

between **sydney** and **hong kong**

*Doing Cultural Research Without
Guarantees*

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Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact.

Raymond Williams

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

William Blake

Dinner, we were told, would be a simple affair. Just a basic meal in the main cafeteria of Lingnan University between a group of us from the Centre for Cultural Research and a few of our hosts from the Department of Cultural Studies at the University. We'd arrived a few hours earlier from Sydney and, after a ten-hour flight, much of which had been spent picking at bland airline food, I was looking forward to some chilli and spice to wake up my taste buds. We all sat down at a large round table upon which the cafeteria staff placed a number of white teapots of Chinese tea. We also received our white plates, bowls and chopsticks. The entree arrived soon after; a selection of spring rolls, dim sums, prawn toasts and dumplings. We were asked if we'd like some soup: most of us said yes. More white plates and bowls were dispatched around the table. Then the first courses arrived, a range of dishes: noodles, chicken and cashews, different kinds of vegetables and rice. After a brief pause to carefully identify the cashews and warn the colleagues with peanut allergies, we continued eating and talking, eating and talking.

The second courses appeared: tofu and mushrooms, more noodles but this time with prawns. More white bowls and plates. More tea. The third course of fish and seafood joined the many other plates around the table. Fresh canisters of boiled rice also arrived. After several more dishes of chicken, fish and seafood combinations, I lost count of what course we were

up to. Eventually plates of fruit came for dessert, which we ate while we marvelled over our appetites and the amount of food we'd just consumed immediately after telling our hosts that we really weren't *that* hungry. Eventually, we left what surely was a banquet, yet which our hosts continued to call just a simple dinner, and strolled across the university campus and back to our accommodation, ready for the next day's discussions on the theme of 'Community Interface and Cultural Research'.

The 'simple meal' that would progress to become an elaborate lunch or dinner was a pattern that would be repeated over the next few days. In fact, each day seemed to be constructed around an important meal, which would in itself be a pivotal moment of sharing and exchange, an intense *mise en abyme* of the discussions and exchanges that would take place on either side of it, in the mornings or afternoon sessions of our busy schedule of presentations, dialogues and field trips. As a group of researchers from the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, we were visiting Lingnan University to take part in a joint research workshop. The first part of the exchange had taken place in Sydney in 2002 on the theme 'Cultural Research: What is it and Who needs it?'; now in 2004, we were in Hong Kong.

In both cities the workshops involved a diverse set of activities—presentations of papers and research projects, and cultural tours. In Sydney the site visits included a trip to Cabra Vale Diggers Club (which commemorates both Australian and Vietnamese war veterans), a multicultural tour of the Fairfield district (*Tune in to Fairfield City*, discussed in this issue), a trip to a women's health centre, a wander around the outer suburban display home estate *HomeWorld*, and a trip to Kings Cross to muse over the seedy history of Victoria Street in the most densely populated square mile of the Australian continent.¹ At the same time, the exchange was not just envisaged as a simple swap of already-in-progress research projects, but as an opportunity for something much greater. It was intended to create a space in which to explore what it means (practically, conceptually, institutionally, ethically) to do cultural research guided by reciprocity and an *engagement with others*, and to interrogate the processes involved in ways of both creating and *translating* different knowledge bases across sectors that have not always been able to talk to each other, let alone work easily together.

This exchange was also in many ways an exercise in hospitality. We were trying to figure out, in practice, how to *do* openness, reciprocity and engagement, how to establish connections across both institutional *and* national borders, not to mention across the constellation of other differences—linguistic, cultural, ethnic and racial, age and gender—over which the exchange was also superimposed. In other words, the exchange was also viewed as an important exercise in *hospitality* in a world which not only seemed to be becoming steadily inhospitable, but also increasingly divided into monolithically unified and

oppositional blocs of difference, guided mainly by fear and suspicion: 'You're either with us or against us'.

For Derrida, hospitality means inviting and welcoming the foreigner, the stranger, the other. It is a deconstructive practice—and deconstruction in turn can be viewed as a practice of hospitality—in that the welcoming of the other is at the heart of both.² But, as Derrida suggests, it is also a fundamentally conditional practice, and the very possibility of hospitality is always dependent on the simultaneous setting of certain conditions and limits prior to its expression or demonstration. Hospitality is also invariably, he argues, structured by an imbalance of power between 'guest' and 'host': the guest is welcomed into the space of the home (or the suburb or the city or the nation), but the owner remains in control of the transactions carried out by all within it. The conditional nature of hospitality, therefore, guarantees that the host stays in charge of both property and identity, even serving perhaps to further secure the host's role as benefactor, master or ruler.

'Unconditional hospitality' on the other hand, is hospitality without limits. This requires the ability to relinquish both mastery of the home and control of the other. It also requires welcoming the other without the *guarantee of knowing in advance* who or what the other might be. Hospitality without limits or conditions is therefore a kind of 'pure' hospitality. According to Derrida, it is not only highly impractical but also very risky:

For unconditional hospitality to take place, you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or killing everyone ...

Those are the risks in pure hospitality, if there is such a thing, and I'm not that sure that there is.³

Conditional hospitality, Derrida suggests, always carries within it the trace or tension, the idea or vestige—the virtual as potential in other words—of what this unconditional 'pure' hospitality might actually be like. For the guest to feel truly welcomed, it is necessary that 'the host must, in a moment of madness, tear up the understanding between him and the guest, act with "excess", make an absolute gift of his property, which is of course impossible. But that is the only way the guest can go away feeling as if he was really made at home'.⁴

For Derrida, hospitality presents a way of 'being-with-others' which is infinitely preferable to the concept of community. While I like these ideas, and while during our visit to Lingnan University there were most certainly moments of 'excess' which seemed to transcend the limits of conditional hospitality, I want now to consider the complexities surrounding exchange and engagement as a kind of hospitality, and some of the difficulties of acting it out in the concrete settings of actually 'working-with-others'; others who, in particular, are often positioned in the very terms and nature of an exchange between two

parties, between two institutions, as representatives of 'community' or as members of a 'common culture'. In other words, I am interested here in a specific context of everyday life as a way of *talking back* to theory, and thereby hopefully opening up a dialogue or exchange with the static hypotheses which theory inevitably sets up.

But I am also, at the same time, trying to work through some of the consequences of defining cultural research as a practice that *can* and *does* connect with the grounded worlds of lived experience while still trying to be able to hold on to the host of theoretical complexities inevitably involved in engaging with and working with others. This is, then, to shift the emphasis a little, and to put theory *into play* with some concrete, material settings without abandoning all the usual, often 'suspect', conceptual categories ('community', 'experience', 'common culture', 'everyday life' and so on) in advance.

Over the last ten years or so both research policy and research culture paradigms have fundamentally changed. What has clearly emerged from this period of ongoing (perhaps permanent) transition is an increasing emphasis on concepts such as efficiency, productivity, performance and accountability within universities. Expressed in reforms that suggest the merits of 'entrepreneurialism' and 'commercialisation' be recognised as key sources for ensuring higher education's continuing viability and means of operation, this new way of administering universities utilises many of the key principles of economic rationalism (or market fundamentalism, as it's also called). A range of recent initiatives, including various pressures to meet the 'needs of industry' and attract external funding from industry partners, a related trend towards collaborative modes of research cooperation, and the wider redistribution of resources for teaching and research, have directly transformed the way in which academic research is conducted and knowledge is produced. Together with a new managerialism responsible for implementing quality assurance measures, performance indicators, and monitoring research 'outcomes and outputs', these changes testify to a shift towards more rigidly economic and corporatist models of university governance. This is, in short, the rise of what Simon Marginson and Mark Considine have called the 'enterprise university', where the production of knowledge is governed first and foremost by neoliberal principles and the economic bottom line of market forces.⁵

For the humanities in Australia, these changes in the values underpinning research have been a challenge. According to a statement issued by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), the humanities 'are the source of many of our insights into the human condition broadly, and to our understanding and managing the consequences of moving to a knowledge-based economy'.⁶ In the manner perhaps of all good statements about humanism, this is rather paradoxical: the current climate of reduced funding for universities,

along with the explicit drive towards entrepreneurial and externally-funded research, poses considerable problems for humanities scholarship, to the extent that it is increasingly difficult to even take up the challenge of meeting such claims. One direct consequence of this situation is that, confronted by a shrinking teaching sector, many humanities doctoral graduates are unable to secure academic positions and are instead working in a range of cultural industries outside of tertiary education. Cultural production, and research into culture more generally, are then, in the broadest sense, now much more widely distributed, taking place in an expanding range of settings, organisations and industries. This is clearly registered in the range of descriptors that have emerged to describe the current situation: the ‘information economy’, ‘the new economy’, ‘the knowledge economy’, the ‘thin air economy’ and so on. What is behind this taxonomy of terms is a general argument that immaterial labour such as intellectual assets or expertise has a value just as much if not more so than tangible physical assets, and that, as more and more societies embrace ‘knowledge economies’, it is precisely this form of expertise that will be increasingly desirable, indeed essential. Within these debates knowledge in general, and culture in particular, is positioned as a calculable quantity or *resource*, as a kind of *standing reserve* tied to social and economic development, and national innovation and productivity.⁷

These changes in the broader research landscape have also combined with what many see as a ‘crisis of method’ in the humanities, particularly within the area of cultural studies. On the one hand there is a growing frustration and impatience with the overtheorisation of much writing within the field, with the insularity and narrowness of its methods and debates, and with the endless recycling of a limited and predictable set of theoretical ideas, themes and texts.⁸ For others, meanwhile, the emphasis on auditing and accountability, on usefulness and relevance, and on the drive to establish connections between the production of knowledge and specific outcomes and benefits (including what has been termed in the latest research assessment exercise—‘impact’) represents a dangerous devaluing of humanities research and the forms of work it has usually taken.⁹ Within this difficult environment *the* key issue is the question of what form and direction contemporary humanities research should take. In other words, what does it mean for research to be ‘useful’ and ‘relevant’, and what are the consequences of this definitional shift?

One of the most significant results of this transformed research landscape is the growing recognition that the academy is not an autonomous sphere of knowledge production isolated from the wider community and other cultural institutions. This recognition has in turn required the academy to consider the complex relationships and articulations it has with social, political, economic and cultural forces once considered to be ‘beyond’ its realm, with existing political and cultural agendas and with wider social movements, and with a range of non-academic sectors including community organisations, government departments and

cultural industries in general. The new research practices being developed at places like Lingnan University's Department of Cultural Studies and the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research, designed to pursue research partnerships with such sectors, are thus a conscious response to, and a reflection on as well as an ongoing commentary about, some of these fundamental changes affecting humanities scholarship both in Australia and internationally.

The term *cultural research* has been coined to describe such forms of collaborative, engaged, cross-sectoral, externally focused, even experimental, kinds of research practice. But, what values should underpin the practice of cultural research? If cultural research is a distinctive way of engaging with the cultural and political world, must all cultural research projects aim to make specific political interventions? If researchers are successful in shifting the intellectual locus outside the confined boundaries of academia and engaging with diverse communities and groups, can this achieve a democratic space of cultural exchange and a genuine ethics of reciprocity? In what ways can researchers engage with the 'community', especially at a time when the concept itself is undergoing redefinition and re-evaluation?

Cultural studies developed as a critical practice concerned with the study of everyday life, 'ordinary' cultures, and the dynamics of lived experience. Cultural research both extends and enlarges this approach to create a viable research practice that can engage with the issues of the day, and specifically with the exceptionally complex cultural environments of contemporary society. It positions itself as a mode of self-reflexive, engaged knowledge and analysis, which, precisely because it is oriented towards everyday life, has connections beyond the academy. Unlike older models of research that favoured a high degree of 'scholarly isolationism', such newer models of research practice depend on collaborations between a heterogeneous set of researchers from both within and outside the university working together on specific questions and problems in localised contexts.¹⁰

These developments within the humanities have, of course, taken place within the larger framework of the reconceptualisation and commercial reorientation of university research in general. Encouraged by both funding bodies and universities themselves, these new research models have even been given their own designation: 'Mode 2' knowledge production. According to its proponents this is more than just 'applied' research; as a practice characterised by reflexivity, transdisciplinarity, social accountability, and empirical research in material contexts, it can give rise to genuinely new knowledge and novel ideas, and opportunities for addressing pressing cultural needs and issues.¹¹ For its opponents, meanwhile, an emphasis on innovation dependent on a demonstration of utility may at best suit the needs of short-term political agendas and at worst threaten the very production of new ideas. Despite these contrasting views, though, this is a research culture that is also now seen as unavoidable or indeed inescapable: for Nowotny et al, for example, Mode 2 knowledge

production has ‘developed in the context of a mode-2 society’ where the boundaries between ‘state’ and ‘market’, ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘culture’ and ‘industry’ are everywhere blurred.¹²

This is the background against which cultural research has developed, and the context for the research agendas it has encouraged. But it would be a mistake to see it as merely reducible to, or simply determined by, the economic circumstances that have provided some of the conditions shaping its emergence. Instead, cultural research has been able to develop as an effective, strategic and, importantly, *pragmatic* way of exploring the contested meanings and values of specific sites and daily practices within social life, guided by a commitment to both sharing *and* producing this knowledge with groups and communities who may find it useful and who can benefit by actually doing something with it.¹³ While this approach has the potential to lead to an expanded range of ‘topics’, many of which may have never been traditionally considered within the domain of humanities research, it also lends itself to an expanded sense of what actually constitutes the role of *research*, which could include influencing policy to motivating alternative modes of critical intervention.

From this point of view culture (after Raymond Williams) may be ordinary, but politics is often ordinary too.¹⁴ Following this logic, cultural research, therefore, aims to be more than just *studies of culture*: it will also be keenly attuned to investigating the politics of culture, that pragmatic level of politics where meanings, values and relations of power are established and struggled over, negotiated and contested. An understanding of culture as complexity, as everyday, and as *lived*, is crucial here. While references to a ‘whole way of life’ have, as Tony Bennett argues, become a ‘more or less ritual incantation’ in cultural studies, this has not necessarily translated into work that takes actual lives or the real-life experiences of groups or communities empirically seriously, or conversely, which gives serious attention to understanding the complexity of cultural processes as themselves *ways of life*.¹⁵ Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke put this wider issue well in an editorial for this journal a while ago:

Every new thought demands its own poetics, and thought is not guaranteed by the mastery of ‘theory’, a potentially moralising genre—socially groundless, history-free, weighed down by a mass of references to a ‘world’ composed of other theoretical writings—that cannot engage with the cultural differences it invokes endlessly.¹⁶

But, it is also the case that ‘theory’ is not the only ‘potentially moralising genre’ around; in recent years a number of ‘critical introductions’ to cultural studies have appeared which follow the same pattern. Socially groundless, history-free yet adamantly invoking the need for (*other*) researchers to engage with the cultural differences of others, these textbooks fit perfectly within an international publishing market geared more towards the production of transnational theoretical fluency and cultural studies as a global discipline, rather than the

detailed exploration of particular formations. Similarly, in *Inside Culture*, for example, Nick Couldry prescribes a rigid schema which, he declares, is necessary no less for the very future of cultural studies: ethnography good, textualism bad; sociology good, post-structuralist philosophy bad. For Couldry, 'Nothing less will do if the democratic vision of cultural studies is to be fulfilled on an international scale'.¹⁷

Alternatively, what I want to propose here is hopefully a little more humble and modest, yet no less serious or 'political'. It seeks a connection with what Stuart Hall once called the 'necessary modesty of cultural studies as an intellectual project'.¹⁸ As a critical practice, cultural research recognises the need to think about how best to create alliances and networks across difference, and it aims to multiply the spaces in which dialogue potentially can occur, as well as to engender more open and engaged forms of intellectual and political association. Yet, by not claiming to know the best interpretive model in advance, and by not simply applying theory *to* lived experience but by starting *from* cultural experience as it is actually lived in distinct historical formations, cultural research can have an epistemological and political value (as well as a cosmopolitan connection with others) that is in fact ironically tied to the parochialism of its approach and to the acceptance of the partiality and the limitations of what it presumes to already know.¹⁹ By taking lived experience seriously, then, in all of its positivity, complexity *and* mundanity, cultural research can also be seen as a productive revisiting of many of the original questions and promises articulated by the project of cultural studies. In this sense, the turn toward community engagement can be seen not just as a pragmatic compromise or merely a reaction to neoliberal government policies, but also as a careful and strategic positioning, or even 'return', to some of the key principles and agendas motivating the formation of cultural studies in the first place.

The entry on 'Cultural Studies' in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* provides a definition of what I am calling here 'engagement':

The self-situating impulse of cultural studies foregrounds issues of *intellectual* authority and authorship as they arise in the course of particular projects; much work in cultural studies shares with other forms of qualitative inquiry a strong interest in the use of dialogic, collaborative, and composite modes of writing and research to foster more open and responsive relations between academics and the communities with whom they work.²⁰

While not all the projects shared and discussed in the CCR/Lingnan exchange—or indeed those being undertaken at both institutions—involve partnerships with non-academic groups or industry partners, many of them nonetheless were, are, characterised by a strong concern with precisely what the statement above calls the *dialogic* dimensions of research: its

connections with what has been referred to (not unproblematically) as the so-called 'real' world outside the university. It is important to stress the tricky language of positivism ('a real world, real life' objectively and transparently accessible) that gets frequently invoked here; after all, one of the major contributions of cultural studies has been to comprehensively question the representations and languages that govern the way in which the 'real' is actually made and known.

In fact, after a morning of debate at Lingnan along the lines of what 'open and responsive' relations with communities actually may mean, and what this might possibly constitute as a piece of academic research, we all climbed onto a very large, air-conditioned (i.e. freezing) tour bus and left the university. This was a good move, I thought, remembering Lawrence Grossberg's advice that 'in every particular instance, cultural studies has to be made up as it goes along. Thus cultural studies always reflects on and situates itself and its claims, limits its field, acknowledges its incompleteness'.²¹

We travelled through the dense forests of towering multi-block housing estates for which Hong Kong is famous, and headed towards Kowloon. I craned my neck and looked out of the bus window, amazed by the bamboo scaffolding being used in the construction of new high-rise apartment blocks, and by the juxtapositions of old and new, traditional, modern and future-oriented. Against the jagged skyline and the mirrored facades of the architectural landmarks on Hong Kong Island, other parts of the city revealed pockets of traditional architecture, old temples, rural-looking districts, and even walled villages. The sleek and stark vertical lines of a world dedicated to achieving the beautiful symmetry of market forces, given such monumentally material form in steel, glass, concrete, optical fibre and plastic in the Central district, sat side-by-side with horizontal worlds of low-density living. Looking at these vertical monuments of finance, it was hard to dispute that verticality, as de Certeau would have it, is first and foremost a statement of power. Outside of the CBD though, verticality and horizontality are not so easily opposed.²²

We were on our way to a meeting with a group of older Hong Kong residents at a local community centre. These elderly Hong Kongers were in the middle of a dispute with the local authorities in a bid to stop their forced removal from the neighbourhoods in which their lives were well established. They met with each other regularly and organised their struggle from a small, low-ceilinged building, and so far their activism had stopped their displacement from the area. We sat down in the main room and one by one were introduced by Kit-ling, one of our hosts at the university who works with this community (see this issue), to the elderly people who had come out on this day to meet with us and tell us about their struggle.

We were divided into small groups, and each group was escorted around the neighbourhood by a couple of representatives from the community. The two older women who

led our group explained their fight while taking us on a tour of the various horizontal and vertical worlds within which they lived their lives: we visited the community health centre where they went for check-ups, the local market where they did their shopping, and every few yards or so we'd run into some of their friends to whom they'd stop and explain the purpose of our visit and we'd take group photos. In the market I gaped at the tables and stalls covered in fish and kinds of seafood I'd never set eyes on before, fresh tofu in thick white blocks, and exotic fresh fruits and vegetables I'd only ever occasionally encountered. One of our guides noticed my amazement at the display and insisted I buy whatever I liked the look of. She suggested certain fruits for me to try, pointed out her favourites, and instructed the vendor to fill up plastic bags while she bargained for me and got the best price.

By the time we left the market, I had several plastic shopping bags weighed down with exotic fruit. In the tiny apartments where the women lived in nearby tower blocks, seemingly miles above the dense opacity of the streets below, we heard more about the multiple, diverse histories that the women had brought to this place, through both planned and acquired cultural inheritances and through the more haphazard geographical movements of families and relatives, both of which, I now think in retrospect, are unable to be contained by the political and territorial coordinates of coherencies such as the 'city', the 'nation' and especially not an SAR (Special Administrative Region). We returned to the community centre for more photos, and more discussion, as the plastic bags in which I was carrying around my exotic fruits etched deeper and deeper grooves in my palms.

Back on the bus, I thought about the women's tactical occupation of their neighbourhood, their place, their community. Powerful though it is, globalisation, the worldwide, the teleological trajectory of growth and development—'progress' in other words—may never abolish the local in every instance, perhaps in any instance, but that does not mean that spaces do not often have to be fought for, defended with whatever resources are available in order to prevent their disappearance.²³ Locality is fragile, the ground of constant historical transformation, cultural appropriation and contestation. This is the daily praxis of occupation: the concrete, visceral and mundane ways in which lives are lived and cultures sustained. These everyday negotiations and conflicts over urban space are complex practices of living that will always unsettle the bounded and regulated plan, the evenness of the grid or map. Within the settings of urban life and culture, the inescapable *everyday* unruliness of the different and the unexpected inevitably challenges the imposition of notions suggesting coherence, wholeness and cohesion.

Does such openness, such complexity, rule then against all associations of commonality? Where does this leave community and the very idea of a 'common culture'? Wholeness and commonality (those favourites of Williams) especially seem oddly unsuited to those spaces of everyday life increasingly characterised by relations of multiple division and

contradiction, where very little is shared and nothing can be taken for granted. But for me, this is where cultural studies can be particularly productive. Rather than rejecting in advance all master narratives, all notions of commonality and coherence (such as 'community' for example) because they are universalist or totalising, cultural studies is a practice that can understand the spaces and moments when such positions can be mobilised for articulating precisely what can be a recognition of individual particularity and difference. In this way, it is a form of intellectual work that can engage with the specificity *and* contingency of contexts in which groups advance their claims to be listened to and be heard, to be 'present' rather than excluded, and to participate, fully and equally, in the production of culture.

This is what Grossberg defines as the 'radical contextualism' of cultural studies, its attention to the particular relationships between context, knowledge and power. As both a form of inquiry *and* intervention, cultural studies uses the intellectual resources needed to best understand the relations of power while simultaneously recognising that contestation is not a reality or a given in every instance, but rather an assumption that can grasp the variability, provisionality and specificity of the particular conditions in which power, and the struggle against it, occurs. As Grossberg also goes on to say, the context of research is not empirically given beforehand, nor provided by theory in advance, and indeed it can be as 'narrow as a neighbourhood at a particular moment' or as 'broad as global capitalism'.²⁴

We left the community centre, and the bus drove us on to Chungking Mansions, where we were due for lunch (of course) in one of the Indian restaurants. Chungking Mansions is a huge, sprawling high-rise complex of low-cost accommodation operators (guest houses, hotels, dormitories), shops and cheap restaurants. While backpackers take advantage of the cheap rooms in the guesthouses, many immigrant workers from neighbouring, less-developed countries in the region live in the long-term boarding houses. Indians and Pakistanis run most of the restaurants, and Chungking Mansions itself is seen to signify the large number of so-called 'South Asians' who live in Hong Kong. Despite their long-standing residency though, members of the Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese communities still float precariously somewhere between being seen as 'non-citizens', 'illegal immigrants' and stateless people.²⁵

At home on SBS I'd seen Wong Kar-Wai's film *Chungking Express*, about the labyrinthine underworld lived within the messy assemblage of the interconnected seventeen storey blocks that make up the Mansions, and in fact we'd actually seen an excerpt from the film that morning, shown to us by Violet, one of the Lingnan postgrads, whose MA thesis looks at the Indian diaspora in Hong Kong. I realised that I had been carrying around images from the film in my head since first arriving in Hong Kong, and I also realised that most of the time since arriving, many of my experiences were being measured against vaguely equivalent scenes from various Wong Kar Wai films. Not so surprising I thought, given that his films are in themselves both portraits of the city and analyses of the mundane intensity

that the city provides. The opaque exigencies of everyday life—eating, smoking, walking the streets, shopping, moving through the city, sex, cooking a meal—are central to the stories he tells, yet conveyed as belonging to a perceptual economy more dominated by the experiential and the sentient, by affect and distraction, than linear narrative or interpretation.

This was palpably clear to me as we stood in our big group and queued up for the tiny, rickety metal lift that was to transport us to the 15th floor and the Indian restaurant. The night before I'd read a warning about these lifts in my Lonely Planet guide:

Chungking Mansions is like a medieval town that has been under permanent siege since the 1600s, surrounded by a nether-world of sleaze and horrifying odours. Don't seek sanctuary in the lifts unless you have to; these are like steel coffins on cables.²⁶

Our multi-course Indian meal, a selection chosen by the owner of the restaurant was, again, a feast. Once more it was in fact too much, and the excessively hospitable owner insisted on packing our leftovers in plastic containers to take with us: more plastic bags to carry around. On the way out, I stopped at a shop and bought a couple of small silk purses to take home as gifts. The couple that ran the shop asked me where I was from, and then told me about their son, studying economics at a university in Sydney. They were very interested in Sydney, about the daily life of the city, about academic life at a university, and so on.

Such encounters—accidental, spontaneous, and in which distance of a sort does seem to really implode—are increasingly common as reminders of a mundane globalisation constantly creating new and unfamiliar interconnections between people and place. But we need to remember that while such transnational connections are often eagerly taken up as evidence of a 'global community' or of a world shrinking in size, and while the transnational academic, the Hong Kong Indian resident, the Indonesian guest worker, and international student may share a world, and even share a poignant moment here and there, the vectors that connect them (either strongly or tenuously) to each other and to the spaces in which they live and work are still experienced in highly uneven, variable and asymmetrical ways. It is symptomatic of this banal globalism, in fact, that researchers can fly around the world and quite literally chew up lots of resources while casting around for ways to make themselves relevant.²⁷

Yet discourses also travel, and what has become increasingly apparent is that the distinctive homogeneity of the travelling discourses about this 'world picture' are often in stark contrast to the realities they actually seek to describe. They do not do justice to the complex negotiations of different, overlapping and constantly shifting 'centres' and 'peripheries' for people whose lives are cast across multiple sites and roles. They also tend not to capture or even register a sense of the different scales at which these new and not so new cultural exchanges occur. Indeed, through these spatial dynamics and transformations the whole

concept of a 'local community' or a 'local culture' is thrown into question. With accelerating mobility, travellers *and* destinations, guests *and* hosts, workers *and* bosses, are all transformed in conjunction with the movements of the world economy, and are positioned *simultaneously* across multiple scales, from the scale of the local neighbourhood to the scale of global capitalism.

Culture then can no longer be seen as a 'place' of wholeness where meanings are brought together into some sort of unity or with some finite closure; nor can 'place' be seen simply as a 'surface' colonised by globalisation or as simply the site of locality and a coherent and bounded culture, typically conceived as only ever 'local'. Rather both must be seen as terrains constituted by the multi-scalar orderings of contemporary life, across which the dialogical encounters between radically different groups occur and are negotiated. This provides a very different model of both 'culture' and 'place' for cultural research, whereby an older notion of separate and discrete cultures must give way to an understanding of porosity, inter-connections, flows and translation. And, precisely because it is interested in paying attention to the empirically grounded and the contextually (though not necessarily locally) specific, cultural research is correspondingly concerned with addressing the cultures and places that are in fact contested and struggled over, whose identity and meaning is disputed and which cannot be reduced to a single narrative or a sense of coherence and closure, without providing an analysis that seeks to secure a neat unity or theoretical resolution. This is also, therefore, to create a space for the singularity of particular cultural sites or experiences, and the specific materialities, the saturated densities, of concrete contexts within the asymmetrical, though nonetheless shared and juxtaposed, geometries of power. But theory is not marginal or redundant to this exercise—quite the contrary. As Stuart Hall once put it, 'The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency'.²⁸ This is not by any means to propose an anti-theoretical stance, but it is to occupy a position where one is always unavoidably forced to wrestle with the conditions and problems of trying to develop intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice. This complexity of analysis across multiple discursive levels and perspectives, locally practical yet also theoretically informed, which is simultaneously descriptive and reflexive, can be understood as a distinctive form of cultural expertise that is developed specifically for this kind of research but which has a utility far beyond it. And in this sense, it can be considered as a form of cultural expertise that is not only very useful but can be translated *across* contexts.

I had to excuse myself from my conversation with the gift shop-owning couple for our group was due at our next site visit, the Asian Migrant Centre in Kowloon. There we were told about the large number of female domestic workers from all over Asia (particularly Indonesia, the Phillipines and Thailand) employed by wealthy families in Hong Kong, and the services—from providing financial aid to arranging legal representation—which the

Centre provides for them. Most of these domestic workers are of course young women and, as members of the 'precarious' labour force at the mercy of the fluctuations of global capitalism, their fates are often uncertain and tied to forces over which they have limited or even no control: from unemployment and under payment or non-payment to physical abuse and even torture. Indonesians in fact constitute the second largest 'minority population' of Hong Kong, and most are employed as domestic workers.²⁹ Indeed there are so many Indonesian domestic workers employed around the world generally, we were told, that domestic labour constitutes one-third of Indonesia's GDP.

We met with a couple of young Indonesian women who'd been employed as domestic workers and had suffered abuse at the hands of their employers, and were now waiting for their cases to come before the courts. An interpreter translated our questions and their answers. One of the coordinators of the Centre, a young Hong Kong Indian woman, then posed a question for us: 'What is it that *you* actually do and what could you do for us?' We looked around uncertainly at each other, unsure about which of us would be willing to attempt a definition of 'cultural research' for these people. A few of us muttered some phrases about cultural studies and the approaches it takes. Others tentatively tried to explain the Centre for Cultural Research, and the kinds of collaborative projects we work on. Everything we said seemed awkward and vague, unsure and unclear. It was obvious that we'd fumbled the pass. *What could we do for them*, we asked amongst ourselves? Well, we do research projects we explained, we analyse cultural practices, meanings, and representations, we unmask the inequalities of power and the contested nature of cultural production, and through practical and relevant research partnerships, in which we work *with* rather than *on* community groups, we try to not only imagine but also *create* alternative social futures and spaces for more open and equitable exchange.

All of which is true. But all of which also didn't seem anywhere near adequate for addressing the question posed for us. Our words fell flat, or perhaps more correctly, disappeared into the yawning gap that had opened up between our self-avowed commitment to intellectual and political practice and the local intensity—the singularity—of this immediate encounter.³⁰ One of the major criticisms of the so-called 'Mode 2' form of knowledge production (collaborative, partnership-driven, tied to specific contexts of application) is that it both underestimates the asymmetrical power relations between diverse social groups, and overestimates its potential to contribute to political change or even achieve anything like an open economy of cooperation.³¹ In the cramped conditions of the Asian Migrant Centre, speaking awkwardly through an interpreter with the young Indonesian women, most of us feeling weary and sleepy after our big Indian meal, my hands sore from lugging around plastic shopping bags, this claim seemed to ring particularly true.

As we left we exchanged business cards with the coordinators of the Centre, and thanked them for their time, their generosity, and for creating a space in which we all could meet. But still there remained a strong and pressing feeling that, as their guests, we hadn't given them anything in return, and that our ethics of reciprocity had been empty: that we hadn't fulfilled the contract of hospitality that had been at the basis of this exchange. Obviously sensing the same feeling, one of my colleagues suggested that we leave them the leftovers from our expansive Indian meal. So we did, and of course, they were grateful to receive them.

Outside in the street, I couldn't help but comment on the irony of our 'gift': they'd asked what we could do for them and so we'd left our plastic containers of Indian leftovers. Later, I thought about what Derrida calls the gift's potential to create 'a break with reciprocity, exchange, economy and circular movement'.³² But then again, he wasn't talking about Indian leftovers. I also thought, again, about hospitality and about the impossibility and the tensions surrounding it, about how it only exists in the efforts to go beyond it, and that it only really occurs in the attempts to exceed it. Hospitality in these terms does not simply exist to reclaim mastery, power or control (of the house, the country, the nation or even the academic exchange), but is a promise that occurs in the very gestures towards an excess that exists beyond its conditions and limits.

I would like to see the 'failure' of our experience at the Asian Migrant Centre in precisely these terms. It is within these encounters with the stranger, the foreigner, the other, that one must address the actualities of the dialogue and the terms on which it will be conducted. These moments of unease and difficulty, newness and surprise—this *aporia*—when everything is not ready in advance and you are completely unprepared, force one to actually consider how the space of the exchange is constructed, and with what degree of openness and generosity, and with what kind of commitment to listening to, hearing, and understanding the experiences of others. They also lead, inevitably, to an assessment of the adequacy (or not) of what we think we know and the methods, models and theories of thought that support it. Or as Grossberg puts it, 'Cultural studies begins by allowing the world outside the academy to ask questions of us as intellectuals'.³³

Such encounters force one to engage in a process, in other words, of taking into account the specific conditions, the strategy needed, the rhetoric required and so on, for each context. They also force us to recognise that the response, not the solution, has to be invented each time, at each moment in these singular situations. This is to shift the focus on to the new experiences that arise *from* these everyday encounters, and to consider the response to them individually in turn, without imposing certain assumptions or theoretical models which may actually be inadequate, be wrong, or fall short. In these terms, such 'failures' are an important reminder of the limitations of intellectual mastery and a general theory of

everything, and the need for theory to always push beyond itself in an attempt to move understanding along. In these terms, solutions only really start to happen when we ‘experience’ failure and impossibility, and are forced to travel through or beyond the inability to respond or to know.

This ‘failure’ is also a reminder of the real difficulties of not just ‘welcoming’ others in some gesture of conditional hospitality, but of also ‘working’ with others. As Meaghan Morris puts it, it’s ‘no good talking *about* the local, the specific, the different and the heterogeneous if we do not know how to *address* constituencies other than or merely beyond our own professional and academic milieux’.³⁴ Cultural research, as a form of engagement with actual contexts, and as a practice that attempts to reconnect with the materialities that comprise distinct formations in concrete settings, offers the potential to address these difficulties precisely because it takes them as *necessary* to the analysis rather than as complexities that simply get in the way and need to be overcome. This is not to claim that cultural research is the only practice that has such aims. Up until now, cultural studies, as a form of intellectual work which has ‘grasped best how analysis and values, methodology and politics, are intertwined’,³⁵ is the space where this kind of thinking and working with culture has most successfully been undertaken. Yet not so long ago bell hooks, among many others, called for cultural studies to recognise ‘the importance of making space where critical dialogues can take place between individuals who have not traditionally been compelled ... to speak with one another.’³⁶ It is cultural research that seems to have best taken up this challenge.

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1. *Comparative Cultural Research: Hong Kong/Western Sydney Exchanges*. A collection of essays and reflections on the first joint workshop held in Sydney 2002. Available at <<http://www.uws.edu.au/research/researchcentres/ccr/partnerships/lingnanuniversity>>.
2. Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. R. Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000. See also John D. Caputo (ed), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1997, p. 109.
3. Jacques Derrida, ‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: a Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’, in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, p. 71.
4. Caputo, p. 111.
5. Simon Marginson and Mark Considine, *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2000.
6. Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Backing Australia's Ability: An Innovation Action Plan for the Future*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2001, quoted in Leon Mann, ‘Shotgun Merger Won't Help Academics’, *The Australian* (Higher Education Supplement), 6 June 2001, p. 30.

7. See George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: the Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003.
8. This is a long-standing criticism, but see for example Nick Couldry, *Inside Culture: Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies*, Sage, London, 2000.
9. See Simon Cooper, John Hinkson and Geoff Sharp (eds), *Scholars and Entrepreneurs: the Universities in Crisis*, Arena, Melbourne, 2002.
10. Ien Ang, 'Who Needs Cultural Research?', CHCI Working Paper, Walter Chapin Center for the Humanities, University of Washington, Seattle WA 98195; see also Michael Gibbons and others, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, Sage, London, 1994.
11. See Elizabeth Cassity and Ien Ang, 'Humanities–Industry Partnerships and the "Knowledge Society": The Australian Experience', *Minerva*, 2006 (forthcoming).
12. Helga Novotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons, '“Mode 2” Revisited: The New Production of Knowledge', *Minerva*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2003, pp. 179–94.
13. I am using 'pragmatic' in the sense discussed by Tony Bennett in his *Culture: A Reformer's Science*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, p. 17. Bennett cites two dictionary definitions: 'To be pragmatic means ... to be concerned "with practical consequences or values" or with matters "pertaining to the affairs of a state or community"'.
14. Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary' in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 4.
15. Bennett, p. 23.
16. Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke, 'Editorial', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2002, p. 8. Healy and Muecke are glossing the editorial written by Meaghan Morris and Stephen Muecke in *The UTS Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–4.
17. Couldry, p. 15.
18. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies' in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 285.
19. See Melissa Gregg, 'A Mundane Voice', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2/3, 2004, pp. 363–83. Meaghan Morris describes cultural research as 'socially cosmopolitan'. See her 'From Criticism to Research: the "Textual" in the Academy' in this issue.
20. John Frow and Meaghan Morris, 'Cultural Studies' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, p. 330.
21. Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing it All Back Home*, Duke University Press, Durham, p. 252.
22. Michel de Certeau, 'Practices of Space' in Marshall Blonsky (ed), *On Signs*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, pp. 123–45.
23. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 86.
24. Grossberg, p. 255.
25. Residents of Hong Kong can become citizens after seven years of permanent residence. 'South Asians', however, are often considered to be 'second-class' citizens when compared to residents of 'pure' Chinese descent. Sun Hung Mui, '“South-Asians” through Hong Kong Perspective', Discussion paper presented at the Lingnan Workshop, 2004.
26. Damian Harper and Robert Storey, *Hong Kong*, Lonely Planet, Hawthorn, 1999, p. 184.
27. I'd like to acknowledge an anonymous referee for making this observation.
28. Hall, p. 280.
29. Sun Hung Mui, p. 2.
30. See Meaghan Morris, 'On the Beach', in Grossberg et al (eds), *Cultural Studies*, pp. 450–78.
31. See Dominique Pestre, 'Regimes of Knowledge Production in Society: Towards a More Political and Social Reading', *Minerva*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2003, p. 254.
32. Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', p. 69.
33. Grossberg, p. 264.
34. Meaghan Morris, 'Please Explain?: Ignorance, Poverty and the Past', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 229.
35. Couldry, p. 143.
36. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Turnaround, Boston, 1991, p. 133.