Doing Ethnography in the City of Whittlesea: Domains of Cultural Participation

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Introduction

The relationship between cultural participation and migrant belonging is an increasingly pertinent issue. Policy and academic discussions about the 'intercultural city', for example, are largely concerned with the kinds of formal and informal attachments migrants have to local, national and transnational spaces (Wood and Landry 2008; Amin 2002). But while there has been much scholarly concern with the forms of spatialised belonging that exist in urban, multicultural Australia (Dreher 2006; Hage 1997; Noble 2009; Noble 2011; Wise and Velayutham 2009) there has been less attention to the ways in which migrant identities are articulated in new, suburban spaces which have a very different relationship with the cultural infrastructure of the inner-city. Scholarly discussions have been mainly structured around understandings of difference in the city as a form of dysfunction – reflected in anxieties about the ethnic 'ghetto' – or opportunity – where diversity is valued for generating creativity, innovation and urban vibrancy. This paper seeks to intervene in these accounts by exploring the relationship between everyday cultural participation and migrant belonging in culturally diverse, suburban Australia. The research discussed considers the relationship between cultural participation as it is imagined by governmental discourses and the lived, cultural practices of migrants.

Since the 1970s, the programs and policies of Australian multiculturalism have brought expressions of ethnic diversity into public spaces and written these expressions into contemporary narratives of national identity. The policies of the Australia Council, for example, have historically demonstrated a desire to both reflect and help shape a culturally diverse Australia. However, much of the discourse surrounding 'multicultural arts', has been framed by projects of cultural maintenance and the celebration of ethnic heritage, cultural practices which are seen to take place on the periphery of a dominant Anglo-Australian centre. Arts and cultural policies have sought to facilitate these forms of marginal cultural maintenance, as well as to provide 'access' to the cultural mainstream. However, these

strategies are unclear about the role of these marginal forms in reshaping the mainstream, and the question of what exactly is being provided access to is rarely interrogated.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing governmental awareness of the need to expand on discourses of national culture – to account for hybridity and cosmopolitanism as part of the texture of Australian multiculturalism, rather than imagining the nation state as constituted by bounded categories of ethnic identity (Australia Council 1993). However, even as the links between 'nation' and culture have become destabilised the belief in a dominant national culture still informs the policy imaginary. One of the challenges of the research this paper describes is to consider what this shared cultural world looks like in a time of what Greg Noble calls, the 'hyperdiversity' of everyday Australian life (Noble 2011). This hyperdiversity refers to both the increase in the kinds of differences that exist, as well as the dynamic production of hybridity. Given the complexity of this cultural landscape how is it possible to define a collective, public cultural life?

The policy discourse of 'access' is related to the ambiguous notion of 'participation'. Levels of cultural participation are regarded as a barometer of access, and of the success of cultural policies in engaging with and reflecting cultural diversity. Patton's etymology of 'participation' describes its origins in the idea of sharing – that it involves taking part in collective activity. While her focus is on civic and economic participation, understanding cultural participation in these terms implies a collective, shared or public cultural life in which one participates. It is this notion of a shared culture that is central to cultural policy, and to its emphasis on public cultural institutions. It is also this lack of clarity about what constitutes cultural participation – and makes it distinct from civic, economic or artistic participation – that means that cultural metrics have tended to focus on a narrowly defined sphere of participation in public culture. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), for example, provides measures of attendance at state-subsidised cultural venues and events (2009).1 The ABS' General Social Survey collects data on participation in civic activity and community groups, including ethnic associations and arts and heritage groups (2010). However, the relationship between these forms of participation and the realm of 'culture' is not articulated. A 2010 study by the Australia Council contains data on a range of forms of arts participation, defined as either 'creative' or 'receptive' participation (2010; See also

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1 The ABS has recently announced, however, that this line of cultural data collection will be discontinued (2014).

Australia Council 2014). However, this study does not consider the significance of these arts and cultural activities to questions of cultural capital, citizenship or belonging.

This paper draws from research into people's everyday cultural lives in order to interrogate these policy understandings of cultural participation. It is interested in the spaces in which cultural participation happens, and the forms it takes. It is only by describing these that we can begin to think about the ways such participation contributes to a collective culture, and functions as practices of belonging. The account below draws from ethnographic research undertaken at the City of Whittlesea in order to reflect on these questions. It is largely a methodological paper, aimed at developing a taxonomy of cultural participation that might meaningfully reflect the everyday words of culturally diverse, suburban Australia.

The research site and methodology

The City of Whittlesea is one of Australia's fastest growing municipalities. Situated about 25 kilometres north of Melbourne's Central Business District, the municipality encompasses new residential areas, large tracts of semi-rural and agricultural land, as well as more established suburbs. It is a geographically large and culturally diverse area, far from the major arts and cultural institutions of the inner-city. The limited reach of public transport to and from central Melbourne means that many in the area are heavily reliant on the cultural infrastructure that is available to them locally – public libraries, recreation centres, multi-purpose community centres, parks, shopping malls, and educational facilities. Research in this area has been undertaken as part of an Australian Research Council-funded project examining the ways in which arts and cultural policies shape and engage with cultural difference. Ethnographic research in this area has taken place over 3 years, consisting of participant-observation at a number of local council-initiated arts and cultural events, as well as in-depth interviews with 20 local residents.

Respondents were invited to participate in the research on the basis of their varying levels of prior involvement with the City of Whittlesea's Community Cultural Development Department. Some were already known to the council as active members of the local community, while others had limited contact with these official cultural programs. Respondents inhabited a range of multi-directional cultural flows – they were active as cultural participants, producers, governmental constituents, family and community members, and had diverse ethnic and religious affiliations. The interviews sought to examine

the kinds of cultural activity that helped respondents negotiate these different positions, and the forms of belonging and citizenship this supported. Respondents were asked about their cultural interests, histories, and aspirations, their participation in a range of activities and spaces, and their motivations for their activity.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are outlined in the table below. There was an overrepresentation of families and those aged between 35 and 49 in the sample, however, this broadly reflects the population spread of the City of Whittlesea (City of Whittlesea 2014).

		number of respondents
Gender	Male	8
	Female	11
	Couple	1
Age	18-24	0
	25-34	2
	35-49	9
	50-59	5
	60+	4
Residence in Australia	Less than 5 years	5
	5-10 years	2
	11-20 years	5
	21 years or more	1
	Born in Australia	7
Household composition	Single	3
	Partnered, no children	5
	Partnered with children	9
	Single with children	2

Each interview was approximately 2 hours in duration. While the interviews were structured around the research themes above, the approach was flexible and open-ended, and allowed

space for respondents to speak on their own terms and to provide an account of their cultural lives unmediated by pre-existing policy categories or conceptual frameworks.

To this end, analysis of the interview data incorporated a 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser 2001). A method of data analysis developed by American sociologist Barney Glaser, the approach seeks to identify patterns within data without imposing pre-existing cognitive or theoretical frameworks on the data. The aim is to let the data 'speak for itself' rather than to subsume it into abstract theories. This method involved a process of close textual analysis of interview transcripts, with attention to the languages and categories used by respondents to describe their cultural worlds. A grounded approach attempts to preserve the complexity of these worlds without reducing respondents' experiences into overarching categories.

However, the process of analysis inevitably involved a hybrid methodology rather than a pure 'grounded' approach – that is, a combination of a 'bottom-up,' 'grounded' approach and one that was informed by the project's aims and research findings. As others have suggested, the notion of a 'pure' form of grounded analysis does not acknowledge that there is always some interpretation or external cognitive organising inherent to any process of analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). This process of interpretation also means that categories themselves are often imprecise. The categories are partly formed on the basis of their experiential qualities – that is, how they are experienced and described by the research participants – rather than being defined by a stable set of externally identified characteristics.

However, while respondents offered their own terms for describing their cultural activity, the analysis then sought to think about how these terms expanded or intervened in existing theoretical frameworks for thinking about cultural participation. Previous research in this project has found an important and mutually constitutive relationship between cultural participation, cultural capital and cultural citizenship (Papastergiadis et al 2014). One of the aims of the ethnographic analysis, then, has been to substantiate these relationships and to explore how respondents' narratives of participation expanded, or intervened in, theoretical and policy accounts of cultural participation and belonging. The advantage of this hybrid method of analysis is its capacity to reveal domains and modes of cultural participation that are not represented in arts and cultural policies, or which inform current policy categories but require further interrogation.

Interview data was coded to capture the range of domains of cultural participation in which respondents were involved, the capitals or capacities such participation facilitated, and the modes of belonging and attachment that marked their lives. The discussion below focuses on the domains of cultural participation that emerged from this analysis. These domains are intended as tentative categories for measuring cultural participation. They form the basis of a framework of measurement for evaluating the extent to which arts and cultural policies engage with diversity, and will be developed and refined in further stages of research. The aim, at this stage, is to capture the range of activities, forms, sites and practices that make up the terrain of everyday cultural participation. Given that the broader project is concerned with the variety of ways cultural participation contributes to belonging and cultural citizenship, there is also a need to assess the relative importance of each of these domains of participation. The term 'domains' describes the areas of activity and participation around which communities build their lives. There is a need for further research which considers how domains of everyday cultural participation compare with the domains of governmental priority and which more closely considers the relationship between participation, capitals and belonging.

Establishing these categories was the result of an extended, iterative process of analysis and coding. Each interview transcript was read by multiple researchers. The first five transcripts were subject to two or three days of examination in order to develop the categories described below. As new categories emerged from each transcript these were added to an overall coding framework, and areas of priority or particular significance noted. As more transcripts were analysed, these categories were clarified, consolidated or reclassified, and the coding process became more streamlined.

The resulting coding schema is subsequently a result of a grounded data analysis of the transcripts, examining the continuities and discontinuities which defined people's cultural practices, as well as theorisations developed in the research relating to cultural participation, cultural capital, citizenship and belonging. The analysis identified 10 domains of cultural participation, 6 forms of capital, and 6 modes of migrant belonging that defined the cultural lives of respondents.

Domains of participation

The 'domains of participation' sought to capture the spectrum of cultural activity that was identified as significant by respondents, as well as participation in spaces and practices that are already identified as important within governmental policies and programs. As we have described, the purpose of these domains is to inform the development of categories of cultural measurement and evaluation. However, the ambiguity of the notion of 'culture' – insofar as it is used to refer to forms, practices and collectivities – means that these domains of cultural participation are unstable categories. While some 'domains' refer to spaces or physical sites of activity, others refer to the types of activities themselves. These domains are also a combination of experiential, theoretical and governmental categories of cultural participation. Each of these domains hold different kinds of significance for research participants; they facilitate belonging in different ways and to a range of different formations. They also contribute to 'public culture' in a variety of ways. This mix of spaces, activities, actors, and strategies of negotiating diversity contribute to the dynamism of public culture, and complicate our efforts to develop categories of cultural participation. As such, the domains of participation are not equivalent or uniform. There is also some overlap between categories – for example, 'structured cultural activity' can take place in 'public space' – but each captures something distinctive about the quality of participation that the accompanying definitions aim to make clear. Each of these domains, their definitions and an account of their theoretical and governmental significance is outlined in the table below.

	Definition	**Significance**
1) Public space	Sites of unmediated or unregulated encounter with other people or with the space itself. These spaces are characterised by low levels of governmental regulation from the cultural sector.	The category of 'public space' is significant because respondents' experiences within these spaces were a key barometer for judging their sense of belonging, ease or safety. It is also an important category within sociological accounts of the modern, urban subject (Amin and Thrift 2002). In accounts of social capital within a community, public space is described as an important site for gauging the functionality of civic life (Putnam 1993). While forms of mediated encounter can take place in public spaces – for example through the use of mobile devices – these spaces are characterised by the localised, physical encounters they make possible.
2) Home	The physical space of the home and the practices that take place within it.	The home emerged as central to respondents' practices of self and community making. The home was described as a primary space of cultural engagement, consumption and participation, and for creating comfort, security and mediating one's relationship with the outside world. However, while the home is a key domain in which processes of 'settlement' and belonging are enacted, it remains largely invisible to governmental frameworks – the home as a cultural site is under-theorised and under-represented in government, particularly in the arts and cultural sector. Feminist theorists have suggested that prevailing emphases on public space within cultural policy reflect a patriarchal view of the spaces of cultural value, and a conflation between the civic, public sphere and public space (Massey 1996).
3) Commercial	Private spaces of cultural consumption and interaction.	Commercial spaces have been incorporated into existing governmental assessments of civic vibrancy, and have been important sites in accounts of economic value of the cultural industries. Respondents mentioned commercial spaces such as restaurants and bars as sites of deliberate and meaningful forms of interaction and cultural consumption.
4) Structured cultural activity	Cultural activity that is regular, deliberate and tangible. Structured cultural activity refers to practices that take place both individually or collectively, and either in or outside the home. Such activity includes practices such as playing an instrument, writing poetry, or taking part in dance classes.	It is within this domain that policy frameworks situate the articulation and expression of cultural heritage. It is also within this domain that an artistic disposition is expressed or enacted.

5) Work	Includes both paid and unpaid work.	While work is an important domain for other sectors of government, the cultural implications of work are poorly understood. This is especially so in the case of voluntary work. From a governmental perspective, work is a primary obligation of citizenship. However, work is also a key site of acculturation and belonging, and a crucial source of social and cultural connection. Also, while the importance of volunteering is emphasised by multicultural policy, there is an under-appreciation for the full spectrum of activity in which migrants participate and the range of reasons why they work without money.
6) Community facilities	Public facilities which form part of people's local, everyday or habitual activity. These facilities are distinct from public space because there is a greater expectation of governmental presence and regulation within these spaces. Community facilities such as public pools or libraries also assume a narrower and prescriptive set of uses than 'public space'.	Community facilities are usually government supported or funded, and are key sites for 'governing at a distance' through the formation of 'community' (Rose 1999). For example, the sports club is an important site of community organising and connection.
7) Political activism	Includes deliberate and tangible practices of political action which attempt to intervene in civic or political processes, such as protests, strikes or donating to charities.	In much theorising on citizenship, these practices are described as key sites for the expression of citizenship (Etzioni 1993; Isin and Turner 2002). Often it is formal membership to a polity which grants rights of political participation such as voting. However, it is not necessary to be a formal citizen to participate in some practices of political activism, and they can be considered an expression of informal or cultural citizenship.
8) Educational institutions	Includes both individual attendance at an educational institution and other kinds of engagement, such as participation in children's sports events and volunteering.	This site is described as a significant domain of cultural activity by respondents, and as a distinct mode of cultural participation. Like with home and work, educational institutions have priority in other areas of public policy (economic and educational), but are not always accounted for within the cultural sector. It is a key site for acculturation and the accumulation of cultural capital.
9) Institutional culture	Facilities, events and activities associated with 'official culture' or 'high' culture, usually state or federally funded. These are primary focuses of governmental attention and for the accumulation of cultural data.	The arts or 'high' culture have historically formed the centre of this category, even though more recently, it has included variations on this which incorporate more 'popular' elements – eg, film festivals. Institutional culture tends to be associated with elite arts and cultural production and is usually concentrated in metropolitan areas or the inner-city. The zoo is an anomaly in this category but is included here because this reflects ABS classifications which measure attendance at cultural venues. Even more commercial forms, such as musical theatre, have some state subsidy, and are all part of the civic marketing of the cultural centre.

10) **Media**	The cultural forms through which meanings are exchanged and circulated.	Media are significant because they enable people to make claims on and form attachments to communities, (including real, virtual, language- culture- or spatial communities). This category is concerned with consumption of media rather than production, though it is assumed that consumption involves an active translation and mediation of meanings in order to have significance within people's lives. Responses were analysed to gauge the level of local versus transnational content. Such analysis points to the extent to which local media are responsible for the accumulation of cultural capital, as well as respondents' involvement in transnational or alternate media communities.

These domains of cultural participation were also analysed according to the motivation for participation. While the domain of participation identifies the particular type or space of cultural activity, the motivation reveals the context in which participation takes place. These motivations highlight the various dimensions of a cultural domain – for example, the distinct function of a public library and the resources it provides, compared with other kinds of community facilities. Data was analysed according to whether an individual was motivated by family commitments, involvement in a cultural group, processes of acculturation, forms of socialising, or practices of self-making or self-expression. These motivations also represent the different contexts in which subjects situate themselves – for example, within the framework of 'family', 'culture', the nation, and so on. These categories of analysis emerged from the data itself and reflects the demographic profile of the respondents, a large proportion of whom were migrants who shared a household with family.

More than half of the sample (60%) mentioned that they were involved in some kind of structured cultural activity. This included activity both inside or outside the home, performed individually or collectively. As mentioned above, this structured activity does not include media consumption but other forms of activity that are deliberate and tangible. This structured cultural activity has been the traditional focus of arts policy, and these findings suggest then that a large segment of the population are important potential constituents of these policies. Another notable finding was that half of the sample considered work, particularly forms of voluntary or unpaid work, to be a significant domain of cultural participation and experience. For many, volunteer work was an important source of acculturation, a space for socialising, as well as an important avenue of self-making and

professional development. Also significant is the relatively high level of use of community facilities, including public libraries, recreation centres, parks, religious institutions and other community centres, highlighting the importance of these spaces as sites of belonging and acculturation to Australian life.

Importantly, less than one-fifth of the sample (18%) participated in institutional culture. This is significant given the large proportion of government attention and resources that are directed towards this domain. The relative ease with which attendance at cultural institutions and venues can be measured also means that this domain predominates in existing cultural data collection, despite the fact that it only constitutes a small proportion of time spent on cultural participation.

There is a clear gap between the priorities of policy and everyday life. Recent years have seen an increasing emphasis within policy on the rhetoric of diversity and creativity. While these frameworks can accommodate hybrid or fluid understandings of cultural difference, they offer a limited framework for valuing difference. They also presume a narrow range of cultural participation –dominant areas of arts funding and governmental support only comprise a small component of the cultural activity in which people engage. There is a need, then, to better understand the ways in which migrants participate in cultural life, the means by which they build and inhabit their worlds, and how such participation shapes the terms for multiple and dispersed forms of migrant belonging. It is only by doing so that the assumptions and imaginaries of cultural policy might be expanded.

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