

2006

# From cobra grubs to dragons: negotiating the politics of representation in cultural research

Tanja Dreher

*University of Wollongong, [tanjad@uow.edu.au](mailto:tanjad@uow.edu.au)*

---

## Publication Details

Dreher, T. 2006, 'From cobra grubs to dragons: negotiating the politics of representation in cultural research', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 90-106.

from

# cobra grubs to dragons

*Negotiating the Politics of Representation  
in Cultural Research*

TANJA DREHER

This seemingly obscure title, ‘from cobra grubs to dragons’, is chosen precisely because it was *not* used as the name of the cultural research project analysed in this paper. ‘From Cobra Grubs to Dragons’ was suggested as the title for a cultural tour of the Fairfield area in Sydney developed by myself and others through a partnership between the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), the Fairfield City Council (FCC) and the Migration Heritage Centre of the NSW government. The cultural researchers involved in producing the tour felt that this title was an evocative description of the tour which guides participants in visiting numerous sites illustrating Fairfield’s cultural diversity: from places associated with the Cabrogal mob that lived in the area prior to invasion, to the dragons which decorate the many Buddhist temples built by migrants and refugees settling in the area from Indochina. As the project developed, a key funding partner vetoed that title, to be replaced by the prosaic ‘Tune in to Fairfield City: a Multicultural Driving Tour’ which now appears on the audio CD, map and instructions that enable motorists to take the tour. This paper analyses the rather more complex issues of naming and representation, partnership and voice raised by this cultural research project.

Ien Ang has argued that cultural research is oriented towards problem-solving, not so much in terms of providing easy ‘solutions’, but rather by contextualising practices and problems within the complexities of culture.<sup>1</sup> Ang reminds us that cultural research is always implicated in the politics of representation and that the distinctive contribution of cultural research might be to highlight the ‘level of politics where meanings and values are struggled over’. My own experience as one of the producers of the ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ tour suggests that the politics of representation is indeed central to cultural research, and that the

inescapable engagement with representational politics raises a number of dilemmas for cultural research that aims not merely to analyse but also to intervene in the politics of representations around cultural diversity.

These challenges are particularly acute when working in collaboration with non-academic partner organisations, whether in a research consultancy such as ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ or through ARC Linkage projects. As collaborative research of this type becomes increasingly central to the new research agenda in Australia, it is vital that cultural researchers are able to examine the dynamics of research partnerships and to develop criteria to ensure excellence in both the research and the outcomes. Collaborative projects provide opportunities for cultural studies to be taken seriously as more than critique, and yet only two percent of ARC Linkage projects in the Humanities and Creative Arts are classified as cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I analyse the achievements of the ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ project and reflect on the challenges of doing cultural research in partnership within the context of the dominant discourses of cultural diversity in Australia.

#### — CONSULTATION AND REPRESENTATION

As cultural researchers trained in media studies and journalism, the ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ production team was influenced by a widely cited essay by Marcia Langton on filmmaking involving Indigenous Australians.<sup>3</sup> Langton draws on feminist and post-colonial theories of representation to argue for a protocol of inter-subjective dialogue and mutual self-definition in order to challenge colonial relations in which the colonised ‘object’ is defined and explained by the colonising ‘subject’. Langton proposes an ideal model for constructing understandings of ‘Aboriginality’ as:

the construction generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, where the individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

Langton offers a model of representation in which both parties articulate models, perspectives and opinions of themselves and of each other, where all interlocutors are agents involved in naming and being named. Langton’s challenge is based on the argument that representations and categories should be developed through negotiation which addresses differences, not only of culture and language, but also differences of power and authority. This has been described as a shift from an interest in representation to a focus on protocols:<sup>5</sup> a move which suggests that changing modes of interaction and relations of power, rather than the critique of ‘representations’, is the most important facet of an anti-colonial filmmaking practice. The past three decades have seen the development of protocols on working

with Indigenous communities at most of the major public cultural and media institutions in Australia, including the SBS, the ABC and the Australian Film Commission.

To adapt this argument to the context of cultural tourism would require processes of dialogue, consultation and above all negotiation in the development of a project such as 'Tune in to Fairfield'. This turns attention towards the quality and dynamics of meaningful consultation and the possibilities for negotiation in cultural production across cultural differences. Debates over the extent and quality of consultation have certainly been central to recent controversies over filmmaking in Australia, including those around the films *Australian Rules* and *Cunanurra*. An emphasis on protocols raises complex questions, such as: Who instigates projects such as 'Tune in to Fairfield'? Why? Who benefits? In what ways? Who owns the project? Who conducts it? Who shapes the stories? Who is the target audience?

In developing the 'Tune in to Fairfield' tour the producers did take some steps to ensure self-representation, cultural sensitivity and ethical practice. Community groups associated with the many sites were invited to introductory meetings and were consulted on the overall direction of the project. Interview transcripts and draft audio scripts were returned to community representatives for comments and their suggestions on the text, on appropriate music and sounds, and on topics or materials that should be excluded were all incorporated in the final version.

These measures certainly represent a relatively minimal level of negotiation, and suggest a need for more thorough processes of community participation. However, the impetus for consultation also raises dilemmas specifically in the context of cultural diversity, where 'community leaders' and 'community organisations' may have an interest in mobilising exactly those essentialising and rigid definitions of community, culture, faith and tradition that cultural researchers aim to problematise. Consultations and interviews with community representatives reveal at least as much self-essentialising, boundary-policing and doctrinal rigidity as the experiences of cultural exchange which the tour sought to highlight.

Some participants in the project were particularly media-savvy with regard to the politics of representation. For example, the Vietnamese Phouc Hue Buddhist temple was represented by a monk who specialises in public relations, and who has been interviewed by the BBC and most Australian media and is very clear about what is considered appropriate in presenting the community and the temple to outsiders. In research interviews the spokesperson skillfully directed conversation away from the everyday practices of lay visitors to the temple, described as superstitious folklore, emphasising instead the doctrinal purity of the resident monks.

While other spokespeople were far less confident in presenting their stories and communities, protocols emphasising self-representation and self-definition did not necessarily address the inequalities of cultural capital and media or research experience among the

various communities and participants. Providing opportunities for self-representation also raised concerns with regard to public relations or 'positive stories', as presenting communities and cultures in the best possible light can also be seen to obscure other important stories and can serve merely to replace one stereotype with another (e.g. Vietnamese heroin dealers versus pious Buddhist monks).

At the heart of this dilemma is the position of 'ethnic community leader' within the discourse of 'community' and the tensions inherent in 'culture work'.<sup>6</sup> These terms describe some of the limits or challenges in negotiating the politics of representation in cultural research. Negotiating the public relations strategies of community organisations is a reminder that stories and representations in the public domain are usually carefully constructed with an assumed audience in mind. Andrew Shryock has analysed this politics of representation as 'culture work'. Drawing on his experience as a researcher, educator and advocate among Arab American communities in Detroit, Shryock defines 'culture work' as 'specific kinds of representational effort' which make public 'an elaborate set of assumptions about identity that are shared among persons both external and internal to 'the community'. As in the 'Tune in to Fairfield' tour, culture work in Arab Detroit operates against the backdrop of 'stigmatised difference' and involves cultural production and education which aims to 'insure that Arabs and Arab Americans are included, on favourable terms, in American public life'. In order to fulfil this aim, 'culture work' foregrounds definitions of community, culture and identity in a 'model minority packaging', angled to deflect attention from more complex and sensitive representations and geared squarely to audiences 'who are assumed to have negative impressions of the group'. In this context, cultural researchers face difficult decisions: to what extent should cultural research reproduce or be complicit in this 'culture work', and to what extent should cultural research critique or make visible the operations of 'culture work'? In the context of cultural research partnerships this tension becomes particularly evident, as all partners will have investments in differing forms of 'culture work'.

Culture work in Fairfield and Cabramatta draws heavily on a particular discourse of 'culture' and 'community'. Gerd Baumann has analysed the dominant discourse of 'culture' in Britain as a discourse in which community–culture–homeland–tradition–language–folklore are almost seamlessly linked, reifying the various categories and creating an emphasis on bounded communities and a focus on tradition.<sup>7</sup> A similar discourse is evident in Australia, producing 'ethnic communities' as homogenous, essentialised and bounded entities defined by visible markers of 'cultural difference'. As in Britain, the discourse of 'culture' is both dominant and naturalised in Australia, forming the basis of state policies of multiculturalism. For those seeking to represent cultural diversity through cultural tourism, the easiest voice to access is that of the 'ethnic community leader', yet in accessing that voice cultural researchers also reproduce many of the exclusions that underpin that position. These include exclusions

around gender, age, sexuality, language, generation, belief and lifestyle and the many other diversities within communities. The dominant conception of 'culture' and 'community' means that 'ethnic community leaders' have an interest in mobilising essentialising and rigid definitions of community, culture, faith and tradition in order to legitimate their own voice and position. 'Ethnic community leaders' can engage in boundary-policing and doctrinal rigidity in order to construct the very community for whom they claim to speak. Spokespeople for religious groups or 'cultures' are often male and conservative.<sup>8</sup> Ethnic leaders are caught between the state and the 'community' they claim to represent, and actually depend on both to ensure their legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging diversity or division within the 'community' undermines the position of 'ethnic community leader'. Ensuring processes of self-representation for 'ethnic community representatives' in cultural research also legitimates 'ethnic leaders' as definers of community and culture.

The relative lack of young people's or second-generation experiences is therefore a serious limitation in the 'Tune in to Fairfield' tour. While recent cultural research analyses youth popular cultures and the experiences of second generation migrants as vital processes of cultural exchange and the development of hybrid identities,<sup>10</sup> these stories occupy a marginal position within the tour format based on religious buildings. Producing a cultural tourism product highlights the difficulty of both challenging or expanding conventional discourses of 'community' and 'culture', while at the same time being heard, being recognisable, and speaking to an audience and to project partners and collaborators. Overall the tour project has expanded the dominant discourse of 'culture' somewhat, but also served to reproduce and to naturalise that discourse in many ways. The project demonstrates something of the difficulty of displacing conventional representations of 'community' and 'culture', particularly in a cultural production focused on spectacular buildings selected as markers of the exotic or foreignness inscribed on the urban landscape.

#### — AN INTERVENTION

The 'Tune in to Fairfield' project was explicitly framed as an intervention against a background of negative news reporting of the suburb of Cabramatta as 'Australia's heroin capital'. The local government, Fairfield City Council, has a longstanding policy of promoting cultural tourism in the area, focused on bargain shopping, food, and multicultural festivals. The tour was developed in 2000 and launched in 2001 as a response to a cultural context in which Cabramatta is a household name and in which Fairfield is represented only in certain very narrow ways. The intervention was an attempt to increase the diversity and the distribution of representations of multicultural Fairfield.

The Fairfield LGA includes the suburb of Cabramatta and encompasses some of the most culturally diverse suburbs in Australia. Residents of Fairfield City Council speak over 60

different languages, and 60 per cent speak a language other than English. More than half of all Fairfield residents were born overseas in 133 different countries—the vast majority in a non English speaking country.<sup>11</sup> In measures of cumulative disadvantage Cabramatta is ranked among the thirty most disadvantaged postcodes in the state of New South Wales.<sup>12</sup> Cabramatta is a large shopping precinct where regular festivals for ‘celebrating diversity’ are held.

Cabramatta–Fairfield has a history of intense media scrutiny focusing on youth ‘gangs’, drug dealing, shootings and murder. In Cabramatta news reporting was most intense following the manslaughter of the local Member of NSW Parliament, John Newman in September 1994,<sup>13</sup> and in subsequent years news reports focused on Vietnamese ‘gangs’ and Asian drug dealers. Overall, the coverage served to ‘ethnicise criminality and criminalise ethnicity’,<sup>14</sup> casting suspicion on entire community groups, and framing criminal justice issues as the responsibility of migrant communities rather than of Australian society as a whole.

As the subject of intense media scrutiny, Cabramatta has an iconic status well beyond Sydney. The suburb has become a household name often invoked in national public debate. The symbolic importance of Cabramatta is due not only to its cultural diversity, but also to its spatial location in Sydney’s ‘western suburbs’. Cabramatta lies thirty two kilometres south west of the Sydney Central Business District (CBD). The ‘western suburbs’ of Sydney have conventionally been represented as Sydney’s ‘other’,<sup>15</sup> areas that are threatening and characterised above all by ‘lack’.<sup>16</sup> Popular discourses have often juxtaposed the cosmopolitan, vibrant urban centre of Sydney with its harbour and nearby beaches to the sprawling, culture-less and disadvantaged suburbs of western Sydney.

The construction of Sydney’s western suburbs as lacking, ugly and deviant articulates with an emphasis on Cabramatta as ‘foreign’ and dangerous in what Suvendrini Perera describes as Sydney’s ‘racialised topography’.<sup>17</sup> Perera names the suburb as a key site in processes of racialisation—Cabramatta is commonly represented as a Vietnamese or Asian ghetto. Earlier Pauline Hanson had used Cabramatta as an example in her critiques of Asian immigration—describing the suburb as a place where she feels like a ‘stranger in her own home’.<sup>18</sup> Cabramatta also has a presence in the popular imagination, often pejoratively referred to as ‘Vietnamatta’.

Cabramatta–Fairfield can be understood as crucial locations in the representation of multicultural Sydney. Cabramatta is an intersection of diverse and competing representations and definitions: represented as an example of ‘multiculturalism gone wrong’ *and* as a ‘multicultural success story’, an ‘Asian ghetto’ *and* a vibrant, diverse tourist attraction—an ‘exotic’ destination for cheap shopping and restaurants.<sup>19</sup> Cabramatta and Fairfield are thus sites of a symbolic struggle to define these suburbs and the communities that live and work in them.

There is a long history of 'community' and local council media projects in this suburb, including the 'Looking Both Ways Project' which developed training materials for journalism students to encourage a 'public journalism' approach to covering Cabramatta and the western suburbs.<sup>20</sup> Community centres run Street Video classes for young people, and conduct writing and poster-making programs such as 'The New Image' book of photographs and refugee stories.<sup>21</sup> Several community workers have acted as spokespeople in mainstream news reports.<sup>22</sup> The Racial Equality Action Lobby produced a 'Real Useful Media Kit' to train community spokespeople. Fairfield City Council has published books such as 'Hidden Heritage'<sup>23</sup> and is developing a range of cultural tourism initiatives. The Lunar New Year and Moon Festivals are held annually in Cabramatta to celebrate and showcase the cultural diversity of the area. Both have been represented in council-produced videos. Fairfield Cultural Arts Network has told stories of migration, displacement and homebuilding in CD Rom, performance, public artworks, video and multimedia. Several large Buddhist temples in Fairfield LGA have produced CD Roms, audio cassettes, pamphlets and books covering history, theology and contemporary activities. A local Orthodox church publishes educational books for use in community schools, and Indigenous people in the Fairfield area are involved in a Cultural Mapping project.

The 'Tune in to Fairfield' project was the latest in this series of local government interventions into the politics of representation around Cabramatta and Fairfield. As is often the case in cultural research, the partners outside the university were themselves exposed to cultural theory, and interested to apply innovative thinking about multiculturalism and cultural diversity. The FCC cultural planner, Paul Graham, explained that Council's policy is that 'Anglos are an ethnic group' and should be represented in 'ethnic' or multicultural projects. Discussing the reasoning behind the project in a conference setting, Graham described a desire to move beyond existing concepts in cultural tourism, such as promoting Cabramatta as where 'East meets West' and as a 'Day Trip to Asia'.

For all its good intentions, however, this branding of Cabramatta as 'Asia' has in some respects reinforced the negative perceptions held by some in the community. Indeed, most of the negative perceptions in the community held were based around the 'Asianisation' of Cabramatta, and the Day Trip to Asia program only served to reinforce these negatives. By continuing to focus on the 'other' and concentrating on our differences, there is a risk that we create an 'them and us' type scenario that is far away from the goal of social cohesion.<sup>24</sup>

This concern also extended to a critique of the activities most commonly undertaken to fulfill the Council's motto, 'celebrating diversity'.

The word 'celebration' is synonymous with ceremonies, festivals and events, commemorations and some other festive activities. The visual appeal and dynamic nature of these celebrations



provides a theatre in which different communities are exposed to opportunities for cultural exchange. The annual Moon Festival, Fairfield Festival of the Arts, the Asia for a Day Program and the Bonnyrigg Festival are a few of the activities Council is involved in to celebrate diversity.<sup>25</sup>

The Fairfield Tour was intended to move beyond the celebration of the ‘exotic’ and the folkloric that underpins these festivals. The drawbacks of festivals for ‘celebrating diversity’ were that they do not require interaction across differences, that ‘focusing on the exotic may give an impression there is something unreal or less than permanent about multiculturalism’, and the ‘presentation of different cultures as the “other”’. One rationale for working in partnership with cultural researchers was to intervene in this politics of representation by developing alternative discourses and by adding complexity to the dominant discourse of difference as exotic spectacle. The challenge, then, was to tell different stories of Cabramatta and Fairfield and to tell the story of multicultural Australia differently.

The concept for a tour of significant sites in the Fairfield area had developed over several years and the historian based at Fairfield Museum had been taking small groups on a smaller, informal version of the tour for a number of years before the FCC decided to produce a standardised version in an accessible format. Community groups such as seniors clubs in the area were also known to visit a selection of local temples and the museum as a day outing. This existing interest was one impetus for producing the tour, along with the success of comparable cultural tourism projects outside Australia, such as the Rotterdam ‘City Safari’<sup>26</sup> and a map showcasing a diversity of religious buildings in Bern. The tour motif has remained popular in the Fairfield area, and in 2005 the Pact Youth Theatre production *Divine Places* featured bus transport to three different religious locations for site-specific performances.

#### — FROM COBRA GRUBS TO DRAGONS

The ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ audio CD represents stories of the Fairfield–Cabramatta area that are unlikely to make the television news. The self-drive tour provides information on seventeen sites associated with Fairfield’s many ethnic and religious communities. Mosques, temples and churches are described in interviews with community representatives. The attempt to tell different stories and to tell the story of multicultural Fairfield differently drew on several contemporary analyses of cultural diversity in Australia. The key themes informing the research were: migration heritage, everyday multiculturalism, the place of Indigenous experiences and Anglo-Celtic culture in representations of multiculturalism, the concept of places as ‘intersections’ or ‘meeting places’ and a focus on cultural exchange.

The project showcases ‘migration as agency’ in preference to discourses of migration focused on passivity and loss.<sup>27</sup> The ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ tour presents a history and an implicit timeline of the contributions made by migrant communities settling in Fairfield,

shaping the urban landscape through the development of industries, community facilities and religious buildings. At a time of intense ‘border panic’ over asylum seekers from the Middle East in Australian public life,<sup>28</sup> the ‘timeline’ documents the significant achievements of many refugee communities arriving throughout the post-war period.

The timeline begins with the Darug name of Cabramatta, moving on to the Fairfield Museum and the history of British colonisation and white farming settlements, then telling the story of Chinese market gardens, followed by churches built by the Italian, Croatian, Russian and Serbian communities, and finally visiting some of the largest Buddhist temples in the southern hemisphere. This history is summed up in the title: From cobra grubs to dragons.

#### — EVERYDAY MULTICULTURALISM

The project also seeks to complicate the assumption, prevalent in both public discourse and public policy in Australia, that multiculturalism primarily concerns ‘ethnic communities’, naturalising Anglo-Celtic ethnicities and cultures as the ‘mainstream’.<sup>29</sup> ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ represents and names Anglo and Celtic cultures and communities as components of multicultural Fairfield, undoing the central privilege of whiteness—exnomination.<sup>30</sup> The aim was to avoid representing a core—periphery model of cultural diversity, emphasising instead the rhizomatic or ‘everyday’ experiences and understandings of Australian multiculturalism.<sup>31</sup> As advocated by Ghassan Hage, an interest in ‘everyday multiculturalism’ turns attention to mundane interactions across cultural difference which are central to processes of ‘migrant home-building’.<sup>32</sup> In Hage’s analysis, mundane interactions across cultural differences at work, in school or in the neighbourhood in Sydney’s western suburbs stand in stark contrast to the cosmopolitan experience of cultural diversity through the consumption of exotic foods or foreign films in Sydney’s fashionable inner city.

To give just one example: the Lao Temple Wat Prayortkeo Dhammayanaram is also a significant community and cultural centre for ethnic Chinese East Timorese people, and the temple representatives are proud of the fact that all of their children have married outside the Lao community. ‘Tune in to Fairfield City’ is intended to encourage cultural exchange and understanding. The tour highlights the sites and Fairfield’s many communities as lively and changing, and stresses intercultural interactions and adaptations as much as cultural maintenance.

#### — ANGLO CULTURE

The representation of British-derived culture is central to the interest in ‘everyday multiculturalism’—which seeks to complicate the core-periphery model of cultural diversity

reflected in much official policy on multiculturalism. Where much of the media and many key institutions have represented Australian culture as consisting of an Anglo-Celtic core with peripheral 'ethnic' add-ons, in Fairfield's urban landscape Anglo culture sits alongside many other cultures and traditions. British-derived culture is central to Fairfield's history, but the suburbs development and future is decisively shaped by interactions across a wide range of cultures.

In the tour this aspect of Fairfield's history and development is best represented by St John's Park Anglican Church. St John's Park was a central area in the Old Orphan School Grant which was granted by Governor King in 1803. The church of St John's dates back to 1914, when St John's Park was an isolated rural area. Cattle, vineyards and orchards were the main farming activities. The small wooden Church stood on this site for more than seventy years before being replaced with the modern building featured in the tour. Today St John's Park Anglican Church hosts a multicultural congregation, and services are held in Vietnamese and English. Thus even this building, visually rather uninteresting, is presented as having a story to tell about the history and diversity of Fairfield.

#### — INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

While the project emphasises stories of migration, all members of the project partnership were committed to including Indigenous Australian perspectives and histories in the tour, and in particular to ensuring that any representation went beyond a token acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land. 'Aboriginal' and 'multicultural' discourses remain largely separate in Australia, producing at best an 'uneasy conversation' between the very different histories of colonisation, migration and their legacies.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the Fairfield tour visits sites associated with both Darug history of the land and contact with the invading Europeans, as well as the diverse contemporary Indigenous communities represented by the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council.

The tour includes a brief stop at Clear Paddock Creek, where numerous stone artefacts have been found. The Darug traditional owners of the area fished and collected cobra grubs along the creek. In fact, Cabramatta takes its name from the Cabrogal band of the Darug-speaking people that lived around Liverpool and Fairfield for thousands of years. The Cabrogal name comes from the *cobra* or *cabra* grub, an edible freshwater worm that breeds in submerged wood. A birthing site and ancient gathering places have also been identified along Clear Paddock Creek, and there is increasing evidence that the Fairfield area was a meeting place for several mobs in the surrounding area.

Today the Fairfield suburb of Bonnyrigg is the centre of a significant Indigenous community. Fairfield's contemporary Koori community still reflects the concept of a meeting

place, as Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi, Bundjalung and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around Australia have come to live in the area. The more visible signs of this Indigenous presence include the many murals on local school buildings and community centres.

#### — INTERSECTIONS AND MEETING PLACES

The tour also reflects an interest in suburbs as ‘meeting’ places or ‘intersections’. This concept derives from the cultural geographer Doreen Massey, who argues that places are not homogenous, bounded entities, but rather each place is a particular, unique point of intersection of social relations and communications.<sup>34</sup> Places are always porous and defined by interaction and social relations—thus definitions of place will be constantly changing, and open to contestation. Places are not static locations, rather we create space and place through our interactions.<sup>35</sup>

This complex and multi-layered conception of place informs the ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ project. Following Massey, Fairfield is seen as a ‘meeting place’ where people, communities, cultures and representations connect and disconnect and space is socially created through interactions. The tour highlights Fairfield’s great diversity, rather than focusing on any particular, bounded community. For example, where Cabramatta is often assumed to be a ‘Vietnamese ghetto’, the tour tells the story of the well-known Pai Lau gateway in Freedom Plaza, which was built as a symbol of multiculturalism and community harmony.

The Cabramatta CBD is a bustling centre for shopping, community celebrations, tourism and cultural activities. At the centre of this area is a three metre ornamental gateway or Pai Lau. Bold letters spell out Liberty and Democracy in Chinese, Vietnamese, English, Khmer and Lao scripts. As many Cabramatta residents arrived in Australia as refugees, community representatives ensured the construction of the monument as a tribute to Australia’s democratic lifestyle. The traditional ornamentation of the Pai Lau also features sculptures of kangaroos and koalas as a symbol of cultural exchange and integration.

The tour also tells stories of interaction and cooperation between communities, and highlights the fact that many of Fairfield’s places are actually shared spaces or meeting places. Many of the places of worship and community centres have links well beyond the Fairfield area, and several inscribe Fairfield in transnational and diasporic flows of tourism, migration and popular culture. While the Phuoc Hue Buddhist Monastery was established by the Vietnamese–Australian community, the temple is very keen to expand its activities and links with other communities. Teachers from Burma, Taiwan, England, the United States, China, Thailand and many other centres have visited the Temple. Monks from nine brother temples visit regularly. The Phuoc Hue temple has also become an important site for celebrations of Peace and multiculturalism.

## — CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Linking all of these key concepts is a focus on cultural exchange. The tour focuses not only on traditions and history, but also on cultural adaptation and processes of change. The tour aims to highlight links and cooperation between community groups, and reflects a complex and dynamic conceptualisation of suburbia, heritage and multiculturalism. It places migration at the centre of representations of Fairfield, but in a way that emphasises cultural exchange and adaptation as much as attachment to homeland or cultural maintenance. This is a Janus-faced conception of migration heritage, looking both forward and backwards. It positions migration and cultural diversity as central to Australia's past, and also a key ingredient in Australia's future.

This emphasis on cultural exchange is perhaps seen best in the story of the phrase, 'fair dinkum'. The remains of a Chinese market garden in Smithfield are used to tell the long history of Chinese migration to Australia. The audio CD relates that during the Nineteenth century Chinese people arrived in Australia as indentured workers. During the Gold Rush of the 1850s and 1860s thousands of Chinese flocked to the goldfields of Victoria and NSW. Their interactions gave rise to that most 'Australian' of expressions, 'fair dinkum'—chin kum means 'real gold' in the Toi Shan Cantonese dialect. (The Tune in to Fairfield producers have since been advised that this story is most likely apocryphal.) This tells a story of cultural adaptation and intercommunal interactions, where the 'Australian', 'host' culture is changed by migration and cultural diversity as much as migrating cultures adapt to new surroundings. The story of 'fair dinkum' represents a long history of Chinese presence and intercultural interactions in Australia and foregrounds hybridisation and complexity in a context of cultural tourism and heritage which often focuses on essentialising categories.

## — DILEMMAS OF COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

While 'Tune in to Fairfield' demonstrates possibilities for innovation and telling different stories of cultural diversity in different ways, the project also highlights a number of dilemmas for cultural researchers working in partnership on the representation of multicultural Australia. This section briefly introduces three practical dilemmas: the challenges of audience and marketing; the difficulty of measuring outcomes; and ethical and legal dilemmas provoked by the collaboration process.

One of the successes of the 'Tune in to Fairfield' tour is that the audio CD makes little sense and has little interest unless it is used while driving the streets of Fairfield. It is certainly possible to listen to the audio elsewhere, but without the visual and physical experience of visiting the various sites, much of the impact is lost. In this sense the project addresses the aim of encouraging visitors to explore Fairfield and, potentially, to interact with local

residents and others who visit the venues. Yet the question of the audience and their assumed interests remained a vexed one for the project partners. Planning meetings revolved around questions such as: 'Who is the audience?', 'How do we know?' and 'What do they want?'. The decision to address the tour to 'the general public' prompted discussions as to whether it was necessary to explain terms such as 'stupa' and 'minaret', while Council insisted on the localised pronunciation of common street names. The overall strategy was to assume ignorance on behalf of all audience members, such that no cultural practices are self-explanatory or natural, all have some intrinsic interest or value, and all can be explained and can tell a story. The project assumed a context in which all communities are in need of explanation and further understanding.

Assumptions about audience interests were further complicated by speculation as to audience desires. As a cultural tourism project, the Fairfield partners assumed that people taking the tour would want the experience to be enjoyable, if not pleasurable, yet this prompted some doubts as to the inclusion of uncomfortable history and confronting stories—such as the invasion history of Fairfield. The tour does not examine the deeply nationalist politics of the Balkan churches, nor the relationships between them. There is no interrogation of the nostalgic and often very conservative conceptions of 'homeland' mobilised by many representatives of temples, churches and mosques in the Fairfield area, nor the prevalence of conservative attitudes to gender and sexuality.

Five years after producing the tour, the experience is that quite specific audiences have taken the tour: delegates to a conference on *Suburbia* organised by the National Trust, university students studying cultural tourism, seniors groups and visiting academics hosted by the CCR. Rather than the ignorance or naivete assumed by the producers, many of those who have experienced the tour have been interested in the politics of representation around Fairfield more than the facts and figures describing the urban landscape. The lesson for the producers has been that, to adapt Raymond Williams, there is no 'general public', there are only ways of imaging general publics. The project partners have also received many requests for the tour to be conducted as a guided tour rather than the self-drive independent car model for which the audio CD was produced. These requests suggest a desire for an intermediary or mediator. There is a potential audience interested to visit Fairfield, but preferably with a guide and an authoritative voice.

The greatest weakness of the 'Tune in to Fairfield' project has been the lack of funding and strategies for marketing. Marketing the tour and measuring its outcomes raised issues and challenges for which cultural researchers are unlikely to be well prepared. The project suffers from a lack of market research and evaluation. Even basic sales figures are difficult to ascertain. Despite the considerable contributions of cultural research to the production of the audio CD, the task of attracting an audience has proved to be a significant obstacle. In this context,

it is also extremely difficult to evaluate the project in terms of its ambitious aims to shift public understandings and imaginings of the Cabramatta–Fairfield area. The skills required here would seem to derive from marketing and business at least as much as from cultural theory.

The project also raised ethical and legal dilemmas around the question of intellectual property. The tour was made possible because many community representatives shared stories generously, helpfully and with immense good will, yet the very communities represented have received very little from the project beyond a nebulous opportunity to share cultures and traditions with wider audiences. While the Fairfield City Council produces the tour on a not-for-profit, cost-recovery basis, lengthy negotiations over the contract revealed that intellectual property law provided no simple means to ensure and to reward community ownership of the stories told in the tour. Once produced as an audio CD, the question of who owns and should benefit from these stories becomes vexed, and legal conceptions of copyright do not adequately address collective ownership of cultural traditions, stories and histories. Indeed, the project raised concerns at the level of University Ethics Guidelines, as none of the project partners were able to ensure future outcomes, such as future uses of the materials gathered or control over any possible commercial operators using the tour materials. These ethical and legal dilemmas again required expertise and negotiating skills that are rarely addressed in conventional training of those involved in cultural research. The ability to ensure ethical research practice can also be particularly difficult when in partnership with non-academic institutions.

#### — CONCLUDING REMARKS

As cultural research responds to the new research environment of collaboration and Linkage projects there are in fact very few fora in which to discuss the challenges and dilemmas raised by this type of work. The requirements for academics to demonstrate impact and track record and for partner organisations to demonstrate successful outcomes in order to ensure future funding all mitigate against frank appraisals of difficulties or failures.

The ‘Tune in to Fairfield’ cultural tourism project is an example of a cultural research partnership which sought to intervene in the politics of representation around multiculturalism in some of Australia’s most culturally diverse suburbs. The intervention aimed to develop alternative representations and to complexify the predominant discourses which have often framed Fairfield-Cabramatta as an ‘Asian ghetto’ and symptomatic of the perceived ‘failures’ of multiculturalism. Approaching this intervention through the framework of cultural research and drawing on key concepts from cultural theory did add complexity and innovative ideas to the original project brief, and this was acknowledged by all project partners, yet, overall, the tour format continues to rely heavily on conventional, essentialising representations of community, religion and culture.



A central challenge for cultural research is the need to move beyond critiques of public discourse to developing alternative modes of representation. A common strategy for developing alternatives through an ethical cultural production process is community consultation and collaboration. The experience of producing 'Tune in to Fairfield' suggests that a simplistic approach to consultation does not necessarily complicate the dominant discourses of 'culture' and 'community' within Australian multiculturalism. While protocols for self-representation are certainly ethically attractive, providing a voice for community spokespeople is no guaranteed solution to the dilemmas of representing cultural diversity.

If cultural research aims to tell different stories of multiculturalism and to tell those stories differently it cannot rely solely on 'communities' to develop or provide those alternatives. Cultural researchers are well-equipped to analyse and critique the representational politics of both the contexts in which we seek to intervene, and the partners and communities with whom we may develop those interventions. However, such analysis does not necessarily lead easily to the development of alternative discourses, nor does it ensure a more ethical politics of representation.

A recent analysis of research partnerships in the humanities identifies a number of crucial challenges.<sup>36</sup> Successful collaboration requires skills development and project management expertise in order that academics *learn* how to collaborate. Clearly these are demands which cultural theory alone cannot meet. More importantly, the research found that 'in many ways the ability to address multiple audiences is central to collaborative research partnerships. For academic researchers, it is the skill to communicate beyond their own specialist peer group into the broader community'. My own experience in working on the Fairfield cultural tour suggests a need for far greater analytical attention to questions of *changing* representations and of *engaging* audiences if cultural studies is to contribute to the practical outcomes required by research partnerships. How can we tell the complex and sometimes uncomfortable stories produced by cultural analysis in ways that resonate beyond the academy? And how best to negotiate the dilemmas of 'culture work'—the desire to challenge dominant representations coupled with the limitations of what can be seen, heard or recognised. Critically analysing collaborations and developing alternative modes of representation may indeed be the most important challenges for cultural research in multicultural Australia.

---

TANJA DREHER is the senior researcher at UTS Shopfront and completed the 'Tune in to Fairfield' project during her doctoral candidature at the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney. <tanja.dreher@uts.edu.au>

---



1. Ien Ang, 'Who Needs Cultural Research?', CHCI working papers, Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes, 1999.
2. Ien Ang and Elizabeth Cassity, 'Attraction of Strangers: Partnerships in Humanities Research', Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2004, p. 11.
3. Marcia Langton, 'Well I heard it on the radio and saw it on the television ...': *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking By and About Aboriginal People and Things*, Australian Film Commission, Woolloomooloo, NSW, 1993.
4. Langton, p. 81.
5. Stephen Muecke, 'Narrative and Intervention in Aboriginal Filmmaking and Policy', *Continuum*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994.
6. Andrew Shryock, 'In the Double Remoteness of Arab Detroit: Reflections on Ethnography, Culture Work, and the Intimate Disciplines of Americanization', in A. Shryock (ed), *Off Stage on Display*, Stanford University Press, California, 2004, pp. 279–312.
7. Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
8. Ellie Vasta, 'Dialectics of Domination: Racism and Multiculturalism', in *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, E. Vasta and S. Castles (eds), Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1996, pp. 46–72.
9. Jock Collins and Scott Poynting (eds), *The Other Sydney: Communities, Identities and Inequalities in Western Sydney*, Common Ground Publishing, Australia, 2000. Paul Tabar, Greg Noble and Scott Poynting, 'The Rise and Falter of the Field of Ethnic Politics in Australia: The Case of Lebanese Community Leadership', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2003, pp. 275–95.
10. Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (eds), *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2003. Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas, *GENERATE: Youth Culture and Migration Heritage in Western Sydney*, Centre for Cultural Research, Sydney, 2001.
11. Fairfield City Council online <<http://www.fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au/>>.
12. Vinson in Collins and Poynting, p. 57.
13. Kevin Dunn, 'Using Cultural Geography to Engage Contested Constructions of Ethnicity and Citizenship in Sydney', *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 153–65. Eric Loo, 'Riding on Platitudes and Prejudice: Media Coverage of John Newman and Vietnamese', *Media Information Australia*, no. 74, November, 1994, pp. 73–7.
14. Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting and Paul Tabar, *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime: Ethnicity, Youth and Crime*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000.
15. Collins and Poynting.
16. Diane Powell, *Out West*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993.
17. Suvendrini Perera, 'Resisting Assimilation in the Urban Landscape', *Reckonings 2001 Forum*, Performance Space, Redfern, 30 August 2001.
18. Kevin Dunn, 'Rethinking the Ethnic Concentration: The Case of Cabramatta, Sydney', *Urban Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1998, 503–27.
19. Diane Powell, pp. 133–39.
20. Antonio Castillo and Martin Hirst, '“Look Both Ways”: Fairfield, Cabramatta and the Media', in Collins and Poynting (eds), pp. 123–40. Antonio Castillo and Martin Hirst, *Journalism: Look Both Ways. Western Sydney and the Media*, Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW, 2001.
21. M. Cabello, *Cabramatta: The New Image*, Sydney, Fairfield Community Arts Network and Young Christian Workers, 1994.
22. Helen Basilli, 'West-side Stories: Ethnic Minority Sources in the Media', *Transitions (Magazine of the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, NSW)*, vol. 8, 2000.
23. G. Caban, *Hidden Heritage: The Fairfield Community Sydney*, Fairfield City Council, 1988.
24. Paul Graham, 'From Cobra Grubs to Dragons: The Fairfield Cultural Tour', paper presented at the *Suburbia* conference, Sydney, 2002.
25. Graham.
26. Rotterdam City Safari, <<http://www.citysafari.nl/?content=citysafari>>.
27. Stuart Cunningham and John Sinclair, *Floating Lives: the Media and Asian Diasporas*, St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 2000.
28. ADB (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board), *Race for the Headlines: Racism and Media Discourse*, Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW, 2003. Liz Jacka and Lelia Green (eds) 'The New “Others”': Media and Society Post-September 11', themed edition of *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy*, no. 109, November 2003.
29. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 1998. Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998.
30. John Gabriel, *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*, London, Routledge, 1998.
31. Stratton.
32. Ghassan Hage, 'At Home in the Entrails of the West', in *Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Sydney's West*, H. Grace, G. Hage,

- L. Johnson, J. Langsworth and M. Symonds (eds), Pluto Press, Sydney, 1997, pp. 99–153.
33. Ann Curthoys, 'An Uneasy Conversation: Multicultural and Indigenous Discourses', in *The Future of Australian Multiculturalism*, G. Hage and R. Couch (eds), Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, 1999, pp 277–94.
34. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p 154.
35. Doreen Massey, 'The Spaces of Community', in *Annotations 1: Mixed Belongings and Unspecified Destinations*, Nikos Papastergiadis (ed), Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1996, p 32.
36. Ang and Cassity, pp 17–25.