Rethinking Ethnic Concentration: The Case of Cabramatta, Sydney

Kevin M. Dunn

Summary. The concentration of Indo-Chinese-Australians in and around the vicinity of Cabramatta in Sydney, NSW, has been unfavourably depicted by most media, policy-makers and academics. Positive aspects of ethnic concentration in Cabramatta are rarely ever discussed. It has been axiomatic in much of the urban studies literature that ethnic concentrations were manifestations of societal malady. This assumption was based upon the premise that social distance equated with spatial distance. However, a just system of urban and social planning requires a perspective which does not automatically pathologise cultural difference. Such a system should not enforce cultural assimilation through strategies such as migrant residential dispersal. To this end, urban researchers require fresh perspectives for the analysis of ethnic concentration. One such perspective is the ‘politics of difference’ approach proposed by Iris Marion Young and others. A politics of difference approach celebrates institutional practices which give rise to diverse cultural expressions, and rejects the previous denial of difference which was dominant in much of urban social science. This perspective allows urban scholars to adopt a more progressive position in contemporary urban political debates about migrant settlement. It also provides a less partial assessment of ethnic concentration by seriously theorising the advantages and the dynamism of unassimilated cultural difference in a place like Cabramatta.

The theory of identity and cultural difference has developed remarkably over the past decade. The analysis of migrant settlement and issues of citizenship has benefited from fresh theoretical perspectives, as well as from long overdue, empirical and methodological reorientations (Fincher, 1993; Morokvasic, 1983). Koffman and England (1997, p. 192) commented that new perspectives should be applied at a range of scales in migration studies. It is my contention that recent perspectives on identity and cultural difference have mostly not been applied at a local scale and certainly not to issues of ethnic concentration. The theoretical tools most urban researchers have drawn upon to analyse ethnic concentration are restrictive, and consequently the conclusions they can draw are limited. Ethnic concentration has been theorised as a spatial outcome of oppressions, and as part of the process of the reproduction of oppression. Alternatively, it is seen as a manifestation of the recalcitrance of an eth-
nic group to participate in some presumed ‘mainstream’.

The last substantial reviews of ethnic concentration theory were carried out in the early 1980s. These comprehensive assessments were able to contrast the assumptions of the Chicago School with Weberian and Marxist political economy approaches (Jackson and Smith; 1984; Peach et al., 1981). More recently, some urban researchers have again expressed dissatisfaction with the extant theories, criticising the assimilationist assumptions (Miyares, 1997), the failure to detect advantages of concentration (Dunn, 1993), or the failure to confront the repressive actions of the state in cultural planning (Yiftachel, 1995). The application of new cultural theory to the issue of ethnic concentration, and contemporary reassessment of established theories, is long overdue. This *Urban Studies* special issue on ‘International migration and ethnic segregation’ provides an excellent forum in which to launch a reassessment of the urban social theory of cultural difference.

I have two general concerns regarding the established theories which have been applied to ethnic concentration. The first is a political concern. At worst, some of the established theory can lend legitimacy to the so-called common-sense ideologies of racist political groups. At best, urban researchers have been left largely devoid of responses to some of the core racist and socio-biologist critiques of ethnic diversity. Conservative critics point to ethnic concentration as ‘spatial proof’ of the failure of ethnic diversity. Concentration is also used as ‘evidence’ for criticism of immigration from specific sources and of state policies which facilitate unassimilated cultural difference. If social scientists allow ethnic concentration to remain an unquestioned negative social phenomenon, then conservatives will possess a powerful critique of cultural difference, which will also lend credence to ethnic intolerance. My second concern regards the partiality of research on ethnic concentration. The central premise of most theories is that ethnic concentration is an outcome of either marginalisation or ethnic separateness. This makes it unlikely that evidence of the positive aspects of ethnic concentration is seriously incorporated or even sought in an analysis. The advantages and dynamism of unassimilated cultural difference are elided.

In this paper, I have two central aims. The first is to reveal the less than satisfactory way that extant urban theories (Chicago School, Weberian and Marxist) treat the issue of ethnic concentration. The socio-biology approach, which still has some popular or common-sense appeal, is also critically outlined. This is necessary because socio-biologist assessments of ethnic concentration are often used to justify racist agendas. The review of theory mapped out below stems from my reflections following research with the Indo-Chinese-Australian communities in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta. The Cabramatta case study also demonstrates some of the important links between the popular understandings of ethnic concentration (the public, media, policy-makers) and academic assessments. Secondly, a new approach to culture, to difference and identity, referred to here as the ‘politics of difference’, is reviewed. This new episteme allows a refreshingly positive approach to cultural difference, as do other recent perspectives on the dynamism and multi-faceted nature of identity. These new perspectives are applied to the case of Cabramatta, drawing upon in-depth interviews carried out with 27 key informants during 1991 and 1993. The paper comprises five sections. The first section briefly reviews four theories which have traditionally been drawn upon to understand ethnic concentration (socio-biologist, Chicago School, Weberian, Marxist) as well as the ‘politics of difference’ approach to identity. The second section reviews Australian government policy on migrant settlement and on ethnic concentration. The third and fourth sections introduce the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta and critically outline the media and academic assessments of Indo-Chinese-Australian concentration. In the final section, a politics of difference approach is used to analyse interview data collected in Cabramatta.
Theorising Ethnic Concentration

The paper’s first aim requires a summary of how the different theoretical models have treated ethnic concentration. This review, and the conclusions which follow, are heavily influenced by the particular set of demographic and policy conditions which prevail in Australia, as well as by the author’s individual experiences in and reflections upon the suburb of Cabramatta. It should be noted that the four established approaches reviewed below have multiple orientations and derivations beyond those which are presented here. However, the focus in this review is upon how core aspects of each have been applied to the issue of ethnic concentration. Notwithstanding these qualifications, I feel that there is one striking conclusion which flows from the following review: the ‘established approaches’ usually theorise ethnic concentrations as an undesirable phenomenon.

Socio-biology

To socio-biologists, ethnic concentration was a natural or biological outcome of ethnic diversity. Ardrey (1967) argued that ethnic groups and ‘races’ were essentially different, and that unbridgeable natural differences between them precluded the possibility of peaceful ethnic diversity. Socio-biologists argued that ethnic groups maintain boundaries around themselves to protect a coherent gene pool or to restrict access to resources. Ardrey explained the formation of territories, even nations, thus.

Nothing in animal example or primate precedent offers any but the conclusion that territory is conservative, that it is invariably defensive, that the biological nation is the supreme natural mechanism for the security of a social group (Ardrey, 1967, p. 253).

Co-operation between ethnic groups was seen as essentially impossible, and conflict the inevitable result of different groups sharing the same territory (Ardrey, 1967). (See Cope et al., 1991, pp. 23–25, for a succinct summary and review.) Following this logic, ethnic concentration is seen as an outcome of unavoidable ethnic conflict of diverse societies. Biologically determined theories of ‘race’ and ethnicity like these were roundly condemned by UNESCO in the 1950s and 1960s (Montagu, 1964; UNESCO, 1983). Only a handful of social scientists continued to utilise socio-biology (Van den Berghe, 1986, pp. 255–257; Smith, 1986, pp. 188–192).

Notwithstanding the academic demise of socio-biology, the approach continues to enjoy significant currency as a popular or commonsense explanation for cultural difference and ethnic conflict. Susan Smith (1988, p. 442) found that political discourse on ethnic relations and segregation often utilised and reinforced socio-biological ideology; particularly those notions of human kind being composed of socially incompatible ‘races’. This has been noted in both media and parliaments. For example, conservative commentators in Australia have warned that cultural diversity will reduce the country to “a conglominate of warring tribes” (Duncombe, 1992, p. iii); and that multi-cultural policies would sustain such division. During 1996, a Member of Parliament from the Australian House of Representatives utilised ideas from socio-biology in a speech which has initiated an ongoing ‘race debate’.

A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united. The world is full of failed and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa and, closer to home, Papua New Guinea. America and Great Britain are currently paying the price (Hanson, 1996, p. 3862).

Hanson warned that bloodshed would be the imminent outcome of cultural diversity in Australia. Central tenets of socio-biology are that ethnic difference will result in conflict and that ethnic concentrations are the socially divisive results of that conflict. Socio-biologists do not conceive of ethnic concentration per se as negative; rather, they see ethnic diversity itself as deleterious. Eth-
nic difference, whether introduced through immigration or encouraged by government policy, is seen as something all societies should avoid. This approach naively assumes that cultural difference can be repressed, and unrealistically ignores the unavoidable and omnipresent nature of cultural difference in all societies.

Socio-biologist notions are often propagated in the media and other Australian forums without a direct and significant theoretical challenge from social scientists. So long as urban researchers are influenced by theories which posit concentration as necessarily negative, they will be unable to engage with the racist-motivated criticisms of multiculturalism which have pointed to ethnic concentration as ‘spatial proof’ of social divisiveness. In other words, the influence of the ‘established approaches’ on ethnic concentration precludes a critique of one of the most sustaining, and yet ‘awed’, notions of socio-biology—that cultural difference is socially divisive.

The Chicago School

Chicago School human ecologists, such as Park and Burgess, based their analyses of migrant settlement and ethnic concentration on an assumed process of cultural and spatial assimilation. Park used the model of a ‘race relations cycle’ in which both introduced and host cultural groups progressed through a four-phase process of contact, conflict, accommodation and assimilation (Park, 1950, pp. 82–84). The phase of conflict was due to a lack of cultural communication between ethnic groups, during which ethnic concentrations were apparent. To Burgess (1925, p. 54), this lack of cultural communication was a temporary stage of disorganisation lasting only until both the newcomers and hosts had been resocialised and eventually assimilated. Social disorganisation was seen as merely a transitory phase of reorganisation before social order was reinstated (Saunders, 1986, pp. 53–54).

A core premise of Burgess’ (1925, pp. 54–58) theory was that migrants settle in temporary concentrations in the city’s ‘zone of transition’. This was followed by eventual residential dispersal which occurred in parallel with cultural assimilation. Temporary ethnic concentrations were not therefore seen as pathological. However, more permanent concentrations were seen as either an outcome of the sustained oppression of a minority group—for example, the ‘black’ ghetto—or as an unwillingness on the part of that minority group to assimilate. More permanent ethnic concentrations were pathologised, and seen as an indicator that the ‘race-relations cycle’ had become mired in the phase of conflict. Notwithstanding this, the thesis that ethnic concentration was merely an ephemeral step toward cultural assimilation became a core and lasting influence of Chicago School urban theory.

The influence of the Chicago School upon contemporary urban studies is still profound as Jackson and Smith (1984) and Miyares (1997) have pointed out. That influence is not often overtly flagged by recent researchers concerned with the social and cultural geography of the city, but it is detectable through the use of key concepts such as assimilation, adaptation and dispersal. Those concepts have been deployed by urban scholars across the Western world and throughout many decades (Miyares, 1997, p. 214). Elements of Chicago School theorising are especially evident in urban studies of ethnic concentration. Many urban researchers assume that an initial concentration—followed by dispersal—is an expected part of a process of assimilation. Such studies are often focused upon measuring the extent of concentration and dispersal of migrant groups in the cities of Western societies. Recent examples include comprehensive analyses of the formation of ethnic concentrations in Vienna (Pacione, 1996), of the presence of ghettos in the UK (Peach, 1996), and the dispersal of second-generation migrant families in Sydney (Burnley, 1994, 1996).

The Chicago School models were developed from studying the mass migration of European migrants to cities of the US
It is questionable whether models developed in a specific space and time continue to be appropriate for theorising the contemporary city. The assimilation/dispersal hypothesis has been deployed by some social scientists as a defence of ethnic concentrations which result from immigration (Jones, 1996). A potential Chicago School response to public unease about ethnic concentration is that dispersal and cultural assimilation will eventually occur. However, such a defence, usually deployed by progressive urban social researchers, still mitigates against cultural difference. The promise was made that cultural difference will subside and mono-culturalism will reign again. This was revelatory of a social functionalism, inherent to Chicago School modelling, in which assimilation to the host culture or moral order was an assumed goal for every individual. A second and related assumption was that the extent of spatial assimilation was a measure of successful settlement or participation in society. Social or cultural distance was thought to be positively correlated to spatial distance. Miyares remarked that this second assumption of assimilation had been defined “from the perspective of dominant U.S. culture” (Miyares, 1997, pp. 214–215). Another concern with the Chicago School was the influence of social Darwinism (Jackson and Smith, 1984; Saunders, 1986, pp. 55–56). The Chicago School considered those able to rise out of the ghetto to be the smartest and most ambitious individuals. By implication, any individual who resolved to continue residing in an area of ethnic concentration was automatically deemed less fit or culturally inferior.

One of the most telling empirical challenges to the assimilation/dispersal hypothesis is the persistence of ethnic segregation and of unassimilated cultural difference in cities (Peach and Smith, 1981). In an analysis of Hmong settlement in the US, Miyares constructed a more progressive gauge for assessing the success of migrant settlement. Rather than using spatial assimilation, Miyares (1997) preferred to measure success of settlement according to the maintenance of cultural identity. The maintenance of cultural identity for the Hmong was apparent in the appropriation and use of space, including the presence of landscape signatures and the creation of culturally identified places. This measure of settlement is radically different from the Chicago School measure of spatial assimilation.

Chicago School theorists astutely drew attention to the supportive role which ethnic concentrations had for recent migrants. Nonetheless, Park and Burgess considered cultural difference to be problematic. Despite their understanding that the city was a matter of experiencing differences (Park, 1925, pp. 45–46; Sennett, 1990, p. 126), the Chicago School urbanists held that the permanent retention of a distinguishable ethnic identity by ‘newcomer’ groups was negative. And since ethnic propinquity can support identity retention, and stunt assimilation, concentrations were considered undesirable. This model of assessing settlement and participation is less tenable in an era in which a social policy of multi-culturalism has been embraced, such as in Australia. Cultural difference is now ostensibly officially celebrated rather than repressed, and models which advocate assimilation are culturally imperialistic.

The Weberian School

To neo-Weberian theorists, ethnic identity was a strategic choice made by individuals. Group membership was seen as a means of gaining some power or privilege (Bell, 1975, p. 171). In Weberian terms, this process of conflict was referred to as social closure; in which access to resources and rewards was determined by singling out certain social or physical attributes which became the criteria of eligibility (Parkin, 1982, p. 100). Usually social closure was carried out by powerful groups against the interests of those less powerful. This was referred to as exclusionary closure. Parkin (1979, p. 44) extended the notion of social closure to include situa-
tions where the excluded in turn close-off access to whatever privileges or possessions remained. This was referred to as usurpationary closure (Parkin, 1979, p. 74).

Weberian ideas were very influential among British urban social theorists in the late 1960s (Rex and Moore, 1967) and in the 1970s and 1980s (Jackson and Smith, 1984). To some neo-Weberians, ethnic concentrations were spatial outcomes of the processes of exclusionary and usurpationary closure. Geographers such as Boal argued that ethnic concentration was not only a spatial outcome of closure, but that it was also a fundamental part of the social process of exclusion. Land, or space, was one of the resources which ethnic groups tried to secure through closure techniques. Boal outlined how ethnic residential concentrations had an important expressive or symbolic role, assisting with the construction of identity through the maintenance of culture (Boal, 1976, p. 50). The concept of closure was applied by Boal (1981, p. 236) to ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland to account for ethnic residential concentration. Boal (1976, pp. 45–50) identified four functions of ethnic concentration: defence, social support, preservation, and attack. These presumed roles of ethnic concentration continue to be influential in studies of urban cultural difference.

To those urban researchers influenced by Weberian theory, ethnic concentration was formed through the strategic choice of incumbents in order to secure territory as a resource and as a way of preserving cultural distinctiveness. The four functions of ethnic concentration, as identified by Boal, do have application to many cultural precincts. However, the premise that ethnic concentration must always be an outcome of ethnic conflict, operating through processes of social closure, is no longer acceptable. In the present Australian political environment, in which unassimilated and embraced cultural difference has been given official sanction, such a conflict-based approach is far too limiting. It precludes the possibility of an openness to cultural difference which city life facilitates.

The Marxist Approach

There is an array of neo-Marxist theories about the manner and the rationale for ethnic group formation (Solomos, 1986). However, a core precept of Marxist theorising of cultural identity was that capitalism enhances and plays upon difference. Much of the socialist academic project has been aimed at abolishing the social and economic construction of groups—whether they be classes or ethnic groups (Fraser, 1995, pp. 70–74). Racism was seen as just one of an array of capitalist tools which could be used for the purposes of exploitation, and as a political strategy for dividing the working class. Ethnic difference facilitated racism, which is one form of ideology which has a particular power both to structure and justify the patterns of exploitation that have emerged historically (Miles and Phizacklea, 1984, p. 136).

Marxist discussions of migrant settlement and ethnic difference were among the first of the established theories to take seriously the role of gender and the insights of feminism. This was particularly due to the input from socialist feminists (Fincher, 1993; Miles and Phizacklea, 1984).

Oppressed ethnic groups, as a form of exploited class, are sufficiently poor to be offered the last choice of housing and location (Harvey, 1973). The sifting of ethnic minorities through the housing market also reinforces a division of the working-class. To urban researchers who deploy Marxist explanations, ethnic concentration assisted in the enhancement of ethnic division, and therefore with the formation of a reserve-army of labour. Engels’ assessment of Irish immigrants to Britain in the early to mid 1800s remains an illustrative example. Engels argued that the Irish workers were made to compete with indigenous workers for jobs and housing, and that the Irish formed a reserve army of labour. This resulted in the downgrading of the already meagre conditions of the English working class: a “cause of abasement to which the English worker is
exposed, ... forcing the whole class down- wards”. A split developed—and was encour-aged—between English and Irish workers. Anti-Irish demonstrations and riots led to official separations in the workplace, and to residential segregation through the development of ‘Irish Towns’ or ‘Little Irelands’. This sort of theorising of ethnicity is most apparent in the Marxist variant referred to as the ‘migrant labour’ approach (Solomos, 1986, pp. 98–101). According to this perspective, ethnic concentration was a manifesta-tion of a form of residential differentiation, in which the ultimate aim was to reproduce class relations (Harvey, 1973, p. 81).

Ethnic segregation was therefore seen as a ploy to facilitate class division and exploi-tation. Ethnicity itself was seen as a nef-arious construct, and ethnic concentration was held to be a conservative means for reproducing regressive social relations. Posi-tive aspects of ethnic concentration would either be regarded as capitalist ideologies for maintaining division, or evidence of func-tionalist processes calculated to sustain an inequitable socioeconomic order. The Marxi-st approach can therefore only provide a partial assessment of ethnic concentration. Benefits of concentration are ignored in the analysis, or they are dismissed as ultimately conservative.

A Critique and the Politics of Difference

It has been almost axiomatic in most of the geographical urban studies literature that eth-nic concentrations are manifestations of soci-etial malady. The ghetto or enclave was, often quite appropriately, conceived of as the spa-tial result of marginalisation of minority eth-nic groups by the wider society (Smith, 1989; White et al., 1987; Winchester and White, 1988). For example, Taeuber (1965, p. 19) concluded that “[d]iscrimination is the principal cause of Negro residential segre-gation” in American cities. The idea was that ethnic spatial segregation either reflects the oppression of a minority group, or a purpose-ful separateness enacted by that minority. These assumptions are apparent in the premise that social distance equates with spatial distance (Park, 1950, pp. 256–260). However, one outcome of theorising culturally distinct urban areas as being essentially socially divisive is that urban social theorists have adopted assimilationist views (except for the socio-biologists who advocate ethnic separateness) and advocated societal ethnic homogeneity. There is an assumption that assimilation, and the residential dispersal of minority ethnic groups, is a desired end in itself. These assimilationist impulses legit-imate the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group, and lend currency to the expec-tation that minority groups should conform to this hegemony through assimilation. The retention of ethnic identity is held to be negative, and since propinquity can be an important component of identity retention, so they also assume ethnic concentration to be negative. Positive aspects of ethnic concen-tration, such as the successful maintenance of cultural identity, remain uninvestigated. In-deed, Peach (1996, pp. 233–234) recently concluded that the “positive desire for clus-tering ... [is] ... worthy of further investiga-tion” in the UK. The benefits of ethnic clustering had been largely ignored in previous research on ethnic concentration.

The failure to recognise the inherent assimilationist impulses, and the denial of positive aspects of ethnic concentration in the established theories, may well be a reflection of a general failing of the social sciences in dealing with cultural difference. Sedgwick (1990, p. 22) remarked that it was “astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools” we have for dealing with the “self-evident fact ... that people are different from each other”. The United Nation’s first High Commissioner for Human Rights recently commented that an adequate philosophy and politics of cultural difference has been lack-ing, and that cultural diversity had been re-garded as a barrier to the universality of human rights (Ayala-Lasso, 1995).

The question that comes up when we talk about cultural diversity is the question of how we can create a positive approach to
diversity and understand this cultural diversity as a political, economic and social strength (Ayala-Lasso, 1995, p. 5).

In recent years, a new episteme referred to as the ‘politics of difference’ has emerged from within cultural studies and elsewhere. Key theorists in this philosophical development have included Cornell West (1990) and Iris Marion Young (1990a). These theorists reject the traditional denial of difference, and argue that institutional practices which give rise to diverse cultural expressions should be encouraged.

Iris Marion Young made the point that much of social science has long been dominated by an ideal of community in which there had been a “totalizing desire to reconcile the differences of subjects” (Young, 1990b, pp. 300–303, 308). Young observed that most academics:

think that social groups are invidious fictions, essentializing arbitrary attributes…. Oppression, on this view, is something that happens to people when they are classified in groups. Because others identify them as a group, they are excluded and despised. Eliminating oppression thus requires eliminating groups (Young, 1990a, pp. 46–47).

The traditional denial of difference has inevitably assisted conservative pushes for assimilation and exclusion. Young (1993, pp. 130–131) referred to this aspect of the social science of identity as the assimilationist ideal. Morrill, a key geographer whose work in the 1960s on ethnic concentration was seminal, reflected in 1993 on his earlier work.

[My work] violated usual standards … by advocating residential integration, if necessary through governmental force or ‘social engineering’, … An implicit assumption, too, was that blacks wanted integration, while whites did not. I recognized but underestimated the strong forces for solidarity within the black community (Morrill, 1993, p. 352). Morrill had failed to accept a politics of difference, and like other urban social scientists he had advocated a denial of cultural difference. The assimilationist impulse has always operated within existing structures of inequality, in which some groups “have greater economic, political or social power”, with the result that the dominant “experiences, points of view, or cultural assumptions” usually become codified as the societal norm and are imposed on everyone (Young, 1993, p. 132). The Chicago School’s initial premise was that the host groups, as well as migrants, should progress through a cycle of adjustment. However, assimilation has rarely ever been politically and popularly recognised as requiring that the dominant culture should change in any profound way. Policy and popular commentary have usually insisted that ‘newcomers’ and ‘minorities’ should adapt to dominant norms and values.

Theorists influenced by the politics of difference do not reject or suppress difference as part of their advocacy for subordinate groups (West, 1990), nor as part of their exposure of oppression (Young, 1990a). Group mobilisation and self-validation often necessitate an assertion of group identity. I contend that the politics of difference is an approach which allows urban researchers to recognise positive aspects of concentration. The approach also facilitates critical comment upon the policies and institutional mechanisms which regulate the expression of cultural difference in the urban setting. Ethnic concentration serves a critical role in reinforcing identity. This was best demonstrated in Boal’s (1976) neo-Weberian work. However, the politics of difference approach goes a step further and valorises the maintenance of cultural identity.

Miyares (1997) suggested that the ability to cultivate a dynamic sense of cultural identity is the appropriate indicator of successful settlement or participation in society. Evidence of such settlement could include landscape signatures and the appropriation and organisation of space which is calculated to maintain and develop cultural identity (Mi-
Recent Australian research on the settlement of migrant women has similarly stressed the empowering way in which these women organise, or systematise, their homes in order to nurture cultural identity (Pulvirenti, 1997; Thompson, 1994). The adoption of a politics of difference approach shifts the research focus from an assessment of spatial assimilation to a review of how well a society facilitates unassimilated cultural difference. The spatial cultural silence associated with residential dispersal and assimilation is a poor indicator of successful settlement or participation. The alternative conceptual framework outlined here operationalises the organisation of, use of and cultural marking of space instead.

Young insisted that a politics of difference is not about reinforcing ‘otherness’ or separateness. It is a conception in which ‘difference does not mean otherness, or exclusive opposition, but rather specificity, variation, heterogeneity’ (Young, 1993, p. 130). Post-structuralist theorists, such as Sedgwick (1990), do not simply assert the diversity of groups, they stress the diverse individual subject, and are critical of established theories:

> every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of delegitimating our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 23).

West (1990, p. 105) argued that new articulations of Black identity in the US should be multi-dimensional in order to “articulate the complexity and diversity of Black practices”. In other words, articulations of cultural identity must be flexible and dynamic enough so as not to be restrictive and exclusive. Cultures develop constantly and intersubjectively; they are continually influenced and are continually influencing one another. The varying experiences of immigration among a cultural group, for example, have been shown to produce very different cultural subjects (Miyares, 1997; Pulvirenti, 1997). There is an inherent heterogeneity within groups. Areas of ethnic concentration should also be understood in this way: as sites where individuals can deploy themselves as active and differing cultural subjects.

**Australian Government Policies on Cultural Diversity**

Australian migrant entry and settlement policy, and the official construction of national identity, have shifted from a ‘White Australia’ identity and practice, through a short phase of assimilationism, to the present model of multi-culturalism (Cope et al., 1991, pp. 3–19; Fincher, 1997, pp. 218–223). Anderson pointed out that the Australian sense of nation, its national identity, has often been constructed out of racist ideals (Anderson, 1993, p. 69). One of the first acts passed in the Australian Federal Parliament was to restrict the entry of Asian migrants (Cope et al., 1991, p. 5; Fincher, 1997, p. 220). Australian nationhood had been officially constructed as British, or negatively defined as ‘not Asian’ or ‘not Black’. The ‘White Australia’ policy on immigration was only officially abolished in 1972. For most of the last 200 years, immigration policies have been based upon a principle of correspondence to, or acculturation to, an Anglo, sometimes Anglo-Celtic, hegemonic norm.

The Multi-cultural Project of the past two decades has been a progressive attempt to transform service institutions, to shift the ideologies of national identity, and to embrace cultural difference in Australia. The previous Labor government in Australia had been congratulated for developing a dynamic and heterogeneous official construction of nationhood, and for its inclusive model of citizenship. This had provided a base upon which to chart the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a multi-cultural society (Department of Communications and the Arts, 1994, pp. 1, 6, 9; Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), 1989, p. v; 1995, p. 6). The official recognition of difference, and a sanctioning of an institutional and service
provider response to it, was progressive. Multi-cultural policy had three broad dimensions: the right to retain cultural identity and to express it; the right to social justice and equal opportunity; and the need to utilise fully the economic potential and abilities of all Australians (OMA, 1989, p. vii). The official policy also imposed limits to Australian multi-culturalism, evoking ideals of nationalist commitment and asserting principles of tolerance. The policy demanded an overriding commitment to Australia, the acceptance of the basic structures and principles of Australian society (law, respect for freedom of speech and religion, democracy and equality of the sexes) and acceptance of the right of others to express their culture and views (OMA, 1989, p. vii). The various programmes and policies of Australian multi-cultural policy have been sorted into three main categories (Morrissey and Mitchell, 1993, pp. 2–5). These three were the access and equity (A&E) policy to provide equitable access to service provision; community relations projects to tackle cultural intolerance, and anti-racism mechanisms. Despite the laudable broadening of official national identity in Australia, there remain significant obstacles, or limits, to representation for those who do not match the archetype Anglo-Australian. Anderson (1993) criticised official articulations of multi-cultural national identity in Australia, taking issue with the Otherness or second-class citizenry still accorded to Chinese-Australians and other groups popularly demarcated by ‘race’. The official policy statements on national identity and ethnic diversity still operationalise very static and inflexible definitions of cultural groups (Pulvirenti, 1997, pp. 33–34). The popular construction of nationhood in Australia is much more fixed and mono-cultural than the recent official reorientations of national identity suggest (McLean, 1997). Anglo-Australians are horrified by the sight of culturally distinctive precincts or ‘migrant homes’. These landscapes unsettle a comfortable Anglo cultural hegemony (Lozanovska, 1994, pp. 197–198, 205–206). There has also been a less than satisfactory institutional application of the Multi-cultural Project, and crucial areas of policy such as anti-racism programmes remain in their infancy (Jureidini, 1997). Nonetheless, these limitations have been overtaken by the recent political turn-around on cultural issues in Australia.

The election of the conservative Howard Coalition government in March 1996 may well have ended the official embrace of cultural difference in Australia. In the rhetoric of the current Federal government there is much reference to a “disillusioned mainstream”, whose history and institutions have been “demeaned” (Howard, 1995, pp. 11, 14; 1996, p. 2). In a key pre-election speech, the Prime Minister dismissively branded multi-cultural policy as the politics of division. The message was quite clear; a politics of sameness was on the ascendency in Australia (McLean, 1997, p. 45). The conservative government have begun to formulate the policy to put their rhetoric into practice. A raft of anti-immigration measures has been introduced, with a focus upon excluding the entry of people from non-Anglo-Celtic origins. Key institutions with responsibility for expanding tolerance and maintaining cultural difference have been disbanded, including the Office of Multi-cultural Affairs and the Bureau of Immigration, Population and Multi-cultural Research. Prime Minister Howard (1996) has spoken passionately against political correctness and has asserted the benefits of a freedom of speech. The Prime Minister’s statement significantly contributed to an on-going ‘race debate’. In that continuing debate, anti-immigration and racist commentators have argued that ethnic concentrations of Asian-Australians were evidence of the failure of immigration and settlement policy.

Case Study: Cabramatta, NSW

Cabramatta is a suburb in the Local Government Area (LGA) of Fairfield, which is in outer-western Sydney (Figures 1 and 2). There is a notable Indo-Chinese presence in the Fairfield LGA. For example, 11 per cent
of residents of the Fairfield LGA were born in Vietnam (Table 1). The reasons for the concentration of Indo-Chinese-Australians around the suburb of Cabramatta are numerous, and have been outlined elsewhere (Burnley, 1989; Dunn, 1993). These location factors included the role of nearby migrant hostels as 'ports of entry', the local provision of job opportunities in manufacturing, the existence of affordable housing, and the process of gravitation migration. There is debate as to whether the Cabramatta area constitutes an enclave of Indo-Chinese. According to strict percentage-based definitions, Fairfield cannot be described as a residential enclave, by virtue of the fact that the Indo-Chinese do not constitute over 30 per cent of the local population (Burnley, 1992).

However, data from the 1991 Australian Housing and Population Census show that 40 per cent of Sydney's Vietnam-born population reside in the Fairfield LGA (Table 1). The contiguous LGAs of Bankstown, Auburn and Fairfield are home to almost two-thirds of all the Vietnam-born residents in Sydney (Figure 1 and Table 1). In the 20

---

Census Collector’s Districts (CDs) which surround the Cabramatta commercial district over 20 per cent of the population were born in Vietnam (Figure 2). Cabramatta is an area of ethnic concentration of Indo-Chinese-Australians. Cabramatta is also a multi-cultural place, and it should not be definitionally fixed as only a concentration of Indo-Chinese-Australians (Burnley, 1992, p. 71). While there are nodes of ethnic concentration in Sydney, such as the Indo-Chinese in Cabramatta, these concentrations are also manifestations of heterogeneity (Burnley, 1992, p. 72). Much of the academic treatment of Cabramatta has problematised the Indo-Chinese-Australian concentration in Cabramatta. Burnley’s analysis is remarkable in
Australia for not pathologising spatial cultural diversity \emph{a priori}. Cabramatta is a suburb where Indo-Chinese are concentrated, both residentially and for leisure activities. But Cabramatta, and the Fairfield LGA around it, is also a place where an array of ethnic groups reside.

But it is in the other spatial spheres of human activity, not residence, where Indo-Chinese ethnic concentration is more obvious and important in Cabramatta. The place has a distinct oriental ambience. Vietnamese-Australians have generated a lasting cultural impact on the landscape. Cabramatta will continue to bear for some time the current landscape icons of Indo-Chinese-Australian cultures. It is also likely to remain a service and social magnet for Indo-Chinese-Australians living throughout the city of Sydney (Dunn, 1993).

**Media and Academic Assessments of Cabramatta**

Newspapers, and radio and television commentaries are the main ways in which Australians get information about a place like Cabramatta. The reporting of events in Cabramatta has been sensationalist and stereotypical. The media portray Cabramatta as a site of crime and poverty (Dunn, 1993, p. 229). This criminalising is linked to long-held Australian stereotypes about Chinese, and about Indo-Chinese or ‘Asians’ generally (Anderson, 1990; Hamilton, 1990).

The media treatment of Cabramatta was at its most extreme and stereotypical following the murder of the local Member of NSW State Parliament. John Newman was the Labor Party member for the seat of Cabramatta. He was murdered on the night of the 5th of September 1994. The murder was sensationalised and the suburb was demonised. The following examples of newspaper copy illustrate the way in which Cabramatta was demonised:

> Cabramatta is simultaneously the fulfilment of our migration dream and its night-marish conclusion (\textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 7 September 1994, p. 8).

> Streets where decent citizens are afraid to walk must be cleansed of drug pushers and menacing local gangs (\textit{The Sun-Herald}, 11 September 1994, p. 28).

The media coverage of the Newman murder also reinforced racial stereotypes about Asian-Australians. Take, for example, the following editorial from Australia’s national business newspaper, which argued that:

> [w]hether or not Mr Newman was murdered because he got in the way of an Asian gang, the fact is that this style of criminal activity has accompanied the recent migrants from Asia (Editorial in \textit{The Australian Financial Review}, 8 September 1994, p. 20).

The images in these texts associate murder and gang activity with Asian migrants. Again this depiction is typical of the way Chinatowns have been portrayed in Western discourses as places of vice and immorality (Anderson, 1987, pp. 589–593; Anderson, 1990, p. 141).

The current ‘race debate’ in Australia has also projected these ‘orientalist’ stereotypes, and has reinforced the negative images of Cabramatta which had previously been circulating. Pauline Hanson, an Independent Member of the Australian Federal Parliament, warned that Australia was “in danger of being swamped by Asians”, whom she argued “have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate” (Hanson, 1996, p. 3862). Public opinion polls reported frightening levels of community support for these views. Hanson and her supporters pointed to Cabramatta, and to Springvale in Melbourne, as outcomes of what they considered to be the culturally divisive policy of multi-culturalism and ‘Asian-dominated’ immigration. Recent research on the residential preferences of immigrants in Australia has rejected the notion that Asian migrants have a cultural preference for residential concentration. Zang and Hassan (1996, pp. 573–574) used data from a 1991 survey of Sydney
and Melbourne residents to show that variables such as housing affordability, employment opportunities and access to services were much more important as residential preferences for Asian-Australians than was a desire to be located with co-ethnics. They concluded that the evidence does not support the contention that immigrants born in north Asia, South-East Asia, and Indochina prefer or want to settle in ethnic enclaves (Zang and Hassan, 1996, p. 573).

Nonetheless, the stereotype that ‘Asians don’t assimilate’ had never been based on empirical evidence; it was borne of racist ideology. The ideas behind the populist statements of Hanson and others are traceable to socio-biological models of ethnic relations, as are the criticisms of Asian-Australians generally and of the Indo-Chinese-Australians in Cabramatta specifically.

The depictions of Cabramatta following the Newman murder, and during the Hanson-initiated ‘race debate’, require a much more extensive and detailed analysis than is attempted here. Nonetheless it is clear that, as a site of Indo-Chinese ethnic concentration, Cabramatta resonates with meaning for Australians. Ethnic concentration in Australia has become intricately bound-up within popular debates about immigration and multi-culturalism. A crucial point that urban researchers should consider is that popular opinion and media stereotypes have fed off the academic assessments of ethnic concentrations. It will be very difficult to quash racist-populist statements—such as Hanson’s—so long as academics are unable to shed a progressive and more comprehensive perspective on ethnic concentration.

Most of the academic comment on Cabramatta has been critical of the place. These critiques have focused first upon the levels of unemployment and welfare dependency in the area (Birrell, 1993; Healy, 1996). Birrell argued that:

[...] the Vietnamese enclave in Fairfield is developing the characteristics of a ‘ghetto’... It is true that ethnic concentrations on the scale of the current aggregation of the Indochinese in Cabramatta have occurred in Australian cities before, but not with the accompanying evidence of disadvantage (Birrell, 1993, p. 31).

Birrell pointed out that the Fairfield LGA in 1991 had 21.9 per cent unemployment. Similarly, Healy focused on the extent of Indo-Chinese unemployment in the Cabramatta postcode area. He also noted that 30.2 per cent of all the unemployed Vietnam-born residing in NSW were located in Cabramatta. However, Jupp (1993, pp. 51–52) pointed out that the socioeconomic deprivation and maladies, of areas such as Fairfield, are not directly related to the ethnicity of the residents but, rather, like other western Sydney suburbs, are related to more general problems of economic crisis and social inequality. Other researchers have similarly observed that the problem is not one of ethnic concentration but unemployment (Jones, 1996, p. 33; Viviani, 1996, p. 23).

A key question, then, is whether these socioeconomic problems are specific to Cabramatta because of its ethnic concentration, or whether these problems are manifestations of general economic problems that are city-wide, or at least common to the western suburbs of Sydney. This is not to say that there are not serious problems of socioeconomic deprivation in Cabramatta; clearly there are (see Viviani et al., 1993). But this is not of itself a valid argument against ethnic concentration. Much of the work of Healy and Birrell has been at pains to establish a link between ethnic concentration and economic disadvantage. And while these two variables have been found to be statistically associated, only very weak causal explanations of how concentration might produce disadvantage have been developed. The unquestioned assumption underlying much of this work is that if cultural difference is added to economic disadvantage an enhanced level of dislocation is the expected result. This expectation is based upon the assumption that maintaining a cultural identity that
differs from a hegemonic norm results in economic marginality.

A second critique of Cabramatta has been that ethnic concentration has sponsored an ethnic separateness and divisiveness. In 1988, history Professor Geoffrey Blainey (1988, p. 18) stated his dissatisfaction that a Vietnamese ghetto, which he labelled a “Little Saigon”, had formed around Cabramatta. The sociologist Bob Birrell has also made this critique. Importantly, these critiques are always extensively covered by the media. Birrell argued that “Asian enclaves symbolise a new Australia marked by separate and ‘visible’ minorities” (Birrell, 1993, p. 30). Birrell asserted that ethnic concentration in Cabramatta was leading to a further disparagement and marginalisation of Indo-Chinese-Australians. Both Blainey and Birrell are academic advocates for a strongly cultural assimilationist position.

In a paper which dealt with Cabramatta, as well as other ethnic concentrations in Australia, Healy (1996, pp. 30–31) criticised new theories of identity and cultural group formation for giving formal succour to minority cultures, and for failing adequately to problematise ethnic concentration.

This myopia concerning the problematic nature of racial segregation was associated with the influence of deconstructionist/postmodernist ideologies which became entrenched…. From such perspectives, it was no longer acceptable to characterise minority status as problematic. To the contrary, minorities were often idealised and perceived as outposts of resistance against the dominant forms of oppression (Healy, 1996, p. 30).

There are some very sweeping, and unexplained, assertions regarding the influence of new theory in Healy’s conclusion. However, even Healy is aware of the clash or chasm between the established theories of culture and identity and more recent approaches.

Both of the types of critique reviewed above—that ethnic concentrations are innate sites of either deprivation or separateness—are grounded upon the models available for analysing concentration (Chicago School, Weberian, Marxist). These critiques are then deployed against immigration generally, and immigration from Asia in particular. They have also been used as arguments against the Australian policy of multi-culturalism, which Blainey argued was encouraging them [Vietnamese and Turkish migrants] to turn Australia into a tribal battleground or into a cluster of enclaves (Blainey, 1988, p. 18).

Imbricated throughout Blainey’s argument is the belief that migrants have an almost natural desire to congregate. This belief draws upon socio-biological notions of innate or natural ethnic group solidarity. After positing a premise of essentialised ethnic gregariousness, Blainey then argued that the immigration of those who differ from a supposed Caucasian norm should be halted:

After all, if ethnic concentrations are frowned upon, but at the same time the migrants arriving in a free country are entitled to form their own enclaves, then any breakdown in social cohesion might well have to be tackled by preventing the inflow of certain migrant groups in their previous numbers (Blainey, 1993, p. 43).

Critiques of ethnic concentration are in fact smokescreens for other critiques: of immigration; of immigration from Asia in particular; of the social policy of multi-culturalism. The debate about ethnic concentration is politically charged. The conclusions of urban researchers on this matter are important: they are reported in the ‘quality’ and tabloid media; and they influence policy-makers. The academically discredited socio-biology approach has resurfaced in political debates. The assimilationist impulse, borne of the established theories, is also apparent in the arguments of academics who are critical of places like Cabramatta.

Reassessing Cabramatta

Cabramatta is a symbolically contested landscape. On the one hand, Cabramatta is dis-
paraged as a drug haven and disadvantaged ghetto. On the other hand, the suburb is a celebrated icon of Australia’s cultural diversity. My second aim in this research was to apply an alternative perspective to the issue of ethnic concentration. My goal was to unearth a more progressive understanding of the Indo-Chinese-Australian communities in Cabramatta. The understanding I derived is one which supports attempts by Cabramatta community leaders and residents to dispel the deleterious imagery associated with their place. It is also a perspective which concurrently counters ‘orientalist’ stereotypes about Asian-Australians. As demonstrated earlier, when the established theories are applied to Cabramatta, only the negative aspects of that area of ethnic concentration were detected. There are of course many advantages of ethnic concentration, as demonstrated to me in interviews carried out in 1990 and 1993. The interview data presented here provide an alternative to the view that ethnic concentration is necessarily linked to deprivation and separateness.

Vietnamese cultural organisations and support groups have flourished in and around Cabramatta. An office-bearer from one of the Indo-Chinese cultural associations made the following observation:

Actually that make our work much easier in the way that we have three offices one in Cabramatta, one in Bankstown and one in Marrickville, where many Vietnamese are living which make it much easier in a way that we have a geographical target group into which we can offer our service, otherwise it would be very difficult (interview transcript, 1990).

For those Indo-Chinese migrants still not host-language competent, Cabramatta provides much needed social welfare support. The cultural associations have been able to secure funding for Grant-in-Aid workers who are dedicated to assisting Indo-Chinese-Australians. The staff of these associations help Indo-Chinese-Australians to negotiate the bureaucracy of service providers and the pitfalls of the property market.

We help them in terms of form fillings, like Social Security form fillings, housing-, employment-, education-form fillings. If they need information about any service available in this area, and doing application for them, and help them in questions from the government and give them emotional—provide them emotional support ... and we also organise seminars, community education. Seminars providing information on immigration, housing and any difficulties in terms of their daily life or settlement difficulties (interview transcript, 1990).

A social worker pointed out that she spent a lot of her time assisting Indo-Chinese tenants in situations where landlords had attempted to ‘rip them off’. Such instances included the retention of rental bond moneys without a satisfactory reason. The associations are also advocates for the Indo-Chinese communities. They demand ethnic-specific services, make representations at various political levels, and assist victims of discrimination. One community leader I interviewed had three meetings planned for the next week, with the NSW Police Commissioner, with the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commissioner and with representatives of the Sydney media. These political and organisational strengths are benefits which result from a critical mass of people who require similar services.

Government and voluntary agencies are able to provide Indo-Chinese-specific services which would not be viable outside this site of ethnic concentration.

The government departments know that there are a lot of Asian people living in the same area, so it is very easy for them to provide a service, like a bi-lingual worker or something like this. Otherwise if you don’t live together, if you live spread around the area, ... they don’t know whether they should provide bi-lingual worker for these people or not, whether it is worthwhile in terms of cost/benefit or not (interview transcript, 1990).

It has become economically worthwhile in Cabramatta for larger service providers,
commercial banks and other private agencies, to provide bi-lingual counter staff. Patients are able to consult medical practitioners who can converse with them in Vietnamese or Chinese. Consultations carried out in the first language are very important, even when the patient has satisfactory English language skills.

We explain in Vietnamese, our own language, so it is easier for the patient to understand. For a doctor like myself, I don’t feel any different explaining in English or Vietnamese, but to the patient if you speak in English they feel very frightened, and they don’t want to see the doctor, because some complaints they want to express themselves they could not express (interview transcript, 1990).

Bi-lingual service provision in Cabramatta has reduced the social isolation that would have been experienced by many elderly Indo-Chinese and others who would not be engaged in formal waged labour: “Concentration also means that non-English speaking Vietnamese are not isolated, or stuck in their homes as they would be if they were in other areas” (field notes, 1990). Total government expenditure on service provision to Australia’s Indo-Chinese is made more efficient by the economies of scale which exist in Cabramatta, not only lessening overall costs but expanding the possibilities of service provision.

Employment is also available in the commercial district of Cabramatta. A multitude of small businesses provide both general and ethnic-specific goods and services. Entrepreneurial opportunities certainly exist for businesses to supply goods and services to co-ethnics. However, competition within these small businesses is fierce. The area has “grocery shops practically along side of each other for five kilometres … there’s too much competition” (interview transcript, 1990). As one informant pointed out:

… like bread shops; maybe the first bread shop is good, but the second one, the third one and tenth compete with each other, and with the market being too small to support them, therefore sometime they go bankrupt, because they share the clients (interview transcript, 1990).

Employment conditions can often be especially exploitative. Healy drew upon evidence collected by the textile and clothing workers’ union to characterise Cabramatta and other ethnic concentrations as places of “highly exploitative Asian outworking” in the garment industry (Healy, 1996, p. 28). It is certainly true that many Indo-Chinese-Australians are involved in outworking.

A lot of Vietnamese women are doing piece work at home. In one way it’s a good thing because it keeps them occupied and it gives them financial support for the family. But on the other hand it is very … I can say that it hurts me a lot … I feel very worried, very hurt, when I see them very exploited at home … They have to accept a very low price for their labour…. It might be paying only $3–4 per hour, and they have to accept, because they cannot work elsewhere (interview transcript, 1990).

To supplement their low incomes, many outworkers remain in receipt of unemployment benefits. This places these Australians in a very unstable and vulnerable legal position. Healy argued that exploitative outworking is a function of ethnic concentration, although he never established a link between the two, other than noting that outworking is often found within areas of ethnic concentration. But the so-called enclave economy offers much more than outworking jobs—indeed, outworking rarely occurs in the site of concentration. Outworking is a suburban-wide phenomenon. The employment offered in the Cabramatta commercial district is dominantly in retailing and consumer services.

Cabramatta is also a site for the pursuit of leisure activities, such as dining and for attending religious services.

It [Cabramatta] certainly is a benefit to the people themselves in buying, finding the
kind of things that they need—that’s a very definite plus, and also the people who are providing the services can concentrate on supplying the kinds of things they know the majority of the people want. It works both ways (interview transcript, 1990).

The Cabramatta area provides social as much as economic opportunities. A young Indo-Chinese entrepreneur noted that

Cabramatta is a good place—foundation place—for them to come in eat their food, people speak their language, read their newspapers, whatever they want, ... go to their religious temple (interview transcript, 1993).

Indo-Chinese-Australians from throughout the Fairfield LGA, and elsewhere in Sydney, travel to Cabramatta to shop, to spend leisure time, or to attend a religious service.

Cabramatta now becomes the regional centre, which is a very unique centre in NSW, to cater and to provide services to the Indo-Chinese community. They were travelling from Wollongong, from Newcastle and other parts of NSW to come to Cabramatta to do their shopping (interview transcript, 1990).

We have people coming here from all over the place and in fact Saturday and Sunday are the two busiest days of the week because of the people coming here from other areas en masse (interview transcript, 1993).

The ethnic concentration in Cabramatta is more an activity-space concentration of Indo-Chinese rather than a residential concentration. The outer areas of Fairfield LGA have progressed through a rural to urban conversion since 1980. Land releases have provided owner-occupier suburban housing for those Indo-Chinese-Australians keen to leave the medium-density accommodation around the Cabramatta commercial district. This has facilitated a small-scale residential dispersal of Indo-Chinese migrant families, but only to sites still proximate enough to Cabramatta to allow continued activity-space ethnic concentration.

Cabramatta has a visible expression of ‘oriental’ culture (Figure 3) and has been celebrated politically as a positive spatial expression of a successful social policy of multiculturalism. A local councillor on Fairfield City Council, who was himself a refugee from Vietnam, told me that

I think by concentrating in a certain area that would give you that chance to provide the means to promote your culture, to show to the people what we are, what we have, what we have brought along with us to this country (interview transcript, 1990).

He went on to observe that:

If you look at Cabramatta 10 years ago, it was a lot different.... Ten years ago when I first stayed at Cabramatta, it was just a one-horse town, and it was a dying town. Most of the contribution to that, is from the Asian community—the Indo-Chinese community—but people tend to overlook that (interview transcript, 1990).

An Italian-Australian office-bearer from the local Chamber of Commerce concurred:

The ones who really changed the face of Cabramatta both in the architecture and also the flavour, as you would put it Kevin, were the South-east Asians (interview transcript, 1993).

Indo-Chinese-Australians have culturally appropriated the space which is Cabramatta, and marked it in distinct ways. The genesis of this marking of space was in the early 1980s, when a number of bread and grocery shops with Chinese and Vietnamese signage were established. A local entrepreneur recalled his own family’s involvement:

... a grocery store ... very small indeed. We were first one. And then after that we noticed restaurants start popping up here and there, and then bread shops.... I think it was roughly about 1980–81, when we start to see the prospect of Cabramatta being ... more or less an oriental town ...
because of the composition of the migrants—mainly from Indo-China (interview transcript, 1993).

Later, particular types of roofing style and the striking uses of green and red in shopfront decoration became apparent.

You know at the very beginning it started with the signs you see, the Vietnamese-language signage, the Chinese characters, the Vietnamese-language up there, and that—it has gone a bit beyond with things like the Asian-style roof of the buildings (interview transcript, 1993).

In 1986, local businesses and cultural associations formed the Cabramatta Pailau Beautification Association. This organisation has organised Chinese New Year festivals in Cabramatta since that time. The most striking landscape impact of this association was the funding and construction of the Pailau Gateway (Figure 3). The Gateway was opened in 1989. It was intended to commemorate the refugees who had come to Australia, as well as to thank the Australian public and government for providing asylum.

The Beautification Association were able to garner support from diverse sources—the scroll placed on one of the monuments pays thanks to a vast cultural array of businesses and migrant associations. As the Italian-Australian officer-bearer of the Cabramatta Chamber of Commerce pointed out:

No, we weren’t against the oriental theme. You take the business people of this town—always got behind the Asians, they wanted to promote something. It was really a combined effort. Functions were held for this purpose and that, at 50 dollars a head. The business people always turned up in large numbers and make their contribution and give their support (interview transcript, 1993).

The cultures which are on display in Cabramatta are diverse, hybrid and dynamic. Business people—developers and landlords—
who were originally from Italy or the former Yugoslavia have not only supported the activities of the Beautification Association, they have also attempted to integrate an ‘oriental’ theme into their own buildings.

People who would want to put up a building, they would want that sort of Asiatic atmosphere if you like. Like Tony Cavallaro here. Council didn’t force him to have a building like that. He wanted to because the flavour here is Asian, and the business is Asian, and it makes his building more attractive not only to Asians who come to shop here, but even to Europeans because it is a different atmosphere (interview transcript, 1993).

Some of the local Indo-Chinese-Australians look upon these Italian-Australian versions of Indo-Chinese buildings with some amusement. These buildings may “have, in the perception of Westerners, an oriental theme, but to us, we think its a very Westernised attempt to be oriental” (interview transcript, 1993). But as another Indo-Chinese informant astutely pointed out: “it is very hard to have a definition of a genuinity of a Chinese architecture in Australia” (interview transcript, 1993). Indeed, the Pailau Gateway (Figure 3) is neither purely Chinese, nor Indo-Chinese, nor Australian. Rather, it is authentically Indo-Chinese-Australian, as are many of the icons and built form in Cabramatta’s commercial district.

The role of the local town planners of the Fairfield City Council in the development of the ‘oriental’ theme in Cabramatta has been interesting. The influence of Indo-Chinese councillors had led to Council initiating seminars and public meetings with residents, associations and businesses on proposed re-developments and the consideration of new development control plans. An Indo-Chinese councillor outlined how he had initiated

seminars on the projects ... like the arch-gate down in Freedom Plaza, and the Vietnam War memorial, the colour of the paving—the path-paving—we tried to maintain an active role in that, also, the floral banners you see on the streets of Cabramatta.... We encouraged the whole town to go for that theme (interview transcript, 1993).

However, Council’s attempts to be more culturally prescriptive, in terms of theme and symbolism, were sometimes clumsy and insensitive. A Strategic Planning Officer of Council admitted that the regulations in their 1989 Development Control Plan were far too rigid (field notes, 1993). The Plan had insisted upon Council’s version of an Asian or oriental theme. The Mayor of Fairfield agreed that enforcing an Asian theme was impractical. The encouragement of the theme among developers and land-holders, rather than an insistence, is now considered more appropriate (field notes, 1993).

Local business and community leaders have also been active in counteracting the deleterious publicity which Cabramatta suffers. They are acutely aware of the negative portrayal of Cabramatta in the media and by critics of immigration and multi-culturalism.

Because look at this place ... the bad press we’re getting—all the time everyone always bagging on Cabramatta.... they ask ‘where do you live’ and I say Cabramatta, ‘where do you work?’ Cabramatta; ‘why do live there, isn’t it dangerous’? And I say ‘no, of course not’. I mean to me—I’m not reluctant, not hesitant, to say that I’m from Cabramatta, I think it’s good to publicise the fact. People feel ... they say ‘Oh jeeze, it’s so bad, people get this’ and they all hear bad stories about it. Every time it goes in the press it reinforces their rumours (interview transcript, 1993).

John Newman, the murdered Member of Parliament, had often expressed his disdain for the media reporting on Cabramatta (see Newman, 1988a, 1988b). He outlined this in interviews I had with him in both 1990 and 1993. In a speech to the NSW State Parliament in 1988 John Newman made the following comments.
Over the next few years it is my intention to improve the image of Cabramatta by continuing campaigns such as the successful 1987 “Stand up for Cabramatta” campaign.... Slowly, Cabramatta is developing a better image and newspapers are now quoting headings such as: Cabramatta the Pearl of the West Trouble Spot? The reality is a booming shopper’s paradise ...

Go West for the Taste of the East The media has now picked up the real face of Cabramatta and given the Electorate a fair go (Newman, 1988a, p. 37).

Newman was proud to announce to me in 1990 that the good news stories were beginning to outnumber the poor depictions (field notes, 1990).8 The influence of the community’s beautification works, and of the Newman-inspired ‘Stand up for Cabramatta’ publicity campaign, had been an important part of this image improvement. But the political and theoretical odds were stacked against this community’s assertion of its diverse and dynamic social and cultural contributions. The anti-Asian socio-biology arguments of Hanson’s One Nation Party pointed to the ‘Indo-Chineseness’ of Cabramatta as spatial proof of the failure of the social policy of multi-culturalism. Furthermore, the academic attention has been mostly disparaging. Either it has shared the Hanson criticism of ‘ethnic separatism’, or it has searched for socioeconomic disadvantage, and then has made the ecologically fallacious assumption that the disadvantage so found was a result of ethnic concentration.

To many of the Indo-Chinese-Australians that I have interviewed, Cabramatta is a place for the social and economic adjustment to a new society. It is also a celebrated spatial contribution to cultural diversity. The three dimensions of Australia’s social policy of multi-culturalism—cultural expression, social equity and economic efficiency (Office of Multi-cultural Affairs, 1989, p. vii)—are realised by many Indo-Chinese-Australians in this area of ethnic concentration. The Indo-Chinese in Cabramatta have greater levels of control over the pace and extent at which they incorporate changes to their ways of living; changes to their culture. Cabramatta has provided an opportunity for a minority ethnic group in Australia to mark out a space, to demonstrate their culture, and to participate in the wider project of multi-culturalism. They are also able better to maintain their own cultural traditions. If these are used as measures of the success of migrant settlement, then Cabramatta is a positive model of migrant settlement in a multi-cultural society. A politics of difference approach would use such measures to assess ethnic concentration. It would allow positive aspects of ethnic concentration to be identified and brought into the analysis. A politics of difference approach also allows urban researchers to valorise the interventions of those who are confronting the forces of cultural imperialism.

Conclusion

There is now a changed political environment in Australia, in which the ‘politics of sameness’ is dominating, and in which cultural difference is pathologised. Conservative policies are now being considered and implemented. These tend to be settlement policy and cultural policy which find their philosophical bases in the older theoretical approaches to ethnic relations and ethnic concentration. Those theories also have profound implications for the ways a place like Cabramatta is depicted. This has been a story about a landscape which is being symbolically contested. Cabramatta and other ethnic concentrations have figured centrally in political debates. The ‘cultural stakes’ in these policy debates are high. It would be better that urban researchers adopt approaches which value the positive aspects of ethnic concentration. The politics of difference is one such approach. Some of the established theories were able to hint at positive functions of concentration. The neo-Weberians recognised the benefit of cultural preservation, and the Chicago School saw concentrations as havens for integration and...
adaptation. However, these established theories ultimately pathologised ethnic concentration. The politics of difference is a more progressive approach, in which cultural and urban practitioners can assist rather than condemn those who live in such contested landscapes.

Notes

1. In 1994 the Federal Office of Multicultural Affairs commissioned a telephone survey of 1000 voters on issues of multi-culturalism and ethnic tolerance. The nation-wide poll was conducted by Irving Saulwick. Some of the results have been reproduced in People & Place, 1996, 4(1) pp. 65–66. One of the questions was ‘Do you agree or disagree that if people from a particular ethnic background want to mix mainly with themselves, they should not be criticised for doing so?’ In total 62.7 per cent of respondents disagreed, indicating a widespread popular opposition to cultural difference and ethnic concentration. It is worth noting that those respondents who had a university education expressed a greater level of intolerance to cultural difference (68.3 per cent). My argument is that the established theories of ethnicity and identity, as taught within universities, encourage an antagonism to cultural difference. The results of the Saulwick poll may support that view.

2. I should also note that there are further criticisms of these theories of ethnic concentration which could not be realistically covered in the space available to me in this paper. A much more comprehensive reassessment than that attempted here is necessary. A retheorisation of ethnic concentration, such as those carried out in the 1980s (Jackson and Smith, 1981; Peach et al., 1981) is much needed. Such a review would need to take on board an array of new theories of identity and citizenship, including the insights and reflections of feminism and post-structuralism.

3. The Chicago School theorists also left so-called natural orders unproblematised, such as laissez-faire capitalism and bourgeois ‘suburban’ values (Jackson, 1984, p. 169). The Chicago urbanists were also social conservatives on gender issues. Sibley (1995, pp. 37, 40–41) has revealed how Park and other male urban sociologists of the 1920s were strongly anti-feminist, and that they regarded the research carried out by women to be ‘unscientific’.

4. The application of these ideas in sexuality and space research has also had a lasting impact in that field (Lyod and Rowntree, 1978).

5. The Australian Constitution provided governments with the power to exclude certain ‘races’ from voting, to refuse persons of foreign citizenship from political representation, and to pass racially differentiated law (Chapter I, sections 25, 44:[i], 51:[xxvi]).

6. An AGB McNair poll found that 10 per cent of a sample of 1032 would vote for Hanson’s One Nation Party in the next Federal election (The Sydney Morning Herald, 6 May 1997, pp. 1, 6). This finding was similar to a Bulletin, 28 April 1997 poll. Other polls indicated that one-quarter of all voters were prepared to vote for Hanson’s political party. Leaders in the Federal government were initially reluctant to repudiate directly her statements. They were wary of opposing what could have been ‘mainstream opinion’. The conservative Coalition parties’ leadership were also keen not to undermine their own championing of ‘free speech’ and their rejection of ‘political correctness’. However, following the reports of poll results, which indicated a flush of conservative votes to the One Nation Party, Federal government ministers have belatedly launched direct critiques of Hanson’s statements and policies.

7. The role of Fairfield City Council in the evolution of the Cabramatta cultural precinct is the focus of a separate and forthcoming research paper. Council’s obstinacy, and cultural insensitivity on issues such as the ‘culturally correct’ placement of statues by the Pailau Association, and their restrictive attempts to control the theme of buildings, are topics which I address in that forthcoming work.

8. Like any politician, parochial and egocentric, he emphasised his role in that image improvement. It was an improvement through which cultural difference was being celebrated rather than feared. It is ironic that he was implicated in the demise of Cabramatta’s image. The sensationalist media reportage of his own murder undid years of his own public (place) relations work.

References


