ‘sphere of British influence in the South Pacific’ (Mein Smith et al 2008), otherwise known as ‘the Anglosphere’ (Reynolds 2011). By 1900 ‘Maoriland’,\(^5\) as it was widely known (Adams 1899) and used in less than romantic terms by the Sydney *Bulletin* (Stafford and Williams nd), nevertheless declined joining the new Commonwealth following initial 1890s enthusiasm. This was regarded as ‘the most important decision that the New Zealand people have yet made’ (Sinclair 1987b: 90). Among numerous reasons to decline federation was New Zealanders’ disdain for their neighbour’s loathsome convict origins and, even worse, treatment of its ‘natives’: Australians,

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\(^5\) ‘Maoriland … refers to the literature of incipient nationalism of late colonial New Zealand, roughly 1880–1915. The term originates in the Sydney *Bulletin* as a way of pointing to what distinguishes New Zealand from Australia: the Maori, who are figured as a “dying race” whose archaic and romantic past can thus be borrowed by Pākehā (European) writers to give their settler culture the authority … of history’ (Stafford and Williams nd).
on the other hand, had ‘recoiled ... from the inclusion of the Maori in such a federation’ (Macintyre 2000). It is pertinent to note that by 1867 Māori were granted four electorates in New Zealand’s parliament, 100 years before Indigenous Australians were enfranchised (Elections New Zealand nd). In this way ‘the place of Māori in New Zealand identity’ proved ‘an important if unequal ... distinguishing element’ of Kiwi nationalism (Phillips 2009).

A striking 1900 cartoon image ‘How we see it’ by New Zealand artist ‘Scatz’ encapsulates this trans-Tasman political-racial divide, with New Zealand taking the high moral ground within an otherwise shared Australasian identity. Depicted as a (white) New Zealand maiden wearing a Māori cloak and holding hands with a young ‘native’ man, ‘innocent’ ‘Zealandia’ repels a brutally primitive ogre who represents convict Australia, complete with shackles. To the ogre’s entreaty ‘Come into these arms’, the maiden replies: ‘Nay, sir, those arms bear chains’.

Scatz, ‘How we see it’, *New Zealand Graphic*, 20 October 1900.

Image courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library,
National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa
Claims of New Zealand’s moral superiority and genteel national demeanour abounded during this period and were critically interrogated by Stafford and Williams (nd) as being less about virtuous enlightenment than romanticised colonial notions of ‘Māori exceptionalism’ among the categories of racial ‘otherness’. In 1898, for example, a common New Zealand attitude was exemplified by the comment: ‘The average colonist ... looks on an Australian black as very near to a wild beast; but he likes the Māoris, and is sorry that they are dying out’ (Reeves, quoted in Williams 2004: 745). Romantic nostalgia for what seemed inevitable ‘native’ extinction was imaged by many artists and writers in both countries, namely Australian artist Tom Roberts and European artists working in Australia and New Zealand like Edward Fristrom. Melancholy depictions of ‘the native race’s demise’, however, were more systematically taken up by New Zealand portrait painters and photographers such as Charles Goldie and Gottfried Lindauer, further indicating ‘New Zealand’s sense of its difference from Australia, especially with respect to Indigenous race relations’ (Williams 2004: 745).

Many New Zealanders resident in Australia or Europeans journeying within both countries continued to cross the Tasman to exhibit and/or become subsumed within the Australian art history canon, among them Nicholas Chevalier, Eugene Von Guerard, Girolamo Nerli, Roland Wakelin (Australia’s most celebrated post-impressionist artist) and pioneer abstractionist Godfrey Miller. However their achievements are rarely geo-culturally identified (Riddler 2010), even in 1982 when New Zealand expatriate artist Rosalie Gascoigne represented Australia in the prestigious Venice Biennale. This invisibility as ‘phantom kiwis’ is compounded by a dearth of contemporary New Zealand and Pacific art held in Australian state galleries. As Daniel Thomas explained, it ‘falls’ between museological classification of ‘Australian’ and ‘European/international’ collections (interview with the author, Hawley...
Beach, Tasmania, 30 September 2003). The elusive New Zealand category would further confound art taxonomies into the next century when it incorporated Pacific art.

**Trans-Tasman ‘tie-ups’ and the white ghosts of ANZART**

Although notions of Australasia were submerged following 1901 Federation, later periods of concerted Australia and New Zealand art exchange took place during the 1970s and 1980s, which attempted to explore regionality as an alternative form of internationalism. Nevertheless, these antipodean investigations investigating Tasman genealogies further uncovered Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations as important markers – or fault lines – of difference between the countries. Along with other socio-cultural divergences, these regional encounters later eventuated in an unexpected family feud that fuelled Australian managerialist organisations to aspire to more professionalised and internationalised (read Euramerican) art opportunities for at least the next two decades.

Fifteen years prior to this neo-conservative turn, and after decades of cultural cringing, there was a brief time throughout the 1970s when Labo(u)r governments on both sides of the Tasman officially recuperated policies of regionality (Whitlam 1995), encouraging artists to explore their geographical identity. Later, in the early 1980s context of the CER (Closer Economic Relations) trade agreement ‘trans-Tasman tie-ups’ were supported by both governments as cultural diplomacy exercises in ‘Closer Esthetic Relations’ (Curnow 1983).

1970s government policies on regionality coincided with a time of intense artistic experimentation. Mildura Sculpture Triennials in rural Victoria provided major opportunities to investigate the Antipodean ‘backyard’ by trying out non-object art – performance, installation and video – in informal environments. Here, participating New Zealanders’ bold innovation was highly acclaimed by Australian critics (Zeplin 2004b) and enduring new trans-Tasman bonds were forged through New Zealand participation in the 1976 Biennale of Sydney, followed by strong trans-Tasman protest activity after their country’s unexpectedly reduced representation at the 1979 Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue (Zeplin 2004a). These new exchange opportunities were enthusiastically and programmatically pursued until

Notwithstanding many successful trans-Tasman projects and enduring relationships over fifteen years, emerging differences between national groups continued largely unaddressed as New Zealanders privileged small, informal and individual values and cross-cultural political issues, while by 1983 mushrooming Australian contingents became preoccupied with an ‘alternative art establishment’ of professionalised careers and industrial rights (Vizents in Van den Bosch 1983: 18), a divide that appeared neo-colonialist to the smaller and less assertive group of country cousins. Divergent approaches to indigeneity and racial politics increasingly characterised these events, particularly at ANZART-in-Christchurch through exposure to the South African Springboks’ 1981 rugby tour and related Māori land rights movements (Berriman 1983). Visiting Australian artists’ ignorance of and/or indifference towards urgent racial issues facing their neighbouring country contrasted with politicised work by Māori and Pākehā artists.

Australians might have returned with a vivid sense that New Zealand’s race relations were different from their own but the next ANZART-in-Hobart saw no Australian Indigenous representation (Van den Bosch 1983: 19). Moreover, the 1985 ANZART-in-Auckland event was the only trans-Tasman exchange to include an Australian Aboriginal artist, Tracey Moffat (Dauth 1985). Together with Australian organisers’ sometimes hysterical misunderstanding of Māori protocols and vehement criticism of host organisation and professional facilities (during a severe recession), a cultural standoff occurred between Australian officials and New Zealand artists; the visitors were described by an Australian critic as ‘walking around like Texans’ (Ewington 1986: 30). This dysfunctional ‘family’ debacle summoned the unfortunate military spectres of 1915 ANZAC Cove and ANZUS four months earlier, resulting in an Australia Council declaration that further interaction with New Zealand was of ‘dubious value’ (Wolfe, in Woodham nd: 3). Henceforth, Australian art was virtually divorced from future trans-Tasman connections as the country’s foremost arts
bureaucracy once again directed its international desire northwards, notwithstanding a minor dalliance with Southeast Asia, in Perth, along the way (Marcon 1993).

**A new Tasman accord?**

From 1987 to 1998 ANZART exchanges were replaced by biannual Perth-based ARX (Artists Regional Exchange) events where New Zealand participation and (what was left of) trans-Tasman accord was virtually extinguished in favour of Southeast Asian artists. Importantly, ARX established a strong (if unacknowledged) artist network for QAGOMA’s Asia-Pacific Triennial of Australian Art (APT) initiated in 1993. APT aligned at least one major Australian art institution with Australia’s national trade and foreign affairs agenda, providing a minor alternative to the prevailing (Euramerican) international art world. Within two decades this development has introduced an estimated 1.8 visitors to contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific region (QAGOMA 2012). However, since this landmark event has privileged northern Pacific and other Asian art over South Pacific art (represented by an average of 12 to 20 per cent of works between 1999 and 2006), we might ask how this Australian event focusing on Asia and the Pacific affects the course of trans-Tasman relations? After all, interest in Asian art was not taken up in New Zealand until well into the following decade, a century after both countries’ hostile abjuration of Asia.

In invoking a new and enlarged geography of de Brosses’ 1756 Australasia, which originally included Southeast Asia, the APT has re-introduced New Zealand art to Australian audiences. Such a reunion also appears to reverse historic Australian antipathy to New Zealand’s ‘native question’ since the majority of APT’s New Zealand selections have been framed within a new Pacific/Oceanic context, notwithstanding that this adjacent region constitutes a very minor part of each exhibition. Growing Australian acceptance, however, has not embraced the neighbouring ‘white tribes’ but a newly branded Aotearoa New Zealand where Auckland is the world’s largest Polynesian capital of sassy, exportable Pasifika culture. While Australian art was disdaining its junior sibling’s lack of sophistication in the 1980s and 1990s, the latter
had grown up, proudly independent, to become a site of hip-hop street culture, quirky fashion, *faʻafafine,* hobbits and female political leaders.

At APT this new exciting New Zealand sensibility mostly took the form of spectacular drag performances, gothic photography and funky jewellery, all glossed with exotic Pacific/Māori Polynesia. This Pacific dominated QAGOMA’s regional vision, and in 2002 it developed the only dedicated state collection of contemporary Pacific art in Australia, now ironically reliant on New Zealand curatorial expertise. Notwithstanding the political, racial and cultural complexities between Oceania and Australia, which has close historical links to Melanesia, rather than Polynesia (Cochrane 2007), QAGOMA’s website unashamedly proclaims its ‘particular focus’ as ‘contemporary works from New Zealand … [with] … emphasis … given to collecting works by significant Māori and Pacific Islander artists … born or living in New Zealand … who address issues of indigeneity in various ways’ (Page 2012).

In 2012 this section’s three main website images still feature ethnic Pacific/New Zealand work while fourteen out of seventeen ‘selected collection highlights’ link to contemporary New Zealand art. The gallery’s 2010 Unnerved exhibition of contemporary New Zealand art was sourced entirely from its own collection, which privileges a recent vogue for the exotic and/or the gothic (Page 2010).

**Conclusion**

In the last few years, this narrow curatorial bias has been slightly broadened to include work from across Oceania, but important questions about Australia and New Zealand’s differences arise, including their respective relations with Oceania. At QAGOMA why is all New Zealand art classified as Pacific and not international? Why is Pacific art overwhelmingly viewed through a New Zealand – rather than Australian – lens which excludes Melanesian, Micronesian and Australian artists of Pacific heritage? Is this another instance of the different ways in which the New Zealand and Australian art worlds have operated regarding indigenous issues in the region, for example, APT’s belated recognition of Australian-Asian

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6 *faʻafafine*: a Samoan term for boys who are raised as girls.
artists and minor inclusion of Indigenous Australia? In QAGOMA curators’ rush to embrace the new vogue in cross-cultural exotica, what happens to older, white tribes’ genealogies? Have these Tasman countries’ separate and entwined histories been submerged beneath spectacle and/or postcolonial embarrassment?

I am tempted to conclude that recent recognition of New Zealand art by at least one major Australian art gallery signifies the beginnings of a new trans-Tasman era of exchange, an expanded Australasia that extends the regional ‘family’ throughout Oceania. However, local history reminds us of longstanding, fraught and hidden family differences, particularly in regard to Indigenous/Pacific issues, which Australian art institutions are yet to address. What then appears as current Australian enthusiasm for Pasifika/Aotearoa art may not signify respect for changing family values so much as opportunistic appropriation of a confident exotic other. Until non-indigenous as well as indigenous art histories across the Tasman and Pacific regions can be locally interrogated, they will remain, except for a colourful but fleeting interlude, flat and bland and blank as Australian settler inhabitants in this region continue questing northwards in search of ancestral identity.

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