INTERSECTIONS
A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO MEDIA, IDENTITY AND PLACE

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Bob Carr

> *'It is people on the fringes of these communities – the Vietnamese or the IndoChinese in Cabramatta, the Lebanese at Lakemba – people on the fringes of basically good communitites and respectful communities, that are causing the problems.' (in Doherty 2001)*

Lisa Maher

> *The narratives [in Wall of Silence] indicate that Cabramatta is much more than the symbolic location it has become in popular culture – it is a vital source of social and cultural identity which provides young people with a sense of connectedness and respite from the racism of everyday life. (in Maher and Ho, 1998)*

Tram Nguyen

> *When I look back now and see our words and the photos I'm glad we decided not to be invisible. If there is a wall of silence then it's not the Asian community that built it. I'm proud of my friends for speaking up. I hope our work will help the community to see that we're human too. (in Maher and Ho, 1998)*

These comments reflect conflicting experiences of Cabramatta – as a scene of drug-related crime, as deviant and 'different', as an essentially 'Vietnamese' or 'Asian' suburb, as a site of community, safety and support, as a complex, culturally mixed and mixing community. Importantly, the comments each appeared in a medium addressed to a wider public – the Sydney Morning Herald and the exhibition 'Wall of Silence: stories of Cabramatta street youth'. This points to a complex politics of visibility and invisibility, of naming and redefinition and negotiations of identity centred in one of Australia's most culturally diverse local government areas (FCC 1996: 17).

This paper examines Cabramatta as an intersection of many cultural flows and diverse experiences and argues for a transdisciplinary approach and a focus on place to adequately grasp and analyse the complexity of media and social relations in culturally diverse contexts. Such an approach may also contribute to a broader theorisation of the role of media as a cultural resource for the negotiation of identities, communities and places. By mapping the conjunctures and disjunctures of media flows in Cabramatta, I aim to better understand the possibilities and the limitations of media in processes of identity construction.

Media is a cultural resource

Cabramatta is a particularly productive place to analyse the possibilities and the limitations of media as a cultural resource for identity construction. Chris Barker argues that television in particular:

> increases the sources and resources for identity production, which can lead to a range of hybrid forms of identity, though the defensive production of 'fundamentalist' identities is an equally significant outcome. The nation is not necessarily the most suitable level to understand the cultural impact of television, rather, we need to consider the various levels of cultural identification, action and influence. Post-traditional identity formation involves the production of multiple identities or identifications many of which have little bearing on questions of national identity. (1997: 209)

Following Marie Gillespie's concept of 'tv talk', media representations can be understood as commonly shared resources for the negotiation and contestation of individual and collective identities. In talk about television we explore and redefine the ways in which we understand ourselves and others (Gillespie 1995, Dreher 2000). Like any resource, cultural resources of media are unevenly distributed. While some people have access to a diverse range of representations through which to imagine themselves and construct identities, others may be confined to contesting a limited range of cultural products and definitions (cf Barker 1997: 147).

Where Barker and Gillespie focus on South Asian diasporic communities in Britain, I apply the conception of media as a cultural resource to an analysis of place as an 'intersection' of multiple communities, experiences and cultural productions. As Barker indicates above, a multiperspectival approach to media and negotiations of identity needs to account for multiple identities and different levels of negotiation. Diasporic or transnational identities are intertwined with national, local and metropolitan cultural identities and crosscut by gender, age, language, sexuality, locale and many other axes of difference. Cabramatta is traversed by many and varied media flows, at the same time as certain representations of Cabramatta circulate widely outside the area. Rather than focusing on a detailed description of any of these particular communities, flows or sites of production, an analysis of 'place' may allow an analysis of the 'structure of the conjunction' (Clifford 2001) of these many experiences. This requires a multidimensional approach which stresses interrelationships and disjunctures, complexities and unevenness in the distribution, production and appropriation of media as a cultural resource.

Global, local, national, regional, transnational, metropolitan and diasporic cultural flows intersect in Cabramatta. The suburb is a focus of mainstream news reporting, of tourism, of business and shopping, of the heroin trade, of research, of small-scale media production, of school excursions, of migration, of community theatre and arts, of public debate and of the popular imagination. Take the time of writing this paper as an example:

In the early weeks of March 2001, Cabramatta was mentioned in daily news reports detailing a New South Wales government inquiry into policing in the area. In the same weeks Premier Bob Carr contributed to an ongoing debate about 'ethnic' crime with the comments reproduced above. Both topics were discussed on talkback radio such as the ABC's 2BL. During these debates Cabramatta's almost iconic status was taken for granted. Sydneysiders who have never visited the area nevertheless feel they 'know' about Cabramatta, and assume that heroin

dealing, gangs and the 'Vietnamese' community are the major defining features of the suburb. Meanwhile, I am part of a team which is producing a self-drive audio tour of culturally diverse sites in the Cabramatta area – focusing on temples, churches and mosques. Our research is simplified by the fact that most of these buildings have been represented in videos, booklets, CD Roms, audio cassettes and other media produced by community groups associated with the various buildings. The audio tour itself aims to highlight the positive aspects of multiculturalism as lived in the Fairfield local government area. This involves a focus on intercommunal interactions and cultural negotiation. From the evidence of the vast array of non-English language newspapers in local newsagents and the variety of radio programs playing at various sites, Cabramatta is also shaped by the circulation and production of diasporic media products such as those analysed in Cunningham and Sinclair's recent study, 'Floating Lives' (2000). During these same weeks, I am surprised when a participant in a workshop with the visiting anthropologist James Clifford comments on Cabramatta's 'strangeness'. The participant seems to assume that all present will 'know' Cabramatta and identify it as an 'Asian' or a 'Vietnamese' suburb. The comments uncomfortably echo Pauline Hanson's earlier use of Cabramatta as an example in her critiques of Asian immigration – the suburb is a place where she feels like a 'stranger in her own home' (Dunn 1998: 515). Cabramatta also has a presence in the popular imagination, often perjoratively referred to as 'Vietnamatta', or seen as an 'exotic' destination for cheap shopping and restaurants (Powell 1993, 133-139). In fact, the local council markets Cabramatta as a tourist destination. At the ferry information centre in central Sydney I come across a brochure which promotes Cabramatta as 'Sydney's day trip to Asia'. During these same weeks the conference 'Whose Place', organised by the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Council included a session in which researchers and community workers discussed media, young people and public places in Cabramatta. Meanwhile my doctoral research involves documenting photographic exhibitions, theatre and video projects which aim to counter negative stereotypes of Cabramatta and those who live and work there. This includes projects such as the Wall of Silence exhibition referred to earlier, and projects of the Fairfield Community Arts Network which will be discussed shortly.

This is a far from exhaustive list of the wide range of cultural resources produced in or about Cabramatta. Rather than focus on any of these representations in particular, my aim is to map and analyse their intersection. What cultural resources are available for understanding Cabramatta and the people and communities associated with that place? Where and how do these resources circulate? How and why are they produced? By whom and for whom? How do these cultural resources impact upon the way in which Cabramatta is understood by those who live and work in the suburb? And by those who do not? How do these different experiences and negotiations of place and identity impact upon one another?

Triangulation and transdisciplinarity

A focus on places as 'intersections' or 'meeting places' requires a transdisciplinary approach to research and analysis (cf Morley 2000: 6). It requires an emphasis on connecting or articulating different perspectives, methodologies and theoretical frameworks. By focusing on interconnections rather than the study of particular flows, texts, audiences or producers, I aim to avoid some of the unhelpful oppositions between active and passive audiences, between misrepresentation and the openness of texts, between mainstream and alternative media, between producers and consumers.

To advocate such an approach is hardly new. John B. Thompson has developed a comprehensive 'tripartite model' for media studies research (1995). Similarly, David Buckingham has called for a triangulation model which incorporates production, representation and consumption. For Buckingham, to argue whether audiences are active or passive is banal (cf Ang 1996: 41) and a far more complex and nuanced analysis is required. Morley, Thompson, Ang, Buckingham and others emphasise the need to theorise the interrelationships between macro and micro perspectives on media, culture, identity and power.

A triangulation of producers, texts and consumers also entails possibilities for transdisciplinarity. My own interest is in articulating approaches to identity developed within cultural studies to a media studies focus on institutions and processes of production. The focus on interrelations and disjunctures between these processes draws also on cultural geography and related work which stresses the social production and construction of place (eg. Massey 1994, Couldry 2000, Dunn 1998, Powell 1993). The aim is to maximise what John Fiske calls 'cultural studies theoretical poaching'. Fiske regards the poaching and articulation of diverse theoretical perspectives as the great strength of cultural studies (Fiske 2000). Within media studies, Nick Couldry's work has focused not on particular texts or audiences, nor on consumption or production only, but rather has highlighted very specific interactions between media and non-media worlds. Couldry's aim 'has been to find a way into studying the workings of media power that takes account of how deeply the media are embedded in social life' (2000: 177). Fictional and factual media, mainstream media consumption and alternative forms of mediation must be studied together, as 'each is part of the vast, uneven pattern of social interaction across space which we simply call 'the media''(ibid).

Mapping media and place

My interest in place draws on the work of Couldry and Doreen Massey in geography. Massey argues that places are not homogenous, bounded entities, but rather each place is a particular, unique point of intersection of social relations and communications (1994: 154). Places are always porous and defined by interaction and social relations – thus definitions of place will be constantly changing, and open to contestation (ibid: 121). This complex and multi-layered conception of place is vital to my interest in Cabramatta as an intersection of diverse cultural flows. Cabramatta is indeed a 'meeting place' (Massey 1996: 33) where people, communities, cultures and representations connect and disconnect and space is socially created through (mediated) interactions.

Something of this perspective is evident in the work of the geographer Kevin Dunn, whose work on Cabramatta includes an analysis of media coverage of the area. For Dunn, media reporting of Cabramatta is important because it impacts on how the area is defined and understood. Media shapes the perceptions of policymakers – which has very concrete consequences in planning and policy decisions (Dunn 1993, 1998). Ethnic concentration in Cabramatta is defined as a problem to be overcome rather than as a source of community support and resources for participation in a multicultural society.

From a media studies perspective, Nick Couldry argues for 'the importance of studying localities of media-related interaction' (2000: 21). Couldry focuses on several places where 'ordinary' people come face to face with media production processes – on the set of the soap opera Coronation Street, and as participants in ongoing protest actions against live animal exports at the port of Brightlingsea. In Couldry's account, these places are traversed by a

variety of people – actors, camera crews, neighbours, roving protesters, activists, concerned citizens, fans, tourists, the curious, publicity seekers, reporters and researchers. At these places the spatial organisation of media power is highlighted – most people are physically excluded from the sites of media production. While this separation is de-naturalised for many participants in mediated protests, the fundamental spatial division between media consumers and media producers is very rarely altered.

Couldry's study highlights the particularly interesting perspectives of people who have seen or heard themselves represented in news and current affairs reporting. Brightlingsea protesters were confronted by the differences between their experiences of events, and the representations of those events and the people involved in nightly news broadcasts. Overall, most participants felt themselves relatively powerless to influence or alter media flows intersecting in their town. Here the concept of 'power geometry' is central. Massey highlights the power-geometry of time-space compression:

> For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. […] Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (1994: 149)

If we focus on media and cultural flows, we can see Cabramatta as a complex intersection of myriad flows and representations – where access to and control over these flows is experienced unevenly. It is important to map the power-geometry of mediation in the Cabramatta area. Such a mapping requires attention to multiple centres and peripheries, to hierarchies and inequalities as well as complexities, regularities and contradictions. Above all it is important to trace the interrelationships between media flows and negotiations of identity – what are the conjunctures and disjunctures between metropolitan and diasporic cultural flows? How do community-based media projects impact upon national debates and vice versa? How do these myriad representations influence the ways in which people understand Cabramatta and those who live and work there? Cabramatta is a particularly interesting place to take a vertical slice through the Sydney mediasphere in order to trace its complex networks and implications.

This vertical slice highlights the intersecting flows of media and representations, of producers, consumers and texts in and about Cabramatta. In Couldry's terms Cabramatta is particularly interesting as a site which disrupts the 'media frame' – a place where the usual spatial organisation of media power is challenged. This spatial separation of media production and consumption also produces a symbolic hierarchy. Yet in Cabramatta this symbolic hierarchy is both implicily and explicitly contested. Many locally-controlled media and cultural production projects in the Cabramatta area are explicit responses to media coverage and popular perceptions of the suburb. Many more community-based projects implicitly reflect a need to project 'positive images' or 'alternative stories' of the area.

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 (see Castillo and Hirst, 2000). 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 (Cabello 1994). Several community workers have acted as

spokespeople in mainstream news reports (Basilli 2000). The Racial Equality Action Lobby produced a 'Real Useful Media Kit' to train community spokespeople (REAL 1990). The Fairfield area is covered by two local English-language newspapers and countless others in languages other than English. Fairfield City Council has published books such as 'Hidden Heritage' (Caban 1988) and is developing 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 CDRom, 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. Indigenous people in the Fairfield area are involved in a Cultural Mapping project.

Many of these projects are important interventions in a symbolic struggle to define Cabramatta, its communities and those who live and work there. How, then, are these projects situated in the 'power geometry' of Cabramatta as a 'meeting place'? Following Couldry's analysis, it is important to note the likelihood that media power may in fact be reproduced even in those sites where it is de-naturalised. Cabramatta is an intersection of highly uneven cultural flows, particularly if we focus on flows out of Cabramatta. In this symbolic struggle, different products and representations are produced by different people and different institutions for various reasons, with different resources and with varied consequences. While many people who live and work in Cabramatta have responded to mainstream media coverage of the area in a variety of ways, there is little evidence that metropolitan or national media flows which represent Cabramatta have been influenced by such interventions.

As evidenced in talkback radio discussions, media reporting, the experiences of local residents and countless casual remarks, Cabramatta remains both a familiar and a 'foreign' place for many Sydneysiders (Powell 1993, Dreher 2000), While the suburb is a household name, mass media remains the primary means by which most people 'travel' to or 'know' about Cabramatta. In media and cultural resources which circulate widely outside Cabramatta, the area is associated with 'Asia', Vietnam, crime and deviance, the pitfalls of multiculturalism and immigration, exotic foods and atmosphere – a site of both 'fear and allure' (Powell 1993). Like Lakemba in Sydney and particular suburbs in most other capital cities, Cabramatta has been pathologised and is a vital site for the 'ethnicisation of crime and the criminalisation of ethnicity' (Collins et al, 2000). These intersecting associations position Cabramatta and those who live and work there as foreign, different and marginal. A popular topic of public discussion, Cabramatta is rarely defined as ordinary, central or Australian.

In this wider context it might be appropriate to think of community-level media projects as complimentary or compensatory, as part of a highly uneven dialogue. This is in no way to diminish the importance of such processes of cultural production. It is to highlight the power geometry in which these projects operate. The 'power geometry' of media is such that self-representations of Cabramatta rarely circulate widely beyond the area, while mainstream news reports reach Sydney-wide and occasionally national audiences. For those spokespeople who have been interviewed on mainstream media, their experiences are at best ambivalent – many are frustrated that their voices are included in representations produced elsewhere, under an agenda over which they have very little control (Basilli 2000, cf Couldry 2000). There are connections, but also vast disjunctures between multilayered cultural flows.

The ability to reach wide audiences remains an important aspect of the power geometry of media intersecting at Cabramatta. People care about how the communities and places with which they are associated are represented to other places and communities – recent discussions around Denis O'Rourke's film Cunnamulla and the book Broometime by Anne Coombs and Susan Varga are prime examples. At stake is not merely the 'accuracy' of the representations, but much more their perceived reception. If media is a cultural resource for our negotiations of identity, media is also a cultural resource for how we are known and identified by others (cf Dreher 2000). It seems quite reasonable for audiences in Cunnamulla, Broome or Cabramatta to assume that, in the absence of other cultural resources associated with these places, those representations that are distributed widely will shape the way places and communities are imagined and understood by distant others – whether they be distant in geographical or in cultural terms.

I hope that my focus on place and intersection avoids positioning the people who live and work in Cabramatta either as passive or helpless victims of uncontrollable media flows, or as fully empowered producers of resistance and free-floating identities. Rather I argue that Cabramatta is a site of symbolic struggle, where a variety of resources are mobilised in different ways with different implications, and where resistance and the imposition of identities, misrepresentation and alternative media production, diaspora, hybridity and national identity collide. Doreen Massey argues that places and communities are not bounded locations which can guarantee authenticity or identity, rather we create space and place through our interactions (1996: 32). Increasingly, media is a central resource for interaction, requiring an analysis which accounts for interrelationships between flows, places, communities and identities.

Everyday multiculturalism

Attention to interrelationships between macro and micro, global and local, national and diasporic cultural flows requires a complex mapping and analysis which is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, I do stress one possible conclusion from a transdisciplinary focus on place – and I want to end on a constructive note. My mapping of media power in Cabramatta aims to highlight potential and missed opportunities. I argue that the everyday experiences of cultural diversity represented in many local cultural productions are of intense interest to a society increasingly aware of differences. That these representations do not circulate more widely is a great loss for the metropolitan and national centres as much as for the people of Cabramatta. Representations of 'everyday multiculturalism' have much to contribute to mainstream mediaspheres.

My interest in 'everyday multiculturalism' draws on the work of Ghassan Hage (1998) and Jon Stratton (1998). Stratton describes everyday multiculturalism as syncretic and rhizomatic, a process by which:

> cultures, produced by individuals in their everyday lives, merge, creolise and transform as people live their lives, adapting to and resisting situations, and (mis)understanding, loving, hating and taking pleasure in other people with whom they come into contact (1998: 15).

Both Hage and Stratton stress processes of mundane interaction and cultural exchange. For Hage, the multiculturalism of daily interaction and migrant home-building experienced in

Sydney's western suburbs, including Cabramatta, is contrasted positively to the cosmo-multiculturalism of consumption based in Sydney's inner city (1997).

The FCAN production 'Border Crossing II' is an example of the many cultural products developed in and around Cabramatta which present aspects of everyday multiculturalism. Border Crossings II was performed in late 1998 by a diverse group of young people living in the Fairfield area, many of them recently arrived in Australia, who came together for a year-long series of workshops in various media – including drama, dance, percussion and music, painting, writing and video. The performance was based on their stories of migration. Many arrived in Australia as refugees. The result was an innovative, challenging and engaging performance which took place in a local shopping centre, claiming a public space for young people's self-expression. The production challenges stereotypes and easy assumptions about youth, about refugees, about migration and about Australia as the 'Lucky Country'. The program reminds us that once these young people arrived in Australia, they still found many borders to cross. The stories tell of racism and frustration, but also of friendship and hope. The young people mimed being 'boxed in' and altercations with police, and in the final scene the performers shout triumphantly that they will make it to university, while painting their discouraging headmaster into a corner.

Border Crossings II was developed through interactions across differences, and tells of everyday experiences in culturally diverse places. Above all it represents daily interactions in schools, shopping centres, at bus stops and in homes – all the places where differences meet and mingle, and where Australian cultures are made and remade. In Border Crossings II whiteness is named (represented by a Judges' wig) and white authorities are expected to change as much as recently-arrived Australians.

Similar stories are told in projects such as Bogcheh (FCAN 2000) and the Fairfield City Cultural Tour. The 'Wall of Silence' exhibition toured to the Tin Sheds gallery in central Sydney presenting 'stories of Cabramatta street youth' in photographs, interview materials and autobiographical writings (Maher and Ho, 1998). The project aimed to 'provide a creative medium for young people to respond to racial stereotyping and negative images of themselves and their communities' (Maher and Ho 1998: 4). The written materials emphasise self-representation, and young people comment on friendship and family, school and fashion, the media and the future as well as drugs and racism. The exhibition presents a glimpse into the complex everyday experiences of people often represented as threatening 'gang' members.

The Fairfield City Cultural Tour audio CD represents very different stories of the Fairfield-Cabramatta area. 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 experiences of the Darug traditional owners of the area sit alongside the stories of refugees from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and the former Yugoslavia. The tour aims to highlight links and cooperation between community groups, such as the annual inter-faith 'Prayer for Peace', or the multilingual slogans on Cabramatta's famous Pailau Gateway. The track for an Anglican Church begins with white farming history and ends with a multicultural congregation attending services in Vietnamese and English. The tour focuses not only on traditions and history, but also on cultural adaptation and change. The history of Chinese market gardeners who moved to the area after the Gold Rushes is told through unpacking the quintessentially 'Australian' phrase 'fair dinkum': chin kum means 'real gold' in the Toi Shan Cantonese dialect.

These cultural resources have the potential to challenge the 'image of the cultural organisation of Australia in terms of a core Australian culture with peripheral cultural add-ons' (Stratton 1998: 37). In this version of multiculturalism, all change is required of the migrant, or the diasporic subject, whereas a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture remains central and unchanging. Significantly, Stratton sees this image realised most clearly in the contrast between the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service. Where 'ethnic' programming is relegated to the SBS, the ABC continues to privilege English-language programming produced locally or in the UK and North America as unproblematically 'Australian'. Such a conception elides the conditions and the possibilities of a much wider process of hybridisation in which media flows might contribute to on-going re-negotiations of identities at many levels of culture and community.

In national public debates about multiculturalism in Australia, there are relatively few cultural resources available with which to imagine an everyday multiculturalism of interaction, interdependence and cultural exchange. Mainstream media offers few representations of migration and multiculturalism as a daily mix and fusion of all cultures, which requires change of the centre as well as the periphery. Cultural resources which ethnisise crime or pathologise Cabramatta on the other hand are regularly and widely available. While diasporic media flows contribute to the development of transnational identities and deterritorialised communities, the sphere of mainstream media largely retains the centre-periphery structure critiqued by Stratton. Instersecting cultural flows in Cabramatta do indeed provide materials for empowering negotiations and hybrid identity formation. However, there is little evidence of hybridisation at the level of metropolitan or national media flows.

I am aware of the danger of idealising and essentialising daily experiences and media production in Cabramatta. There are certainly cultural products produced in Cabramatta which stress bounded communities and maintenance of traditions. Many cross-cultural interactions in the area are structured by prejudice and unequal power relations. The intersections of cultures in Cabramatta certainly does not guarantee understanding and negotiation – but it does raise these possibilities, and there are many people in the area determined to meet the challenges.

For researchers the challenge is not so much to analyse whether audiences in Cabramatta are powerful or frustrated (of course they are both – see Dreher 2000), nor whether Cabramatta is misrepresented or actively renegotiated – both concepts are applicable. Instead a complex mapping of intersections might locate opportunities for intervention and possibilities for representations which highlight the complex experiences of cultural interaction in Cabramatta to circulate much more widely. This means thinking through tactics for shifting the ‘power geometry’ of media flows which intersect in Cabramatta. What are the possibilities for counter-flows or different conjunctures? The mapping presented here suggests that these questions demand attention to the central sites of media power as much as the activities of those who seek to challenge them.

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