

ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

ASIAN STUDIES IN “CRISIS”: IS CULTURAL STUDIES THE ANSWER?*

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This article explores some of the benefits and limitations of Cultural Studies in Asian studies with particular reference to the expression of Asian-Australian identity in diaspora. It has been suggested that the influence of Cultural Studies – a discipline that is viewed as more globally relevant – may be an answer to the Asian studies “crisis”. In relation to the Cultural Studies approach to Asian-Australian identity, I argue that the discourse and rhetoric of Cultural Studies is highly beneficial in breaking down stereotypes and rebuilding the national narrative of identity. However, as a methodology it is not without limitations.

It has been recently suggested that one strategy through which conventional “Area Studies” scholarship – and sub-areas such as “Asian Studies” – may be reconfigured and revitalized is by “more fully and warmly embracing those movements or networks such as cultural studies that can be seen as responses to global changes”.¹ This article addresses some of the benefits and limitations this brings to Asian Studies. In addressing the (Asian) Area studies “crisis”, Chris Burgess implies that although Area Studies specialists are often more in touch with Asia or a sub-area of Asia than most theorists in Cultural Studies, (Asian) Area Studies scholars are not embracing responses to global changes. Recently, (Asian) Area Studies has come under attack as a discipline for being too empirical and, more importantly, not having a sophisticated theoretical approach. Dutton, for instance, argues for an attempt to produce a different way of seeing, writing and theorizing (Asian) Area Studies.²

Where did the so-called “crisis” in (Asian) Area Studies begin? To answer this question, we need to turn to the scholarly precursor of Asian Studies: “Area Studies”. According to Kratoska, Raben and Nordholt, two key principles underpinned Area Studies: “The first was that regions with common characteristics could be identified and examined collectively.

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1 Burgess 2004, p. 121.

2 Dutton, 2002, p. 524.

The second was that such regions should be studied “from within” on the basis of detailed local knowledge.³ The aim was to conduct research from a local perspective, which required first-hand familiarity with local languages and cultures. It is suggested that the whole project of Area Studies, and Asian Studies in particular, was developed in response to the security needs of World War II initially, and then the political needs associated with the Cold War. In the 1940s, the need to learn Asian languages was purely for practical purposes, to help the American soldiers interrogate their enemies and obtain necessary security-related data. The acquisition of Asian languages was therefore seen as a crucial methodological tool for understanding a foreign culture.⁴

(Asian) Area Studies has since suffered from what Dutton calls the “epistemic violence” of social scientific model building that attempts to “colonize” Area Studies.⁵ In a similar vein, others have argued that (Asian) Area Studies has relied too heavily on the uncritical reliance on western social research methods. According to Kratoska *et al.*, in the decades following World War II, sub-units of Asian Studies, such as Southeast Asian Studies, were marked by “a flood of empirical research, but remarkably little conceptual work”.⁶ Harootunian notes that the unquestioning fusion with the social sciences has been attacked not because of its theoretical limitations but because of its applicability as social science was deficient.⁷ From the perspective of Cultural Studies, Area Studies (such as Asian Studies) are considered anti-theoretical and resistant to innovation.⁸ The influence of Cultural Studies has been helpful, and has been instrumental in incorporating marginalized knowledge into mainstream agendas, such as Australia’s national narrative of identity and multiculturalism. However, Cultural Studies – as it stands on its own – has limitations. For instance, rather than engaging in a quest to describe Asian cultures, beliefs, values and attitudes, the Cultural Studies scholarship that has had the most influence in (Asian) Area Studies has primarily revolved around the notion of “representation”. This article will argue that Cultural Studies, with its focus on representation, may not be the answer to the so-called Asian Studies “crisis”. In order to develop this argument, the next section will briefly delineate the history of Cultural Studies and how it has overlapped with (Asian) Area Studies, in particular in relation to studies of the Asian-Australian diaspora.

THE CULTURAL STUDIES INFLUENCE

Research on the Asian-Australian diaspora has been largely influenced by diasporic discourses which rely heavily on Cultural Studies theoretical approaches. The Cultural Studies approaches to experiences of the Asian-Australian diaspora arise from a discomfort with the way that Australian national identity is conceptualized in official and media

3 Kratoska *et al.*, 2005, pp. 1–19.

4 See, for instance, Harootunian and Sakai 1999.

5 Dutton 2002, p. 506.

6 Kratoska *et al.*, 2005, p. 6.

7 Harootunian 2002, p. 542.

8 Harootunian and Sakai, 1999.

discourse, where essentialized identity categories often go unquestioned and power binaries frame much of the discourse. The Cultural Studies approach to the Asian-Australian diaspora examines the shifting subjectivities of Asian-Australian diaspora through employing a methodology that focuses on charting the boundaries that delineate binary identity categories in order to demonstrate the arbitrary, constructed nature of the boundaries and categories themselves. Their strongest critique appears to be focused on issues concerning Australian nationalism and multiculturalism. For example, Yuval-Davis suggests that while multiculturalism was successful in reducing racist and nationalistic stereotypes of the past, it has raised new problems of ethnic pluralism. Yuval-Davis writes:

a basic problem with multiculturalism is the assumption that all members of a specific cultural collectivity are equally committed to that culture. It tends to construct the members of minority collectivities as basically homogeneous, speaking with a unified cultural voice. These cultural voices have to be as distinguishable as possible from the majority culture in order for them to be perceived as being “different”; thus the more traditional and distanced from the majority culture the voice of the “community representatives” is, the more “authentic” it will be seen to be within such a construction.⁹

Yuval-Davis further suggests that in multiculturalism policies, the naturalization of a western hegemonic culture is promoted while the minority cultures become reified and differentiated from the majority.¹⁰ Many who write on the experiences of the Asian-Australian diaspora have attempted to challenge such notions of identity and multiculturalism.¹¹ Cultural Studies practitioners, in particular, aim to return the social into critical theory at a time when problems in sociology are emerging as to how we define common experiences (such as those defined in multiculturalism) in a context of rapid and cultural transformations at the global and local levels.¹²

The tradition of British Cultural Studies has had a significant influence in contemporary studies of Asian-Australian diasporic experiences. British Cultural Studies originated in the works of Raymond Williams¹³ and Richard Hoggart.¹⁴ Their work challenged the study of artistic and literary texts in post-war England that were viewed as aesthetically and culturally superior to popular texts. Hoggart and Williams argued that the literary-aesthetic version of culture was just one interpretation of culture. In addition, “culture” was to include the everyday lived experiences of all individuals and groups in society. For example, in *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart researched working-class culture through the

9 Yuval-Davis 1993, pp. 627–28.

10 N. Yuval-Davis 1999.

11 See, for instance, Ang 2001; Ang 2000a; Ang, Chalmers, Law and Thomas 2000; Butcher and Thomas 2003; Castles *et al.* 1988; H. Chan 2000; Joshi 2000; Julian 2004; Lo 2001a; Lo, Khoo and Gilbert 2000; Matthews 2002; Thomas 2003a; Thomas 2003b.

12 Lash and Urry 1994.

13 Williams 1958; Williams 1961.

14 Hoggart, 1957.

study of music, popular literature and everyday family and neighbourhood relations. Similarly, in *Culture and Society*, Williams studied the broader relationship between text and everyday cultural meanings. Williams further developed this idea of culture in *The Long Revolution*. He described the "social" definition of culture as one in which "culture is a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour."¹⁵ Such an analysis included the organization of production, the structure of the family and the structure of the institutions that express or govern social relationships. This "first generation" of British Cultural Studies scholars focused on everyday life as an object of cultural analysis. For example, Williams and Hoggart were actively involved in projects of working-class education and socialist reform. This type of Cultural Studies was influenced by socialist working-class politics, viewed as a tool for progressive social change. This generation's radicalism also had an important influence on the second generation of Cultural Studies experts who responded to later stages of capitalism.

The school of Cultural Studies which influenced many second generation scholars was inaugurated at the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1963/64 and led by Stuart Hall. The Centre developed a range of critical approaches to the study of culture, combining social theory and literary analysis of cultural texts. For example, the Birmingham scholars began to focus on the representations of race, gender, class, ethnicity and nationality in cultural texts, with a particular concentration on the media. During the 1970s second-generation scholars were among the first to examine the effects of popular culture in the media on receiving audiences. In examining popular culture in the media, a Marxian approach was used which was influenced by Althusser and Gramsci.¹⁶ For instance, Gramsci's concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony¹⁷ was employed as a model to reveal the ways in which cultural forms represented through the media functioned either to strengthen social domination, or to help people to resist and struggle against it. According to Kellner, British Cultural Studies "analyses society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic and national strata".¹⁸ Thus the main aim of British Cultural Studies was to analyse hegemonic social and cultural forces of domination and to employ "counter-hegemonic" modes of resistance and struggle.¹⁹

Social realities were largely interpreted through texts. Texts had multiple and contradictory meanings which attended to the concerns of power, oppression, resistance and agency. The second generation of British Cultural Studies scholars approached the text as a system of signs and meanings organized by codes and conventions.²⁰ This involved a process of examining how myths and cultural beliefs underlie meanings and values that on the surface seem to be natural. Media texts, for instance, can endorse certain myths

15 Williams 1961, p. 57.

16 See, for instance, Hall 1980.

17 See, for instance, Gramsci 1971; Gramsci 1992.

18 Kellner 2001, p. 396.

19 Kellner 2001, p. 396.

20 Kellner 2001, p. 69.

about social identities and cultural norms. The analysis of media discourse through textual dialogism can describe the practices of stereotyping, exclusion and other forms of dominance that operate across texts. Lawrence Grossberg observes that Cultural Studies is

concerned with describing and intervening in the ways “texts” and “discourses” (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power.²¹

These existing structures of power operate through hegemonic ideology. An ideology is hegemonic when its acceptance becomes widespread and seemingly natural. A Cultural Studies analysis of ideological coding reveals how discursive practices can turn specific group interests into universals through the medium of the text. It is the task of analysts to denaturalize the text to demonstrate the product of ideological coding.

Even though I have described some general approaches to Cultural Studies analysis, Grossberg reminds us that Cultural Studies is always changing and there is no specific Cultural Studies position. It is, in fact, always renegotiating its identity and repositioning itself in different social and political contexts. Stuart Hall shows that Cultural Studies represents the “weakening of the traditional boundaries among the disciplines and of the growth of the traditional forms of interdisciplinary research that don’t easily fit, or can’t be contained, within the confines of existing divisions of knowledge”.²² It therefore represents tension between the disciplines of established knowledge. Overall, however, its focus is now on cultural processes that are innately ideological and connected with the interests of the dominant and powerful classes in society.

Central to this Cultural Studies approach are the issues of cultural identity and political articulation. According to Kellner, during the late 1970s, Cultural Studies “came to centre attention on how sub-groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities.”²³ People began to define themselves with oppositional identities that were different to the dominant forms of identification. Cultural identities, for example, accept that identities are never unified and are increasingly fragmented and fractured.²⁴ This notion of a fragmented and fractured cultural identity is a tool which theorists of Cultural Studies have referred to as a way of empowering the subaltern. As David Bailey and Stuart Hall observe, “we are all involved in a series of political games around fractured or decentred identities”.²⁵ Bhabha similarly writes that “it is from the effective experience of social marginality that we must conceive of a political strategy of empowerment and articulation . . .”.²⁶ Scholars writing on the Asian-Australian experience

21 Grossberg 1998, p. 180.

22 Hall 1998, p. 337.

23 Kellner 2001, p. 397.

24 Hall 1996.

25 Bailey and Hall 1992, p. 21.

26 Bhabha 1992, p. 56.

of diaspora have applied these theories of Cultural Studies through textual analysis to reject multiculturalism, ethnic absolutism, cultural racism and grand narratives of history, language and literature.²⁷

CULTURAL STUDIES AND ASIAN IDENTITY

Cultural Studies scholars frequently engage with the rhetoric of the Asian-Australian diasporic experience. Books and articles have appeared viewing race and ethnicity as socially constructed and multiculturalism as serving the needs of the dominant race.²⁸ Meanwhile, historians²⁹ and writers³⁰ have intervened in dominant representations of Australian nationalism with a discourse of their own, covering narratives of Australian history and experiences of identity within multicultural Australia. Historians who are sympathetic with Asian-Australian marginalized histories have intervened with new narratives that have been left out of textbook understandings of Australian history. Similarly, Asian-Australian writers have intervened by describing their experiences of diaspora in multicultural Australia as one of loneliness, anger, confusion and displacement.

Matthews summarizes some of the main concerns of Asian-Australian cultural politics. Matthews acknowledges that:

- (a) race and ethnicity are socially constructed and the racializing effects are damaging;
- (b) the effects of racialization are various and contradictory, which means that they are oppressive and powerful and also able to be subversive.³¹

Matthews's research highlights that many studies of "Asian" groups assume that such categories are definitive geographical or genealogical terms that distinguish discrete racial, cultural or national groups. As a consequence, Matthews observes that they are often taken to refer to essential, homogeneous and pre-given identities and realities. In relation to multiculturalism, these homogeneous categories used in public discourse further overstate ethnic, cultural and national differences which according to Matthews, suggests that these identities are authentic, unassailable and absolute.³²

Studies of diaspora by Cultural Studies practitioners focus on these issues of identity and representation in Australian national discourse. Through a form of textual dialogism, participants are encouraged to engage with a politics of identity. A politics of identity

27 Hall 1991.

28 See, for instance, Ang 1993a; Ang 1993b; Hage 1998; Kalantzis 1988.

29 See, for instance, H. Chan 2000; H. Chan 2001; Curthoys 2000; Edwards and Yuanfang 2003; Macknight 1976.

30 For instance, Anggraeni 1999; Liu 1995; Jun 1995; Ye 1996; Yu 1997; Yu 2002.

31 Matthews 2002, p. 207.

32 Matthews 2002, p. 209.

in Asian-Australian studies alerts us to the whole area of Australian culture and representations of Australian national identity that are exclusive of Asian-Australian diasporic experiences. Ang, for instance, argues that diasporas always link the local and the global, the past and present and therefore have the potential to unsettle static and essentialist conceptions of national identity with its origins based in a common history.³³ For example, with reference to Australia, the way history has been narrativized secures white Anglo-Celtics in a dominant subject position which is predicated on marginalizing all “others” who don’t belong to this racial mix of people.

An Asian-Australian cultural politics challenges outdated notions of nationalism and multiculturalism. For instance, Ang argues that the historical tensions within the Australian history of “race relations” are not solved by the rhetoric of multiculturalism.³⁴ Instead, Ang argues that they are made more complicated through the myth of pluralist tolerance. What lies at the heart of multiculturalism, according to Ang, is the power to tolerate, while minorities can only be at the receiving end of tolerance which paradoxically perpetuates the self-other divide.³⁵ Ghassan Hage in *White Nation* refers to multiculturalism in terms of a “White Nation” fantasy that is dependent on the staging of the ethnic other as an object which mystifies the increased power, resistance and struggle of migrant Australians.³⁶

Ang suggests that Asian-Australians respond to the containment of cultural difference with a strategy of structural ambivalence which involves an ongoing tension between difference as benign diversity and difference as conflict, disruption and dissension.³⁷ In relation to multiculturalism, Ang observes that it is the *repression* of ambivalence that makes us unable to grasp the complexities and difficulties of “living with difference”.³⁸ In this sense, Ang describes this ambivalence as a political force with subversive potential. Bhabha has referred to this ambivalence in terms of “the third space”, a space in-between sameness and otherness.³⁹ This ambivalence is often expressed through an ongoing micro-politics of hybridity. A politics of hybridity aims to disrupt the self/other dichotomy as a necessity in modern society. According to Ang, hybridity is crucial for the conduct of ordinary everyday life in situations of complicated entanglement and is widely practised by the masses against the grain of imposed fixed identities.⁴⁰

Cultural Studies practitioners writing on the Asian-Australian experience frequently engage with this mixed notion of hybridity as a strategy to examine the nature of Asian-Australian identity that contrasts with the fixed essential identities categorized in dominant discourse of national identity and multiculturalism. This understanding of

33 Ang 1993b.

34 Ang 2001.

35 Ang 2001, p. 142.

36 Hage 1998.

37 Ang 2001, p. 142.

38 Ang 2001, p. 146.

39 Bhabha 1990.

40 Ang 2001, p. 74.

hybridity stems from works on diaspora by Paul Gilroy,⁴¹ Stuart Hall,⁴² Iain Chambers,⁴³ Homi Bhabha,⁴⁴ and James Clifford.⁴⁵ Cultural Studies approaches to Asian-Australian identity that include these issues of identity, hybridity and representation are included in research by Mandy Thomas, Melissa Butcher, Amanda Wise, Vijaya Joshi, Jacqueline Lo, Suvendrini Perera, Julie Matthews, Allen Luke and Carmen Luke, Devleena Ghosh and Dean Chan.⁴⁶

Many Cultural Studies intellectuals writing on the experiences of Asian-Australians aim to redefine the national culture and the place of immigrants *within* the nation.⁴⁷ For example, Asian-Australian cultural texts challenge the accepted Anglo-Celtic narrative of nationhood, that is, that the history of this country began with white "settlement". Historian, Henry Chan, for example, argues that an Australian identity needs to include and recognize the multiple "histories" in addition to the Anglo-Celtic historical narrative.⁴⁸ Asian-Australian "concrete experience" enables Asian-Australian writers, historians, artists and so on to (re)write their histories from their own experiences of marginalization. Therefore, Asian-Australian narratives can serve as political tools by which Asian-Australians can position themselves and their marginalized knowledge in Australia, deconstruct stereotypes and define themselves in their own terms. Thus the Cultural Studies approach to identity involves taking control of representation/s of identity through new narratives and representations in an act of resistance. For instance, Stuart Hall suggests that racial identities be regarded as narratives and representations. For example, he argues that:

We have a notion of identity that is contradictory, as composed of more than one discourse, as composed always across the silences of the other, as written in and through ambivalence and desire. These are extremely important ways of trying to think of identity which is not a sealed or closed totality.⁴⁹

Identities are viewed as complex arrangements of fragments that have no unified subject or centre that can be revealed. It is because they are fragmented with no essentialist core, that they can be used to strategically break down essentialist and homogeneous identity categories. In this sense, Rattansi argues that they should have no "political belonging".⁵⁰ Strategic writings of the subjective experiences of Asian-Australian marginality have incorporated

41 See, for instance, Gilroy 1993; Gilroy 1994; Gilroy 2000.

42 See, for instance, Hall 1992; Hall 1995.

43 Chambers 1994.

44 Bhabha 1994.

45 Clifford 2000.

46 See, for instance, Thomas 2003b; Butcher and Thomas 2003; Wise 2003; Joshi 2000; Lo 2001a; Perera 2000; Matthews 2002; A. Luke and C. Luke 2001; Ghosh 2001 and D. Chan 2001.

47 Ang, Chalmers, Law and Thomas 2000.

48 H. Chan, 2000.

49 Hall 1991, p. 49.

50 Rattansi 1995, p. 257.

these ideas of subversion. For example, Chinese-Australian writers⁵¹ describe their experience of diaspora as one that is filled with anger, loneliness, trauma and feelings of detachment from Australia. Ouyang Yu in *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* gives frequent criticisms of Australian identity and Australians in general.

I have so far outlined how Cultural Studies intellectuals writing on Asian-Australian experiences of diaspora add insight into established representations and discourses of power and how they intervene through new ways of seeing, writing and theorizing. However, what is hidden in much of this discourse are some of the limitations of Cultural Studies that may not be beneficial to the (Asian) Area Studies “crisis” and may also pose new methodological problems of representation. In the next section, I briefly outline some of these problems and I also stress that the Asian Studies “crisis” is not solely due to these problems of representation and lack of relevant critical theorizing as suggested in some of the Cultural Studies literature.

LIMITATIONS OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN ASIAN STUDIES

Burgess’s central argument is that (Asian) Area Studies needs the help of Cultural Studies to aid the “crisis” in Asian studies. It needs to be said that one of the major causes of the “crisis” lies, not in the internal weaknesses of (Asian) Area Studies itself, but in the surrounding political environment, particularly the fear of “Asia” evoked by images of terrorism, drug scandals, unfair trials and natural disasters. The Bali bombing of 2002 and the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami in Asia, for instance, have had a significant effect. The “trial by media” of Schapelle Corby, charged with importing drugs into Indonesia, is being seen as a very good reason to avoid Asia, and Bali in particular. Students – and their parents – no longer feel secure with the idea of studying in Asia with the “new” threat of terrorism, the threat of impending earthquakes, tsunamis, drugs being planted in one’s luggage, and so on. This has undoubtedly had an enormous impact on the morale of (Asian) Area Studies scholars, who have become accustomed to steadily decreasing student numbers. In fact, the humanities overall are facing falling student numbers due to the current conservative political climate. However, Burgess argues that there are more pressing issues, such as the need for (Asian) Area studies specialists to embrace more warmly contemporary intellectual frameworks, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism and Cultural Studies.

In terms of the internal weaknesses of (Asian) Area Studies, Cultural Studies is similarly laden with theoretical and methodological dilemmas that may not be helpful to (Asian) Area Studies. For instance, Burgess mentions the contemporary crisis in representation generated by changing global conditions. It is argued that Harvey’s concept of time-space compression on identity can be used as a helpful springboard for a new approach to identity, as opposed to the traditional colonial structure of Asian Studies and the way in which it has produced knowledge about identity.⁵² It is implied that many Asians or Asian-Australians are now experiencing the effects of time-space compression that result

51 For instance, Liu 1995; Jun 1995; Ye 1996; Yu 2002.

52 Refer to Harvey 1990 and Burgess 2004.

in dissonance, disorientation and doubt.⁵³ Burgess argues that the old single framework version of Asian studies that focused on the static lines and boundaries between "peoples", "cultures" and "civilizations" has become outdated.⁵⁴

Sociologists of identity have since extended Harvey's concept of time-space compression and pose the need for a new understanding of an identity that is becoming increasingly fragmented and ephemeral. Craib, for instance, has shown that the individual is becoming less powerful, less able to change his or her world while being subjected to changes well beyond his/her understanding.⁵⁵ This inevitably leads to a lack of continuity and security across time and space that makes it hard for an individual to function in daily life.⁵⁶ Bradley argues that the combined effect of the processes of deconstruction, fragmentation and loss of continuity in postmodernism creates a sense of "fractured identities" in contemporary social life.⁵⁷ This means that individuals now have the desire to strengthen their adaptive social identities whether they are based along the lines of ethnicity, gender, class, religion and so on. According to Budgeon,

rather than modernity being fundamentally about the eradication of tradition, the argument has been that the processes of detraditionalisation coexist with processes that lead to the rejuvenation, reconstruction, and the maintenance of tradition within modern forms of life.⁵⁸

Therefore, detraditionalization is driven by a constant process of revision and reflexivity. This constant reflexive evaluation and building of different social identities that may be adaptive or maladaptive is part of constructing a secure sense of "self" in conditions of postmodernity. These disembedding mechanisms that lift social relations out of the specific time-space contexts that Burgess mentions, also provide new opportunities for their reinsertion. As a consequence, there are new attempts to build secondary forms of community.⁵⁹

As previously mentioned, many academics, writers and artists have highlighted new forms of Asian-Australian identity and community that are not focused on the static lines and boundaries between "peoples", "cultures" and "civilizations". These studies have been highly beneficial in breaking down homogeneous stereotypes as promoted in ideologically generated Australian nationalism and multicultural rhetoric. However, such approaches to identity and community are not without limitations. The most significant problem is that the Cultural Studies approach to communities in diaspora may sometimes deny the empirical realities through which many may live. Sherwood, Smith *et al.*, for instance,

53 Burgess 2004, p. 126.

54 Burgess 2004, p. 128.

55 Craib 1998, p. 2.

56 Phillips and Western 2005.

57 Bradley 2000, p. 480.

58 Budgeon 2003, p. 9.

59 Beck, Bonss and Lau 2003.

argue that Cultural Studies often remains confined within abstracted political narratives, rather than engaging the stories by which everyday social actors navigate their reality.⁶⁰

Much of the Cultural Studies discourse on Asian-Australian diasporas, for instance, focuses on issues of empowerment and disempowerment particularly in relation to experiences of multiculturalism. The term multiculturalism is often referred to with little reference to specific policies which are of enormous benefit to the Asian-Australian diaspora. For instance, according to Ien Ang:

by repressing the discourse of “race” rather than acknowledging its power in the Australian cultural imaginary, and dealing with its ideological implications, multiculturalism has allowed, contrary to its intentions, the possibility for the conservative renovation of racializing discourses as an aspect of a renewed emphasis on assimilation and on a “mainstream culture” whose whiteness is unspoken but undeniable.⁶¹

Ang argues that the historical tensions within the Australian history of “race relations” are not solved by the rhetoric of multiculturalism.⁶² Instead, Ang argues that they are made more complicated through the myth of pluralist tolerance. What lies at the heart of multiculturalism according to Ang, is the power to tolerate, while minorities can only be at the receiving end of tolerance which paradoxically perpetuates the self-other divide.⁶³

What Ang, in fact, refers to is the official version of pluralist multiculturalism associated with right-wing politics rather than the ethnic rights multiculturalism that was previously associated with the political Left.⁶⁴ This version of pluralist multiculturalism may or may not be supported by the general population of Australians. Contrary to Cultural Studies expectations, this version of multiculturalism may in fact be supported by ordinary Asian-Australians. These are unanswered questions which require substantial empirical research. In a similar style, Ghassan Hage, in *White Nation*, refers to multiculturalism in terms of a “White Nation” fantasy that is dependent on the staging of the ethnic other as an object which mystifies the increased power, resistance and struggle of migrant Australians. This view of multiculturalism gives little recognition to the achievements of multiculturalism for ordinary Asian-Australian migrants who do not view themselves as struggling migrants with increased power and a need for resistance.

Issues of empowerment and disempowerment also feature strongly in Cultural Studies discourses of diaspora in relation to hybrid experiences of identity. For example, in *Ingenious*, edited by Butcher and Thomas, respondents describe a sense of confusion and frustration of living between Asia and Australia.⁶⁵ Dianne, a Chinese-Cambodian, writes:

60 Sherwood *et al.* 1993, p. 373.

61 Ang 2001, p. 111.

62 Ang 2001, p. 111.

63 Ang 2001, p. 142.

64 See Lopez 2000.

65 Butcher and Thomas 2003.

I confuse myself. . . I feel very un-Asian. We want conflicting things . . . sometimes I feel I don't have a home . . . but I need my roots . . . for me, it's about how you define particular notions for yourself: "culture" or "victimisation".⁶⁶

Even though this research shows an insight into the dilemmas faced by migrant youths, there are issues that need further analysis. In relation to qualitative interviews which gauge diasporic experiences of identity, while most of the research is informative, there can also be limitations which should be noted in the analysis. Ning Tang, for instance, argues that the interviewer and interviewee's perceptions of social, cultural and personal differences have a significant impact on the power relationship in the interview and the subsequent analysis of the interview.⁶⁷

Another limitation with Cultural Studies approaches to diaspora is an underlying assumption that many white Anglo-Celtic Australians are not as hybrid, cosmopolitan and sympathetic to Asian-Australian histories as those with a "concrete experience" of diaspora. Indeed, the condition of diaspora may also apply to white Anglo-Celtic Australians who feel alienated in their own homeland. For instance, Ali, who analyses the experiences of the Kashmiri diaspora, suggests that the experience of diaspora may account for the way in which a people may stay in the same place but still become diasporic. Ali refers to the condition of diaspora as a feeling of being homeless in the world.⁶⁸

Without large samples of empirical research, it is hard to gauge the attitudes of both Australians and Asian-Australians on important issues such as identity, nationalism and multiculturalism. So far, studies have been limited to textual analysis and qualitative interviews which may perpetuate power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee. Phillips, for example, in a study on popular views about Australian identity observes that "there has been an understandable tendency amongst some researchers to gauge or "read off" patterns of stability and change in popular views about Australian identity from either popular and impressionistic accounts, textual analysis, or social and political continuities".⁶⁹ Phillips argues that the danger of treating human behaviour and reactions as "obvious" in the absence of empirical research has been well documented.⁷⁰ Through the examination of empirical research one is able to examine other social factors that can compound or alleviate social disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

Given that most Asian-Australians are not involved in the means of cultural production, it becomes necessary to find a legitimate way to find out about the whole "community" through a representative sample with maximum diversity. This may alleviate the problem of misrepresenting the represented constituency of Asian-Australians in Cultural Studies discourse. For example, Cultural Studies approaches to identity in Australia often interpret

66 Butcher and Thomas 2003, p. 45.

67 Tang 2002.

68 Ali 2003, p. 473.

69 Phillips 1998, p. 282.

70 Phillips 1998, p. 282.

Australian attitudes as correlated with dominant political and media representations which are not always representative of the general population. There are indeed many white Anglo-Celtic Australians, particularly those in Asian Studies who have contributed to the re-installing of Asian histories and narratives into a new Australian identity that is inclusive of Asian-Australians. This (re)writing of Asian-Australian history by Asian-Australians and Anglo-Celtic Australians is an invaluable contribution to Asian Studies. However, the issue of identity needs to be further teased out methodologically so that all Asian-Australians will benefit from the research.

In this article, I have argued that the nature of Asian-Australian identity as approached in Cultural Studies is highly beneficial in breaking down stereotypes and rebuilding the national narrative but as a methodology it is not without its limitations. I have argued that narratives in Cultural Studies discourse are sometimes abstract and highly ideological. This makes it difficult for the average Australian to gain a greater appreciation of Asia and its diversity. (Asian) Area Studies has already incorporated many aspects of Cultural Studies, postcolonialism and postmodernism but it has that extra dimension of empirical observation of in-country experience that is crucial to the understanding of Asia. It seems apparent that there is a great need for an appreciation of what specialists in (Asian) Area Studies have tried to do for many years. Through their empirical and anthropological experience they, along with theorists in Cultural Studies, have given Australians a greater understanding of Asia which can only be beneficial in reducing fear and racism.

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